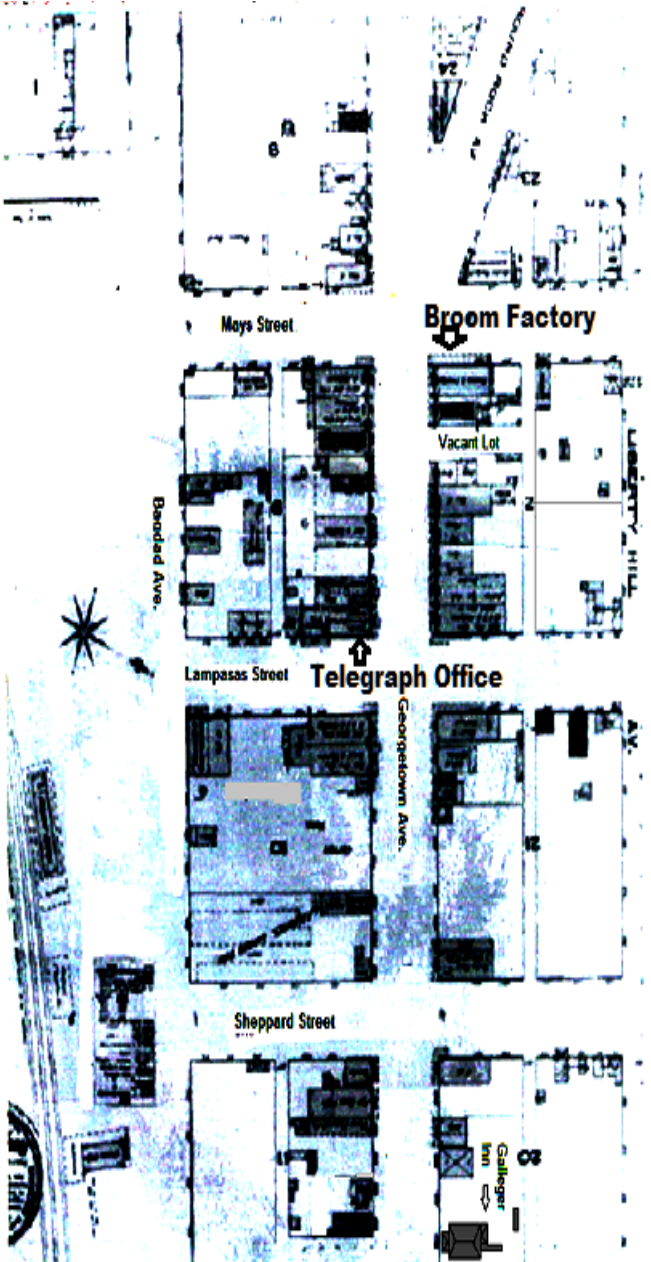






Round Rock, Texas 1878

**THEY RODE
FROM
ROUND ROCK
The McGowan Saga**

By
MICHAEL LOYD STORY

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Dedicated to my wife Rosa Elena Story
de Montoya, without whose love and support
I could never have finished this novel.

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PROLOGUE: August 23rd, 1877: Florida

Early in the morning, just before sun rise, the cool breeze off the Gulf of Mexico wafted across the sugar white coastal sands and into the small city of Pensacola, Florida. The gentle wind carried moisture off the green blue waters, mixing with the warm earthen air in the town and the train depot, creating a light damp fog.

In the station the thin cloud was enhanced by repeated swirls of steam hissing from the pressure valves of a solitary black four wheeled locomotive.

The engine itself, parked under a large water tower, was drinking like a thirsty animal from a rusty metal spout emanating from the huge wooden container. Liquid that filled the coils surrounding the fire box to create the steam power to drive the great pistons on each side of the black monster. Its large boxed driving lamp, mounted high on the front of the engine forward of the funnel shaped exhaust stack; glowed a pale yellow.

Like the eye of a giant slow breathing dragon, its dim light reflecting off the mist, casting eerie shadows as it circled with the steam. Swirling over and under the machine, its wood tender, the freight and passenger cars in line behind.

There were not many; one boxcar, two coaches and the brakeman's cab.

Behind the caboose stood six men, five dressed in dark long coats and wearing black bowlers and one who wore a waist length brown leather riding coat, tan cord britches and a grey Stetson, its tall domed peak creased forward from the top.

They stood silent, looking at each other and occasionally making quick glances down the sides of the train toward the passenger cars.

Two were carrying long double barreled shotguns. The remaining four had their weapons hidden under their coats, waiting

for the conductor to return from his covert mission of scouting the coaches for a few particular occupants.

Finally he returned, his head bent down in a hurried manner, throwing nervous looks over his shoulder, momentarily catching his balance with an out flung left hand against the rail cars as he stumbled on the small rocks of the track grading; a mixture of worry and fear written on his face.

"They are in the second passenger coach; no one else!" he whispered excitedly, sucking in his breath as if he had been running for many minutes for several hundred yards, "Seated toward this end, all five of them."

Six hat brims dipped in an understanding nod as the one who wore the Stetson pulled the conductor aside and whispered one command.

"You wait here!"

The trainmaster nodded his comprehension several times as the group split up evenly to each side of the line of cars, and quietly crept forward; three pulling small, five shot .36 caliber Colt Police percussion revolvers from under their coats as they went.

The fourth, the one wearing the Stetson, displayed his long barreled nickel plated .45 Colt Peacemaker.

One group, on the left, stopped at the boarding steps of the second passenger coach and waited for the others to pass on the opposite.

One of each cadre, the ones carrying the shotguns, stepped six feet away from the train cars for a better field of vision of the entire train.

On the right; the man with the shotgun, seen in the gap between the caboose and the last coach, motioned with his hand that the other two had reached the forward end of the same car and were about to board.

He dropped his arm a moment later; the signal for all to climb on.

They climbed the black iron steps, careful not to brush their weapons against any part of the vehicle, scrape their boots or shoes, in order not to alert those sitting inside.

In silence, the duo from the left side opened the door on their end of the coach and entered behind the seated targets; their presence not felt as the stalked carried on with jokes and laughter as they settled in their seats.

On the forward landing of the car, the two men from the right side entered; the one wearing the Stetson and one other. Amazingly, they are inside past the "privy closet" and advancing at a quick pace, guns down at their sides before any of the victims took account.

One man, a tall, lanky fellow, with dark brown hair, big dark moustache, heavy eyebrows and dressed in a dark suit, similar to what the stalkers from outside wore, was half turned on his bench laughing and talking to one of his companions behind him; when he observed the man's expression; he glanced over his shoulder at the two advancing on them.

His eyes focused on the fellow wearing the grey Stetson moving toward him at a rapid pace and more importantly the long barreled Colt held in his fist. He instinctively knew who the man represented.

Jumping up from his seat, but off balanced, he fell back and jumped up again, reaching under his coat with his right hand to retrieve his own Army Colt hidden under the cloth, at the same time yelling in a frightened exclamation!

"TEXAS BY GOD!"

His gun hung on his woven, ornate red suspender strap as he tried to jerk the weapon from his shoulder holster, the thumb curl of the hammer having caught in the material in his haste to retrieve it.

The young man sitting beside him, seeing the two gun carrying characters in front of him and the other armed men behind tried to escape by jumping out, head first, through the open window next to his seat.

A shot from behind hit him in the back as he passed into the opening. A boom from outside, a shotgun, ended his career and his young life.

While the tall man struggled with his hung up Colt, the stranger with the Peacemaker closed the short distance between them, raising his Colt in his right hand over his left shoulder and brought the seven and half inch iron barrel across and down against the side of the struggling man's head, just over his ear.

He dropped to the train car floor like a basket of spilled yellow onions.

The other three men threw up their hands quickly after the first shot, surrendering themselves without a struggle. Each handcuffed and motioned to sit back down until all were secured.

The lawman in the Stetson cuffed the downed and dazed gunman, pulled him into a sitting position, then with his hands under the tall man's armpits lifted him onto the passenger bench he originally occupied.

"John Wesley Hardin!" he said in a firm manner, looking into the dazed but murderous eyes, "My name is John Armstrong; I am a Texas Ranger. You're under arrest for the murder of Sheriff Charles Webb of Cherokee County, Texas.

You're to remain in my custody until we return by train to Austin, at which time you will be jailed, arraigned and tried in a court of law!"

"Do you understand? Your dance is over."

GOOD DAY GONE BAD

Emmitt McGowan rose up in his saddle and stretched his back, throwing his arms out horizontally to his sides and rolling his head around his neck. Two hours on horseback since he had rode out of Round Rock and he was already getting stiff. He realized he had stayed up too late the evening before.

He shifted to one side and pulled his left foot free of the stirrup and slung his leg around the saddle-horn.

His horse, a rangy blue roan colored mustang he affectionately called Ol' Blu, looked back with the shifting of weight of his rider.

Emmitt reached over and rubbed him on the neck while he pulled off his boot and scratched the bottom of his foot.

Blu meandered along, no more in a hurry than Emmitt. The day began with a gorgeous sunrise and rolling into the noonday, promised to be a lovely afternoon and evening. What a beautiful ride to be alive and free!

His growling stomach made him smile as he glanced up at the sun. It would be time to eat in another hour or two. The sausage and egg breakfast he had earlier in the morning remained a pleasant memory as he contemplated the ham sandwiches he had requested after breakfast at the Inn. They are wrapped in wax paper, residing now in his saddlebag for his lunch.

His mouth watered as he realized he hadn't thought where to supper; probably at Maria's Café or perhaps the Austin Inn if he wanted a steak.

Grinning, he mused how nice it was to be able to plan the day knowing there aren't obligations to be met and no hurry. Several months had passed since he had time for himself and riding leisurely into Austin, instead of taking the stage or the newly constructed rail line, sounded great!

Only he and Ol Blu and the big blue Texas sky! McGowan was at peace.

He pulled his boot on, straightened in his saddle and started humming to himself parts of a song played last night in town.

"Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above; don't fence me in. Let me ride through the wide open country that I love; don't fence me in!" he sang to himself.

The jaunty piano player put out a joyous tune, he thought. For a moment he could not remember the name? Oh yes, Davey! Fellow had a beautiful voice too. And friendly, everyone knew each other as typical of small towns and they took to this wandering stranger right off. Sometimes places like Round Rock are more pleasant and enjoyable than any of the larger cities he had ever been in.

"I want to ride to the ridge where the West commences. Gaze at the moon till I lose my senses. Can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences. Don't fence me in," he continued singing what he remembered and whistled the rest.

The beer was cold too!

The proprietor, a big jolly red faced fellow, who probably sampled a lot of his own brew, judging by his ample girth, kept his kegs in an old limestone wash behind the tavern, a few yards away from Brushy Creek. When one keg ran out, he sent two young boys to fetch another. Sometimes they took a while and toward the end of the evening, they seemed to stagger with slight rubbery knees, a mite more under the weight of each keg they carried.

The saloon keeper, with a knowing smile, ignored the lite state of mind the youngsters appeared to be in, even when he admonished them for taking their time.

The cool beer, worth waiting for, never stirred a complaint from his customers.

Yes sir, he would make a point of stopping in more often in Round Rock, Emmitt mused; instead of passing through on his way to Austin or Fort Worth. A real friendly place!

"Don't fence me in." he sang on.

The Austin road curved to the right up ahead and passed by a clump of tall gray rocks on the left and a slight rocky and yellow/green colored grassy knoll on the opposite side.

A flock of blackbirds swarmed into an old oak covering most of the hilltop like a gigantic umbrella, making a tremendous racket.

Behind the hill, on the edge of a stand of younger oaks and cedar, he spotted a deer as it pivoted and darted back into the safety of the trees.

McGowan knitted his eyebrows together momentarily and focused his attention that direction. He couldn't see under the tree for all the tall yellow grass dominated rocky terrain, but something spooked the deer.

Too far away, he decided, for the animal to bolt in fear from him. The possibility of a bear or a cougar, perhaps a wolf up there in the rocks crossed his mind. Whatever it was didn't seem to bother those birds, he determined.

McGowan watched Blu's ears twitch. The blue roan snorted and turned his head toward the hilltop. He knew to trust the animal's instincts, almost as sensitive as a hunting dog.

Emmitt suspected Blu of picking up the scent of a large animal, yet Blu didn't show signs of any danger. Never the less, the young cattleman kept a watchful eye cocked as he and Blu drew near.

With the promise of such a nice, good day; he hoped nothing up there wanted to disturb his ride.

Emmitt's thoughts turned toward Austin as he and Blu neared the curve in the road. Many months had passed since he had been through the capitol. His job, range detective for the Northwest Texas Cattle Coalition, had led him all over the northwestern part of the state for the past two years. He did more traveling now than he did over a decade ago when he started driving his father's cattle to the Kansas market.

With three years since reconstruction officially declared over and fewer Yankee solders around to keep the peace, save for those down on the Rio Grande and just east of the Pecos; most of the Indians locally were either defeated or dead. Outlaws and cattle thieves were what people had to deal with now and his job was concerned with the latter.

Mr. Goodnight had recommended him to the Coalition along with two others after they tracked down some rustling man killers who had murdered some of their compatriots in the Palo Verde Canyon area.

Emmitt thought about the night he and his pards faced those men in a deadly saloon shootout in the small town of San Angelo across from Fort Concho; the rustler's drawing the bad cards. Shaking his head in wonder he also remembered the trouble with the local lawman afterwards.

Goodnight solved the problem, sending in an old Ranger acquaintance to relieve the local lawman of these gun-fighting cowmen.

Over two years ago, it seemed longer due to the time filled with various adventures and successes.

In the Pan Handle, the local county sheriff threatened several time's to arrest Goodnight and his men if they didn't stop taking the law into their own hands.

However, the sheriff, located two hundred miles away from the ranch and the general vastness of the Pan Handle area, did not encourage a desire to summon him, due to time or patience; therefore, they handled the rustling and general thieving problems themselves with frontier style Texas Justice and buried the evidence.

Later a coalition from the surrounding ranches was formed to provide local law enforcement. That still did not satisfy the sheriff and he continued his threats, calling the coalition vigilantes.

Eventually, Mr. Goodnight finally agreed, some say due to his wife's insistence, to acquire some sanctioned legal substance to the coalition's range detectives.

A ranger friend, the same one who escorted Emmitt and his partner's from the San Angelo jail, suggested the detectives receive some sort of legal appointment from the State Governor, much like the Texas Rangers. So, the old ranger wrote up the recommendations to the Governor to put them on the state payroll.

Emmitt and his associates didn't think much of that. The state wouldn't pay nearly as well as the coalition even if the legal appointments gave them the authority of a lawman.

This would be a problem, he mused. Still, as things stood, he and his fellow range detectives were limited at being deputized occasionally by local lawmen. Investigation of cattle thievery on the open range called for immediate resolution sometimes. And this is the issue for Goodnight and the coalition; no time for summoning the law and if done, would allow the rustler's time to disappear; so it would be better if he and his compatriots had State authority.

If there were only a way to justify keeping them on the association's payroll, things would be all right he felt.

He and Blu neared the narrowing between the hill and the tall rocks as his thoughts wandered again over what the Governor and the Texas Senators would do after they talked to him, Ben Maxwell, Masters and Hardwell. They might not -----.

The distant but unmistakable hollow clack of a Winchester rifle's loading lever and breech bolt in operation quickly grabbed his attention. He spurred Blu and pointed him at the rocks that were now close by.

As Blu's gait changed in a heartbeat, hooves digging into and throwing up dirt, Emmitt kicked his right boot free of the stirrup, threw his leg over the saddle horn and slid out, hitting the ground running, slapping Blu on the flank to hurry him even faster.

Blu had no more began to break into a run when the blackbirds in the old oak screeched and took flight, startled by the rapid deep double boom of rifles breaking the stillness of the late morning.

Hat flying from his head, Emmitt rolled to his left and dove for the dirt as Blu bolted. One bullet followed another, whistling across his back, tugging at his shirt. His chin struck hard against the rocky soil, as he plowed into the earth, tearing a deep jagged chunk of skin off.

He cursed in silent pain; as he lay flat, gathering his senses. Pretending to be dead, he prayed that the unknown shooters wouldn't send another volley of hot lead his way.

He made his breathing as shallow as possible. He strained his ears, listening for sounds of his tormentors over the wind, the distant screeching birds and the thundering beat of his own heart. He knew safety lay a few yards away in the tall rocks and he prepared to make a break to them as soon as he could tell what the shooters were doing.

There! The scrape of boot leather against rock and moments later the dull clunk of wood, a butt stock?

He sensed this as the moment to act and jumped up and sprinted the short distance to safety. As he ran, he slipped the leather hold-down off his open top Colt he had purchased in Fort Worth less than a month ago.

His goal reached, he dove again, between two scrub cedar bushes fronting the protective barrier and over the rocks, for the safety of the earth. This time taking more care how he landed.

He rolled against the stones and heard a startled shout followed by double rifle shots booming loudly close by. The heavy lead bullets striking the face of one of the taller rocks he hid behind.

Emmitt scrambled to his knees, his stomach knotted in pain from the sudden tension. He took several deep breaths to slow his heart and shaking as he peered with care out from the sanctuary for signs of the shooters.

Emmitt forced his breathing under control and rationalized the men very close, too near for him to plan anything elaborate; no time.

So he waited on the shooter's next move, his muscles coiled, ready to strike like a cornered rattler. His senses sharp, intensified by the adrenaline rushing through his body!

Aware of the strong green scent of the cedar around him and the smell of his own sweat, he was conscious without noticing the sound of a cricket behind him somewhere and the cicada's in the trees behind the hill. The blackbirds continued to circle, chattering, still spooked.

He waited. The wait was not long.

He saw the shadow of a man moving across the clumps of grass and weeds that surrounded the tall rocks about twenty feet away. Then a boot, the right one followed by the man's hip.

McGowan pulled the trigger on his Colt, the hammer fell on the big Stetson Henry cartridge and exploding the lead bullet out of the end of the barrel in a roar.

As the revolver rotated upward in his hand, with one smooth motion, he re-cocked with his thumb on the hammer spur as he snapped the weapon down to target. He fired again.

There came a cry of pain and surprise and the shooter fell from Emmitt's view.

He waited in the shadow of the rocks for several minutes, waiting for the smoke from his Colt to dissipate and the second man to make his presence known.

Nothing happened.

With care, he raised his head out of his stone fortress. He spotted the fellow lying on his back, not more than twenty feet from

him, moaning in agony. The man was hit solid, bleeding from the hip and from his chest.

McGowan's eyes searched the hillside for other gunmen for a while before he approached the downed shooter. Nothing stirred or shot at him.

Surprised but satisfied the wounded man acted alone, he took the few steps to the dying body, kicking his rifle out of reach and bending down to examine the bushwhacker.

He was old, late fifty's or better. Typical weathered face of a farmer, perhaps a rancher who had spent his life in the sun. Dressed in dark homespun trousers and a faded red flannel shirt; his sombrero, worn and tattered, lay several feet away; his boots badly scuffed, showed deep dry cracks in the leather. The man appeared poor.

Emmitt knelt down beside him after he determined the shooter harmless. The old fellow moaned again and then focused his attention on who he had tried to kill.

"You're not Jenkins!" he whispered in surprise.

"No," Emmitt said as he checked the man's wounds; the one in the chest bubbling, "My name is McGowan."

"Damn," the dying fellow cursed as he coughed up sputum and blood, "I get kilt trying to kill the wrong man!"

"You damn fool; couldn't you see who I was?" Emmitt hissed between his teeth, as he wiped bloody sweat from under his chin, his eyes watering. The last few minutes damn near unraveled his nerves. Ambushes are terrifying, if you are the one being ambushed.

"Not so good, me eyesight ain't as it used to be. I's after Jenkins, Todd Jenkins. He took my wife, cattle, land and put my boy in jail. He ruined me; just because I wouldn't let him drive my herd to market," he said breathing in raggedly, "He had no good reason, no need to ruin me for that," he coughed again, bright red, bubbly blood welling up from his lungs. McGowan knew the man hadn't long to live.

"What's your name?"

"Kev Perry," he answered as he reached up and grasped Emmitt's arm.

"I made a terrible mistake, shooting at you mister. Glad I missed, wouldn't have if I'd shot at you twenty years ago," he whispered gurgling; he started hacking again, hard, almost choking.

With his life bubbling red at the corners of his mouth, the old man pleaded, his eyes wide at the door of death, his voice garbled with fluid; drowning!

"Help make things right mister. Find Jenkins and shoot him dead for me!"

McGowan grasped the shooter's hand and pulled it free of his arm, saying in a tight voice.

"I ain't promising anything to you, you tried to kill me! You're crazy asking this!"

Kev Perry could not reply; he was already dead.

Emmitt rocked back on his heels and sat down, his arms wrapped around his legs. His head hung between his knees, his eyes closed.

"Damn!" he cursed to himself as he lifted his head up and glared at the dead man.

This fellow had troubles in this world he tried to solve with murder; an idiot to try that and an even bigger fool for not identifying his target. Now the old son-of-a-bitch was gone but not before he asked to leave his troubles with whom he attempted to kill!

For him to ask Emmitt to square things this way was plain crazy! The worn out fool's hatred for this fellow Jenkins had flashed back on him, sending him straight to Hell.

McGowan shook his head in sadness as he realized Kev Perry's last act in life, standing on the edge of the eternal burning pit, was an attempt to drag him into his affairs.

He didn't like that, not at all! Well, he thought angrily, the answer is no!

"Burn in hell bushwhacker!"

McGowan sat for a moment more and stared off at nothing as he tried to relax. His stomach knotted so tight, it hurt. He started to feel weak; the tension from the fear and anger began to leave his body, leaving him nauseated and exhausted.

He rose to his feet, realizing his revolver still in his hand. Shucking the two spent cartridges from the cylinder and replacing them with fresh ones from his belt, he holstered the Colt, turned and took a few shaky steps away from the body. He stopped, his eyes searching around for a moment, spotted his Stetson sombrero in the

grass, walked on shaky knees to pick the hat up, then stared at the sky, breathing deeply.

"Dear Lord, what are you leading me into?" he murmured.

After several minutes, he felt better. He slapped his hat on his leg to shake the dust off before settling over his hair and surveying the scene.

He spotted Perry's rifle lying in the buffalo grass where he had kicked it and walked over to pick the weapon up. It was a Winchester model 1876; a huge heavy gun, bigger than his Henry rifle. He fingered the lever, racking open the breech bolt and caught the unfired round as it ejected, a fat 45-75 cartridge.

Emmitt whistled to himself. This fellow was good. He originally thought there were two shooters.

McGowan glazed at the dead shooter for several moments, with a mixture of admiration and anger. This old codger would have killed him if not for his professed bad eyes! Emmitt shook his head in wonder and decided the good Lord must still be pleased with him to allow such luck.

The shooting incident had taken less than five minutes; waking up, shaving and getting dressed, bridle and saddling your horse or even eating a decent meal took more time. Death takes only a moment.

Emmitt remembered other shootings he had been involved in, with bandits and Indians; each was different but with the same results as this; he succeeded in keeping himself from being dead. The men who attempted to kill him usually got killed or badly hurt. Many of them were just plain bad and needed to die; he had no regrets over them. This old man though?

McGowan shrugged, uncertain about the man's evilness, however, he tried to bushwhack a stranger and deserved what he got. Frontier justice in Texas is hard and near always fatal.

He glanced up at the swarm of blackbirds as they flew around in a large sweeping circle to finally land again in the old oak. The cicada's seemed louder now and the day had gotten hotter.

Life went on, ignoring the scene of death some feet off the road. Not even the buzzards had showed up yet. This killing was too fast for them. A good day gone bad and no one, save for him and Blu, took notice of it.

Emmitt walked behind the rocks to Ol' Blu, calmly nibbling on the grass behind the cedars that had given his master cover minutes earlier.

"Damn mustang, you have better nerves than I do," Emmitt said to the animal.

He gathered up the reins, mounted and rode back past his recent fortress and stared at the old man's corpse. Sad this happened, he hated killing, even in self-defense.

Blu trotted past the body, shying a little from the smell of blood, as Emmitt sat straight in his saddle. He shrugged his shoulders again, goaded Blu with his spurs and crossed the road toward the backside of the hill. Perry's cayuse should be tied up behind there somewhere. He'd need the horse to transport the dead man back to Round Rock.

Kev Perry must have someone who cares enough to bury him proper. Austin can wait.

This was such a beautiful day for living, not for dying.

His jaw set, his temperament grim, Emmitt McGowan could no longer enjoy the afternoon. The bushwhacker had ruined it for him.

FRIEND OF YOURS?

The beautiful day that had started out so well for McGowan had only two hours of daylight left by the time he and his bloody cargo rode into Round Rock. His thoughts were not pleasant, as he directed Ol' Blu to the county sheriff's office.

He did not like the idea of going through the investigation which most certainly will detain him several days. He didn't know this sheriff and unsure what kind of response he would receive.

Acquainted with a number of lawmen who were strict followers of the letter of the law, a few less inclined if it meant work and some who used the badge to their own political benefit. He hoped this one wasn't of the latter.

The word spread fast as he rode into town. People walked out of the various business's he passed, stopping just short of stepping into the street, shading their eyes from the glare of the sun and speaking quietly to one another as if afraid of waking the corpse, as they observed McGowan led the deceased man's horse down Georgetown Ave.

It became very quiet, save for the murmur of a slight breeze, a few chirping birds and the steady cllop of Ol' Blu and Perry's pony.

Several young barefooted boys ran up beside him to get a closer look at him and dropped back to the body, some actually pressing their small faces to the side of the horse to peer at the man's face. Then whispering amongst themselves and pointing to the dried blood on the saddle and pony, they ran off to spread the news of their bravery to all the children who didn't have the nerve to investigate.

The sheriff, dressed in a wrinkled white cotton shirt and dark gray corded trousers and topped off with a light tan leather vest, a tin star attached, stepped out of his office after one of the younger men of the town announced McGowan's arrival through the door.

He stood next to the hitch railing, he's eyes taking in the two horses, the rider in the lead and the body of the man lashed face down across the saddle of the horse being led.

He nodded slightly after his deputy walked up and whispered to him, his eyes never leaving Emmitt's as the small parade came to a halt in front of him. The grass stem he was chewing bobbed up and down.

"Friend of yours?" he asked, the straw jumping around as he spoke.

McGowan sat still in his saddle, knowing better than to make any sudden moves.

"No Sheriff, he ain't. He tried to bushwhack me about six miles south of town," he said, his eyes following the deputy as he stepped up to the corpse and raised its head.

"Bushwhacked? You're might lucky then, if that is what happened. I suggest you come down real slow like, keep your mitts where I can see them!"

"It's Kev Perry, Sheriff," the younger lawman said, dropping the dead man's head against the bloody saddle fender.

"Perry? Well, I guess you've got some explaining to do fella. Suppose you step on inside here?" the sheriff motioned toward the doorway of his office, "Keep your hands up away from that iron on your hip," he added as he reached and pulled McGowan's open top Colt from its holster.

"You know there's a law in this here state about wearing firearms in the cities?"

Emmitt nodded in reply; knowing the results if he didn't follow instructions and responding to the peace officers baiting would not do him any good. He was certain he could clear things up, but this was not the time.

Unbuckling his gun belt, he handed the empty rig to the sheriff silently as he entered the building.

Inside, Emmitt walked over to and sat in a chair pointed out to him, facing the only desk in the front office. As he crossed the floor, his boot heels thudding on the wooden planking, his spurs jingling, he took in his surroundings.

The room was small. To his right, on the wall, he observed a cork poster board with several wanted posters tacked to it as well as other pamphlets and a Regulator clock hanging next to it.

To the left behind the single desk, a framed water color print of a well-dressed lady in the latest eastern clothing adorned that space and to the right side of the big piece of furniture, against the back wall, stood a Ben Franklin stove.

A stack of wood, apparently from last year's winter now covered with spider webs, filled the small space between the stove and the corner of the room.

A wooden rack of rifles and shotguns also hung from the wall opposite from the heater and the desk. The door they had just entered and a dirty six pane window comprised the front of the building.

No other furniture or shelving present; the walls of bare wood, unlike some of the more permanent buildings constructed of limestone in the newer part of town farther east down the Avenue reminded McGowan of many a lawman's place of business he had seen and all near identical. He surmised the cells for the prisoners located behind the door at the back of the room, centered between the stove and the rifle rack.

"So, you're saying old man Perry tried to bushwhack you huh?" the sheriff asked as he sat down, leaning backward in his chair, the wood legs creaking in protest as the straw sticking out of his mouth continued bobbing up and down.

"Yes Sheriff that is exactly what happened," Emmitt replied his eyes focused on his interrogator as he too sat down.

He figured this lawman not for a lot of effort, judging by the paunch he carried around his middle.

McGowan, aware that towns don't become or remain peaceful because of lazy peace officers was cognizant too much tranquility softens a man. He suspected this one of getting that way and would resist anyone disrupting his quiet reign.

"Care to tell me how this happened?" the grass stem bobbed.

"I reckon," Emmitt began. He sensed this sheriff was playing it straight, no disinterest nor roughing him up. Not yet anyway. He knew by riding in with a dead body he had admitted shooting to death he had placed himself in a dangerous position.

Any indication of his lying would make things doubly hard to portray the incident took place as happened and prove his innocence.

McGowan told the story as carefully and quickly as possible, with no assumptions on his part as to why Perry shot at him, other than mistaken identity. He had dealt with sheriffs and their deputies

and even a U.S. Marshall and a few Rangers and he knew they didn't need or want outside assumptions as to motives.

Lawyers, judges and juries would decide those things. His only concern was putting himself in the best light, to show he shot and killed Kev Perry in self-defense.

When he finished he sat quietly while the sheriff stared out the dirty main street window. McGowan, aware of the deputy standing behind him during his telling of his story, eased his neck muscles a bit as the assistant lawman took a seat on a bench along the back wall, next to the door he thought led to the cells.

The atmosphere didn't seem as tense as before he started talking and the only sound now came from the Regulator clock ticking behind him.

"Sounds like you had no choice," the lawman finally commented, ending the silence.

"Old Perry had fallen on real hard times lately. It got to him, made him mean, difficult to be around," he continued as he put his boots on the wooden floor with a thud and leaned forward with his elbows on his desk.

"He had a powerful grudge against Jenkins. Blamed him for everything happening bad to his family, got to drinking a lot, spent some time in here," he pointed to the back of the office with his right thumb.

"And I suspect he did mistake you for Todd Jenkins; you're about the same size and build. The old fool eyes weren't worth a damn anymore.

Yep, you resemble Jenkins some; he's who I thought you were at first, riding up. Didn't know the body was Kev until my deputy said so, but I reckon Ol' Perry got tangled up for a final time," he changed ends on his straw and continued.

"Still, I want your story checked out," he held up his hand as McGowan started to reply.

"I understand you said no one was around, but Perry must of left signs of his wait and those cartridge cases from his rifle should still be on the ground. I need hard evidence of an ambush."

"A.W. here," he nodded at the deputy, "He's a damn good tracker, a former Ranger and he'll find what is needed to settle this."

He turned to his young lawman and wiggled with his forefinger, "Ride out first thing in the morning and locate the ambush site. I believe you've a good idea where to search?"

Grimes nodded.

"And take old Perry over to Brown's parlor. He can prepare the body. I reckon some of the ranchers will cover the bill for his burial."

"Right Sheriff!" AW Grimes replied as he stood up and started to leave the office but stopped as he reached for the door handle.

"Uh, Mr. McGowan, are you aware you've holes in your shirt?"

"No, just the one in my sleeve here where I hit the ground," McGowan replied raising his arm to show Grimes.

"Well, you got two round ones in the back," Deputy Grimes stated as he exited.

McGowan reached over his right shoulder, his fingers probing his shirt and repeated the motion under his left. His eyebrows shot up as he glanced at the peace officer in front of him.

"Mind if I take my garment off?"

"No, go ahead."

Emmitt stood up and unbuttoned, as the lawman walked behind him.

"A.W. is right, you've two small holes, one on each side," he said, thumping McGowan's back before he pulled the cloth off.

"You didn't know this?"

"No, I bought this yesterday, it was sound then."

"You did, where?"

"The mercantile in the new part of town, I spent the night, on my way to Austin," McGowan answered as he slid the garment off his left arm.

"Damn, this thing cost me three dollars!" Emmitt blurted as he held the blue and white checkered blouse up to the fading light of the main street window.

"I figured on mending my sleeve, but two holes in the back sure do ruin it!"

The sheriff took the cotton garment and hung it on the hat rack that stood beside the door. Next he located his yardstick from under a pile of newspapers on his desk and laid the wooden device across the two sets of holes in the shirt. The ruler ran at a diagonal from the right, over what would be Emmitt's shoulder blade, to below his left blade.

"Turn around," he ordered.

He examined McGowan's back carefully. A faint red burn streak dotted with black spots of dried blood showed across his right side.

"You didn't feel that?" he asked, after commenting on what he found.

"No Sir, I was busy trying to survive. Pretty close, huh?"

"Appears to me another quarter inch and you'd be missing a piece of your back," the sheriff said as he handed McGowan's his garment.

"Twenty, hell---, three years ago, Old Perry wouldn't miss at all; you're a damn lucky man McGowan."

"So I hear," Emmitt muttered, "Then you believe me?" he said as he pulled the shirt back on, tucking its tail into his faded brown whipcord britches.

"Possibly; appears the shot came from above you. That would account for Perry being on a hill. But you might still have fired at him first and turned to run as he returned fire.

We'll find out tomorrow when A.W. returns," the sheriff answered, sitting down behind his desk and returning his booted feet to the top again.

"I won't hold you here in a cell, I ain't charging you with anything yet, but don't leave Round Rock."

"I expected that. I guess you're keeping my Colt also?" Emmitt asked as he finished buttoning his shirt. "Yep, you won't need your iron here! I keep this county and town peaceful."

"Yea, I saw yesterday. A real friendly place," he stated as he turned for the door.

"I'll be staying at the Inn on the east end of this street."

"That's fine. Say where you from anyhow?"

"Oakville; my family owns a ranch about half way between San-ann-tone and Corpus Christi."

"Cattle?"

"Yeah," McGowan said, stopping at the door.

"Thought you would be a cowpuncher; top hand for someone?"

"No sheriff. I work for the Northwest Texas Cattle Coalition."

"Never heard of them, what are you doing with them?"

"Range detective."

"Oh?"

Emmitt stepped outside, untied Ol' Blu and walked him over to the next street behind the sheriff's office to the livery stable. He mused at how careful the lawman was at not accusing him of murdering Perry until the evidence is in and his offhand way of telling him to stay in town.

But, he glanced up and smiled at both of his rifles still in their scabbards. The man isn't that careful.

Few people were outside after he left the sheriff. Those watching him walk away with his horse whispered their comments to each other as they went on about their business. The excitement of the week had come and gone. Life continued as if nothing had happened in the quiet friendly town of Round Rock.

Evening found McGowan dining on a thick steak, green peas and mashed potatoes. A large schooner of cool beer sat on his right to wash everything down.

He was hungry, more so than he thought he would be after the events of the day, but he had not eaten since breakfast. The ham sandwiches he relished over earlier still resided, untouched, in his saddlebags.

He dined at one of two long, twelve place tables in the Inn's dining room. He chose to eat there to avoid too much exposure outside and the meals were excellent.

As he dined he thought about the past hours since returning to Round Rock.

After registering back in at the Inn, he had taken a hot bath and dressed in a new blue/white checked shirt; bought from the same mercantile store, called Kopperal's, where he acquired the last one.

Comfortable but worn, black dyed cotton sailor's pantaloons and a pair of well used beaded Comanche moccasins completed his wardrobe for the evening.

He was confident of the deputy's report being favorable but he chose to stay inside this hotel. His weapons upstairs if needed.

His rifles, both given to him by his father, a 1859 Sharps carbine, converted to 50-70 self-contained copper cartridges he used for hunting and his .44 Henry rifle which he loaded with the more accurate Winchester Stetson Henry cartridge like his Colt, are secure upstairs in his room.

He carried a spare revolver in his saddlebags, a bronze framed percussion Griswold and Gunnison six-shooter of .36 caliber

his papa had carried during the war; he tucked this away between the mattress and pillow of his bed after loading with six nitro-paper cartridges and primer caps.

He felt as secure as could be with not knowing who might want to confront him in this town concerning Kev Perry.

Emmitt, having finished his meal and sipping on his beer while relaxing, realized several men, who had entered during the middle of his dining and had seated together; were all stealing glances toward his table.

He recognized their kind of hombres almost immediately. Dressed rather well, but having that weathered exterior only men acquire from hard outdoor labor. Most of them appeared successful, a few less nicely attired, they are still every inch cattlemen. He guessed they would be discussing business, as their type do when they get together. He ought to know, having participated in many gatherings in his own career, however, he also laid odds they'd been talking about him and Kev Perry.

Not privy to the amount of respect Perry commanded, only what the sheriff alluded to; he now regretted leaving his Griswold in his room. Afraid trouble had found him he palmed his steak knife into his shirt sleeve.

Emmitt expected the worst and he didn't care to explain the day's events again.

He knew to ride for the brand meant loyalty, sometimes to the death. They cared for one another, like a brotherhood of knights. And God help anyone who decided to go against them.

So how close a brother was Kev Perry to these men he wondered?

"May I take your plate?"

"What? Yeah, sure ma'am," he said to the young woman standing beside him.

"I'll be finished with my beer in a moment."

"Oh! That's all right. It appears you're about to have company and it wouldn't do to have dirty dishes in front of you," she said softly, smiled and carried his dinner plate off.

McGowan stared at her in alarmed surprise as he turned his attention across the room. He sat quietly his eyes on a two of the

group as they rose up among an explosion of whispers and head shaking and approached his table.

Hands folded politely in front, the duo nervously faced him. They had an inquisitive expression on their faces, so much McGowan found it odd considering the hard stares he had received on the occasional glances from the others.

Both dressed in gray Eastern type suits, albeit dusty. They'd ridden into town today he surmised, probably early this evening.

One, a fancier dresser than the other seemed to be the leader of the small party. The fancy one sported a red and gold silk vest with a watch-chain hanging from his left pocket.

Both close to the same age, around forty, their mustaches showing more gray than their original brown colors. One was balding, the silk vested one sported thick gray/brown hair, cut short, the way Emmitt wore his.

"Mr. McGowan?" the leader spoke.

"Yes?" Emmitt replied with caution.

"Excuse our interruption of you evening dinner and relaxation, but we would like a word with you, if you don't mind."

"To whom have I the pleasure of speaking to?" McGowan smiled, setting his beer down and leaning back in his chair.

"Er, excuse us again," he pointed with his right thumb, "This here's Cass Worthington and my name is Carl Stephens. We own ranches west of here.

"Mine's more southwest Carl," Worthington chided.

"Well yeah it is, but I don't think Mr. McGowan would be too concerned with that right now."

Emmitt watched the men with slight amusement at their discomfort. He wondered what had been told to them concerning him.

"How can I help, gentlemen?" he asked, noticing the table they had left had grown quiet; the others were probably straining to hear every word.

"We'd like to talk to you about issues happening locally," Carl Stephens said as he glanced around the room.

"You mean the incident I had with Kev Perry?" Emmitt asked, intending to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"Yes," Stephens answered with care, his nerves rattled, caught off guard at McGowan's bluntness.

"Perry is part of it, but this runs deeper than that. There is a man named Todd Jenkins who, we suspect, is behind a lot of the problems the cattle ranchers around Williamson County and adjoining counties are experiencing."

Worthington spoke up, "Cattle missing, riders hurt or disappearing and presumed killed, by accident it always seems."

A certain amount is common in this business, however, too many of our men are down, one is crippled for life and two we think are dead, they just disappeared. Each time beeves they were working also are gone."

"How long's this been going on?" McGowan asked.

"Near fourteen months or so," Worthington replied.

"However, Perry started complaining about Jenkins two years ago, nobody listened too close, as he was bitching about things constantly."

Then his wife was found beaten and savaged; she went out of her mind over that, never recovered and she finally took her own life.

His son sought to avenge her and wound up in jail in Fort Worth. After his boy was jailed Perry lost his ranch to Jenkins in a card game."

"Yeah, and the rest of us started having trouble shortly after," Stephens finished.

"Fourteen months, huh?" McGowan asked as he leaned back in his chair, his left hand tapping a butter knife on the side of his schooner.

"I trust you brought this up with the sheriff?"

"Sure, several times!" they both said in unison.

"And he always comes up with nothing," Worthington lamented.

McGowan cocked his head sideways in question.

"He nor his deputy spend enough time out on the prairie or the hill country to catch anyone, not there is much to find. If Jenkins is behind all of this, he covers his tracks real careful like."

Worthington added further, "The sheriff needs to hire someone to ride the ranges, especially down near the river; however, the county nor the town ain't got the money."

"Is Grimes his only deputy?"

"You've met him? Good fella; does his job and some of the sheriff's it seems. But he is all they can afford. The city Marshall

hasn't even the luxury of a deputy. He relies on the sheriff to help keep Round Rock safe."

"So Grimes does duty for both offices?"

"Yep!"

"What about your own men?"

"None are experienced with this kind of business or would want too."

"I appreciate you fella's telling me this, helps me understand the reason Perry shot at me."

I don't comprehend why y'all picked Jenkins as the culprit, you are not saying there is any proof other than what happened between him and Perry," Emmitt said as he took a swallow of his beer, "But I sense y'all want something else."

The two cattlemen glance at one another before Worthington spoke.

"Well yes. You see, the sheriff did some checking on you and after he got his wire, the telegraph clerk informed Mike Jarrell over yonder," he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder toward the table of cattlemen, "We learned from him you were in town."

We know you're a range detective and brand inspector working for the Northwest Texas Cattle Coalition on Charles Goodnight's hearty recommendation."

He sucked in a breath and continued, "I might add, we are aware of your successes these last two years in solving several thieving and fake branding cases."

We also know you were a deputy for Sheriff Courtwright up in Fort Worth for a while; you have the reputation of a man to reckon with in a fight and can be trusted implicitly!"

McGowan threw back his head and roared. His laughter startled the two ranchers and the table of cattlemen behind them. They all turned and stared with questioning looks on their faces.

The young lady who had waited on him appeared in the kitchen door, as a man's face hovered a moment over her shoulder, both with quizzical expressions in their eyes.

"Where in the world did y'all get all that?" he asked trying to hold his chortling down, aware of the scene between the three of them is attracting attention from the few other patrons in the dining room. It seemed everyone was suddenly tuned into the conversation by his laughter.

"Why, from your employers and the Texas Rangers office in Austin!" Worthington answered, his face turning red.

"It is now nine o'clock, I have been in town since four and you received this information in five hours?"

"No sir," Stephens replied, "We've been trying to interest the Coalition you work for in letting us join them. During those discussions two months ago we were told you were coming through here but we missed you by a day when you rode out this morning.

Now it seems providence has returned you," Stephens concluded.

"I see," McGowan commented, a little disturbed his employer gave up his history.

"Gentlemen, most of what y'all said is stretching the truth just a bit, also, I'm not sure I like you folks sticking your nose's into my business.

I'd question whether I'd be someone to reckon with in any kind of fight," he leaned forward his hands on the table, palms down; his face grew a couple of shades darker.

"I am not a man-hunter or gunman. I don't want that reputation and object to you implying such!

I'm ordinary a fellow who makes a living at what I do, which is tracking stolen cows and the Good Lord has seen fit to keep me whole and well up to now!" he said as he stood up.

"I'm sorry, but I have present duties with the Coalition and if'n y'all are asking me to solve your problems, the answer is no!

Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'd like to turn in early tonight," McGowan shoved his chair with the back of his legs, nodded to the group of cattlemen and left the dining area for the stairs and his room.

Worthington and Stephens eyed each other dejectedly as they returned to the cattlemen's table.

"Y'all heard?" Stephens asked, standing at the end behind Mike Jarrell.

"Is there anyone else we could get? A Ranger perhaps?" one man spoke. His name was Kinkaid, a red faced chubby rancher who had reported his spread lost over thirty known head in six weeks.

Jarrell pushed his dinner plate away and lit a cigar, took a drag and said, "Not within two hundred miles. And the Rangers have their hands full, I was told by one of them three weeks ago, chasing the bandit Sam Bass and his gang.

We need proof of a major cattle-rustling ring before they'd step in. Damn it, they recommended using a range detective," Jarrell continued, "Still, I suppose we could advertise."

"That's a choice? Hell, we'd get all kinds of varmints in here, more crooked than Jenkins," the red faced Kinkaid spat.

Jarrell looked up at the other end of the table when the oldest and best clothed cattleman at the meeting, Henderson, stood up and spoke.

"Enough of this bickering!" Henderson exploded.

"Mike, telegraph the Coalition up Panhandle way and ask them for McGowan, convey to them he refused our request on the grounds he works for them and offer to them a deposit for his services, anything they want. Perhaps they'll let him loose," he barked, sticking his own stogy into his mouth.

Smoke curled toward the ceiling, around the ornate candle chandeliers and then curling down the walls as he puffed heavily, the cigar tobacco coals glowing brightly each time he drew in.

"It's about the only thing we can do short of going after Jenkins ourselves and gunning him down and some of us getting gunned down in the process. We need a man who knows how to do this kind of job," Stephens chipped in, rubbing his hands against each other, and straightened his jacket collar, trying to not look like the conspirator he felt in his heart.

"Short of the Army settling things, which I don't want those blue bellied bastards around here sticking their noses where they don't belong, I say let's get after Jenkins!" Kinkade argued, "My boys are ready for locking horns with him and his men right now."

"Kinkade!" Jarrell barked sharply, his color turning red with anger, "You let us find a man to do the job, be it McGowan or someone else!

When there is proof without a doubt Jenkins is behind the cattle thieving, you can bring in your boys. But not before! Understand?"

Kinkade, his face puffed up, grumbled and nodded his head he understood as he stood up and walked out of the dining room saying, "Ain't no one man going to do this work, especially this one y'all just talked at!"

After Kinkade left, Jarrell asked, "Ok, we all agree we force McGowan to tie in with us if we can?" as he scanned each face until

he came to Henderson at the end, and said, "I'll telegraph the Northwest Coalition and make a request for the services of McGowan or one of their other investigators."

"No, only ask for him. We know something about him, he knows us now of a sorts and he is aware of our situation," Henderson commanded.

"Hell fire, he does have an interest in this. Perry has brought him in whether he likes it or not!" Worthington replied.

"Probably the reason he don't want to work for us," another man chuckled under his breath.

All the cattlemen nodded in agreement, even if the comment was an off handed pass at humor. The men started discussing other matters for one more hour before they disbanded and made their way to their rooms for the night or their buggies and horses tied up behind the Inn.

McGowan sat on his bed trying to read the local paper but the conversation he had at supper with those cattlemen distracted him. He sensed their reluctance to give up on hiring him despite his objections.

Their eagerness to hire him and their belief of his competence as a shooter worried him. Not so much from the standpoint they were impressed with the things they learned about him, but their concept that a gunman is necessary to deal with the rustling problem. And gunmen were glamorous in many eyes.

The blunt truth, his job consisted of nothing more than asking questions of cowhands, tracking old trails, spending hot or cold days and nights in dust and mud. Sleeping alone around cattle, stepping in fresh slippery cow shit and constantly watching your back hunting rustlers, who are always inclined to shoot you before you discovered them; not too glamorous!

He was comfortable with using firearms as any Texas boy would be, but he didn't consider himself a shooter and absolutely no hunter of men.

He laid the paper in his lap and stared at the gold lace decorating the pale blue walls of his room, thinking. They wanted a gunman to finish off Todd Jenkins; if Jenkins could be linked to the stolen cattle so much better. Jenkins is whom they blamed, rightly or not.

A range detective would be too slow for them, results not forth coming quick enough. It took time to develop a case, tracking missing cattle, inspecting brands for alteration and unless the rustlers are caught red handed, which is not very likely, the cattlemen are not in a mood to wait for long.

Emmitt smelled trouble; a range war, even a small one was not good for anyone. He wanted no part of it.

LIGHT A SHUCK FOR AUSTIN

October 7th, 1877 dawned with cloudy skies and a gusty north wind. A chill settled in with the new day and McGowan, restless to start for Austin, waited in the sitting parlor of the Gallagher Inn for deputy Grimes to return from the ambush site.

He pulled his Hamilton time piece out of his vest pocket and flicking the cover open, he sighed as the tiny second hand scrolled around its pivot point several times before closing the lid with a snap. He didn't even notice the time as he had done the same thing ten or so minutes earlier.

His eyes crinkled in humor as he followed, through the front window panes, several of the town's citizen's passing down the wooden walk across the avenue from the Inn; the men trying to hold on to their big brimmed sombreros or short bowers and the few ladies who dared to be out in this chilly wind, busy holding on to their bonnets and struggling to keep their dress skirts down as they came to and left the Post Office.

On edge, despite being out of the weather and the relative warmth inside failing in its attempt to induce drowsiness, he could not relax.

The anticipation of the twenty mile ride a head of him in the approaching bad conditions kept him alert. His thoughts over the meeting with the Governor worried him as he needed to be at his best and a late start would mean little sleep tonight.

McGowan rubbed his left hand. He had scratched a knuckle picking his saddle up from where it hung over a rail inside the stable, as he prepared Ol' Blu to be ready to ride, the moment the sheriff allowed him to go.

Out of concern for the fast dropping temperatures, he left the mustang in the livery with plenty of feed. Blu would need the extra

grain in his belly, what with this sudden change in the air, the last thing McGowan wanted, was an ailing horse.

Saddling the cayuse ever since he rode out from his father's ranch down on the Nueces River on his first cattle drive ten years ago; they shared many adventures together and although the stallion still possessed health and strength, he thought of putting the animal out to pasture after Austin, for his retirement, relaxing, eating grass and making little mustangs.

Blu had been a fine choice, the best any man could ask for. They worked well together, depending on each other constantly; the horse saving Emmitt's life a number of times.

He loved the big brute, sometimes with a tenderness he never exhibited to anything or anyone else. For him, keeping the old cayuse out of the weather when possible was the natural thing to do.

McGowan sat back and picked up the book he bought earlier in the morning, 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer' by Mark Twain, and began reading where he left off with Huckleberry Finn describing how to get rid of warts with a dead cat.

As he chuckled at the conversation written down in the fancy gold laced, black leather, hardbound novel, he felt the presence of someone standing to his right, next to the settee he was resting on against the east wall of the parlor. He glanced up and recognized the young woman whom he waited on him the previous night. She spoke something to him, he recollected.

She worked at the Inn and was related in some way to the proprietor he gathered. Wife, sister or daughter he wondered?

He remembered her comment to him as she took his dinner plate last evening and giving him friendly warning.

Why, he wondered, as he tilted his head questionably and smiled. She returned a quick smile before she spoke.

"Good read?"

"Pardon?"

She pointed at the book in his hands.

"You were laughing, is it that good?"

"Oh, I'm sorry if I'm disturbing anyone, but, yes it is.

Reminds me a little of the mischief my brothers and I use to get in too," he said smiling.

She was, he thought, a pretty young lady; soft featured, slight oval face, some olive in color with a narrow nose bordered with a

few light freckles on each side; full lips, dark blue eyes under thin arched eyebrows, small but strong chin. Her looks accented with dimples when she smiled showing her big even white teeth.

Her frame sported wide hips, 'child bearing' his pa would call them, with a short narrow waist topped with the swell of large bosoms.

She had apparently slightly longer legs for her height under her flowing skirt, around five feet two inches or better, he judged; unusually pretty he mused as he sighed quietly in appreciation.

He remembered how she moved in the dining room the previous evening, with a lightness and self-assuredness he admired. She reminded him of ---, Ol' Blu? He chuckled.

"It must be a good novel, you're still laughing. You seem to laugh a lot, like last night," she said with her soft voice, then, smiling once more, she left the room, her light green skirted dress swishing softly about her legs, her blue eyes sparkling.

He turned in his chair as she walked out, noting the easy swaying of her hips, not making a sound as she passed over the carpeted wood floor, her shoulders remaining level and her chin up, proud, facing forward, not cowering as some women do.

As she left the room the thought dawned on him he didn't know her name. So what is new he laughed to himself, it wouldn't be the first time.

Acknowledging he was not gifted in talking to women he figured that would keep him single for a long time, unlike his brothers back home.

He didn't meet a lot who interested him in his line of work anyway. Few females wanted to talk about cows, brands, tracking and investigating.

He turned back around and found his place where he had left off, making one final note to himself how pretty her hair was, long, down past her shoulders like Mexican gals wear theirs, not like the popular short eastern style many gals wore these days. And a startling auburn in color!

As he sighed once more he started to read again.

The Regulator grandfather clock, standing against the wall behind the reception desk, chimed three times for the hour, the last of its musical notes ringing were barely dying away as Deputy Grimes rode past the window toward the sheriff's office.

Dog-earring the page he was reading, Emmitt put on the new coat he acquired when he bought the book; shoving the novel in one of its big front pockets. He picked up his saddle bags and bedroll, opened the twin entrance doors of the Inn and stepped out into the blustery north wind whipping around the corners of the wooded structure.

He grabbed his Stetson's brim and pulling the big hat down tighter on his head before cinching the leather thong up against his chin, he stepped off the wooden veranda and quickly walked west down the walkway the three blocks toward the livery stables, a street over, to collect Blu and then to the sheriff's office.

He cursed silently Perry's judgment. He should have already been in Austin.

Twenty minutes later he entered the lawman's jail, shutting the door with his shoulder as a gust of wind pushed it back hitting his body. He stood for a moment, listening to the howl outside, waiting for the sheriff and deputy Grimes to finish their conversation.

"Well, I see you didn't waste no time getting here!" the county lawman spoke as he turned and picked up his coffee cup.

"Want some?"

"No-thanks Sheriff, I drank my fill at Gallagher's. Am I free to go?"

"Direct fella, aren't you?" he said as he eyed his deputy who was stuffing the small pot belly stove with all it would take.

"Not too much dammit A.W., it ain't that cold yet!"

"It is if you've been out in that damn wind all day; it damned near sucked the heat right out of my bones!" the twenty five year old deputy replied, standing up and holding his hands to the hot heater, almost touching the metal.

"Ain't a good time to ride anywhere, you sure you want to leave for Austin today?" the sheriff asked while refilling his cup and moved next to the stove, crowding his deputy out.

"I've got a hearing to be at tomorrow morning. The stage has already left, no train scheduled, but my horse is ready. I need to leave now while there is still some light. I'll be riding in the dark as is, before I reach Austin.

Am I free to leave?" McGowan asked again, time was passing.

The sheriff waved his tin mug in the air, splashing a few drops.

"Yeah, go on. A.W. reported the ambush site was as described. He found four spent casings; Winchester 45-75's, two at the top of the hill under the big oak you said was there and the others at the bottom next to the road. His pipe and tobacco pouch were still under the tree as was an old saddle blanket he apparently was sitting on; Ol' Perry had made himself at home waiting on you; you're a mighty lucky man McGowan!"

McGowan picked up his saddlebags and bedroll from where he had dropped them when he walked in and looked at the sheriff rather curiously, "That's what you keep saying.

May I have my Colt back?"

"Oh yeah! A.W. hand him his pistol. Don't put the thing on here in town now; you know the law about packing iron?"

"Yes, sheriff, I do," McGowan answered taking the holstered long barreled .44 rig from the deputy and stuffing the cold steel into his already crowded saddle bags and strapping the empty holster around his hips.

"Goodbye Sheriff, ---Deputy," he said opening the door; a strong gust slammed into the building at the same time and he caught the wooden slab before he was hit in the face.

After McGowan exited, the big bellied lawman turned and sat down at his desk, propping his boots on the top left corner.

"He'll need to light a shuck for Austin, be dark soon," he remarked as he opened Perry's pipe tobacco pouch and started to stuff the dead mans pipe bowl.

He stopped for a moment as he listened to the howling gusts, then studied his deputy cleaning his fingernails with his folding knife.

"Hell of a wind today!" he said, striking a match.

The tempest blew the entire day and gave appearance it would blow all night. Cold and damp, the clouds hung low, boiling gray and dark over the land. The sun set quickly in the evening making travel over any road difficult.

McGowan slowed Ol' Blu down from a fast lope to an easy trot as he strained his eyes in the increasing darkness. He'd been

pushing his horse, talking to him and rubbing his neck every so often.

He worried about the cayuse continuing this pace as old as he is; he'd been babying him for several months since the animal took ill with a bad cough the first of the summer.

Stopping in Fort Worth for a quick checkup, the veterinarian suggested he be put out to pasture.

McGowan intended to follow the vet's suggestion after business was attended to in Austin; however, he needed the horse to perform tonight and the blue roan showed no signs of weakening. He seemed to enjoy the cool air and the run with the wind at their backs.

At around nine thirty in the evening a few dim lights from cabins and homes surrounding the city of Austin appeared in the distance.

Minutes passed before the rider and mustang entered the outskirts with McGowan directing Ol' Blu straight to McBride's livery. An hour later, the tired roan found himself eating oats with a warm canvas blanket wrapped around his body, his tail switching in contentment.

McGowan left him under the watchful eye of the son of the proprietor whom he had awakened from sleep, as he carried his saddlebags to Miss Crawford's boarding house.

Too late for supper he asked her for a couple of sandwiches and a bottle of Austin brewed beer, which he carted up to his room held in reservation for him.

Tossing the saddlebags and bedroll into a corner and then downing the two hoagies and the brew, he stripped, filled the large porcelain bowl on the dresser with water, took a hand towel and washed his body, gasping at the cold liquid.

He dried off, jumped into the feather stuffed bed, pulled the heavy quilts up to his neck, reached to turn the oil lamp down and was asleep in a matter of minutes.

“NOT A STATE EMPLOYEE”

McGowan stood half way down the steps of the Texas Senate Building and turned to face the bright afternoon sunshine. He closed his eyes and let his body soak in the sun's warmth. The wind, having died down around noon into a light breeze, kept things comfortable as the last of the clouds scurried away. Cool, but not the chilly damp cold of the preceding days.

In Austin just seventy two hours and he was already tired of the Capitol and the people who ran the government of Texas he mused.

He returned to reality when he heard the click of boot heels signaling the approach of someone from behind him. He turned to his longtime friend and associate range detective, Ben Maxwell, who lit up a cigar as he stepped down toward him.

Maxwell's big brimmed gray sombrero, with its familiar crease down the front center of the tall crown and flat brim, pushed slightly back on his head, revealed the heavy lines radiating from his eye-sockets and cheeks.

His turn down mustache hid many creases around his mouth as did his longish hair on his neck. Those weathering marks represented thirty eight seasons of long hours in the saddle under the sun since age fourteen; bleaching his mane and mustache the color of gypsum and his skin to leather.

He wore a charcoal colored wool suit, bought just the day before the meeting with the Governor, buttoned as high as it would go. A white cotton dress shirt topped with a celluloid collar completed his attire and he still was cold; old blood too thin and no fat to keep him warm.

Standing over six feet, compared to McGowan's own five and eight inches, he was an imposing figure of a man, long, lanky and tough as nails.

Ben had a colorful history and had taken to Emmitt, protecting him like a younger brother ever since their first cattle drive together years ago. Ben smiled around his cigar and spoke in his slow, deep, gravelly voice.

“Well, do you think we convinced them?” he asked between puffs of his stogie.

Emmitt stared down the dusty, busy Congress Avenue fronting Capitol Square and the State Capitol building, for a moment before answering, “Don't know for sure, but I don't think so.”

“I do and we ain't gonna get what we want,” Maxwell said as he stooped and sat down on the steps next to McGowan, his long legs bent, his knees used to rest his arms. He puffed on his Georgia tobacco as his eyes followed the traffic passing in front of them.

“The Senator who sat in for Governor Hubbard asked too many damn questions. And I figured we didn't answer them to his satisfaction. Hell, I could tell we were wasting our time when that Senator showed up instead of the Governor!”

McGowan sat down beside Ben and pulled his handkerchief from his vest pocket and blew his nose. It always drained during the first days of cold weather.

He agreed with Ben; the meeting was supposed to have been with Governor Richard Hubbard, but he was said to have had unexpected pressing business in San Antonio and left Senator Lambert to run the proceedings.

Lambert, apparently, was not informed of the background for the get together or didn't approve of the reasons.

“Such as?” Emmitt inquired.

“When he asked who will be covering our expenses and salaries, the Coalition or Texas,” he said.

“Captain McAlison answered that one,” Emmitt replied, crossing his arms over his own knees.

“Yeah, and his answer, you recall that?” Maxwell tapped his cigar.

“I seem to remember he didn't offer much of one.”

“Yep, he left it open. So who will be our employer, Texas? They wouldn't pay more than what they do the Rangers, probably less, which means almost nothing! I know about government pay!

The Coalition ain't paying us if'n we are paid by Texas; they'll claim us State employees, but if we aren't appointed some kind of special sanctioned range detectives or other nonsense like

that, we won't get that lawman's authority and we'll be back where we started; having to keep an eye on our backsides about breaking the law while catching lawbreakers.

I ain't hankering to be locked up for doing what needs to be done with rustlers. However, it sure don't appear like we're gonna get any help."

McGowan stared at his partner, "Damn Ben! You damn-near got me confused!"

"Yep," Ben went on, not answering Emmitt, "I don't reckon the State of Texas is giving us the authority of lawmen but if'n we are employees of them our current employers are gonna lose their control on things needing to be investigated. Also, if the Coalition keeps us on their payroll, every Ranger with any sense about money would apply for our jobs, and I can't blame them!"

He tapped his stogie hard and stuck it back in his mouth.

"Hell fire! I ain't want'n to be a State employee, they don't make nothing!" he exclaimed.

Ben inhaled deep into his lungs the smoke of his cigar as if a cigarette then expelled the stale gray cloud into the wind.

"Like I said, we're right back where we wore, other than sometimes being deputized in the counties we work," he mourned, "Yep, assuming those county sheriffs even liked us; some of them are getting paid off and I suspect they'd be against helping us," He added.

McGowan grinned and shook his head and glanced down as his fresh polished boots.

"So what the hell are we doing here anyhow?" Emmitt chuckled.

"To make life a little easier for ourselves I reckon; it peers to me this whole blamed idea were Mr. Goodnight's!" Maxwell flicked more ash off his cigar, "Hell, he's the one who has been hollering about making us range detective's lawmen."

"Only because that damn sheriff was pressing him and the Coalition to do things legal like; to carry state wide authority as the Rangers do would make working with local sheriffs and constables a mite easier," McGowan said as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's get a beer; this discussion is making my head hurt," Maxwell replied as he stood up and stepped down toward the red brick walkway along Congress Avenue. He turned and looked up at Emmitt standing above him on the steps.

"You know, them Senators sure got an easy life; sit'n around making laws that aren't needed and getting rich and fat doing so."

McGowan smiled as he stepped down several steps and nodded, "Yeah, I think your right," he said as he clapped Ben on the shoulder.

"I need to check on Blu first, and I'll meet you for a beer at the Black Horse."

Maxwell examined McGowan with amusement.

"I thought you were a-going to retire that old nag to the pasture?"

"Yeah," McGowan answered as he stepped on to the red sidewalk, "But I'm taking him home to Pa's spread to do that. Keep him in the family."

Maxwell grumbled something Emmitt couldn't understand then shook his head in acknowledgment as he walked off, nodding and touching his hat brim to two ladies strolling past him.

McGowan watched Ben's back for a moment as he walked away; smiling at his friend, then turned his attention to the busy avenue full of buggies, wagons and saddle horses passing to and fro.

When a gap in the traffic appeared he crossed and made his way to McBride's' livery; he hadn't checked on Ol' Blu since yesterday. He spent too much time in meetings for nothing apparently, he mused, while the old horse stayed in the back of his mind.

Now free for the day, McGowan hurried to check on his animal.

The Black Horse Tavern, originally built on the edge of town before the Civil War, was the watering hole for most travelers passing through Austin.

Its clientele consisted mostly of transient customers; rough cowhands, hard bitten salesmen, Texas Rangers, gamblers and the occasional incognito outlaw.

The structure itself was constructed of unpainted, weathered wood planks, much like the shanties of the surrounding buildings found around the outskirts of Austin. Only in the last few years had batten been used to cover the gaps between the wooden boards, cutting off the north winds effectively.

The Black Horse Tavern was one of the few places that had not been replaced by stone or brick buildings as the City of Austin

had grown since the war, expanding outward past the old edge of the town limits.

The tavern was the information center for political gossip. The wiser legislators of the State having “discovered” it, preferring its ambiance of worn furniture, sawdust floor and stained green felt covered tables, to the newer, glittery, snobbish Royal saloon closer to the Capitol Building.

Only the orneriest, roughest legislators, of which there are abundance of in Texas, frequent the establishment; however, due to the regular clientele not tolerating the political speeches of the ‘city fellers who’ve never worked’ while consuming their own whiskeys and beers; occasional fights broke out.

The tavern became, over the years, one of McGowan’s favorite places in the six hundred odd miles between Oakville near his father’s ranch and Palo Duro Canyon, in the Panhandle, where Charles Goodnight ran the John Adair spread.

He always discovered people he knew taking a brew, sometimes, he found someone he wished he didn’t know also.

Today, that wasn’t the case.

The saloon was unusually empty as he entered through the dirty colored stain glass inlaid doors, one of the few elegant accoutrements of the place.

He spotted Ben immediately, standing at the long worn but ornate bar; imported from France some said. Ben had his right booted foot resting on the tarnished brass railing running the length of the entire cabinet.

He lifted his beer mug in acknowledgment of McGowan’s presence as Emmitt crossed the short distance to the bar.

“How’s your horse?” Ben asked, his low gravelly voice rolling out from under the big bushy mustache.

“Doing just fine; the ride the other night doesn’t seem to have affected him none,” Emmitt said as he raised his hand to the barkeeper, “Jeb, I’ll have a beer.”

“Sure thing Mr. McGowan,” the barman replied, grinning. He was a tall dark haired fellow, graying around the temples, but ink black elsewhere. Even his extra-long arms sported thick, rich black hair

Emmitt saw him once without his shirt on, during a prize fight, and thought the man was part bear because he had so much dark fur on his body.

The keeper set a fresh mug of cool beer, the foam head running down the sides of the glass, in front of Emmitt.

“I haven’t seen you in here in a couple of years er more.”

“I reckon you’re right. How have you been doing?” Emmitt asked, sipping his beer.

“Ah, tolerable Mr. McGowan, just tolerable,” Jeb answered, continuing to clean a set of whisky glasses.

“You baby that animal too much Emmitt. He’s stronger than you think,” Maxwell said quietly, his low gravelly voice sounding like distant rolling thunder.

He leaned forward on his elbows as he continued.

“Good horses last a damn long time,” he picked up his mug and spoke into it as he drank, “A damn long time.”

“Maybe I am, but Blu has gotten me out of a lot of scrapes, saved my bacon many a adventure and I can do no less than take the best care of him possible.”

Maxwell nodded in agreement, finished his beer and put out the empty mug for Jeb to refill.

“I reckon you’re right, but I tend to think you worry too much with him, you’re gonna spoil that blue roan in his old age.

Hell, what am I complaining about? I’d like to be spoiled in my old age,” Maxwell grumbled.

McGowan laughed lightly, wiping beer foam from his mustache, “Who you gonna find to do that? You don’t stay in one place long enough for anyone to get attached to you!”

“I suppose so. Never found a woman who’d put up with me,” Ben grinned.

“Yep, I know what you mean,” McGowan answered quietly as both men drank deeply, trying to wash the sour taste of the lonely cowman’s life out of their mouths.

The Regulator hanging behind the bar chimed four times and continued its slow regular ticking. Maxwell reached into his vest pocket and pulled his railroad-watch out, flicked the thin silver lid open and compared the time between it and the Regulator.

“A little fast, I’d say,” he said, flicking the case shut.

“Which?” McGowan asked as he performed the same maneuver, pulling his engraved Hamilton timepiece and opening the gold cover.

"Why, the Regulator of course. My Hamilton never is inaccurate," Ben snorted, "What about yours?"

"Right on time; not a minute slow, nor a minute fast," McGowan grinned.

"Here let me see that thing!" Maxwell reached for the gleaming timepiece.

"Hum! It's on the money with the damn clock on the wall," he shook his head, "Hell; I guess both of them are off."

"Think so huh?"

"Yep," Maxwell retorted, fingering the deep fancy engraving. He stared several moments at the note scripted on the inside of the case.

"This is the one he gave you eh?" Ben commented, handing the timepiece back to McGowan.

"Yeah, good watch!" Emmitt replied, snapping the lid shut and returning the engraved device to his vest pocket.

"Up in Kansas, wasn't it?" Ben asked, finishing his second beer and setting the tankard out for another refill.

McGowan eyed the empty glass waiting for Jeb to fill.

"You thirsty?"

"Uh huh, Abilene wasn't it?" Ben pressed.

"Yeah, Abilene," McGowan mumbled, putting his mug down with both hands, his thumbs rubbing back and forth on the smooth glass rim. He thought for a moment, remembering the encounter in Kansas with his old cattle partner.

He glazed at the older man standing next to him at the bar and remembered it was this time of the year in the same kind of establishment, with more patrons of course.

Two herds had reached Abilene a day apart, sold within days of each other and their newly paid drovers were in Abilene catching up on entertainment.

He came in with the second herd of beeves and after three weeks of grazing six miles south of Abilene on the prairie, the sale was made and the cattle delivered to the pens and loaded onto the rail cars. Payday was met and that night was he and his men's time in town.

He had been carousing with his fellow drovers for several hours at the Bull Pen saloon. They whiled away their time listening to the tinny piano, the ladies singing, his men trying to sing, playing Faro or Blackjack and attempting to drink dry the establishments

owner's, Ben Thompson, kegs of beer when he finally decided to leave.

His eyesight and balance was less than what he would have wished when staggering he exited the saloon late in the evening and bumped against someone outside on the walk, who grabbed him by the shoulder as he started to fall.

Unable to focus his blood shot eyes on the individual; he mumbled something close to an apology.

"Your drunker en a skunk Emmitt McGowan!" the amused man said.

"I am? Naw, well ----- who the hell are you?" McGowan inquired, blinking his eyes, trying to focus and stand without swaying.

"You don't recognize me?" the stranger asked, amusement spreading across his face, "I reckon I've never seen you like this!"

"I don't remem-----oh damn, I'm gonna be ----- sick-----my apologies for disappointing you. I, uh, shit--- I'm gonna to puke!"

McGowan staggered down the wooden walk in front of the saloon and two other buildings to the corner of the alley with his new found friend walking along side, holding Emmitt's left arm to balance him. Another man grasped his right at the first's request.

McGowan stumbled and staggered several feet back in the alley, groaning again about his stomach, leaned forward as the two Samaritans pulled his arms behind him and held him there as he vomited, multiple times.

"You better?" the first asked.

"Yeah, --- I wanna lay down, I -----."

McGowan passed out.

The strangers bent down and hoisted him up over the first's shoulder, carrying him to the Drovers Cottage, where most of the trail drivers, who stayed in town, slept.

Emmitt woke once, bouncing as the stranger carried him and recognized who it was before he passed out again. He never got a glimpse of the face of the second man.

The Samaritan left McGowan in the care of Mrs. Lou Gore, the cottage proprietor's wife whose life was dedicated to the wellbeing of these drunken cowpunchers during the season.

Morning came with a vengeance to those who abused themselves with alcohol the night before, McGowan included,

waking with the sun blazing bright in his eyes through the one open window of the dorm room. The taste of sour vomit in his mouth and the sensation his brain was too big for his skull greeted him with the new day.

His head spinning and screaming with each movement, he slowly rolled off of his cot, climbed over three of the other four comatose drovers in the dormitory and staggered to the wash basin.

He washed his face and gargled with 'Dr. Jones Patented Mouth Refresher' which helped some; however, his head pounded fiercely, his stomach hurt and his body was dirty and slick.

An alcoholic residue appeared to seep from each pore of his skin. His nose reeled at the odor of stale sweat, vomit and urine from his person and that of the others in the room.

Weakly, he pulled his clothes on and then stared at himself in the dirty basin mirror, his blood shot eyes and sad hangdog expression confirmed he looked as bad as he felt. He appeared much too old for his twenty years and he promised God he'd never get this drunk again if he'd let him live through the day.

He peered with red swollen eyes down at his hands; they were shaking as he pushed them against the top of the basin to control them. On the wash stand laid several paper advertisement chits for a local Chinese steam bath house which caught his eye.

He'd had one of those steam baths once before and remembered how good he felt afterwards.

The need to do anything to be rid of this hangover became his primary desire. He searched for his big brimmed hat among the debris of clothing, boots and other gear strewn on the floor, found it and grabbing one of the yellow pieces of paper, he headed out the door.

McGowan spirits lifted somewhat after leaving the drovers cottage and encountering fresh air. He still stank and his pores oozed sticky oils, but the stench of stale vomit and urine from the room was gone. After asking directions to the Chinese bathhouse, he made his way, occasionally stopping and leaning against a hitching rail to catch his breath.

That evening found him continuing to nurse his headache, subsided, but still present. He was standing at the long ornately carved bar at the Alamo Saloon, sipping on a tall mug of lemonade not served at the Bull Pen.

His head was better after his steam bath earlier and a regular hot bath and soaking in a copper tub. Now dressed in clean clothes he had bought the previous afternoon, throwing his old tired and worn trail duds away, he felt almost human.

Still weak, however, he had tried to eat something but his stomach wouldn't tolerate it. He finally was able to take in some hardtack crackers after sipping the yellow liquid all morning.

The day dragged miserably on, however, the last half hour went by quickly due to the excitement generated by the town marshal and a buckskin clad fellow who entered and took a seat at one of the tables close to them.

McGowan caught fleeting glimpse's, in the large mirror behind the bar, of James Butler Hickok and his guest through the noisy crowd which formed around them..

He realized Hickok was as big of man as was said, confirming much of his legend as true. When he entered, he towered over most of the men in the saloon.

Standing way over six feet, broad shouldered and narrowed waist, he dressed in a fancy gray colored Eastern suit with his ivory handled 1851 percussion Navy Colts strapped; butt forward, in ornate tooled leather Slim Jim holsters held up not with a leather belt but a red sash tied flamboyantly around his middle.

His wide brimmed low crowned plainsman hat, the brim curled up slightly all around the edge, sat at a jaunty angle to one side of his head. Long curls of light blond hair peeked from under his sombrero and drooped down on his shoulders, his mustache hung down past the corners of his mouth.

He sat at his table in a relaxed manner, legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed; his eyes moving, watching with constant effort. Emmitt noted Hickok as a desperate character and gave him no further mind.

The buckskin clad fellow slouched at the table with him, a slight, smaller and thinner man, sporting long dark blondish hair, a goatee and mustache on a taunt, deeply tanned and weathered face. He did not have the nervous, darting watchful eyes of Hickok, just the opposite.

He wore a beaded leather belt around his waist, a large Bowie knife stuffed inside a scabbard decorated also with colored beads; much like an Indian would wear. This provided an interesting

touch to his persona. He topped off his garb with a typical beat up sweat stained low crown, flat brim plainsman sombrero.

McGowan watched him with interest as the saloon clientele hovered around the two of them, joking and enjoying the presence of famous men.

He didn't know who the fella in buckskin was.

"Bill Cody."

Wha---? Emmitt turned, wincing at the movement and stared at the man who had taken the space at the bar next to him.

Mixed emotions ran through his mind, surprise, shock, anger and then pleasure. This was one character Emmitt acknowledged as dangerous to know, but he also respected and sometimes even liked him.

"I'll be. ----- Hello Wes," McGowan stuck out his hand.

"How've you been doing?" he exclaimed to the darkly dressed man next to him.

John Wesley Hardin, stood next to Emmitt, wearing a full Western cut business suit, gray charcoal with darker stripes, white pleated shirt and string tie; on his head he sported a new sombrero in pale gray, flat brim with a tall peaked crown which he wore squarely centered on his brow. The silver Conchos decorating the hatband glinted in the orange/yellow oil lamps of the saloon.

His long face reflected the saloons yellow lights, displaying his straight dark eyebrows, mustache and wavy hair which showed cut fresh up over his ears.

A slight bulge protruded from under his coat, the grip of his ever present Colt printed against the cloth, hidden out of sight due to the ordinance prohibiting the open carrying of firearms in the city limits.

"Just fine Pard. It's been a couple of years ain't it?" Hardin answered, signaling the bartender for a shot of rye whisky. He seemed at ease, he always looked that way around those he trusted and respected.

"Yeah, back in 68 or 67 wasn't it?"

"Three years by my count; what are you drinking?"

"Lemonade," McGowan said in a low voice, "I can't hold anything else down right now. Got pretty drunk last night!"

"Yeah seems to me you barfed on everything in the alley out back of the Bull Pen, and then passed out."

"You're who took care of me? I thought I'd been dreaming."

"You sure put one on Pard; any particular reason?" Hardin asked laughing at Emmitt's escapade the night before.

"Yeah, sorta, we got paid and you remember Miguel? The old cook who made those stuffed tortillas you liked so much on the drive we did together?"

Hardin nodded in acknowledgment.

"Pa sent me a wire; was waiting for me here. Some son-of-a-bitch killed him while attempting to rob my family. He jumped in front of Pa and took a bullet in the heart; saved Pa's life."

Hardin shook his head again, "Who did the shooting?"

"A bandito named Rebe la Cosa, trying to make a name for his self by robbing ranches and folks traveling alone on the trail in their wagons. You know the Nueces strip is pretty bad with bandits n' such!"

Hardin focused his eyes on the glass in his hand, "Sorry for Miguel. I've never heard of la Cosa. You were close to Miguel weren't you?"

"Yeah, with Pa away fighting the Yankees and Ma trying to make ends meet I went to Galveston looking for work. I met Miguel on the docks and he helped me get a berth as a deck hand on a fast cargo schooner running Yankee blockades out of Galveston, then later Corpus Christi, down to Mexico and Jamaica in 64 and 65.

He took me under his wing, taught me to box and handle a knife and to fight dirty. I was fourteen on that first voyage.

After the war I found him in Galveston, brought him to Pa's ranch and Pa gave him a job. An old sailor, 'beached' he liked to say; educated me on life a lot, growing up in them days."

John Wesley Hardin sipped his rye and nodded, quiet and brooding. Finally he reached into his left pocket where kept his hand, "That's a hell of a name, Rebe the thing?" he laughed then continued.

"67, remember? You loaned me your Griswold to fight them Mexie's," he said, returning to their previous topic.

McGowan's smile dropped a little as he remembered, "Yeah Wes, I do, have never forgotten those days. You and Brown Bowen finished them fellas off," his stomach churned a moment, as he recalled the six Mexican's gunned down because their cattle came too close to the herd that he, Wes and some of the others were driving to Missouri. His first out of state drive.

He was seventeen and shortly after the shooting, with the help of Ben Maxwell, he pulled his pa's cattle out of the collection of beeves, not happy with Hardin's behavior as trail boss after the shootout.

Bowen, Gipson, Clements, Baker, Duderstodt and Ben stayed with Hardin. Miguel and three others worked his small bunch of cows.

"Yeah, that wasn't all though, them Comanche's I got tangled up with later, damn near had me done in if it weren't for you riding in; screaming and hollering like a demon from hell."

"Well, if I'd known it was you, I'd might not been so eager to charge those braves," Emmitt laughed.

Hardin laughing, slapped McGowan on the back, "I reckon you could be right. Anyhow," he dropped his voice, "You kept your word and to the best of knowledge you haven't spoken of it to anyone. I'm much obliged. My reputation, you understand, is important!"

He pulled out his left hand from his coat pocket, holding a brown paper wrapped package.

"I suppose I won't get to ever return the favor, so I want to give you a gift you can keep. I'll be famous here pretty soon and this'll be worth something later," he placed the small package on the bar in front of McGowan.

"I've been carrying this thing for some time waiting to run into you again."

"You're already famous now Wes," Emmitt replied opening the wrapped paper where he found a heavily engraved, gold cased ,railroad issued, pocket-watch, a Hamilton Standard.

Emmitt opened the case to examine the ornate gold numerals and read the script on the inside of the lid.

TO

E.A. McGOWAN

THANKS

J.W. HARDIN

"I don't rightly know what to say. I do need a good timepiece," he turned the shiny golden case over and over, rubbing the deep engraving in the metal with his fingers.

"Don't utter a word. I owe my life to you. That is the only time I believe I was actually scared," Hardin said quietly.

"I'd wish you'd done better with it."

Hardin surveyed the crowd around Cody and Hickok then stared into Emmitt's eyes, conveying the message that he was one of few men Hardin would allow to criticize him about his life and the direction he has taken; his father, a Methodist minister and his brother, of the same occupation, the others.

"Well, we all get a reputation one way or another; Question is who is gonna live longest."

"I don't have one. Never did, nor have most of these fellas here."

"Yeah, you will someday, probably after you're long gone, but it'll happen. And them to," he added, nodding toward a group of drovers, some who had worked with Emmitt and his herd.

"These cattle drives won't last forever with the railroad making its way all over Texas. Soon this will be history and y'all be part of that story."

Emmitt set the time and after winding the main spring, put the watch in his vest pocket and glanced at the crowd around Hickok and Cody.

"Bill Cody huh, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yep, he and Hickok go back a long ways."

"Taken different roads though, as we did," Emmitt remarked.

"Yeah, like us," Hardin said quietly. He slapped Emmitt again on the shoulder, turned and finished his rye whiskey then stared at Emmitt closely.

"You take care of yourself Pard. Perhaps we'll meet up somewhere someday."

Emmitt grabbed Hardin's hand, gripping it tightly as he shook it, looking him hard in the eyes.

"So long, Wes!"

Hardin scanned the room and then took his leave. Emmitt reached back to the bar for his lemonade and moments later a finger tapped on his shoulder. He glanced around and found Hickok standing behind him.

"The fella who you were a talking to is he a friend of yours?"

"Yeah Marshal, he's an acquaintance," Emmitt smiled, sensing the hair on his neck standup.

"Well cow pusher, I'll tell you like I told him. You cause any ruckus in my town and you'll have to answer to me," Hickok

snarled, his face getting close to McGowan's, his breath sour with stale beer.

"I hear you Marshal. There'll be no trouble."

"Good!" Hickok growled before he stalked back to the table where his guest and admirers clustered, satisfied he had made his point.

McGowan realized Cody was staring at him as if appraising cattle; then apparently satisfied he returned his attention to two freight haulers who never stopped asking questions.

Emmitt reached for a new batch of crackers the bartender had set out and wondered why did he always have the sensation he was standing on the edge of impending disaster when around Hardin? He shrugged his shoulders and bit into a cracker.

"So, you saved his life on the drive huh?" Maxwell snorted, "What'd you do?"

McGowan shook his head and pushed his mug out for Jeb to refill.

"I can't say, promised you understand. I reckoned I talked too much already."

"I figured it were something to do with Indians," Ben responded quietly, "His attitude to the rest of us changed after he come a walking in to camp on foot one afternoon, claiming his horse had broken its leg in a prairie dog hole. But we'd been seeing signs of Kickapoo or Comanche for two, three days so we all thought he'd run into some kind of Indian trouble.

Ben rubbed his face with his left hand, "We wondered why they were so far east and finally decided they'd be a looking for stray cattle and horses to steal from herds like ours along the Cherokee Strip."

"I think I made a big mistake, staying with his herd instead of riding with your'ns. Don't worry pard," he said glancing over toward McGowan, "I'll take what you told me to my grave, if necessary. I don't need him a coming after me. He ain't gonna hang and he won't stay in prison long. He's way too mean and smart, even for a fella as young as he is."

Ben scratched his chin in thought and continued, "Hell, he was the trail boss and seventeen like you but a proven killer. He'd grown up real quick, as we all did in this country, just he grew wrong."

Emmitt nodded his head yes in response to his friend's statements. Hardin would avoid hanging somehow and might not stay locked up long but not live to be an old man either.

This is the kind of fellow he was.

Some of it was not his fault, only the way a lot people perceived him because of the Sutton-Taylor feud he was involved in.

A number of folks got themselves shot trying to make a name for themselves in that fracas and he had become one of the few survivors whom no one wanted to face off or turn their back to.

Wes will likely get it in the back someday; much like Hickok did recently as no man alive had a chance facing him.

"Where do you go from here?" Ben asked, wiping his mustache with a bar towel. He'd had enough for the day.

"Like I said," Emmitt replied after finishing off his second beer and setting the mug down, "I want to visit the folks awhile, after that, I'll have to check with the Coalition."

Ben peered at Emmitt closely, "Thinking of quitting?"

"Not sure. I am tired of the cold weather up there."

"You're one of them South Texas boys and your blood will always be thin. I'll ride along with you if you don't mind? Got friends and kin in San-Ann-tone I ain't seen in quite a spell," Ben grinned, "The Coalition can do without us for a while."

"Mr. McGowan?"

Emmitt glanced over his right shoulder toward the man standing inside the doorway who called his name. He groaned then nodded in acknowledgement and returned his attention back to his drink.

"Damn!" he cursed under his breath.

"Problem?" Ben asked in the same hushed tone.

"Yeah, one of them ranchers from Round Rock," he mumbled down into his shirt as Worthington, dressed in a dark brown eastern cut suit, gray sombrero with a double dimpled crown in his hands, walked up behind him. He was wiping nervous sweat off his balding head.

"Mr. McGowan, may I take a moment of your time?"

"I suppose," he replied turning around to face Worthington, "I ain't changed my mind though."

"I understand, but please hear me out?" he asked and not waiting for an answer he began.

"The group of ranchers from Williamson and Travis counties; I being one of them, wired the Northwest Texas Cattle Coalition to inquire about our request for membership as we said the other evening when we spoke to you," he paused to see if Emmitt would respond.

Not observing a reaction he continued.

"That application is still under consideration; however, they understand the seriousness of livestock being stolen statewide and of our plight and suggested we form our own coalition.

They wired us back, noting their roundups aren't scheduled until the early spring and since things are quiet in their part of the state, we may use your services until then, provided you agree."

McGowan stared hard at Worthington for so long Worthington began to feel uneasy.

He added, "The situation with our cattle being rustled is getting out of hand and we've lost another man.

We told you this when we first approached you. Tempers are extremely short and there's talk of lynching Jenkins outright. Those who still control their senses are afraid a range war will erupt if this thing isn't settled!"

"Do tell?" Emmitt smirked, glancing over at Ben.

"Yes sir, a fact," Worthington stated, not batting an eye to the insult Emmitt implied, "Look, I and my associates are regretful you were shot at by one of our own people. But he paid the price and this shows you how far everything has come!

We are desperate Mr. McGowan! We're in need of a fellow who has the ability to solve this problem before other mistakes are made!"

Worthington hesitated a moment before continuing.

"We believe you are the one for the job Mr. McGowan. An outsider is needed with no ties to anyone here but also someone we can trust to find out who is behind the rustling!"

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a brown envelope from which he extracted two sheets of paper with, Emmitt perceived, to be some kind of official looking header on one and handed them to Emmitt.

"I have been authorized by the Travis and Williamson County Rancher's Coalition-----," he paused to explain, "We formed an association of our own, as suggested, for legal reasons, until we are accepted into the Northwest Coalition. I have been

authorized," he started to repeat himself then stopped to collect his wits. Sweat had broken out on his forehead again. This man made him nervous.

"To offer you the same wages paid by the Northwest Texas Cattle Coalition plus a bonus of one thousand dollars with the apprehension and conviction of the rustlers or their demise," he added.

Maxwell snorted and turned away as Worthington realized his error in speech. He started to correct himself but decided it is better he did not. He wasn't going to apologize nor plead further; his insides are churning now from bowing to another of less stature.

What has this McGowan accomplished? All he has is his rifle and his horse, no ranch, tangible possessions or esteemed place in the community.

The Coalition be damned! He didn't like the pressure nor responsibility the others placed on him to face this man. Deep inside his being, he truthfully refused to acknowledge the reality he was frightened of McGowan; but he couldn't return to Round Rock to stand before the other ranchers empty handed. This tormented him even more.

Emmitt shook his head in disgust as he read the sheets of paper. The first, an official offer from the new Travis and Williamson County Coalition for his services, outlining what Worthington had said and listed the names of the members.

The second letter, a private one whose hand writing was much different from the first, written by a Texas Ranger Captain named Lee who, on behalf of the Coalition, requested he check into the troubles with the ranchers and 'report' any findings that would require action by the Rangers.

McGowan handed the Captain's letter to Ben to read; he knew most of the Ranger captains by name or reputation and although he was not privileged to know Lee personally, he was aware of the lawman's accomplishments.

And with this letter, he thought to himself, he would be working indirectly for the State, but with no real legal authority. Nothing has changed.

The money wasn't important; he was to be paid well. He just didn't want to hunt trouble without a badge to back him up. Not that it mattered much. Men with badges get hurt the same as anyone else,

but a tin star made relationships with other lawmen work smoother. San Angelo was a good example.

Ben chortled when he handed the letter back. Emmitt folded both letters, putting them in his coat pocket. The ranchers certainly could apply pressure, he mused.

"Friend, I appreciate the difficulties you and your compadre's are facing but I sure get the impression that y'all's needs and what you're expecting are two different things.

I told you before; I ain't a gun for hire. I'm not a shooter nor am I a man hunter. If y'all need an investigation for cattle thievery, I can oblige you, but it'll be done my way!

However, assuming you're looking for someone to do some killing for you; the answer is still no; this Coalition your friends formed must abide by my rules and allow me to do the job you're wanting to hire me for,"

He took a deep breath and continued, "I suppose I don't have too much choice, since I've now got the time; considering your friends arranged for my employer to allow me to be shanghaied," he ended rather sarcastically.

Worthington's face blushed and he stammered for a moment before he regained his composure enough to reply.

"I, ah--, a sure you Mr. McGowan, we want a legal investigation, not a range war!

If the culprits are found before the spring prior to you needing to leave for your employer, I am positive they will be brought to justice in a court of law; what with the new laws passed in 73 making cattle stealing a felony.

The Sheriff or the Rangers can take over with enough proof, which is all we ask; you find the evidence."

Emmitt stared hard into Worthington's eyes, searching for anything other than what he heard. He sighed and glazed out the dirty front windows of the tavern for several moments.

Worthington waited nervously, clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back as he kept glancing to Maxwell, as if hoping he would offer some kind of encouragement. None of course was given. About to burst with anxiety, he coughed when Emmitt spoke.

"I'm inclined to say yes to your proposal, however, I want to sleep on it and see to some affairs before I commit myself."

"That's agreeable," Worthington hastily answered, afraid to disagree to anything this man wanted for fear of his changing his mind.

"There is one thing."

"Yes?" Worthington's heart stuck in his throat.

"If ----- I take the job, I'm going to need assistance; ----- you're talking about a lot of country, five or six ranches."

"Seven," Worthington interrupted, "Plus several farmers who run stock also."

"Right -----," Emmitt looked at Maxwell, who nodded his unspoken approval, "Seven, and some farmers----- I want Ben Maxwell here, working with me at the same rates. I'll split the bonus with him. Two can cover more territory faster and maybe find something one man might overlook."

"I assure you that will be acceptable."

"Also, when we worked for the Northwest Coalition, they covered any expenses incurred."

"Expenses?"

"Grub stake. Beans, bread, jerky, extra blankets, pack horses, feed, Possible's such as that. We'll be spending a lot of time in the saddle but will need a place to stay, I am thinking that Inn in Round Rock."

Worthington looked relieved. "No problem. I will supply most of those from my ranch; the others can do the same as you require resupply. We will make arrangements with Mr. Gallagher for two rooms at his hotel."

"Another thing; I or Ben would be visiting each spread during our investigation. We'll need bread and board when not on the range and cooperation from the hands."

"Not a problem."

"Good, I'll give my answer in the morning. Good-day Mr. Worthington," Emmitt stuck his hand out and Worthington took it eagerly and shook hard.

Emmitt nodded to Ben and they left the tavern; Worthington following a few steps behind.

Worthington previously filled with apprehension but now relief, also felt chastised. He wasn't use to hired hands behaving toward him the way McGowan did. Men who normally would be under him as hirelings, didn't talk to him in such a manner and walk in front of him as this man did. It was a new experience for him.

In his position he gave orders, of men deferring to him as a southern officer during the war, before on his plantation in Georgia and now on his ranch.

In Round Rock, he had the respect of the merchants and the other ranchers. A few were superior to him, but none the less, of his ilk.

This man, McGowan, is different; aloof and extremely confident. Not given to follow anyone. He seemed to create a desire in men, by his mere presence, to place their trust in him and more important, to have him trust them.

Worthington realized to lose this from this man, would be disastrous. He was not a fellow to have against you, even if he professed to not being a gun thrower; he certainly could cause great harm if provoked.

After all, according to the Ranger Captain, McGowan rode once with Wes Hardin and was on friendly terms with him. This range detective apparently took a different road with his life but surely he must be cut from the same tough cloth!

Worthington understood from Charles Goodnight's letter, McGowan was a real Texan, tough, smart, and honest; unlike the deceptive, money grubbing, northern carpet-bagger types whom moved into the state during the Yankee occupation.

Goodnight described him as honest, if not stubborn, loyal to the brand as his record stood on its own and a stickler for justice, Frontier style when needed. And he was one of the best cattle theft detectives in Texas.

Goodnight had emphasized in his comments. 'Hombre's like McGowan are the pillars Texas is built on!'

Worthington was thankful he would be on their side as he followed the two outside the tavern, where Emmitt turned to him.

"I just remembered there is supposed to be a decision made tomorrow morning by a Senate committee that Maxwell and I have been testifying for. Afterwards, I'll meet you here, say around three o'clock and give my answer."

"Tomorrow afternoon will be fine,--- good day gents," Worthington said with the confidence he didn't possess earlier. He shook McGowan and Maxwell's hands again then walked up the dirt street toward the center of town; a much different man than the one who arrived in Austin the evening before.

Maxwell stared at Worthington's back as he walked off for a few moments and then realized Emmitt was half way across the street heading in the direction of the stables where he boarded Blu.

"Where the hell are you going Emmitt?"

"To find a horse doctor; I ain't got time to train another ride so I reckon I'll take Ol' Blu with me. I want to make sure he is healthy enough!"

Maxwell stood and watched his young friend walk off, shaking his head.

"You worry over that animal like some old woman," he called out as he pulled out a plug of tobacco from his coat pocket.

Emmitt raised his left hand in acknowledgment and disappeared down the dusty street.

BAD FEELING

Todd Jenkins shrugged off an uneasy feeling which suddenly flowed through his body as he sat on his Dunn colored mare watching his men separate the new 'strays' from his own cattle.

One pair stood by with their red hot irons; ready to re-brand each animal as a third man cut them from the herd. The two and three year olds, selected from the small collection first and driven to this hidden canyon, numbered less than the yearlings and calves which would follow.

It took a lot of care doing this type of work, a different kind of branding, a skill not practiced by the normal cowpuncher. The iron needed to be made sure at placement, covering the old brand perfectly.

If not the job would be ruined and the animal destroyed; its hide disposed of so no one will ever find any evidence of the fate of the critter.

Jacobs Keen and Calley Longman had re-branded a large number of cattle in the past, not only here in Texas, but in Kansas, Colorado and the New Mexico Territory also.

Experienced men, they had ridden with him for almost ten years, developing their skills and improving their techniques for rustling and hardening their souls to the human bloodshed which went along with their occupation.

Getting warmer with the progression of the day, the first hard cold spell having moved on, Jenkins pulled his heavy coat off and walked over to the cook's fire next to the supply cart for coffee.

He saw the coals turning grey with less of a red glow, as he poured a large cup full of the strong Arbuckle brew and tossed a couple of sticks of wood on the dying fire.

Sipping the hot mixture he continued to admire Jacobs and Calley working; slapping the glowing iron on the living hide of a

struggling animal the cutters had roped and dragged with their horses toward the branding fire.

Together they had weathered a lot of storms, cattle and posses'; instinctively understanding what the other was thinking and how each would react to any given situation. Of all the characters who had ridden with him, this pair he trusted with his life; both helping each other finesse the methods they used today.

The two possessed sharp, intelligent minds. Jacobs, an artist when it came to constructing branding irons that covered existing brands and Calley, the quickest and most precise man he had ever known with those devices.

He smiled to himself as Calley stooped and rolled one of the modified symbols over in the red embers at his feet, while Jacobs helped one of the wranglers wrestle a two year old over on its side, yelling.

"HOT IRON!"

Calley hollering back "HOT IRON COMING!" as he carried the glowing metal to the beast.

They had three brands in this fire, each different, to match the respective markings on the 'strays' mixed into the herd.

Calley laid his hot marker carefully over the existing brand of the calf held before him as the sizzle and stench of burning flesh intertwined with the bawling and excrement of the animal.

Jenkins men had rounded up mostly mavericks or calves, their mama's, yearlings and a few two and three year olds'. They belonged mainly to the largest ranches in the surrounding counties but if discovering unmarked young beeves wandering on other ranges, they were gathered also. They never kept older branded animals when picked up; however he planned to change that soon.

He had applied for four additional brands in three counties, one located a hundred miles from here. All registered to the five small spreads he purchased in those districts, under assumed aliases.

The new markers will cover over the symbols of six of the local ranches, making the count seven for him. Four under other names and three for the ranch he had won in a poker game from the old fool Perry.

Those young beeves are to be driven to the other established spreads where they will be accumulated while their hides healed from the branding and re-branding. Then in a couple of years moved

to Dodge on the north trail through Fort Worth, up the Goodnight route to Fort Sumner or on to Colorado.

He found this the easiest place in his entire rustling career to acquire. He and his men would find the mavericks and drifting groups of the other rancher's cattle; most of the time, along the Colorado River where the owners let their herds graze over the green grass and drive them up one of the numerous arroyos and smaller canyons which sliced into the rim of the larger canyon.

The two year olds and older beeves they separated and drove back three or four miles from the collection point. Afterwards, the branded calves and young unbranded mavericks, they pushed up the river to a crossing near Marble Falls where they mixed with his own secret herd held on a ranch west of the beautiful cascade of water and rocks.

His method proved slow but it also made things harder to establish rustling was going on.

This would change as well. The mavericks belonged to who ever found and branded them. Lately the numbers had been getting smaller as his men scrounged the country side, so the amount of yearlings and older marked calves, cows and heifers they took increased as did the risk.

Jenkins grinned to himself. The quantity available this year should be a lot less than previous years for the ranchers and he understood they would throw a fit. Yet they will not be able to prove rustling despite suspicion of him and his boys. The stock owners, careless with their property, would not know what was missing until roundup.

Those who stumbled onto their operation were dealt with harshly. A procedure he had followed elsewhere for years and no one ever knew who he and his men were, or suspicious enough of their activities to investigate them.

Any who had information never lived to tell anyone; all who stuck their noses where it didn't belong ended up dead.

So far the count tallied three with this operation; the third died this morning making the mistake of following a suspicious cow trail too far north through the thick cotton woods and oak along the edge of the river.

Calley took care of him and dismembered and spread his body parts among the jagged black rocks high above the east river

bank where it's very unlikely to be found except by hungry animals. No corpse meant no proof of anything. The unlucky rider just left the territory!

Jenkins smiled at his own shrewdness. For years he had stolen small herds of cattle, always a few jumps ahead of a posse, sometimes having to abandon them when the law (or the owners) closed in.

He learned though, from the accumulation of each experience, he developed the concept for this operation. He only needed the right mix of territory and complacent ranchers.

And he found it!

He grinned at his good fortune. He had, by accident, stumbled on to this string of valleys along the Colorado. Cattle roamed in abundance, ready for the taking and the ranchers so complacently stupid in their lack of vigilance for rustlers. Not like the barons in West Texas or elsewhere.

With next to no activities concerning rustling going on when he arrived; he and his men were successful in keeping any suspicions down. To acquire a ranch had been his first objective and finding a fool with his money, a rancher hot headed enough to make several mistakes, came easily.

Perry proved an easy mark; he made it simple to destroy his family. His son, much like his father, stumbled foolishly into circumstances arranged for him to commit a crime. And the wife, so lonely and desperate for attention, fell into an unpardonable sin with Jenkins.

All these character flaws in the Perry family led to Jenkins' owing Perry's ranch.

Jenkins smiled again to himself, comfortable with the progression of this venture. His ultimate goal, to have the biggest cattle operation in Texas and become a respectable cattleman, with the power and trimmings which came with such status, is visible in the distance. He figured by spring roundups he'd be sitting pretty and he'd focus on real ranching.

Despite the success he achieved, something ticked at the back of his mind. He glanced up to the distant cliffs towering about the river basin, where the lookouts kept watch for unwanted visitors, and wondered if he had all the angles covered as he returned his attention to his branders.

"How y'all doing Calley?" he asked, taking another sip of coffee.

"Howdy boss, doing real good; we got us a goodly haul of calves this time," he said as he spit out brown tobacco juice into the fire pit at his feet.

"That's what I want to hear. I'd like to get them done today and get of here," Jenkins retorted finishing his coffee and throwing the grounds into the hot ashes, "Push the men if you have to. I got a feeling."

Calley looked up from where he was squatting, rolling the irons in the coals.

"Bad one?"

"Naw, just a feeling," Jenkins replied as he turned to his Dunn mare.

Jacobs walked back over to Calley after wrestling a calf and observed the concern on the gunman's face as their leader rode off down the arroyo toward the river, disappearing into the trees.

"Trouble?"

"Dun-no, the boss has got one of his feelings. Wants us to finish today and move them'."

"I guess we'd better do what he says. His feelings ain't ever been wrong yet," Jacobs commented and turned to the next calf being dragged to them, squalling.

Calley grunted in agreement as he rolled an iron in the embers, wondering if Jenkins was spooked from the killing earlier in the morning. Trouble might be following the dead ranch hand, he concluded.

"HOT IRON!"

"HOT IRON COMING!" Calley hollered picking up a glowing red branding iron.

MISS VERNA ROSE GALLAGER

Verna Gallagher stared closely into her swinging mirror while sitting at her vanity, examining the small lines appearing around her eyes each time she squinted. She leaned close to get a better look and then sat back sighing as she picked a loose hair off the left sleeve of her blue silk robe.

She was slightly worried. They didn't fade as quickly as they did last year and her freckles had grown larger next to her nose instead of fading, thanks to the hot Texas sun.

She also detected what appeared to be white strands of hair growing from her temples.

Again examining her face in the mirror, she groaned wishing she had her mother's dark olive and creamy smooth skin, instead of her father's lighter coloring. Although of mixed blood, as many women in Texas are, she would have preferred a slightly darker complexion.

Her mother had remained beautiful and young appearing up to her death, she remembered as she ran a brush through her long auburn hair.

She shook her head slowly, worried about getting old before her time. Her twenty fourth birthday is coming in three weeks and she recalled how traumatic last year proved to be and not married. Most women her age had a spouse for six or seven years and several children.

She reminded herself they also had aged, many appearing like they were in their thirties or older. She continued to appear young, but never-the-less unmarried.

She put the brush down thinking about her father.

She was aware of his concern also, although he never said anything. He had been encouraged when Josh Bedham, a ranch hand

who worked for Mr. Kinkade's outfit, tried to court her after she arrived home almost three years ago.

She considered strongly the temptation until she met his sister; a woman two years younger than her and married six years with five children. Verna recollected how old the young mother seemed, heavy, tired and already showing deep lines in her face.

The hard, lonely ranch or farm life was not for her, nor a large number of children. It had been difficult to discourage Josh, but she didn't want what he offered.

She preferred working with her father in this hotel, having inherited the business trait from her grandmother and him. After the encounter with Josh's sister, she liked it even more.

The enterprise allowed her to meet interesting people and a few not so much; folks who traveled through Round Rock on their way to the big Texas cities and elsewhere. Some who are wealthy and many who weren't.

She sighed and started brushing her hair again.

Some of the travelers stayed a few days to rest from their journeys and she got to know them a little. She liked that, she thought to herself as she stopped again and held the brush in her lap.

Glazing at her image she started thinking about the lanky cattleman who passed through last month. The one who had to stay in town until cleared of the death of poor Kev Perry.

A handsome looking man in appearance she remembered. A little above average height, five feet eight inches or more; broad shouldered and trim waist, deep brown wide set eyes crowned with thick eyebrows, strong nose and short cropped brown hair he parted in the middle, his sideburns stopping at the bottom of his ears. He had a big dark bushy mustache he kept trimmed just below the corners of his mouth with a little gray mixed in.

She also remembered he had a square chin and sharp jaw line and possessed a happy smile, his thin lips disappearing as he revealed his clean even teeth.

His eyes twinkled when he did smile; at least at her.

He appeared to be a friendly if shy man. Not at all a killer as the rumors said, still things do happen in this wild country, she shrugged.

Verna started to frown as she pulled the loose hair from her brush.

The lanky cattleman had shot Mr. Perry in self-defense. However, the event didn't seem to bother him.

He did not boast nor mourned the incident or his actions, not in public anyway. Quiet and pleasant to almost everyone, she remembered he was in a hurry to get to Austin.

She wondered if he had a conscience.

She started thinking about that evening in the dining room when the local ranchers propositioned him and the way he listened and laughed at them. They represented a lot of money and power in Williamson County; they could have made things difficult for him over Mr. Perry and yet he laughed at them.

The sheriff didn't seem to faze him either, only delayed his business, which appeared to irritate him a little.

Verna finished brushing her hair, laid the comb down and glazed deep into her own dark blue eyes.

She was curious if anything frightened him? Soon, maybe she would find out. She recently learned through her father of his returning.

Mr. Worthington had convinced him to help track down the rustlers and missing men and cattle.

Her father had also told her of what he had learned concerning this man, whose family name is McGowan. The ranchers all talked about him, saying he is an experienced cattleman in his own right having trailed beeves north in his youth, and spent time working for Charles Goodnight, the former partner of the late Oliver Loving.

He also had lawman experience and was currently employed with the cattle consortium in northwest Texas as a range detective.

She prayed he could help before things came to a terrible end between the local cattlemen and Mr. Jenkins.

Verna smiled at all her questions in her mind about this McGowan. His likes, dislikes, his family, how was he raised she wondered?

The thought of his returning excited her and not understanding why she felt this way brought a smile to her lips; to see him again proved enough she reasoned; for now.

JEFFERY

The weather had turned clear and warm again by November 7th, 1877, as a few straggling birds were still winging their way south above the dry, white grasses of the Texas prairie.

The wind blew from the southeast, rustling the fall leaves of brown, reds and yellows loose from the limbs of trees.

Hungry squirrels chatter could scarcely be heard over the wind, if one stopped to listen, as rabbits rummaged playfully through the crackling foliage, looking for food to store for the winter.

Bucks fought one another, as only male deer do, over the favor of doe's in heat. They'd lower their heads and rush headlong at their foe among the evergreen cedars, red and live oaks and golden leaf cottonwoods; their antlers clacking loudly together at the end of each grunting charge, both seeking to wound or kill their opponent.

Black bears sat still and awaited the outcome; happy to eat the losers and sometimes the victors, food for storing up fat for their long sleep, while hidden in the shadows, coyotes and cougars hunted all a fore mentioned creatures, not caring which season it was; their only concern their stomachs.

Other predator's stalked the land also and like the coyote and cougar, they looked for easy prey, to fatten their store of ill-gotten property.

No one recognized the signs that the winter and coming year, for both the creatures of Texas and for the citizens of Round Rock and the surrounding ranches, promised to be hard and difficult.

The season change seemed to be put on hold for the day as the temperature was hot when Emmitt, in his shirt sleeves, rode into this small town for the third time in a month. Not alone as before however; Ben Maxwell accompanied him; both men leading pack horses.

Fresh memories rendered Emmitt silent as he contemplated the last visit he had in this place pulling a laden animal, which carried a body instead of the equipment he and Ben had purchased in Austin on Worthington's credit.

Ben, aware of his partner's silence, leaned away from his mare to spit out the wad of tobacco he had been chewing and adjusted the short barreled converted .38 caliber New Police Colt hidden in a leather lined pocket inside his vest; he studied the people going about their daily business.

"I have never paid much attention to this burg the many times I passed through here, but it appears to have grown a mite," he said watching a wagon being unloaded of bundles of new brooms and carried into a large warehouse waiting for shipping; newly manufactured in another building further along the same avenue.

"Sure did not think I'd ever be a working in this part of the country," he added.

Emmitt glanced over at him, "How so?"

"Muy tranquillo, least I thought so; just a sleepy stop between Austin and them cities and towns up north; all central like and close to Austin, never was much in the way of Indian raids.

I don't remember hearing of problems with cattle thieves; just mostly farmers located here, at least what I recollect.

If'n there were trouble of any kind, it'd be from outlaws like Longley, or the James boys but with Longley hanged and Jessie done in with their thieving up north, ain't no one local I know of who'd fool with hotels, banks and them new trains," he spat again and added, "Not much work here for the likes of us.

"Till now," Emmitt commented.

Ben contemplated for a few moments on Emmitt's comment before answering, "Yup, till now; surprising how things can happen, I suppose the rail road coming here is the reason for all this activity."

Emmitt McGowan didn't reply as he eye'd the town's population, who, busy with their chores and errands, passed around them as their horses walked east on the main avenue, pass the sheriff's post and the saloon he spent time in and, then into the business district, past the Williamson County Bank, Koppel's general mercantile store and the broom factory across the street, the barber's parlor and the railroad telegraph office.

Activity seemed even more pronounced down the side streets leading off a short distance toward the rail station with its

warehouse's and back the opposite direction on Mays Street. He remembered one of the two livery stables located there and one in the old district.

The white limestone buildings fronting the avenue contrasted sharply with the wooden structures branching away into the distance behind them, running along Brushy Creek that Ben commented on.

The older section which now seemed to be mostly a sleepy shanty village housed a mixture of poor White, Negro and Mexican family's.

He had seen, from a distance, clothes hanging out in the wind to dry unattended. The male inhabitants probably working the quarry some miles distant or in someone's crops field while the wives toiled inside cooking their men's evening meals.

Here, in the middle of Round Rock's bustling business district, there was much more activity, however, few paid much attention to them.

Some men, busy constructing three new buildings on each side of the avenue, stacking the local quarried white limestone into walls which later would support a roof, did not even glance their way.

Emmitt noted how short people's memories appeared. He had been on this street several weeks ago attracting a lot of attention and yet he and his blue roan were not recognized today. Not more than a month ago they looked at him as a possible murderer, most assuredly a shootest.

Today they were two travelers passing through the town on this warm and windy late fall day, nothing important.

Even the sheriff hadn't appeared nor his deputy which surprised Emmitt, for the lawman gave him the impression of not wandering away very far from his office or his town.

They rode past the business district and its stone buildings onto the next two blocks bare of businesses other than a warehouse and a cobblers shop on the left, a storage field for baled cotton ready to ship and a lumber yard both, on the right with easy access to the rail depot.

Round Rock was growing; fueled as Ben noted, by the year old train depot. Prosperity was quickly coming to the small community, Emmitt mused.

After reaching their destination, he and Ben reined in their horses and dismounted in front of the hotel named Gallagher's Inn, on the east end of George Town Ave across from the wood framed building which housed the Post Office and a stone building housing a carriage blacksmith shop.

The Inn, a two story wooden structure with ten guest rooms was huge compared to most of the other buildings on this main street.

Painted white with sky-blue gingerbread trim, the building complete with a high turret on the southwest front corner was crowned with a gabled, steep slate roof and featured a large covered veranda with railing painted to match the blue trim.

Various types of gimbal rocking or cane wicker chairs scattered around on the grey painted wood decking, completed the picture.

Emmitt knew in the back a staircase stretched from the ground to the upper rooms for guests to enter and exit privately if desired. A four stall privy with lockable doors, no more than thirty yards from the end of the stairs, provided privy privacy.

He counted twenty windows on both floors and mused again how impressive this building is, compared to the low limestone buildings just two blocks away in the business district and a short convenient ten minute walk from the train depot.

McGowan went inside to confirm their rooms while Maxwell started unloading their animals, setting their gear on the wooden sidewalk fronting the private hotel.

A small boy, of about eight years, stood off to one side and watched Maxwell work.

"Howdy Mister!"

Maxwell glanced over the back of his pack horse and studied the child. A vision of dirty bare feet and hands sticking out of pants and coat too small for the boy presented itself to him. Fluid ran out of the left nostril of the boys nose which he wiped every so often on the sleeve of the stained tattered midnight blue wool jacket.

His unkempt light red hair stood up on end with each burst of wind blowing down the street. Olive skin, too dark for a redhead, showed darker from the dust and dirt on his hands, face and feet.

Maxwell especially noted how luminous the child's eyes are, almost like two blue lights. Predatory blue; Maxwell mused as he

remembered coming across a few wolves with orbs that bright. They were shrewd, intelligent and cunning. He wondered if that could be applied to a human child also.

If this boy was cleaned up he would be pretty Maxwell decided.

"Howdy yourself!" he said pulling the ropes free from the canvas panniers as he side stepped the splashing puddle the dun colored gelding created with its urine.

"What-cha got there mister?"

"Possibles," he replied as he moved around the animal to pull loose a rope that hung up, "Say, why ain't you in school?"

"Teachers sick. -- You need help?"

"Where's your ma?"

"She's working for Mr. Kopperal's at his store. Kin I help you carry some of your Possibles?" he asked, taking a few steps closer.

"Where's your pa?"

"He daid; got killed trailing cows when I wore little," he answered flatly. His manner indicated he is not asking for sympathy.

"You're little now!" Ben growled.

"Way-ell," the boy stared at his feet. "When I where littler; kin I help with your Possibles? I kin carry some for five cents!"

Maxwell stopped a moment, thinking, as he searched those blue eyes.

"Say, I like a hombre who wants to work for pay; shows where his priorities are! Stand clear until I get this here gear on the ground," Maxwell ordered grinning as he unloaded the two pack horses.

McGowan just finished signing his name and Ben's in the registrar's book when Verna Gallagher walked up behind him.

"Well, look whose back in town," she murmured softly.

Emmitt glanced down over his left shoulder recognizing the young woman; he turned and smiled removing his Stetson.

"Howdy Miss," he grinned, "Nice to see you again!"

"Really.... nice to see you too ----- my name is Verna," she said coolly as she held out her hand.

Emmitt accepted her offered hand by grasping her fingers. He was immediately startled by her softness of skin and her underlying strength as she closed her fingers, capturing his hand.

"Well, uh, Miss Verna, I guess me and my pard will be lodging here for a while," he said not knowing what else to say, her eyes were swallowing him up as he stood there.

Silence reigned uncomfortably for several moments until Verna's father coughed and held out the keys to the rooms Emmitt and Ben were assigned. Emmitt quickly let go of her and snatched them, relieved of the awkward moment.

At the same time, the glass rattled in the front double doors as they banged open. Ben Maxwell struggled in with heavy canvas pannier packs, one hanging on each arm, and sat them down in the center of the lobby.

He is followed by the red haired boy, who fought to carry, almost dragging, a pair of saddle bags.

When the youngster stepped his bare feet on the red/green area carpet that covered most of the floor, the leather pouches dropped on the polished wood flooring behind him and dragged, bunching up the edge of the rug around his heels, which pulled him off balance as he attempted to heave the bags up on his shoulder.

Down he went, spinning, landing on his back. A loud 'clump' shook the room. The boy's feet shot straight up into the air, pant legs sliding down to his knees, his limbs wobbling in circles for several moments before returning to the wood.

At the same time, the saddle bags landed on his chest, stomach and face, eliciting a muffled 'umph!'

Almost total silence reined for many seconds; only the sound of the ticking Regulator grandfather clock, standing behind the registrar desk, could be heard as everyone turned to the large lump of child and leather at the edge of the red/green rug.

Maxwell, McGowan and Mr. Gallagher stared amazed at the waving dirty feet until they fell back to earth. Verna, the first to react, ran to the pile of saddlebags, red hair, arms and legs.

"Oh you poor dear!" she cried, "Are you hurt?" she asked as she pulled the heavy leather bags off the child.

"No ma'am," he answered from the floor, looking up at her and rolled his eyes up at Maxwell before he sheepishly crawled to his feet; his ears turning crimson, matching his hair.

"I sorter tripped."

"You sure as hell did boy!" Maxwell roared out in laughter.

The burning red spread across his face as he grinned with embarrassment. Everyone started laughing, except Verna, whose features turned dark also, but not from embarrassment.

She helped the youngster pick up the saddlebags and set them down with the canvas panniers. Turning slowly, she faced Maxwell, her arm around the boy. The expression on her face brought a halt to the laughter.

"Why in God's name did you make this child carry those heavy bags?" she asked, as she shook visibly, trying to control herself, "Jeffery could have hurt himself!"

Maxwell was caught off guard by her cold, blue stare. He couldn't answer. It had been too many years since a beautiful lady had glared at him, venting her temper as her eyes bored through him.

Almost powerless, he lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. Jeffery came to his aid.

"I hired on to carry them bags Miss Verna. He gonna pay me five cents for carrying what I could," he said looking up at her as he pulled on her skirt.

"Jeffery, they were way too heavy for you to carry," she replied softly, moving her hands over his hair, smoothing it. Her voice calming as she spoke.

"Naw, it were for your rug tripping me up, that's all."

She looked up from the child at Maxwell; anger still blazing in her eyes; her words cold enough to freeze the heart of a grizzly bear.

"Mister?"

"It's Maxwell, ma'am," Ben replied, clearing his throat involuntarily.

"Mister Maxwell, you ought to have more sense than to let such a small child carry so much weight," she commented with quiet coolness.

Maxwell, feeling quite a bit shorter than his six feet two inches, peered questioningly down at the boy.

"Them bags too heavy for you Jeff?" he asked with a softness Emmitt, in all the years he had known Ben, had never heard before.

"No Sir, I just tripped." Jeffery said embarrassedly.

He looked up at Verna Gallagher, "Miss Gallagher, Mister Maxwell was gonna pay me to help him with his Possibles. It ain't his fault I fell down," he pleaded, bowing his head down he

mumbled, "Now I ain't gonna get paid on account of my being clumsy," he drawled with heartbreaking sadness.

Her heart pained and flustered by the reasoning of the child, Verna stood in silence and stared at the boy. In an instant, he had defeated her anger, drained her strength for this fight with this old Texan and had reminded her of the hidden conflict within her heart of the knowledge of his and his mother's plight.

Her own memories of what she saw in the eastern cities during her school days, of the broken backs of children, slaved to industry without mercy, retreated back into the recesses of her mind.

"Get your head up boy," Maxwell growled in a soft voice, "Never whine about mistakes, just fess up, correct them and go on!"

He took the child by the shoulders and with tenderness directed him toward the leaded glass double doors.

"Come on Pard, we still got things to bring in," he said more for Miss Gallagher's benefit than Jeffery's.

Verna stood watching the two walk out as she remained in place until she realized other eyes were on her; Emmitt, her father and another guest who happened down the stairs. As well as the cook, who had wandered in with a question about the evening meal which he had quickly forgotten.

All waited in silence, not daring to move a muscle, until they were sure things had returned to normal with this beautiful woman who had turned into a hell cat. There was no desire among any of them to suffer the same as Maxwell.

Verna, her thunder gone and not wanting to continue this conversation with anyone for fear of losing her composure, kept her chin up and eyes focused in front of her as she walked past Emmitt, around the registrar desk, behind her father and through the door that led to the kitchen. Her lace-up boot heels pounding with an authoritative rumble on the rug and wooden floor.

The cook, Juan, also not wishing to crowd her, followed several steps back as he nervously wiped his hands on his yellow stained apron. His eyes rolling to the proprietor for assurance his daughter would not spend her remaining fury on him.

McGowan exchanged glances with the guest who still stood at the bottom of the stairs and the owner of the Inn; amusement and questions filled his eyes.

Fred Gallagher shrugged his shoulders, his face turning pink between his white old fashioned mutton sideburns. He stammered, "Well, ----- gentlemen, I ---- I surely do apologize -- for my daughters manners.

She picked up some peculiar ideas back east during her school days. It doesn't justify her attack on your partner though," he finished saying, directing his last statement toward Emmitt.

"Well, I reckon it did no harm to Ol Ben," McGowan replied grinning, "He is due for a hollering by a pretty lady anyhow, just to set his priorities straight," he winked, "He's been living with cows so long he doesn't remember how to act around women folk."

"Never-the-less, my daughter has better manners than this and I apologize," Gallagher said again, his demeanor returned.

"I honestly don't know what's gotten into her lately. She's been easy to upset," he stopped and searched the young Texan's eyes for understanding, knowing he should not say so much to a stranger.

Family affairs were a private matter and Gallagher was shocked at his own lack of discreetness. Strangers would not understand the stress he and his daughter and the town were under.

Emmitt nodded and picked up one of the panniers and his saddlebags then proceeded up the stairs.

Gallagher glazed up at him, realizing perhaps with this man here now, the precipice he sensed looming in the immediate future for his town, might be avoided. A cold shudder ran down his spine as he worried for his daughter's and his safety.

STARTING THE NEW JOB

The following morning was half over before Emmitt and Ben were in their saddles again, riding south on the Austin road before turning off to the west on a well-used wagon trail toward Worthington's ranch.

Breakfast, eaten with haste by Ben who excused himself from the table before Verna Gallagher could approach him with the pretext of needing to purchase a few items from the mercantile store, lingered for Emmitt.

Emmitt sat watching Miss Gallagher wait on the other customers during breakfast. He wished to speak to her, given an opportunity, but not having any idea what he would say if he had the free moment.

She finally broke the ice, after pouring him his fourth cup of coffee, by inquiring of 'Mister Maxwell's health' and did 'Mister Maxwell' possess hard feelings toward her for her outburst yesterday.

Emmitt stumbled through an assurance to her Ben held no such thoughts, bringing a smile from her face which froze him to his chair.

She exited the dining room afterwards and did not return. Emmitt gave into the need to rid his self of too much coffee and left for the privy behind the Inn.

He waited later with the horses for Maxwell, pacing up and down in the front of the stables, twice having to relieve himself 'out back' again of the excess coffee.

Ben finally returned, meandering up the street around nine o'clock. Emmitt began to complain about the time but stopped when he realized Ben seemed strangely somber.

They saddled up without a word spoken and rode for over an hour before Ben spoke.

"Sure seems like an Indian summer coming on," he grumbled as he rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows. He'd already pulled his heavy coat off and lashed it behind him.

Emmitt glanced over at his partner noticing a slight smile on his face and sitting straighter in the saddle than normal also.

"Did your business at the mercantile?" he asked; wondering what news Ben is keeping to himself.

"Yep, sure did."

"Talk to the boy you hired to help yesterday?"

"For a minute, his mama was trying to get him off to school," Ben replied stifling a yawn.

"You met his ma, huh?"

Emmitt waited for Ben to say something concerning the young boy's mother. He knew better than to pry into other fella's activities, even a close friend, so he waited with amused curiosity.

"Sure did," Ben answered softly. He rode silent for several minutes before continuing on.

"I know now where that child got his red hair. And it ain't from her."

"It ain't?"

"Nope," he replied, spitting tobacco juice on a horned toad sunning itself on a large white flat rock they rode past.

"She's a Tejana and a widow; my guess of pure Spanish decent, don't appear to be any Indian in her blood by her appearance. You ought-a see her Emmitt; one of them bu-tee-full Tejana women!"

"Do say?" Emmitt grinned at the back of Ol' Blu's head, "So, where does the hair come from?"

"Late husband; Irish decent I believe; names O'Conner."

"She told you this?"

"Now look here Emmitt!" Ben turned in his saddle and glared at Emmitt.

"I ain't like that. The man she works for in the mercantile store called her Mrs. O'Conner. The boy told me yesterday his pa is dead. Don't take much to figure out the rest. She did say her name was Maria, nothing else."

"Ok, ok pard," Emmitt replied with a chuckle, knowing better than to push Ben further.

They rode on in silence for two more hours, each deep in their own thoughts about the women who had crossed their paths.

The wagon trail they followed started to worm deeper into the broken hills of the Balcones Escarpment rising in front of them. The path they were following was quickly becoming a snake of a trace as it twisted around grayish black and white limestone and water stained red or pink granite projecting up from the earth.

Clusters of green scrub cedars, old oaks, cotton woods, hackberry's trees and prickly pear cactus filled in the gaps as they fought for the meager spaces between the rocks.

Emmitt felt hemmed in. He was use to the open prairie, not this rocky, congested country. He wondered how anyone could raise much livestock in this environment with grass at such a premium.

Rounding a sharp curve between to clumps of lime colored scrub cedar guarding the road, they came upon a wooden gateway and sign that proclaiming to all who passed they were entering Worthington's domain.

Ben stopped and stared for several minutes at the large ornately carved poles supporting the even more elegantly arched beacon stretching over the wagon road, before riding on to catch up with Emmitt.

"Kind of a fancy gate back yonder."

"Yeah, Worthington seems to have a lot of pretense about him."

"Can we trust him?"

"I reckon so, he ain't the leader of this coalition though, ---- has others or someone pulling his rope."

"Well, we knew that, and it ain't no committee running things either," he looked at Emmitt, "Who do you think is?"

"I'm not for sure; ----- reckon we'll find out soon."

As he spoke, two riders appeared from out of a stand of new oaks to their left and rode into the trail McGowan and Maxwell followed and stopped, watching them as they grew nearer.

Blu snorted and sidestepped as they drew up close to the two men.

Maxwell moved his mare away from Emmitt to the edge of the road, giving some space between them. They could not spread further on the narrow trail because of the rocks and brush.

"Howdy boys; you fellas know you're on Worthington property?" the taller and older of the pair asked. A black man; truly black man, Emmitt thought; sporting a big nose with an even bigger tight curly moustache and close cut beard under a wide set of pale

brown eyes, almost yellow. He leaned forward, his arms crossed over his saddle horn as he spoke.

The other, a young, skinny but handsome, dark haired, reddish skin rider, whose good looks were marred by buck teeth, slouched back against the cantle of his leather seat. His right thumb hooked into his pistol belt, just in front of his revolver.

Both men wore brown colored, sweat stained, broad brimmed Mexican style sombreros providing shade out to their shoulders. Each had the stiff edges of the brims turned down flat, instead of curved upwards like a bowl which is the way of most Vaqueros. The two also sported a single crease in the front of the peak.

McGowan noted wearing this style of hat was popular with the ranch hands in the hotter southern part of Texas; different from the plainsman type, which had a low crown and floppy brim folks farther north donned.

He acknowledged among its obvious uses, the sombrero a fellow topped out in also helped others determine where a man hailed from and what he did for a living, at a glance. These fellows are from central or south Texas and had been here some time, judging from the dirty sweat stains.

"Yep, I reckon that's so," Emmitt smiled in reply, slowly pushing his own grey Stetson back on his head.

"We came to talk with your boss. I'm Emmitt McGowan and this here's Ben Maxwell," he finished, motioning to Ben.

"Yeah?" The tall black rider said, straightening up as the leather under him creaked, "The range detectives? Mr. Worthington has been expecting you for several days now.

I'm mighty glad to meet you and your pard. Trouble is a brewing and we need someone of y'all's ilk to head it off, or else there's going to be blood running in the Colorado."

"We ain't figuring on getting in any shootin contest!" Maxwell chided in, his eyes watching the younger man, who had not taken his gun hand away from his holster.

"All fine in good Mr. Maxwell, however, Jenkins might entertain other ideas once he gets wind y'all are here!"

"Perhaps, but it appears to me your young partner is cocked and ready for a fight right now," Ben replied, lifting his hand in the direction of the younger man.

The tall black rider glanced over his shoulder at his companion and motioned for him to ease up.

"Y'all have to excuse Brushy; we are all a little jumpy. One of our men has been missing for two weeks now."

"Where'd he go?" Emmitt asked, his eyebrows raising a fraction.

"Down on the Colorado; best grazing this time of year. Since the trouble started, the boss decided not to use the river grasses to graze the beeves unless several boys are with them. Most of the cattle have been driven out, but a few hundred are still milling around up in the breaks, arroyos and in the cottonwoods dotting the valley.

Charley Beats rode off up river to scout for some of those strays alone and ain't never come back."

"That was not a smart move; anyone sent out to search for him?" Ben asked.

"Yep, found nothing!"

"He might have left the country, went someplace else!" Emmitt offered.

"Naw, he where sweet on a gal who was the sister of one of Jarrell's wranglers; he wouldn't leave unless he took her and he didn't. Besides, old Charley were one of Worthington's oldest hands, almost as long as me; been here since the war was over. He's not cut out that way," the dark skin man said rather testily.

"I suspect we need to make ourselves known to your boss. I'd like to meet with all the ranchers as soon as possible."

The black rider goaded his horse next to Emmitt's and stuck out his hand.

"Names Riley, Riley Joshua. I's Mr. Worthington's foreman. This here is Billy Roberts."

Emmitt took the offered palm and again Roberts. "Thought I heard Riley call you Brushy?"

Roberts smiled and replied, "That's my handle; Brushy Bill."

"Aha, I see," Emmitt said grinning.

Maxwell nudged his mare up to the three men and after another round of handshakes they rode up the wagon trail together.

Emmitt half listened to the chatter concerning Worthington's ranch and the other ranches in Travis and Williamson Counties while he pondered the news about the missing man.

This was the third perhaps fourth one to disappear somehow. He became a bit uneasy this job could turn into more than what he first assumed.

Cattle disappearing had a habit of showing up somewhere, either they're lost or in someone else's hands. But missing men presented another problem, especially when so many start vanishing.

Riley Joshua might be right. Blood could flow in the Colorado, possibly innocent. He sensed an urgency to discover who is behind all this and bring them to justice quickly.

He suddenly felt a cold chill run down his back. This job he assumed was beginning to appear more than he was prepared for and he might get himself and Ben killed if he wasn't careful.

FACE OFF

The evening of the 19th of November found Todd Jenkins standing outside the front door of Gallagher's Inn on the dimly lit veranda, as he unbuttoned his jacket and pushed back the left side, jerking loose the leather hammer thong holding his Colt down in its cross draw holster.

His fingers passing over the smooth, worn, wooden grips helped settle the butterflies in his stomach. The past month, his nerves had played havoc with his digestive system. Disappearing only days ago, but returning tonight.

Not expecting a warm reception when he walked into the Coalition meeting, he was ready for anything.

The gathering had been called by the range detective they hired but he had not been invited, which didn't faze him. He understood they distrusted him, some even hated him, however, no one at present really had an idea of the unprecedented of stealing he was doing to them.

Rightly suspicious, if only they knew how right they were he mused. He gambled on enough doubts lingering among the cattlemen to feel relatively safe to visit the group meeting tonight.

He intended to throw them further off by his presence this evening. They still didn't know they were the victims of the biggest rustling operation ever attempted, requiring the use of every ruse available to keep the ranchers confused.

No wonder his nerves are eating him up he thought as he rubbed his chin!

He pulled out his watch and held it up in the moon light. 10:30 P.M., the meeting should have been well along and everyone settled by now.

He turned to look over his left shoulder at his gunman Calley Longman, catching his eyes and nodded. With a deep breath, he boldly entered the Inn.

One man is all he needed to back him up. More could invite trouble.

He planned to present himself as an honest, trusting rancher who has been offended by the false accusations of the others and not spoiling for a fight. But if a fracas started, Calley is who he wanted at his side.

Longman is a cold blooded killer, a fact which never bothered Jenkins. He realized a long time ago Calley had lost his soul or conscience as nothing the man did seemed to trouble him one bit!

And Calley was 'his killer', like a trained attack dog, as loyal to Jenkins as the sky was blue. They had been through a lot together, each pulling the other's 'fat out of the fire' too many times to count.

Todd Jenkins trusted his life with this man.

"Aw shit! Who the hell let your hide in here?" Kinkade stood and yelled the moment he spotted Jenkins standing in the double sliding doorway entrance to the meeting room.

"I let myself in!" Jenkins replied with equal venom, his eyes darting around the dining hall, even though his reply had been directed at Kinkade.

"It appears I was left off the invite for this here meeting."

"You damn right you were, you thief!" Kinkade blasted out again, his face and neck turning as flaming red as his hair, his fingers inching toward his revolver hidden under his coat.

"Back off Kinkade!" Jenkins retorted, pushing his jacket off his pistol with his left hand, "I didn't come to get in to a shooting fight with the likes of you!"

"Just why are you here, Jenkins?" Mike Jarrell asked coldly, as all eyes in the room stared at him and the face of Calley's hovering over his shoulder in the shadows.

"Now, ain't this something! I'm a law abiding rancher, just like you fellers, and I get no invite to this here meeting about the rustling going on.

But I do hear some folks think me and my boys are responsible for the trouble y'all are having and that rumor has got to stop tonight before someone gets hurt! This is why I'm here!"

"You ain't a member of the Coalition!" Kinkade spat.

"Yeah, I know; another slap in my face and without good reason!"

"Plenty of reason, you stole poor old Perry's land, his wife and ruined his son!" One of the ranchers, who had been silent, spoke up.

"I won his property fair and square in a poker game, y'all know that!" Jenkins pointed his right hand at the rancher, his voice raising an octave.

"As for his missus, I had nothing to do with her killing herself and his boy stirred up his own troubles. You fellers ain't got no call to treat me this-a-way!"

Bedlam erupted amongst the members, each raising their voices at one another and at Jenkins, all trying to out shout the other. Tempers raced to the ragged edge, they were only moments from losing control and pistols pulled.

Emmitt, sensing the direction this squabble headed, sought to cut it off before the shooting began. He stepped back and retrieved the log poker leaning against the fireplace bricks and the tin ash pan next to it and started banging them together.

The loud stinging metallic noise slowly caught the attention of the others, who, one and two at a time, turned to the sound behind them, their faces reacting to the offensive music.

Finally the room grew quiet.

"There is a simple way to solve most of these concerns, if you're agreeable?" he said, tossing the tools back to the wall.

"And who might you be? Jenkins asked.

"Emmitt McGowan!"

"Oh yeah, you're the range detective I've been hearing about. How can you solve this Mr. Range Detective?"

"By letting me and my partner inspect your stock and property," McGowan replied, walking around the seated men, stopping within arm's length of Jenkins.

"We have to do the same with all of the ranchers involved here anyway. Best way to clear up a lot of misconceptions; assuming you're innocent."

"Now wait a minute, I don't need my stock inspected; hell they are being stolen too!" Kinkade blurted out.

"Y'all hired me to find the rustlers! Do this my way or get someone else!" Emmitt snapped back, his patience for Kinkade's bellowing growing very short.

Worthington held his hand up to Kinkade before he could say another word and said, "McGowan is right; we all have to be examined."

He turned to Jenkins and asked, "How about it Jenkins, you agree to our man inspecting your stock and property?"

Jenkins momentarily stopped breathing as the room grew quiet again. He had been ready for something like this; for several days now.

"Sure, come on out tomorrow if you want," he said quietly. "Calley here can show you around."

"Alright; your place will be the first I inspect, is this acceptable with you men?" McGowan raised his voice in question to the ranchers, glancing at the various faces for dissenters.

A rumbling of agreements and nodding of heads told him the situation is diffused for the moment; the tension in his neck muscles relaxed somewhat as well.

"I'll be a-going now; I'll expect you and your partner tomorrow," Jenkins said in satisfaction as he turned to leave. He didn't care to stay one minute longer. He got the time he was looking for. This range detective won't find a damn thing and the pressure will be off him and his men for a while.

After Jenkins left the Inn, Emmitt turned, glancing at Worthington and Jarrell as he returned to the fireplace, picked up the poker, leaned against the mantel with one arm and preceded to push the burning logs around.

Maxwell walked over to him as he looked up. What he felt inside was written on the old mans weathered face. Jenkins had thrown down the gauntlet by coming tonight and not one of the ranchers expected this nor were they ready for it.

A fight was coming if they couldn't solve the rustling question. Just what is at stake and how much sat on their shoulders was sobering. Any previous misconceptions about the job that lay before them disappeared!

ICE

The Balconies Escarpment, the hill country west of Austin and Round Rock and home of several of the struggling ranches; is a prehistoric limestone caprock, which through the centuries had been eroded by weather and water; creating crevices, arroyos, small and large canyons all leading to the Colorado River. In places these fissures of erosion are cut deep into the limestone bedrock exposing the red granite beneath.

The entire area, as far as a person can see from the highest of the flat top hills, is covered in oaks, cotton woods, hackberry's trees; cedar, juniper, mesquite brush and prickly pear cactus.

The ground forage was quite sparse compared to the open Texas plains; mostly buffalo grass, growing in clumps on every bare piece of earth.

Some eighteen miles from the Austin/Round Rock area, the Colorado River had cut into the limestone, a huge deep and wide canyon, with high steep walls, in many places over four hundred feet. This gorge snaked back through the broken hills, supplied by the smaller springs and seasonal dry creeks that cut their own pathways in the underlying stone, until it opened up to the rolling foothills around Marble Falls.

Some of these feeder canyons, meandering down to the larger canyon, provided wide open areas allowing buffalo grass, Johnson and other wild grasses, to grow profusely; the green weeds also grew in places bordering the river banks as well.

Beautiful but rough country, land not given to the openness of the prairies Emmitt McGowan was use to or even the Nueces River valley area where he was raised in South Texas.

Except for the towns and villages running north next to the cattle trail to Kansas, this hill country southwest, west and northwest around the Colorado River was, for the most part, wild and unsettled.

The Comanche Indians having been subdued only years earlier did not create the mass expansion some had expected.

Several one dog towns existed further out with tiny populations, trying to etch out a living on the border of the escarpment, but even for them any kind of existence away from the major wagon freight, railroad and stage lines, which were numerous in East Texas, still provided a difficult life and not many folks tried or succeeded in establishing their selves to far out from civilization.

The escarpment proved to be a true wilderness. This was a mean land for hard people, Emmitt realized.

McGowan and Maxwell found themselves spending two weeks on Jenkins' spread. Their escort, Calley Longman, first led them through the harsh terrain that bordered the eastern bank of the Colorado River some thirty five miles southeast of Marble Falls in the Balconies Escarpment and south of a heavily wooded and rocky state owned thicket not fit for cattle.

From there they circled back east then southwest over the stony, scrubby land which comprised most of Jenkins' seven thousand acres.

It was a long narrow dog legged ranch, adjacent to state owned property to the north and due west of where the northern cattle trail passed by.

The spread was bigger than much of the other local ones established nearer to Austin. Most comprised of only a couple thousand acres.

The stock owners supplemented grazing by having access to the state ranges to feed their animals, as did the farmers whom invested in livestock.

The majority of the ranchers, in the recent established coalition, were located directly south or east of Jenkins' property, while a few were across the Colorado River, southwest of Austin.

Emmitt speculated on the locations of each ranch as they crossed a large grassy plain toward a row of trees in the distance.

Below Jenkins about six miles lay Jarrell's operation and below his Worthington's. Both men had given an estimate at the meeting of fifteen hundred each, ready for market, plus nursing cows and calves.

Across the river, to the west of Austin and Bee Cave lay Mercer's and above him, Stephens; they gave an approximation of two thousand steers, not including two year olds, mama's and yearlings, most lost in the thickets of mesquite, oak, cedar and rocks.

A few miles up the road north from Round Rock towards Georgetown and east of that small community, Kinkade, Peterson and McKinney had established their operations; running by their own count around fifteen to eighteen hundred head of steers per ranch, also not considering mamas, yearlings and new born.

The eastern most ranches of the coalition didn't have easy access to the Colorado for water or the green river valley grass, yet their animals disappeared as well. He thought it odd and asked how could cattle in the eastern areas disappear and yet no one had seen signs of cattle driven off.

The stock owners informed him if anyone did; they are the riders who are reported as missing.

Emmitt learned at the meeting all of the ranchers bought the majority of their cattle in 1871, when the price of beef fell in the northern markets and again in 73 with the New York stock market crash.

The biggest of the purchases had been from concerns based in San Antonio where the first big drives of 67 thru 70 had been organized and funded. Cheap cattle in those depressed years of 71 and 73 meant an opportunity for men, who had a few dollars, to create their own ranches and opportunities of cashing in on the unquenchable hunger of the northeastern states for beef after the civil war; due to almost all northern cattle used up to feed the Union Army.

Stock markets would rally and prices wouldn't stay down forever. So these local men gambled, along with the bank, proving successful in the last four years with the driving of increasingly larger herds to market. This year promised to be their best and the next the ranchers expected to be even better.

Now they are angry and worried their hard work and dreams are being stolen from under their noses.

A disaster, for the stock owners and also for the surrounding counties, including the Williamson County Bank where sizable loans had been given out. This worried everyone.

McGowan mused to himself over the difference between Charles Goodnight and the Coalition he now worked for. Goodnight did things in a much grandiose and sometimes harsher way than these men.

Since 74, financed by John Adair of Colorado, Goodnight had bought up or leased almost the entire Palo Duro canyon after the Comanche had been driven out.

After stocking over 100,000 head of beeves, he ran the largest ranch at this time in Texas. Yet cattle rustling hurt his bank account just as well as anyone.

The difference between them lay with Goodnight's answer to rustling that these ranchers couldn't apply. The proximity of the law is too close.

This area of Texas contained lawmen, of sorts, but the Pan Handle was still untamed and wild, where the nearest sheriff sat in his warm office over two hundred miles from Palo Duro.

He and the other men, who rode for Goodnight, applied the frontier form of justice to all who are caught stealing cattle or horses. A rope was cruel perhaps, but always final.

That would not work in this part of Texas.

He wondered if the local sheriff would play an active role in solving the rustling problem. Somehow, he didn't think so.

This time the law might make his job even harder!

He shook his head and grinned at the irony. Perhaps the Coalition could persuade the Sheriff to help or stay out of his and Ben's way.

Emmitt thought about the past ten days.

He found nothing indicating over-branding, nor did they find brands other than the ones belonging to Jenkins. He did notice all the animals were branded, including the calves; this before a roundup began. Uncommon but not unusual, however, that kind of practice would require a tremendous amount of effort and work.

He also took note of the times they crossed wide worn paths leading to the northern part of the ranch, near the river. The earth pounded into dust, indicated heavy use. He commented on how well used those traces are.

"Buffalo runs," Calley replied, "the best place to reach the Colorado is on the northwest border of the boss's spread. These old trails run right in to it. The ground has an easy grade down to the

bottom and that's where the boss has us move the herds' for water and grazing.

Problem is them damn beeves continue a returning to the slope a heading for the canyon grass on their own. We are always moving them back up here; never ending battle," he shifted his weight in his saddle and continued, "Boss is afraid of cows being stolen like everyone else is claiming. Especially since all of the other rancher's cattle are a coming up missing on the river."

He added, "This ranch ain't the best, too many rocks, the grass ain't real good or plentiful. Not a lot of places to water either, so them critters meander down yonder."

Emmitt nodded his understanding at his last comment. The ground forage wasn't adequate for grazing. Yet all the cattle they had seen, approximately a thousand, were well fed.

He asked, "How many head did you say your boss had?"

Calley shifted in his saddle again, spit out a wad of tobacco juice as he glanced back at McGowan.

"Almost two thousand ready to drive to market, give or take a hundred. About half are up in them thickets north of here. You've seen the rest. You don't want to roust them out, do you? That'll take some time."

Emmitt shook his head no as he eyed the expression on Ben's face. He knew the old man didn't believe Calley's story and neither did he.

There hadn't been any buffalo in this part of the country for years. Cattle beat this ground down, lots of them, more than two thousand head moving around to water and back.

"So, can I tell Mr. Jenkins he ain't no cow thief?" Calley asked, reining to a stop in front of both men.

Emmitt stared at Calley for a moment before answering him.

"Not that I found. You've done a fair showing of your boss's spread. I didn't find anyone animals other than his," he said, "If I were Jenkins, I'd continue to keep them critters out of the river valley bottom, unless he can spare the men to mind them."

"I'll tell him that. Y'all able find y'all's way outta here and back to the North road?"

"I reckon.... Good day Calley," Emmitt nodded and wheeled Blu around to the east. Maxwell touched his hat brim in ado to Calley, but said nothing, following McGowan's lead, pulling their pack horse.

They rode for several minutes, each lost in thought.

"You think Calley's lying?" Ben broke the silence.

"I do," Emmitt answered, "But no solid proof, just bits and pieces not making sense."

"Yeah, I believe he is too. Your right though, I didn't spot any cattle not belonging, least ways the ones he showed us," Ben echoed.

He added, "I've been down on the Colorado a few years ago. Weren't no ranches around here back them days. I remember the old buffalo run down to the river and many of those critters, kicking up lots of dust. Mud too, when they reached the water.

I also recollect another way up to the rim further up the canyon; couldn't see the spot real well until you ride in to it; opens in to a small valley surrounded by cottonwoods; kinda hidden. About, oh--- say several hundred acres worth, before rising up to the top. Best I recall anyway," Ben continued, "And a lot of grass."

"There is? Hum, might explain these fatted animals. This country is not given to raising cattle. To damn rough, not much prime foliage and I understand how easy those beeves can get lost; or stolen."

"Yep, but they might spend time down on the bottom feeding like Calley said," Ben replied.

"Yeah---where is this place?" Emmitt asked.

"About five -- seven miles up from the buffalo run," Ben answered, scratching his chin, "I think it's near to a little draw called Cypress Creek. It'd take some time to find again," he added.

Emmitt pulled on the reins to stop Ol Blu and turned around, searching for Calley. He finally spotted him, his horse just topping a rise, about five hundred yards away, heading north in the direction of Jenkins's ranch house.

"Why don't we take a look-see along the river?" he asked Ben.

"What? Hell Emmitt, if I'd known you wanted to ride down there now, I'd waited till we got back to Round Rock before I said anything!"

Emmitt threw his chin up and laughed as Blu shook his head, "Ben, I know you're a hankering to visit with that little mamacita, but if we ride all the way back, we'll have to come all the way out here again!"

"I reckon," Ben grumbled, hitching his coat collar up around his ears; the wind blowing cooler suddenly, putting a chill through the old range rider's bones. "But, have you looked at the northern sky? I don't want to be out here when that thing hits and besides we're low on grub and there ain't nothin worse than having to weather out a storm with no eats!"

"Yeah, you're right," Emmitt gave in. He admitted to himself he hadn't given much thought to the dark blue clouds gathering to the north or how low they are on supplies.

But right now Jenkins's men wouldn't be out because of the changing elements so there would be less chance of discovery. Later they might not cotton to his and Ben's looking around on their own without one or two of Jenkins boys tagging along.

A cold gust blew down his coat collar. That helped him make up his mind. Not any sense staying out in bad climate he reasoned. It ain't the same as pushing cattle to market; no need to discomfort himself and Ben he reasoned.

Emmitt's thoughts raced back to the spring of 1874, on his seventh drive in as many years. The weather got nasty all of a sudden with misty rain and chilly winds dogging their herd and drovers for two days.

On April 6th, things became horribly bad. They were in the process of starting to cross Hell Raising Creek in Indian Territory, not many miles from the Canadian and Arkansas Rivers and on in to Kansas, when the bottom of the clouds seemed to drop down onto the ground. The temperature dropped fast and within hours the wind and misty rain had turned into hard driving sleet and snow.

McGowan was riding a sorrel when his and all the other drovers' horses collapsed, frozen to death right between their legs. Their trail boss Sol West's horse the last to go.

The south Texas ponies were not use to the cold, having only come up from the warmth of southern Texas several weeks earlier. Their winter coats already shed.

The riders, whose ages ran from sixteen thru twenty three, found themselves on foot and split by the weather into two groups.

Emmitt's group bunched the cattle the best they could before they forced their way through the storm to the chuck wagon camped on the banks of Hell Raising Creek.

The cook had erected a canvas wind break and a roaring fire had been started.

They near froze to death; but, their strong youthful bodies, huddled together, enabled them to endure and kept them alive.

The other group of three men led by Sol West made toward a glow on the horizon, they thought was the drovers camp

After slogging for an hour uphill against the polar like wind, ice and snow, they found the light to be coming from a dugout homesteader's cabin with a pair of fellows living inside. The three spent the night with these two men, warm as toast.

Most of their sixty-five horses were lost as well as a good piece of the herd to the sudden cold snap. However, part of their remuda had been driven into a brushy and thick wooded draw by the wrangler in charge of them, where most survived, sheltered from the wind; Ol' Blu one of them.

Emmitt recalled the trail drivers behind them, seven maybe eight miles, lost every one of their steers. The animals were either scattered clear across the Red River into Texas or frozen to death along with seventy eight of their horses plus one man.

This all happened in a short five hours. The weather warmed up the next day.

McGowan shook his head; he couldn't believe the event took place four years ago. It seemed like last year.

He shuddered remembering how cold he got. All the clothing they had consisted of light coats, leather chaps and some had oilskin slickers. Those items helped save their lives by stopping the wind from cutting through to their bones and freezing them.

That was his last long trail drive before trying other occupations, finally ending up in the Palo Duro canyon and working for the Northwest Texas Cattle Coalition. He shook his head again, a lot had happened in the last four years.

In all that time he never liked the winters in the Pan Handle; Ben was right, his south Texas blood is too thin for that part of the country.

A second strong gust of cold air blasted into his face and down his coat collar. He looked up at the sky. Low, opaque clouds began to skitter across the blue.

"All right, let's go find a warm room," he relented, "The valley you mention ain't going no where's anyhow."

"Now you're a talking!" cried Ben with a grin, spurring his animal into a gentle lope.

Emmitt grinned himself and leaned over to pat Blu on the neck, "You know fella; I believe Ol' Ben is love smitten. I'll reckon we'll have to humor him for a spell until this weather blows over."

Emmitt spurred his steady mount into a fast lope to catch up with Ben, his mare and pack horse, "Yeee-ha, let's go big boy!" he hollered laughing.

They rode into Georgetown close to midnight with the bitter cold front blowing a mean streak into central Texas. The stage inn turned out to be full but the two were told a small boarding house on the outskirts of town might have a room left. The pair wearily climbed back in their frozen saddles and directed their ice covered animals to the edge of the present civilization.

Stomping their boots on the wooden porch of the small home, to force some feeling into their feet, they were met at the door by the proprietor and a boy of about fourteen.

"Howdy!" Ben called cheerily through chapped cracked lips, his face red from the freezing wind.

"Good evening gentlemen. Come on in and get yourselves warm," the owner said with friendly concern, "Y'all need a room for the night?" he asked as they stepped into the hallway.

"I reckon so!" Emmitt coughed, his sinuses were running down the back of his throat, his humor from earlier in the day all frozen away. He hated cold weather. It always made his nose run or his throat sore; sometimes both

A doctor told him once he is sensitive to certain kinds of dust in the winds. He figured he just didn't like the cold.

"Yes we have one room left. It is small and has only one single bed I'm afraid but does have a small Franklin.

I can provide a cot for whoever chooses to sleep on it," he smiled and turned his head to his son, motioning with his right hand.

"I'll send my boy to stable your horses in the barn out back and give them some hay, oats and a good rub down," he finished and nodded to the young man.

Much obliged," Ben replied, "I'll take the cot, I reckon your beds will be too soft for me," he said as he shook the ice off his big brimmed hat.

"You're sure?" Emmitt asked, looking sideways at Ben while coughing into his bandanna he had pulled from his neck; melting ice tinkling to the polished wooden floor from his hat also.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Both men signed in, Ben paid the money for the one night stay and took the key.

"Is the kitchen still open?"

"No sir, it's past midnight," the pleasant owner glanced at the regulator hanging on the wall to the left of his roll top desk in the little room just off the hall they entered from, "Dinner was served at six o'clock; however, I can get my wife to make up some sandwiches for you gentlemen."

"Yeah, thanks. I need a small bowl of hot salty water also, if you don't mind," Emmitt coughed again.

The proprietor nodded his understanding and led them to their room.

Twenty minutes later, answering a knock on their door revealed a large woman wearing a heavy gray robe and slippers on her feet. She was holding a wooden tray plied with slices of thick Dutch oven bread, a dish of mustard, sliced roast pork, two mugs of local brewed beer and a one quart tin bucket of steaming water. She looked half awake.

Emmitt took the board and thanked the woman who smiled faintly with sleep filled eyes and waddled off. He immediately sat the tray down and picked up the tin as he pulled a leather box out of his saddle bags.

Opening it, he removed a hollow brass rod, about a 1/4 inch in diameter and three inches long dipping one end into the tin of hot salt water. He put his forefinger over the opposite end to hold the fluid in place, laid back with his head over the mattress edge and placed the brass tube into the opening of his right nostril then removed his finger. The hot salty liquid ran down into his sinus cavity.

He repeated the procedure with his left nostril and again a second time for both. Then he just lay with his neck over the side and relaxed.

Maxwell watched as he munched on a big thick sandwich.

"I don't see how you can do that. I tried that once, the salt burned the dickens outta my snout."

"Does mine too," Emmitt replied, coughing and blowing his nose, "But it works pretty good. Sure stops this damn drainage," he added, tears forming in his eyes.

He held the brass rod up and spoke, "These things are a God send. My Ma use to make me snort this stuff from a bowl when I was a youngster; always made a mess."

He sat up after several repeat doctoring's and built a sandwich.

"What do you think about our friend Calley?" He asked Ben.

Ben had started to take a sip of his beer but stopped and answered, "I told you, the man's a damn liar! We were led around like a couple of old goats, him expecting us to be ready to accept and eat anything he offered!"

"Yeah," Emmitt nodded in agreement, "He said a lot which don't hold water. Those cattle sure are fat for such poor foliage and if they're keeping them off the river grass, I wonder where'd they find enough to eat? The leaves on the mesquite and other trees are gone for the winter, no food from those sources. Jenkins has found a source to fatten his critters somehow; so the question is does this place have enough to feed the cattle missing from the ranches?"

"The little valley I told you about. Might be sufficient grass in there," Ben replied.

"I don't know without taking a peek myself," Emmitt commented and continued, "The story he gave us of the old buffalo trails being used by his cattle," Emmitt shook his skull slowly in disbelief.

"Doesn't make sense; how can a thousand steers run the grass down to dirt and dust going to water and back up the rim and them stay so fat? They'd have to be moving up and down every day.

The cows Calley showed us weren't in no hurry of any kind to get down to the river!" Ben sighed and grabbed the makings for another sandwich before continuing.

"A true cowman knows them longhorns ain't a going anywhere unless they is driven. With as much running to and fro as Calley let on, they'd be run down to their knees with their ribs a sticking out!"

Ben looked Emmitt directly in the eyes to make his next point, "There have been a lot of cattle moving along that trail and it ain't the ones we found!"

“Yeah, I know you’re right. We’ll have to keep quiet until we determine if he’s letting other’s cross his range,” McGowan replied, stroking his mustache.

Ben raised his eyebrows, “I hadn’t thought of that! You’re correct, some of those ranches east of him might want to get to water from time to time; especially with the bad year they’ve been having.

Also, it’d be a good way to split off a few now and then when no one was a looking. Still, trying to catch someone red handed in that country would be just plain luck!”

McGowan rubbed his temples, his eyes seemed like they were swelling up as he said, “This trip created more questions than answers about Jenkins.

We’ll have some work to do when we get back to Round Rock. Visiting all the ranches, collecting copies of the brands the ranchers are using, inspecting their animals and learning their routines.

Those items will be the key to what’s going on I think. If Jenkins is stealing, it’s gonna be difficult to prove without knowing what everyone else is doing.”

He shook his head, he was getting dizzy, “A big job with a lot of work; take some time but right now I need to rest up.”

The warmth of the small iron bellied stove in the small room was making him drowsy.

“You feel poorly?”

“Yeah tired mostly; I hate the cold,” he said pulling his spurs, boots and corded riding britches off before crawling under the blankets of the narrow bed. He was asleep before Ben finished eating and retired for the evening himself.

The arctic wind, what some Texans call a Blue Norther’, howled through the darkness across the north, central and southern plains of the Lone Star State and into northern Mexico. It beat so harsh against the walls of human made structures their supports creaked.

The wind rattled doors inside buildings, banged shutters without mercy and tore an occasional roofing slate loose. Its icy fingers probed through cracks and gaps in the Texan shelters, combating the warmth emanating from potbellied stoves and fireplaces.

Occasionally a random tree limb snapped and was flung to the earth yards from its origin as wild life, which hunted at night, sought shelter from the terrible damp cold; some died as the freezing rain continued throughout the darkness, growing heavier until a thick two inch coating of glittering ice covered the ground, buildings and trees.

Winter had come to Texas as the inhabitants of the land burrowed deeper under their blankets, quilts, caves and burrows.

FEVER

Three days after the ice storm made its presence known, McGowan and Maxwell were able to ride into Round Rock.

Their horses, covered in mud from the melted precipitation, ate heartily as they were rubbed down by the livery boy who dressed them with warm horse blankets.

Emmitt and his partner, leaving their steeds under the care of the stable help, trudged up the muddy avenue toward Gallagher's Inn, Emmitt coughing constantly. He had the sensation his ears were on fire and his eyes blurred.

Uncomfortably queasy when they left Georgetown, now his stomach and gut churned. He realized he is getting sick and the thought of the warm comfort of the Inn and the special lady who helped run it drove him on.

Ben glanced at him several times, concern showing unabashed on his face. In all the years they had rode together, this man seldom took to a sick bed but when he did, he always had a rough ride.

Pneumonia, the greatest killer of cattlemen, is his biggest worry. Emmitt learned to expect trouble with his nose and throat during the beginning of every winter. As a rule, he dealt with it successfully without getting ill, but sometimes problems arose and he would get feverish and come down with a bad cold.

Ben worried about them both catching whatever some of the folks at the little boarding house in Georgetown seemed to be coming down with, the first morning after the ice storm. He appreciated from a long life time of experience, if he or Emmitt or anyone else out on the range didn't find rest and warmth when sickness struck, serious trouble followed. He remembered a number of fellas who had succumbed to fevers and pneumonia.

Relieved to put distance between them and the sick folks at the small Inn as they rode out that morning, they were not too far

from Gallagher's when they left Georgetown, just a little over ten miles, an easy four hour ride on the muddy road; he now hurried his partner to the warmth of a bed two blocks down the street.

They stomped onto the wooden sidewalk leading up to the hotel, their heels thundering as they hastily made their way; reaching and crossing the veranda in four fast steps, Maxwell threw open the front double doors in one swift movement, steering his fading partner on to the settee' facing the window.

Quick to cover the distance to the reception desk, Ben started pounding the silver plated service bell.

"I've got a sick man here! Send for a doctor and get someone to help me carry him up to his room!" he extorted to Mr. Gallagher, as the proprietor hurried to the incessant ringing of the bell.

Moments after, Verna entered from the kitchen and in a glance took in Maxwell and McGowan. Quick to assess the situation, she rushed to Emmitt, put her hand on his forehead and shouted for the cook, Juan.

She rapidly barked orders to Juan in Spanish to fetch the doctor as she motioned for Maxwell to come to her.

"How do you feel?"

"Why, I'm fit, it's Emmitt that's sick," he said puzzled.

"Assist me to get him to his room!" she commanded, not explaining herself, which confused Maxwell even more.

Emmitt attempted to rise from the settee as Verna and Ben both grabbed his arms to help him up. He didn't realize how dizzy he'd become until he started to stand again

He began to cough and then doubled over moaning, his gut on fire. His chest ached, his stomach screamed at him, his legs weak and lifeless, he understood he was in trouble, he had never been this sick in his life!

A cold fear swept through him amplified by the burning in his belly and chest.

With Verna's and Ben's aid he stumbled up the staircase to his room. He grasped a moment of wellbeing as he put his trust in this woman and his friend to carry him through this ordeal, which vanished with another convulsion of pain.

He wondered if he had caught pneumonia but the thought flitted away as swiftly as the other thoughts with another gasp.

His clouded mind struggled with the task of stumbling up the stairs, complicated with the spasms which dropped him down to his knees.

Ben and Verna would hold him up, goading him to keep on climbing, each encouraging him to reach his bed where he could lie down and rest.

In a fog, his thoughts raced from one fuzzy jumbled idea to another until falling on to the iron framed mattress in his room, he tried to relax but with a violent seizure and an uncontrollable cry he lost consciousness.

Time went by with a second cold front sweeping through North and Central Texas that carried additional freezing rain and snow and left a number of deaths from exposure and sickness in its wake.

McGowan, sweating and writhing in agony for six days, survived; due to the care he received from his partner and the woman he admired

He didn't have pneumonia as feared, but he did have a head cold coupled with a bad case of influenza, picked up from other travelers seeking shelter in Georgetown.

The trail of sickness ran back to the Inn in Salado and to Belton and Waco, ending in Austin; with four dead in Georgetown and two in Austin. No word came from Salado, Belton and Waco.

Sickness's of many types were passing through the land; fortunately, the severe weather slowed or stopped travel between the towns and settlements, giving the different illness's time to die out before spreading further.

Laudanum, given sparingly, helped keep McGowan from experiencing the harsher realities of the flu, but only at the insistent request from Verna to the town doctor, who appreciated the fact she packed a wealth of experiences from her years as a volunteer nurse while attending school in Pennsylvania.

Somehow, she and Ben avoided the illness themselves as they attended to Emmitt and kept away from the guests, the kitchen and her father.

Verna stood motionless, her left hand holding back the green window curtains as she viewed the cook Juan, from Emmitt's room,

boiling the bed sheets, clothes and additional items from his bedstead.

Juan was next to a large iron three legged pot that sat over glowing coals out back of the Inn. He stretched his body under his heavy coat when he glimpsed her in the window and waved before dipping a huge wooden ladle into the boiling water to stir the sheets.

He did this routinely every day according to her instructions; Verna understood the sickness would be carried in the cloth for several days and could make other guests sick.

She was tired and a little apprehensive about this man's health. A giver by nature, she seemed to be always attending to someone's needs if they are helpless and Emmitt's present requirements are no more different than anyone before that she had helped.

Never-the-less, she sensed a strange pull toward him, an attraction which started the first time she laid eyes on him and grew each moment he came near her.

She'd become slightly light headed when he spoke to her, which troubled her dignity. She valued her self-pride, in her ability to control her emotions and behavior among folks, not letting others direct her paths, either in conversations or actions.

She was very aware she was called strong willed and other less flattering names behind her back. However, when around this man she always found herself teetering on the brink of swooning as an undisciplined school girl; neither lady-like nor strong willed she mused. And certainly not the manners she had been taught in finishing school.

Verna absently ran her fingers across the cold window glass as she watched Juan pull the hot sheets and clothing, from Emmitt's bed, out of the iron pot and placed them on the clothes lines. All the while wondering what mystery's concerning this Texan so trouble her heart.

He's just another of those rough range riders, she thought to herself. More at home on his damn old horse than in polite company!

A free spirit for certain but he did not exhibit the loneliness generally most men of his profession packed away in their hearts. He did not acknowledge it perhaps; however, she was sure he carried it.

She remembered many ranchers, wranglers and cowmen she had met in the last few years since she returned from the east, who exhibited this lonely countenance.

Never-the-less she mused, this Emmitt McGowan is somehow different, not quite like the others.

She had concluded right away he was very kind and gentle if somewhat shy to her and friendly to all he came around, still his fierce independence is so strong; no one was given to lead him; a leader himself perhaps, yet not wanting the role.

And according to what few gossips she has been privy to, afraid of little; and again, a bit dangerous, even deadly!

She'd been told in whispers he isn't someone anyone wanted to cross.

She wondered how accurate the rumor concerning him as a friend of that man-killer Hardin? If true, he took a different path in life, a law abiding road, to a certain degree of course.

Somehow, all of this mystery attracted her even more. A moth to a flame she reasoned, with a guardian like him around, no one in their right mind will bother or hurt her; ever.

This bit of knowledge satisfied her womanly ego. She pondered the concept of a man such as he; would he be happy with a woman as herself?

His life was so full and busy. Would there be room for her? And will she be satisfied with such a rough Texan? Maybe she should back away before she got hurt, she thought to herself.

Verna returned to the rocker next to Emmitt's bedstead and worried over these questions until Ben Maxwell entered the room several hours later to relieve her.

"Say," McGowan croaked from his pillow, waking to the noise of Ben entering, "How does one get fed around here?"

"You hungry pard?" Ben asked.

Verna looked up from her book and stared at Emmitt, a smile slowly spreading across her face.

"Well you're awake and I see you are better today!" she said as she rose and moved toward his side, putting her palm on his forehead. It was cool to the touch,

"Your fever is broken. Are you hungry?"

"I could stand some eggs, perhaps biscuits too," He replied as he tried to rise up.

"I'll go tell the cook, be back in a minute!" Ben said to both Emmitt and Verna, his eyes laughing.

Verna pushed him gently down, "Don't try to get up yet. You're still recovering and weak."

"I'm not weak," he shot back trying to move her hand. He found to his surprise she was stronger than he.

"Damn... I guess you're right. How long have I been out?"

"About six days. You had a bad case of influenza."

"Influenza --- six days? I remember being sick and hurting but don't recall the time passing!"

"You were talking sometimes but not really awake; the laudanum we gave you helped with the pain. It also made you sleep a lot."

"Laudanum, I was given laudanum? Ain't that stuff dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" Verna at first didn't understand his question, and then realized what he meant.

"Oh! You mean addictive. It is if taken for an extended period of time; a month or more. You'll be fine, don't worry," she finished, raising his head and bunching his pillow up.

"Better?"

"Yeah, who ----- who's been taking care of me and, ---- uh, helping care for my eliminations and such?" he stammered.

She stared at him a moment, the corners of her mouth turned up slightly, but he didn't catch it when she spoke.

"Ben and I; we took turns until you passed out of danger. I did most of the time, which wasn't much. Why?" she asked, enjoying his embarrassment.

"I'm obliged for you watching over me, but --- uhm, did Ben or you take care of my personal -- uh, needs?" he pressed, his ears were turning red as Verna tucked his covers around his shoulders and leaned close to his face smiling.

"Why, Mr. Maxwell of course. I bathed you once but you were covered where it mattered," she answered.

Emmitt's head and neck down to the covers turned red. All of a sudden he grinned and said to Verna as she was picking up her shawl to leave.

"I just wondered. We aren't well acquainted but it appears you are acquainted with me better than most gals," his grin getting bigger, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Most gals --- well I never expected to hear this! Mr. McGowan, I'll want you know," her voice shaking slightly and raised an octave, "I am not most gals! I was a volunteer nurse for three years while at school. I helped bathe and care for numerous

patients, soldiers mostly and I can truthfully say yes, I probably am acquainted with you better than yourself. I've seen your front, back, cleaned the top of your head of fleas and scrubbed the fungus from between your toes!"

She stepped to the foot of his bed, her hands on her hips and an indignant smile on her lips.

"And Mr. McGowan, you don't possess anything new I haven't seen before!" she barked, spinning on her heels and stormed toward the door, where turning, she gave him a long cool look and then said haughtily, "You should ought to bathe more often."

She turned and opened the door, her eyes dancing with hidden mirth as she pretended to be offended as this man's crude insinuation.

She finished the act by slamming the partition behind her and stomped off down the hall and down the stairs. Privy to the rough, off handed and often dark humor cowmen delighted in, she wasn't about to let on to his antics, after all, she had a position of stature to maintain and she thought she did quite well.

Emmitt stared at the closed entrance for a few moments as her thundering heels faded. He ran his left hand through his hair and examined his fingers.

"Fleas?" he asked himself.

After the shock from Verna's reaction had passed, he shut his eyes and started to drift off to sleep.

Women, his last thought before slumber over took him, do not understand good natured humor. He acknowledged he would be in trouble the moment he met one who did.

Three weeks after his illness, Emmitt forked Blu again, riding east toward Kinkade's ranch the day after New Year's.

Still slightly shaky from the flu but more tormented from cabin fever and the polite coolness of Verna, he realized he needed to get outdoors. After a few short rides from Christmas to New Year's, he sensed his strength returning and was ready to return to work.

He and Ben held a meeting and planned how they were to investigate the rustling problem.

Splitting their chores, they agreed Maxwell would ride up the Colorado to where the trail sloped down easily to the canyon bottom.

From there he'd scout north following the Colorado's bank, searching for the small valley he remembered from long ago.

If Jenkins ran stolen cattle in this area, a trail might be picked up before the floods came with the spring rains and covered everything.

Emmitt intended to visit each ranch belonging to the Coalition, starting with Kinkade's.

In his saddle bags he carried the necessary tools he figured he'd need. Sheets of onion paper for tracings, a sketch pad, several pencils and a small hardbound accountants ledger to record observations and other notations. This book also contained a growing list of livestock brands he came across the last few years which may or may not be listed with the counties.

He did not carry much in the way of supplies, relying instead on the agreements of each of the ranchers to board him while he worked their ranches.

He resigned himself to a long period of investigation on the trail as nothing more appeared to be gained remaining in Round Rock. He'd spoken to all who knew anything about the stock men and their quarrel with Jenkins.

He was also becoming increasingly confused with Verna Gallagher. He liked her, but they were at odds with each other more every day. He didn't understand her or women in general for that matter and found himself saying things or doing something which seemed to upset her.

He ate Christmas Eve dinner with her and her father but had declined going to Church with her Christmas Morning, stating he had to get packed for the coming days.

Christmas never had much meaning to him as far as socializing, having spent many Christmas's on horseback. He did not grasp her reaction to what he said nor did he comprehend why "she" did not understand how he felt about attending church with her. Not going did not have anything to do with her but she acted like it did.

He knew who God and his Son were and what happened to Jesus and why; his ma made sure of his learning the story. He couldn't see the need, however, to sit in a building on a hard wooden seat to express this knowledge. He gave thanks, as most cowpokes did, every minute he was in the saddle.

He reckoned the Good Lord had an account of the times he had saved his bacon and how many heartfelt "Gracias" were received each time.

Emmitt didn't need a structure to pray in. Most cowmen were this way. The open country was their church. God's country some called it.

He tried to explain all this to Verna and thought she understood before she left with her father for Christmas services. Up on her return she showed coolness toward him for the remainder of the day which he found he did not like or appreciated.

The Christmas morning after breakfast, she did flutter, going misty eyed for a moment when he gave her a Cameo charm on a gold chain. The Cameo wasn't much to him, just a trinket, a gift, but she acted like it was the most important thing happening to her that day, until he refused to attend services with her.

He absolutely could not understand what she wanted and resigned in his heart he never would.

So he made the decision to ride away from all of it, which confused him even more because he didn't want to.

Time will solve the problem for him, he decided and left it at that.

HERE'S MY PLAN

The Blue Norther which brought in the ice curtailed Jenkins' plans to ride north toward Dallas to check on his holdings. He and the rest of his men weathered the sudden freeze in the ranch and bunk house, once belonging to Perry.

Jenkins spent most of the time drinking during the storm, sitting in Kev Perry's favorite stuffed chair, in front of a huge rock fireplace built by Perry and his son several years ago.

Jenkins liked the decor of the house so well he had not moved or replaced the furniture. Even the smoke stained oil painting of Perry's deceased wife still hung on the wall over the fireplace.

He often felt remorse over her as he stood in front of the portrait, drinking in the beauty of the dead woman.

He told himself several times, when he took to drink, to burn that damn painting, for it reminded him of his own loneliness and his failure to keep a sweetheart. He remembered how he had fallen in love with Perry's wife as she with him. In secret, they met each other away from prying eyes, while he pretended to be her husband's best friend.

Even when his plan to implement the takeover of her husband's holdings was jeopardized with this liaison, he did not stop seeing her. Her son found out about them and Jenkins arranged for him to be arrested on a fake robbery charge in Johnson County and imprisoned.

Jenkins threats to reveal their forbidden affair if she didn't conspire with him to take the ranch, finally shook her to her senses and she threatened to tell all.

Her true loyalty to her spouse and her love for her son and what she had allowed to happen between Jenkins and her, overwhelmed her with so much grief, she lost her mind and shot herself the same evening with her husband's shotgun.

Perry, distraught at his wife's disloyalty and death, deep in debt to Jenkins for loans paid to some overpriced lawyers to futilely keep his son out of jail, turned to drink and, in a drunken stupor, challenged Jenkins to a fight in the old town saloon in Round Rock.

Jenkins, sober and waiting as a mountain lion for the kill, begged off in that public place. He stated he didn't want to hurt Perry and instead suggested they settle their differences like civilized men over a game of cards. Of course Jenkins was using a marked deck and Perry lost everything to him.

Thus ending the first part of his plan he had started almost two years ago.

He was deep in his self-pity over the woman when Calley stomped into the room from outside. His face was beet red under his battered plainsman's hat. A ragged towel stuffed into the collar of his worn coat, to stop the cold from creeping down his neck and back, complemented a similar tattered rag wrapped across the top of his sombrero and around his head to keep his ears warm; the brim pulled down so it resembled a woman's bonnet.

Jenkins glazed drunkenly up when the fireplace flames grew brighter and taller as a cold jab of air followed his main henchman in doors.

"Close the damn door!" Jenkins growled, his words slurred from too much whisky.

"What do you want?" he barked again.

Calley looked at Jenkins, glanced at the portrait and knew instinctively how to act.

"Not a lot boss, the boys are getting a mite crotchety with cabin fever. The ice has melted enough so the horses won't slip and fall and I thought I'd send someone out to check on them beeves hold up in the hidden canyon," he answered, "It'll do them good to get out of the bunkhouse; them that ain't drunk and passed out."

Todd Jenkins sat silent, rubbing his thumb over the rim of the shot glass he was holding. He marveled again at how Calley's southwestern accent had so completely replaced his New Yorker dialect.

He understood the man did everything possible to erase his heritage. His hate for anything northeastern ran as deep as his anger for people in general.

Presently, Jenkins put down his glass next to the near empty bottle of rye perched on a red marble topped end table next to his chair and poured another ounce of the brown liquid from the container. Throwing his head back, he tossed the fire water down his throat.

"I got a better idea. Take them animals up river to the crossing at Marble Falls and on to Bill's place. Keep them there until we collect a few more and move them back across and on up to Charlie's."

"It's a might cold to be driving cattle right now, you reckon boss?"

"Don't argue with me! That range detective will be sticking his nose around here again and I don't want them beeves near my land!" he yelled drunkenly.

"Alright, alright, I'll send some of the boy's out. They won't like it. I can't say I would either; but you're the boss!"

"That's right, and don't you forget it!" Jenkins slurred in his drunkenness.

Calley put his coat and towels back on and left Jenkins staring at the painting of the dead woman. He didn't have any idea who to tell and who to send since they all got pretty drunk last night he realized unhappily, stomping across the frozen ground toward the rock bunkhouse. He'd have to go with them or they wouldn't do the job.

He acknowledged they were afraid of crossing him and Jenkins, however, he or his boss always needed to be on hand.

His boss ran the outfit with fear which didn't inspire much loyalty on days like today. He wondered how many would back them if the time ever came. Not a lot he figured. Jacobs and Jon and a couple more were all he could trust. The rest will run.

Several times he had been tempted as well to ride off and leave his boss. But he never did.

Calley didn't have any regard for anyone except Jenkins, who sometimes acted as a father and other moments like a brother to him and he was not about to desert the man.

After growing up on the dirty slum streets of New York city, watching his mother raped and murdered, not knowing his real father, raised and later tossed out by his aunt, beaten again and again by the street gangs until big enough to fight back, surviving by

stealing, finally joining the army when the war started and nearly getting killed at Antietam 'in that damn corn field,' he grew a tough exterior and a heart of cold stone.

Recovered from his wounds and released at the end of the conflict from the military, he found himself without a home, job or future.

This prompted his move west where he found nothing to his liking and resorted again to petty theft and a couple of big robberies with which he applied the skills he learned growing up on the streets and also the shooting ability taught by the army.

He eventually rode for a while with the James and Younger boys, hiding his northern identity until he met Jenkins.

He thought back to the night he was cornered in a saloon in Missouri by several gunmen; self-appointed bounty hunters who were intent on taking him in for the reward on his head, dead or alive. It seemed they wanted him mostly dead.

Jenkins, standing at the other end of the bar, joined in on the fight on his side. In all, six men fell that evening.

Later, after both lit out of town and after they crossed the border into Kansas, Jenkins offered him a place in his plan to rustle cattle in Kansas and Texas.

Calley figured it to be a good idea, since he didn't cotton much to working for wages. He had found he liked to kill men for sport as well as survival and Jenkins considered this as asset of great value to him.

And riding with Jenkins provided less notoriety than association with the James gang and robbing banks.

Jenkins said he needed a man with skills such as his and he did appreciate Calley's cold blooded outlook on life. He taught him about cattle and branding techniques, to curb his temper and not shoot every person who crossed him. Eventually making him number two man in his organization.

Jenkins took care of him, like no one else did and Calley would ride into Hell for him. And he probably will someday.

The only other fellow whom he ever considered a friend had been the gunman John Wesley Hardin, whom he had known only a short while.

That was in Abilene in 71. Hardin and he understood one another and shared some short hours of rowdy hell-raising before Hardin was run out of town by Hickok.

What Calley didn't understand concerned Hardin's friendship with a cattleman he seemingly had a gentle affection towards.

Calley first met McGowan when he helped Hardin put the drunken drover to bed. He later learned the drover had ridden with Hardin on a cattle drive in their younger years.

The biggest surprise occurred when the Abilene city council had issued a temporary writ for Hardin to pursue and apprehend a Mexican bandit who had gunned down and robbed a trail boss from Texas.

Hardin asked McGowan to ride with him and not Calley, so he left town soured over another friendship.

This cattleman wasn't the same like he and Hardin, so their friendship mystified him.

Although the range detective didn't show it, Calley wondered if McGowan recognized him after seven years. McGowan was pretty drunk and probably did not; as he did not reveal any signs of recognition the two weeks he and Maxwell rode with him as he showed off the bosses spread.

He hadn't said anything to Jenkins about this and as long as McGowan didn't recognize him, he'd keep it to himself.

Another issue is the detective might discover Calley and his boss's involvement for a short time in rustling up along the Canadian; stealing from Goodnight and some of the newer ranchers as well as the trail drives pushing through the Indian Territories. That would be a problem but he was sure Jenkins had already considered that.

Good pickings they were, he mused, until Jenkins had a falling out with Red, another noted cattle thief and the big man at Wild Horse Lake. The rustler had more men than Jenkins and after a daylong running gunfight, only four of them got clear of Red and his bunch.

Just as well, Calley mused as he opened the bunkhouse door. The new cattle consortium, Goodnight started, has about wiped out Red and his rustlers.

Now the detective and his partner are down here snooping around and both of them rode for Goodnight.

Jenkins needs to be established as a rancher before McGowan figures out too much. Even a blind man could put two and two together and the longer Jenkins waits the better chance of mistakes made and getting caught.

Entering the smaller rock building, the smell of stale whiskey, dirty bodies and clothes assaulted his nose after breathing the fresh cold air of the outdoors.

Only two of the sixteen men were awake. One was trying to pull his boots on and the other was bent over the potbellied stove stirring what Calley assumed were eggs in an iron skillet.

Both grimaced as he opened the door, their faces telegraphing the discomfort running through them as the cold draft of air followed Calley into the room. Their expressions relaxed somewhat as he shut off the column of freezing air.

They held their movements in check, one with his half booted left foot and leg in the air and the other standing with his spoon hovering over his skillet of bubbling eggs as they waited for the foreman to speak.

"The boss wants the stock down in the hidden canyon moved."

Both men groaned and shook their heads slowly.

"Where to?" Tham Hartman asked as he stirred his eggs.

"Upstream to the Marble Falls crossing and on to Bill's place; afterwards, we'll acquire a few additional and move the whole bunch from Bill's to Charlie's spread later."

"Aw Hell, that'll take a month and a half or more in this cold mud!" Tham grumbled, "Who in hell will be out looking for cows in this here weather?"

Calley walked over and peered down at the egg's Tham was stirring.

"I reckon you know who! Boss don't trust the new range detective to stay indoors, I don't either, he worked for Goodnight up in the Panhandle and cold weather ain't nothing to him or his partner! If they find them animals at the river canyon, there'll be trouble a plenty!"

"Shee-it! Who's gonna do the rustling for the few more?" the other man, Jon Rogers, asked as he was pulling on his boots.

"You a wanting the job?" Calley asked as he stared at him.

"Hell yes, beats sitting in a saddle for a month or so freezing my ass off!" Jon spat, "The river bottom is as cold as a witch's tit this time of the year and them heifers and their calves won't want to move willingly no how! A lot of damn work!"

"Alright, when Jim gets back, you can ride with him. Remember you have to drive them one's y'all rustle up the river anyhow!"

"Shit, it'll be a might warmer come February. Most of this freezing crap will be over; especially if we have to wait on Jim.

I reckon he's holed up some where's with a Mex-kan or Darkie woman's legs wrapped around his back. Be a while before he gets here!" Jon grinned, standing up and stomping over to look at Tham's eggs.

"Wha'cha got cooking pardner?"

"I ain't your pardner and you can cook your own damn eggs!" Tham cried defensively as he pulled the skillet away from Jon's inquisitive nose.

"Alright, I will!" Jon exclaimed, looking about the bunkhouse, "Where you keeping them?"

"I ain't keeping them anywhere. The chickens are!"

"The hen house?"

"Yup!" Tham replied, gobbling down the fried embryos in large bites.

"You didn't bring in enough for everyone?"

"Nope, you were asleep when I went out to the chicken coop!" Tham mumbled around a mouth full of yellow.

"Why you son-of-a-bitch!" Jon cursed as he cocked his fisted arm back.

"Enough!" Calley grabbed Jon's fist with an open hand.

"You can get your own breakfast; don't start nothin in here. I ain't about to listen or watch y'all fight!" Calley yelled, cutting the argument short.

"Collect all the eggs. The other boys will want something to eat when they get awake. And cut a big slice of that ham hanging in the smokehouse also!"

"It's frozen solid," Tham interjected.

"Bring in the whole damn quarter and let it thaw in here," Calley restated to Jon.

"Alright boss," Jon said as he gave Tham a murderous look sulking back to his bunk to put on his coat and hat. He slammed the bunkhouse door on his way out.

He continued to grumble loudly, complaining in the cold until no one could hear him as he walked away.

The weather held for the next six days with sunshine and a warming of the air. Although the riders with Calley knew another blue Norther might appear at any time, they were grateful for the warmer temperatures.

The muddy earth dried out proving the drive not as difficult to push the stolen cattle out of the hidden valley and along the Colorado flood plains as first thought.

Calley rode point. Tham was outrider on the right of the herd, occasionally turning off and driving a misguided mama or calf back into the fold. The water kept them in check on the left and the other three men pulled drag and outrider at the rear.

The trail narrowed following the muddy bank in spots with the bluffs just yards from the water's edge, forcing the cows into a tight line abreast and on occasion single file.

Other places, the bottom land opened into wide valleys, dotted with cottonwood stands, large grey and red rocks and tall grass everywhere. The animals would spread out as far as the men allowed.

Not a big drive, it consisted of two hundred and fifty longhorns, mostly yearlings, a few new born's with momma's; none of them ready for market.

Jenkins didn't want steers unless they were fresh cut calves, only females or heifers which had not produced off springs as of yet, momma cows with their young and immature bulls.

Calley knew his boss's plan called for building up a collection of ranches. Each stocked with these stolen animals. Marketing would come later after the heat and suspicion died down in one or two years.

Calley looked back as he searched the bluffs, clumps of trees and the arroyos along the river behind them. He worried about the muddy hoof marks, left by the cattle, providing an easy trail to follow.

There was not much water in the mud as normal which would, over a few hours, collapse the tracks into themselves. The tall river grass, dead after the freeze, didn't spring back as it did when green, leaving a noticeable trail.

He suspected this move had not been a good idea, since professional cattle detectives, who knew how to track, were looking for signs such as this.

Reaching the shallows below Marble Falls around mid-January, just two more weeks, was his only consolation. Once over those slick pink and red granite shoals, they would hide the beeves at Bill Handover's place, west of Dead Man's Hole, until the weather got better then move them back across the falls and up to Jenkins new ranch close to Burnett.

The ground, rocky and hard, was full of that pink granite on that side of the crossing. A trail will be damn near impossible to follow save for occasional cow patties. Calley wanted this drive over as soon as possible; he had the feeling this time.

He decided he would wait at Marble Falls for Jon and the second herd before moving on to Bills spread.

Jim Albright rode back to Jenkins ranch nine days after the ice melted with news for his employer. He had started to put his saddle up after turning his horse loose in the corral behind the barn when Jenkins walked in behind him.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Jim turned his head toward Jenkins, somewhat startled and surprised at his boss talking to him in such a way.

"Why, in Round Rock chief. I got stranded during that ice spell!"

"The weather has been warm for several days! What the hell is your excuse now?"

"Aw boss, you don't have to talk to me this way! I've been watching out for your interests. That range detective from the Panhandle took sick and I waited to see if he'd pull through!"

"Sick! Wa-da-ya mean sick?" Jenkins asked as he stopped in the middle of the barn, his fists on his hips.

Jim turned and faced Jenkins after putting his saddle on a railing and grinned as he pushed his hat back.

"Influenza; the son of a bitch caught influenza. I hung around for a while after I heard this, hoping he wouldn't recover. Some folks down in Austin didn't, according to rumors in town."

"Well, did he or not?"

"Yeah, he did but he was real sick, out of his head and it's gonna be a spell before he recovers enough to get back to work."

Jenkins laughed, slapping his thigh, almost jumping in excitement.

"This bit of luck gives us time to finish my plan, but what about that old man who rides with him, Maxwell?" he asked, stepping forward for more good news.

"He took care of his partner, so did the woman whose pa owns the Inn their staying at. I reckon he'll get sick next, or stay around a spell to nurse maid his friend," Jim said, scratching his chin.

"He don't seem near as smart as McGowan. I don't think we'd have much trouble dealing with him if he pursued the investigation alone; not at all!"

Jenkins, forgetting why he was angry, put his right arm around Jim's shoulders, steering him out of the barn to the ranch house.

"Jim, here's my plan of what I want you to do---," he started talking slowly, explaining the next steps in his grand scheme.

TRACKING

Maxwell stood up slowly and stiffly from his campfire, grimacing at the pain in his knees from squatting too long. He threw the remaining dregs of his coffee on to the hot embers, tapped the grounds out of his tin with his fingers over the coals and put the blackened pot and his cup into one of the pannier bags strapped over the Dunn colored pack horse.

As he kicked dirt over the still smoking charcoal, he readied himself for another day of following the trail he found leading out of the hidden valley near Cypress creek.

He camped up high along the bluff, preferring a good spot to observe for several miles both up and down the river. He chose a secluded location, as he did every night, not inaccessible but relatively secure.

Now it was time to ride down into the bottom and continue tracking the muddy trail left by cattle and horses passing through there several days earlier.

Suddenly, the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He quickly looked south down the canyon. All his life he had a sixth sense for trouble and he learned to listen to it as this always kept disaster at arm's length.

He pulled his brass field telescope from his pommel bag and scanned every yard of river valley. Not seeing anything, Ben started to shrug off his unexpected tension and saddle up, but his senses were so strong as compared to the past week of occasional uneasiness, he decided to wait a while.

After rediscovering the hidden canyon and finding recent tracks of animals grazing there and later driven off up stream, he had carefully followed the hoof prints for nearly two full weeks. The trail was cold and another few hours would not make a difference he mused.

He had taken his time as on several occasions the trail faded on the occasional rock surface of the river bed and mindful that others had disappeared when alone down here, he was careful to not make mistakes.

Ben felt tired, cold, and dirty. He realized, as each day passed, at age fifty two he didn't want this kind of life anymore and had been thinking of putting roots down before he got too old.

He thought about the widow Maria and her son Jeffery in Round Rock for a moment before forcing his mind back to business. A smile spread slowly on his face as he realize the idea of her made him feel both comfortable and lonely.

Ben Maxwell sat down between a pair of large rocks, leaning against the north one so he could face south. He squirmed around until settled, noting his vantage point. A small cedar bush, growing below him, provided cover from anyone observing him directly from the canyon bottom.

He laid his field telescope across his lap and stood his Henry rifle to the right of his head against the stone. He glanced over his left shoulder to check on his two horses grazing, debating if he should unpack the Dunn but decided he might need to move in a hurry. The packhorse stayed packed.

Three hours passed in the warming sun when he thought he noted above the noise of the wind, bawling cattle. He didn't hear anything for a while after that, save for the breeze blowing and whistling down the canyon, hard from the southeast.

He reckoned it had been his imagination and started to get up from his post, grab a biscuit for lunch and ride down to the bottom to track the old trail for the remainder of the day; when he recognized the crying of cattle; this time a bit more clear than before.

Settling back down, he waited.

He sat motionless, waiting quietly, a habit he learned through his early ranger years tracking Quahadies, Kickapoo and other Indians and later again with the Rangers right after the war with Mexico, hunting outlaws.

Wounded in the leg during a fracas down on the Salado in his early ranger years, he was discharged and after he healed, worked cattle with his brother Jeb.

They bought and sold beeves to the Confederate government in New Orleans after the war started; driving the cattle to the loading wharf across the bay from Galveston.

When the Yankees ships surrounded Galveston in October of 1862, they captured both he and his older sibling along with their herd at sea.

They had set sail on a paddle steamer for Mobile one October morning, trying to out run the blockade around Galveston. They gambled they could make it to Mobile, Alabama since New Orleans fell to Union forces that April.

It was a bad gamble.

He lost everything monetary, his freedom for a short time and Jeb. The Yankee's transferred him and his brother from a damp ships cell into the Galveston jail during the brief period they held the city in December.

Jeb, already very sick with pneumonia he contracted on board the prison ship, died before they were freed by the Texas units consisting of old men and young boys retaking the island a week later.

After the war, despite his bad luck in life, he hired on several drives, joined up with Captain McNeely's Rangers for one year, getting shot again, then more cattle expeditions until he settled in with Charles Goodnight's operation.

He spent most of his time riding with Emmitt McGowan, whom he met first on the infamous drive with Hardin in 67.

He recalled those days with a grin on how he took to the young fellow and taught him about tracking; most of what Emmitt is now savvy. He witnessed him grow and mature from a, devil may care firebrand, into a fine, honest man. Ben cared for him as if he was a younger brother.

Ben's thoughts were interrupted by the distant bawling of cattle. He could distinctly discern the snapping of whips, whistling and shouting of men although he had no view of them yet.

An embankment blocked his line of vision where the river bent back to the east, an approximate mile or so from his position. But their noise carried with clarity on the wind now.

He pulled a slab of jerky out of his vest pocket and bit off a piece to chew. This would have to do for lunch he sighed, couldn't risk a fire now.

He waited for almost another hour before the cattle, some two hundred fifty head, passed below his perch. He counted six men driving the beeves up the valley, none of whom he recognize, but he sensed them as Jenkins' people.

For another couple of hours he waited until the herd had moved out of sight; he stood up, stretched his stiff body and pounded his butt to get the numbness out.

He relieved himself and gathered his horse's reins to lead them down the narrow trace through the rocks, scrub oaks and cedars to the river bottom.

The herd was near three hours gone when he reached the water's edge and began following the tracks they left.

Ben did not move too quickly. He didn't want to ride up on one of those men who might be searching for strays or watching their rear for people like him.

He knew what lay up a head, the trail is clear and fresh, so he took his time.

He intended to wait until the herd bedded down for the night before moving into a good spot to survey the goings on without disturbing the cattle or the men.

He planned, assuming the opportunity presented itself, to sneak into the gaggle of cows tonight to examine their markings. If the beeves are Jenkins' then no reason for him to continue to follow, but somehow he didn't think they are the man's property and Emmitt would want to know what brand's the critters are wearing and their destination.

He knew he had to check the brands on those animals despite the chance of getting caught.

He shook his head as he pulled on the lead rope of the pack horse, goading his own mount to move forward in a slow walk.

Trouble is coming. Everything appeared as if the rancher's bitterness and complaining about loss cattle is justified. As evidence grows, Jenkins is right smack in the middle of it all. Tonight, examining the brands would confirm the suspicions.

One other thing bothered him though. The herd he had witnessed moving up the river consisted of new born's, yearlings and a few mama's, but no steers! He noted this plain enough with his spy glass!

Not typical for rustlers he mused. The animals are too young! The beef buyers wouldn't pay much for them, assuming they reached a market alive.

What is going on?

He pondered the question for a while, until he recalled all of Jenkins's cattle are branded. Even the young newborn calves; which is odd, since most ranchers do that during the roundups in the spring, not in the fall!

He and Emmitt had noted, after being in the company of that Calley-fella, the possible reason's Jenkins spent so much time and effort keeping his stock branded; a year round job.

He also wondered where they are taking these little ones who are not ready to make such a hard journey. He reckoned most would not survive a long drive.

He realized he had more questions needing answers than he had answers to fit them. This is different than the operations up on the Llano Estacado.

Very peculiar, he mused.

On the table rock it was simpler to find the rustlers stealing steers. Rustling appealed to men who are after fast money but sometimes got in a shootout or necktie party instead.

What he found here is vastly different; there is no quick money from these critters. He knew proof was needed for the law and courts to handle before the hanging and shooting took place.

He also realized the only person who might get shot in the next few days is him, trying to acquire this proof.

The evening passed uneventful; the cows bedded down and the men driving them drifted toward a campfire set in a draw north of the herd. Only one man is left out to guard the animals and he camped on his butt twenty feet from his horse, between some smooth large river rocks to block the wind.

The temperature started to turn cold again, although the breeze still blew out of the southeast. The disturbance of men and strange critters in the valley with the changing weather lent an air of anticipation sensed by the local inhabitants.

Four deer, a buck and three small doe, a cougar and two black bears, in addition to smaller animals, all which hid among the rocks and trees of the canyon during the day, silently stole away as darkness fell.

The men in the cow camp paid no attention to the exodus; too intent on their miserable existence as voiced steadily by their constant profanity.

But one sole set of human eyes, aware of the change taking place in the natural world of this valley approached the bedded animals with silent and rapid movements, like the Indians he fought years ago.

After establishing his own cold camp, again up on the bluffs, Ben Maxwell stole up to an outcropping of rocks and surveyed the encampment until darkness blotted out the men and the beeves.

He made mental notes about the lay of the land around him and down to where the longhorns bedded down, his idea to slip up close to examine the brands on the beasts; just a few, to determine whether they belonged to Jenkins.

He reckoned there is enough ground cover around the herd to move without being seen by the rustlers, but if he spooked the cows or they moved for any reason, he'd have a hard time staying hidden.

Fortune smiled on him, the sky was overcast, no moon and nary a star to reveal his presence. A pitch, black night; thank you Lord he whispered.

Satisfied with his plan, he deftly slipped the half mile to his camp, checked his own horses and then sat down and leaning against his saddle he bit off a large chew of jerky.

While eating Ben decided he would make his move around two in the morning and considered what he'd do and how.

Finished with his dried beef meal, he took a long drawn on his canteen, made a mental note to wake up at the allotted time and pulled his blanket over his chest.

His last thoughts, before sleep over came him, were of the woman Maria and her son Jeffery. He decided to court her and if she'd have him, quit this business.

MARBLE FALLS

The temperature had fallen as the wind moved from the southeast to the northwest around two in the morning, increasing in speed.

Ben was shivering but grateful as he was now downwind of the herd with the breeze blowing away any sounds he might make. His scent now will be carried from the herd and the horses.

He took most of an hour to work his way down and over to the bed ground. He found the night rider still hunkered down between an outcropping of rocks, sheltered against the draft, sound asleep. His steed, hobbled, had drifted with the cold zephyr several yards south of him. The others were curled up under their horse blankets around a dying camp fire, snoring loudly in deep sleep.

Not one rustler awake at all.

Ben shook his head in wonderment and smiled to himself. If he was one of the Quahadie Comanche's, or Waddies as commonly called the Indians he fought in the past, these boys would wake up this morning with their throats cut.

Fools he thought.

For a moment he considered slipping in and cutting their gullets, then taking the cattle back, but the idea faded away as unworkable.

Bright enough to see several yards well, with the clouds gone and star light guiding him, he felt at ease moving amongst the bedded animals.

He reached the first animal, a mama, who laid on her left side on the brand. Ben patted her, making soothing sounds as he scratched her ears, searching for her calf.

He found two, next to each other. One, apparently orphaned or taken from its mother and had latched on this small family. He pulled his leather gloves off as he groped around the little creature's hind quarters until he discovered the fresh scaring of the iron.

He petted and smoothed the fur of the calf as he retrieved a small square of thin writing paper from his right vest pocket and a piece of charcoal he carried in his left.

Ben laid the onion skin over the brand with gentle movements and ran the charred wood across the material several times with a bit of pressure. He repeated the exercise, doing the same with another piece of paper, to the other calf. He had already committed to memory Jenkins's brands and these matched up with them. He moved on to the next group.

For over an hour, Ben crept through the herd, petting and soothing the easily spooked bovines, searching their bodies for the telltale scarring of the branding iron.

He soon had discovered on all the calves he inspected and many of the yearlings that they were branded with one of the three markings that Jenkins used. No way to prove they are anyone cows but Jenkins', he mused, although, some should still be sucking on their mama's.

The remainder of the year olds didn't possess fresh scarring nor did the childless heifers. And most telling, their brands were not Jenkins!

These were stolen cattle he realized, recently rustled, to be over branded sometime soon he guessed; probably when they reached their destination.

He surmised if the over branding is as good as it needed to be, these cattle will be lost to their owners forever.

The pieces of charcoal traced paper secure in his vest, Ben slipped out of the herd with the same ease he had entered it as he began considering his next move.

Ben wanted to follow them but he also needed to report what he had found to Emmitt and the law. If he returned now to Round Rock with this information, these cattle will be gone; their destination unknown.

He is not able to stop this crowd alone, not one gun against six. So he decided discovering where they were going and then high tailing it to report to Emmitt was the best option.

Ben Maxwell followed the herd for another five days. The rustlers, not making good speed on that winding river bottom with those little calves and yearlings, gave Ben an opportunity each morning for an hour or so for a fire to boil a couple of cups of coffee

and eat his only warm meal. He couldn't chance such a luxury in the evening without discovery.

On the eve of the fifth day, he found something which made his stomach turn. A new born calf, floating just below the surface, washed into a crook of the stream where the current is not effective.

Ben stopped and studied the thing in the water for a while. He had seen other calves lying dead beside the sorry muddy trail every day, most are not even hidden; he guessed the drovers figured the carnivores along the river would eat the remains before anyone found them.

This drive is taking its toll on the young calves. and Ben wondered if these men will have any stock left.

He waded out into the wet cold and pulled the corpse to the bank. The poor creature had its legs bound, with a rawhide rope looped around its middle.

Ben could see the animal had been gutted but he didn't know why until he curled the stiff flesh back. The critter was stuffed with rocks.

Apparently an effort had been made to sink this little one as it floated down stream.

Ben returned the carcass to the water and watched as the current sucked the calf out into the river again. A curious anger welled up in him. He did not understand why those boys had gone to so much trouble for this animal but this senseless butchery made him sick and mad.

Anyone who would go to the trouble of gutting a poor critter who is dying and stuffing it full of rocks and then tossing the remains into this river is not someone he cared to meet, Ben mused, fingering the bone handle of his Bowie knife. He might do a little gutting of his own if he did.

On the sixth day, after a leisurely breakfast, he followed the same routine, trailing the stolen animals a couple of hours behind their departure. The temperature had dropped the previous night, the wind whipping through the valley, roughing the water and bending and shaking every grass stem and tree limb, creating a loud canopy of indistinguishable noise.

He had been riding an hour when he rounded a grove of cottonwoods growing close to the Colorado's bank. The distant complaining of cattle and men shouting caused him to pull up.

He reined his Bay mare to stop so quick the mare's hind hoofs skidded in the mud almost sitting on its rump. The pack horse didn't halt as rapidly and slid into him and his mount.

The cattle, he was trailing, were crossing the river; slipping and splashing in shallow fast running water between a series of small falls stretching up stream for a short distance to where a large fall cascaded down from a higher level. He distinguished the polished dark pink color of the granite stones under the clear water and realized this is Marble Falls; they are crossing here!

He should have guessed.

Boot heel deep in most places, good footing on the rocky bottom, if somewhat slick; the streams level was down this time of the year exposing the ground around the bank on both sides which consisted of broken shale and granite shards. Scrub and blackjack oak along with bushy evergreen cedar dotted the landscape above the high bluff on each side for several miles back.

He realized with the cattle traversing here, tracking would next to impossible to over the stony ground. This was a perfect crossing for outlaws.

Caught up in the essence of the moment, Ben failed to keep himself hidden from the view of the rustlers already on the far side. He saw the faint puff of smoke, before the heavy breeze blew it away, from a rifle held by one of the men on a grey Paint pony.

The round hit the bank next to him, throwing mud and bits of rock several feet to his left.

The wind had blown the shot off target and Ben backed his Bay mare quickly, knocking the pack horse on its haunches. Another bullet kicked up dirt directly behind the gaggle of two horses and a cursing Ben, as the hum of the projectile passed his head, sending cold chills down his spine.

"Aw hell" he cursed. Instinct told him, without his thinking, a dangerous mistake had been made and he needed to get away as fast as he could.

Quick as possible, pulling the Dunn along, he raced back over his own tracks, searching for a break in the steep rocky bluffs on his left, for a way out of this valley.

He rode for several miles at a breakneck gallop over the muddy ground, infested with large rocks and washed up drift timber, before stopping to rest his animals and search the trail behind for pursuers.

"Sure enough!" he grumbled, as he watched a rider coming out from behind a huge jutting rock right at the river's edge. It appeared to be the same gray Paint and rifleman from earlier.

Ben swore to himself and scanned the embankment leading up to the bluffs above him. He found no trail that his horses might manage, so he spurred his animal again, the Dunn tugging hard before it accepted the wild running.

Minutes later, Ben spotted a likely draw leading upward, a sliver in the rocks, a brush covered crack wide enough for one horse at a time.

He took a quick glance over his shoulder. Not seeing anyone for the moment, he spurred his mare up the draw.

Thirty minutes later, he reached a level spot below the rocky bluffs, shaded with oak and cedar; it seemed a good place to hold up.

He didn't know if more of the rustlers followed him or just the one. One is enough he mused. Ben had never seen anyone shoot like this except Billy Dixon and the rifleman following him certainly isn't Dixon.

For the first time in a very long time, he was scared but resolute. Years ago, he learned how to channel his fear into aggressive action. An old Ranger once told him in his youth to always use what frightens you if you want to survive.

And to think!

Ben pulled his Henry from its scabbard and slid off his mare. He stepped over to the mouth of the draw he had ridden up and searched for his pursuer.

It didn't take too long to find him, about five hundred yards away along the river edge; the shooter was walking his horse, taking his time following Ben's tracks, his rifle in his hand.

Ben realized this fellow is smart and wouldn't get too close to give him an opportunity to fight. He didn't have to, Ben acknowledged. Whatever the hombre is shooting is able to outreach his Henry.

Probably a Sharps like Emmitt's, which he wished he had right now as he turned and examined with care the washout he had climbed up to.

The rock rim, towering above him, had been cut out by erosion to form a shallow cave along the base where he stood. Fine

soft silt covered the floor, marked with animal track's running in several different directions.

This was an animal lair and he knew from experience there might be a useable trail of some sort to the top of the bluff's from here.

The bluff rim, he mused, would be a better place to make a stand.

He took another quick glance at his pursuer then turned and scouted the base of the cave on both sides. To the left, behind a clump of cedar, he found what he'd been looking for. A narrow, gravel strewn game trail which led in a winding turn up the rock bluff.

Ben scouted up the path a little ways and decided he and the ponies could make it! However, he would have to take the panniers off the Dunn. He and the horses will be seen from the floor of the valley, he reckoned, but this couldn't be helped as he turned to his task.

He untied quickly the straps holding the panniers on the Dunn and found a small washout concealed from view to stash them. After he was satisfied they were hidden well enough, he opened one of the packs and retrieved a large slab of jerky and several hard tack crackers and stuffed them inside his shirt.

Returning to his mounts, he tied the pack horse's lead line to his mare's saddle horn and started up the white gravel game trail.

He had climbed sixty to eighty feet up the path when a loud crack startled him and the animals. No sooner had he calmed them down than another shower of rock fragments splattered down on them, causing him to involuntarily duck from the second bullet impacting the stone above him.

His Bay reared up, whining; Ben, his arms wrapped around her neck near her shoulders, pulled her back down with his weight.

He felt the tugging of the Dunn through the lead tied to the saddle and reached up to undo it. He couldn't handle two animals on this narrow ledge with both frightened.

The gelding would have to follow on it's own.

As he let the rope go, rocks fragmented again in a loud crack, splattering him and the horses. The Bay started to rise up on her hind legs screaming in fear and confusion, pulling him off the ground.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" he cried at the shooter, "Whoa girl!" He urged to his mount.

The Dunn did the same frightened rearing, copying the mare, but lost the footing of his hind hooves and fell sideways screaming off the ledge, crashing through the branches below them, landing, with a sickening crunch, several feet beneath the tree tops.

The horse lay still; Ben couldn't tell if the animal was dead or only injured and he didn't have time to check. He grabbed the reins of his Bay and ran as fast as manageable up the game path, pulling and praying his Bay could keep her balance and not fall.

The trail led between a fallen boulder and the sheer rock bluff, giving him some small cover for the moment.

Another crack with splattering fragments showered down on him. Ben figured the shooter wasn't trying to hit him as much as to rid him of his transportation; playing with him and his animal's fears.

Ben stopped for a moment, patted his horse, soothing it as he stared back along the pathway he came. Then slowly, he started up again. The game trail never opened out again into an open view from below as before, giving Ben some relief. But he knew the rifleman would soon be hot behind him.

Suddenly, the escape route turned to the right into a huge split in the gray wall, hidden from below by a thick stand of oak and cedar. He surveyed it quickly, realizing this was what he was looking for as it appeared to run all the way to the top of the bluff.

"Thank you Lord!" he muttered half out loud, as he pulled the Bay forward.

Minutes later, they were on level ground, surrounded in the same type of scrub trees growing down the side of the valley wall. The surface consisted of broken red and gray rocks embedded in hard packed reddish dirt. This gave Ben the advantage he needed; no tracks!

He scanned the sky and noted darkness coming soon and the rifleman, if he made it up here before dark, will not be able to find or follow him easily. He led his mustang east, away from the canyon, into the jumbled thicket running along the edge of the bluff.

Ben thought about waiting for the shooter to show his self and deal with him, but figured the fellow was smarter than that and would wait till morning. Ben needed to be gone before then.

An hour later, he cleared the biggest part of the thicket and mounted and spurred his Bay into a fast trot. Ben rode until he

couldn't see well in the rapidly darkening sky. He found a clump of cedars, dismounted and led his mare into the middle of them.

He sat the entire night without a camp fire, cross legged, with his Henry rifle lying in his lap, his saddle blanket over his shoulders, waiting for the rifleman.

Morning came slowly; the sun again hidden by the overcast sky. By the time the light was bright enough to reveal the trail; Ben had been in the saddle for an hour.

Another day passed riding over rugged terrain before he crossed the Fort Worth-Austin road. He swapped his exhausted Bay mare for a Chestnut gelding in George Town before riding hell bent to Round Rock.

GOT SOMETHING IMPORTANT

Verna Rose Gallagher glazed out the window of her father's study at two Sparrows' hopping on the ledge, wondering why these kinds of birds did not fly south like all the others.

She sat at his desk and before her lay the financial records of the Inn. She had just finished entering the week's transactions including the cost of supplies, laundry, food stuffs, general up keep of the building and the hired helps pay.

At the bottom, she tallied the balance after overhead and smiled at the tally line total.

An idea had been circling in her mind for over a year which she had kept to herself and now it appeared the time is approaching to discuss her concept with her father; the possibility of expanding the holdings of the family by either investing or outright purchasing another inn or hotel.

This establishment, bought by her papa shortly after the war was over in sixty five, proved productive. The small fortune he amassed was considerable, but she felt it could be increased by the purchase of a second property.

She possessed a head for finances and he sometimes took counsel from her on ventures he would consider.

She remembered once he did not consider her approval of his investing in cattle several years ago. Cows he bought in San Antonio, with another business partner. They hired a man to drive the beeves to Kansas to sell in 72.

A risky venture; however, the investment proved sound and several thousand dollars had been added to his bank account.

He refrained from repeating the buy the following year, due to her insistence and avoided the market crash in 73 which ruined many farmers and ranchers who put all their money into the cattle trade.

He often remarked, to anyone listening, 'had he not paid attention to his daughter he undoubtedly would have lost the inn and his shirt to.'

He took pride in his daughter's remarkable head for business and bragged when the subject came up. He also listened to her and had not attempted to repeat his one success with cattle again.

She liked to think she is a practical woman with money. Not given to unwarranted risks; this is why the idea of investing into another inn or hotel seemed such a good scheme, but care must be taken to determine its market.

Location is the sticking point. For the moment she did not have a place in mind. To approach her father and interest him, she will need a suitable spot or an already established concern to convince him to invest.

They would require someone to operate it and hire employees, or keep the help on if the ideal place now existed. The former is not an issue, for she intended to run the second operation herself.

She saw no possible objections from her papa she did not have answers for. It will work, but she must locate what she had in mind. She smiled again.

The smile faded as another item began to tug at her conscience. Since meeting Emmitt McGowan, her opinion of the cattle business had softened.

Listening in on the conversations of the ranchers when they had their meetings in the dining room with Emmitt, she was startled at the amount of cash spoken of. Of money lost due to stolen cattle.

The market had improved up north with the increase in demand and price of beef, she reasoned.

The Indian threat is almost nonexistent on many of the cattle-trails. Only rustlers or bandits and they are handled most of the time.

Perhaps purchasing beeves to be driven to the northern markets wouldn't be such a risky venture anymore and she knew the man to run that enterprise.

Verna sat back, smiled again and closed her father's ledger; another item she might bring up with him, sometime in the immediate future.

The morning had been still and quiet. All the patrons, who were staying at the Inn, were out doing their business in town. The

cook busied his self in the kitchen; his pots and pans rattling, singing a Mexican song to no one. She heard the footsteps of her father moving about at the reception desk.

The day was peaceful, almost languid.

Suddenly, there was an intrusion into her peace, her private world, as heavy booted steps sounded from the lobby. She could distinctly hear the sound of spur's jingling as the man who had entered moved slowly across the rug covered floor to the registrar desk.

"I need my keys please!" a voice rumbled with its deep gravelly resonance.

Verna knew immediately who the voice belonged to. Ben Maxwell was back, she realized with excitement as she rushed from her father's study into the front room.

"Howdy Miss Verna!" he said with soft polite ease as she entered, the strain of the last few days showing in his voice as well as in his posture and face.

"I don't reckon Emmitt is in town is he?"

"Hello Ben. No he isn't, but according to the schedule he left, he should be back any day now," she said in her soft voice, having sympathy for the man.

He appeared old and tired. His eyes sunk deep into their sockets. She thought he ought to take up an easier occupation for a living and leave this kind of work for younger men.

"I reckon I need to go out to where he is then; got something important to tell him."

"Mr. Maxwell!" she replied with concern, "You look exhausted! When was the last time you slept?"

"I recollect about two or three days ago ma'am, don't remember right now; been riding hard!" He answered as if it was an effort to even talk.

"Well, I think you need to rest and not go off looking for Mr. McGowan," she said, as she moved next to him, taking his left arm and drawing him toward the foot of the stair's.

"I suppose you're right, but I need to speak with Emmitt pronto!"

"I'm sure it is important, however, if you fall asleep and topple off your horse, breaking your neck, he won't ever get the message!"

Please, let me help you up the stairs....Father," she glanced over her shoulder at Mr. Gallagher, "Would you mind finding a rider to fetch Mr. McGowan? I believe he is at the Stephens ranch. That is where his schedule says he will be.

If not there have the rider find him and bring him back here," she finished as she turned the corner of the staircase landing.

"Yes daughter, ----- Juan!" he called into the kitchen.

Ben found himself yielding to this woman without complaint. He was dead tired, and she smelled good to his old nose so what resistance he might offer, faded to her feminism. He wondered if he'd been this easy to yield to a woman's logic in his younger years and smiled? He didn't think so.

He draped his left hand on her shoulder and leaned against her as she put her right arm around his waist, her fingers hooking under his gun belt through his coat as she took the weight he placed on her. Then thinking about the warm bed waiting for him he dreamed of Maria.

COMMON THREAD

Another cold snap blew across Texas, sending everyone and everything scurrying for shelter again. The front brought icy rain, followed by sleet and snow. This happened on the first day of March, the bottom of the sky falling out, frustrating the ranchers as they started to gather their resources together for the spring roundup.

All the ranch hands who worked the north central area comprising the land above Austin and the Colorado River, cursed a blue streak as they saddled their horses, knowing the work must be done, despite the environment.

The only consolation they had, the knowledge the temperature would warm soon.

It is Texas after all, the country where if you don't like the weather, wait a few days, it'd change.

Their bosses, aware of the dangers of riding on icy ground, pushed for a early roundup. They normally waited until late March or even April to start the gathering of cattle and drive them north, putting them a week behind the first herds which passed through from San Antonio and the other areas of the Texas Diamond further south.

They feared the rustlers had struck deeply into their scattered herds and while not completely aware of the type of thieving being carried out or the ultimate goal of Jenkins, they were anxious to gather as many left as possible.

Other than Jenkins and his desperadoes, the only man with any firsthand knowledge of the rustling was Ben Maxwell. And he didn't comprehend the scope and complexity that he had stumbled on.

He said as much to Emmitt McGowan, after Emmitt had ridden back into Round Rock at Verna's summons.

Emmitt, at first, couldn't figure what to make of the information Ben delivered either, other than Jenkins men are

rustling. He kept the knowledge between himself and Ben for the moment, mulling it over, while he finished visiting each ranch collecting sketches of all brand or brands and noting their methods and routines of handling their animals.

A few wranglers had resented the intrusion into their daily work schedule, having the notion they might be doing something wrong or were careless with their jobs.

However, most understood what Emmitt was trying to put together and cooperated with him. He appreciated them making his job easier.

He sat for a moment, staring out the south window of Mr. Gallager's office musing when Verna, sitting across from him at her father's desk, interrupted his thoughts

"You really collected a lot of information, what are you going to do now?" she asked, amazed at the sheets of notes, rough etches of brands and hand drawn maps of the areas around each individual ranch.

"Try to find a common thread, something which will lead me to the rustlers. This whole operation is so broad and scattered; it is hard to figure out where the cattle were taken, or when. Not to mention why," he answered, his fingers drumming on the desk top.

"The only thing for certain right now is the counts are getting smaller each time they go out. The ranchers won't have actual numbers tallied until the roundup next month, but they believe I will be too late to prove anything. Their thinking is Jenkins is responsible and will be gone by then."

"You don't think this way?"

"No. Jenkins is here for a long stay. He hasn't any cattle on his land which are not his. All I have is Ben's report and the tracings. No proof though to back him up. Those beeves, Ben discovered, are long gone."

"So what do you think they are up to?" she asked quietly, her eyes drawn to his in the yellow lamp light of the room.

"I'm not sure, to tell the truth. Nothing is making sense to me. If he is behind the thefts, it isn't for the markets. There are a lot different symbols to deal with; I can't see him getting away with this by waiting to sell in a year or two either.

Too many brands would rise up a lot of suspicious eyebrows in the yards in Dodge or anywhere else he tried to sell a herd of mixed symbols."

"Yards?"

"Stockyards."

"Oh, of course; I 'm afraid I am not too educated on the cattle industry," she confessed.

"That's ok."

"I'd like to learn," she added, smiling, her facing lighting up the room seemingly to Emmitt. She pulled her wool wrap closer around her and glanced to her left out the frosted window.

"The sun is shining, perhaps this weather will change soon and warm again," she said.

Emmitt followed her glaze and stared for a moment out the same ice covered glass. He felt comfortable sitting here in this cozy room with this woman across from him; her perfume filling every space around him.

"Yeh, but it won't be soon enough for me," he answered, his mind still on the rustling problem.

"Do you have to leave tomorrow?" she turned her head back and refocused on his eyes.

"Yep, spring is coming and I reckon the rustlers will be dormant during the roundup. I need advice from the Rangers on what to do, before things get out of hand when the final tallies are made."

"You honestly think there will be trouble between the ranchers and Jenkins?"

"Yeah, most were ready to string him up when they hired me. After they get a total count on the number of animals they have and compare that to the number they were expecting, I reckon a lot of trouble will happen."

Verna sat back in her chair, a fear of what the future might bring rising up in her soul. If what this man across from her said is any way near accurate, her life, her fathers, this town and the surrounding country would be unsafe and dangerous for an undetermined amount of time.

Business will be lost; no traveler would journey through Round Rock for fear of the range war. People she cared about could be killed or injured. She feared this thing approaching. She hated what is happening to her world around her.

For a moment she even hated the man and what he stood for sitting across from her, before she corrected herself as she realized he might be the only person who can stop all of this from taking place.

She was shocked how far from her protected existence his world is. How hard and violent his occupation, the cattle industry, could be.

From the lingering death of pneumonia or dying under the hoofs of stampedes, to the lynching and murders which enveloped his business; horrible is the word she thought of.

Yet the lucky and skilled made buckets of money.

What drew men like him to this life? He didn't appear to make much money; he was only a hired hand. Yet he stayed.

She had not heard or understood the term 'loyal to the brand' or understood the strength that pulled cattlemen toward each other as a band of brothers. She didn't yet realize how large a family and close knit these men are, but that time is fast approaching.

In her heart she knew he is a good man; kind and gentle when he wanted to be. The other, the hard side he had to have to survive in his business, this scared her.

She wondered again how much like his friend, Hardin, he is?

Verna calmed somewhat as he began shoveling his papers into a leather brief he had bought earlier in the day and realized the intensity that drew her to him. She is confused, this she understood.

A thought jumped from the back of her mind; a question she long had pondered.

"Every year, since I returned home from school, these cattle drives have passed by us here in Round Rock. Each year the herds become larger and more of them. Where are all these animals coming from?" She asked.

Emmitt glazed at her questioning eyes for a moment, amazed at her inquiry, then answered.

"They mostly come from the brush country between San Antonio, Laredo, Brownsville, and Corps Christi.

If you looked at a map and drew a line between each city and back to San Antonio you'd get a rough shaped diamond. The Texas Diamond, as some cattlemen call it, as that area is rich in cattle, left alone to breed during the Yankee war with Texas and the south. Some estimated over 2 million head in that area, running wild in the brush. A lot of feed from the mesquite trees and no one after them.

In the past years other ranchers have established their own herds all over Texas, all taken from the Diamond."

"Such as Mr. Goodnight, your former employer." Verna commented. "All the longhorns originally come up from the Texas Diamond."

"Yep, he and the ranchers around here and further up the trail to Fort Worth."

"Including Jenkins." Verna Gallagher quipped.

Emmitt let out a sigh as he answered her with a yes.

A moment passed before either spoke again. Then Vern broke the silence.

"It is going to be a cold ride."

"I know," he answered as he sealed the brief with a leather string. "I for one will be glad when the weather starts warming; won't be soon enough for me," he repeated what he said earlier.

Verna smiled her easy smile as her eyes and his locked, held in silence for a time.

CAPTAIN LEE

Emmitt McGowan, quiet and somber, sat across from the Ranger Captain's desk as he realized his investigation had exceeded his present skill level and the pressure from the ranchers for a quick answer to the rustling problem only intensified his lack of adequacy.

His scribbling, as Ben referred to his note taking, would serve a different purpose than what it had meant to be in the past.

Simple evidence which had always led him to the guilty parties' with mediation in a court of law or hanging if needed.

Now this had become a collection of documents that told only part of a complex tale. A tale for which he was here looking for direction to the rest of the story and how this information before him fits.

He was in a box and needed to find the way out. Up against an impassable stone wall for the first time in many years, he felt ignorant.

Hell! He thought to himself, he is just a range hand, good at tracking. He isn't experienced at investigating complex crimes. It is one thing to track fresh or even week old trails left by rustlers and the animals they stole.

This was different.

Most of the time the job is simple enough to find the rustlers and execute the rough law of the Texas plains.

That isn't applicable here. This part of Texas had become civilized to a degree.

He knew most rustlers' methods and their goals, but he had no idea what Jenkins is up to and how to go about finding out; short of tying the man to a tree and beating the information out of him.

From Ben's report, Todd Jenkins men are stealing cattle; this is evident. Why he is taking only the calves and yearlings and where is he keeping them does not make sense

What is the motive, the ultimate goal?

All he had at present is Ben's word on the events he saw and the traced papers, but no other proof. And the cattle are long gone now.

He hoped Captain Lee might offer some much needed advise after he finished studying McGowan's collection of drawings and his short report.

Two hours had passed since Lee had started reading Emmitt's stack of documents. He examined the sheets of paper with the tracings of each brand from the ranches Emmitt visited and researched.

He read and reread all the statements from the foremen and most of the hired hands of every spread, concerning the steady disappearance of cattle, the accidents and disappearances of their compatriots.

The final sheet dealt with Ben Maxwell's discovery of actual rustled cattle on the Colorado River and the branded animals he inspected; also reporting the incident of the rifleman at Marble Falls as related by Ben.

The evidence lying on the Ranger Captains desk, though not conclusive, hopefully is enough to warrant the Ranger's interest.

"You partner examined the brands and traced them in the dark?" Lee asked.

"Yes Sir. That is the only opportunity with such a small herd and I reckon the boys weren't so sociable; he might not had gotten back otherwise," Emmitt replied, knowing what Ben did could be torn apart by a courtroom lawyer."

"Son, you gathered enough of a start toward proof Jenkins is behind the rustling in Travis and Williamson County. But without some stolen cattle as hard evidence, you're not going to convince any judge to issue a warrant," Lee stated, sitting back in his banker chair as he inhaled on the cigar he lit up.

"Captain, I am aware of this; what I have isn't enough but it does give me cause to continue. The only problem is," he shrugged, holding his hands out to his sides, palms up, "I lack the experience needed to do this kind of investigation.

Cattle tracking, yes! Not this!" he said, "I don't have any idea where I need to look next! Jenkins seems to always be a step ahead of me and Ben."

"I understand. You suppose the Coalition has a spy?"

"I sometimes think yes, considering all, but with nary an idea whom this might be nor how they do it," Emmitt said shaking his head.

"Jenkins has never been caught red handed until the incident with Ben on the river, at least not by anyone who lived to tell the tale," he continued, "Anyway, those cattle are gone. Ben was alone so he has no support to back his testimony up," he stopped a moment and then admitted; "I need help!"

Captain Lee smiled and leaned forward, his elbows on the edge of his desk, arms crossed; tapping his cigar ash off on the floor, he searched Emmitt over carefully.

"Seems to me you're doing all right; I am impressed with the detail of your investigation. You seem to naturally know how to build the foundation needed to construct a theory.

Ever considered that?"

Emmitt shook his head no.

"After creating your theory's, you research them out until you find the one that stands on its own merit.

Have you given any thought to why, this fellow Jenkins is moving his stolen stock further up the river, away from the main trail to market?"

"Yeah I did, the general direction of the original herd Ben was following, he's got them stashed somewhere south of Marble Falls.

This is a lot of country to scout looking for anything. It'd take years!" Emmitt complained.

"Maybe; However, I think he'd be taking a chance on some poor fella seeing all those beeves out in the middle of nowhere, with nary a ranch nor farm to claim them.

I'd be afraid someone would appropriate them for themselves or report them to the local authority. But not if he was putting them on an established spread," Captain Lee replied, "less chance anyone will notice them let alone give a close exam."

"That makes sense, it is easy to hide anything in that area, however with so few cattle spreads out there and fewer settlers staking out homesteads; if anyone held them for Jenkins or bought them from him, they're putting themselves in jeopardy," Emmitt countered.

"I'm not too sure. I'd bet if a ranch has the stolen animals, it is someone who is associated with Jenkins somehow and with a similar brand registered in their respective counties as those here in Travis and Williamson.

However, this will appear suspicious for critters with near identical brands if challenged," Captain Lee said, "But there are many a folks dumb enough to do that, believing no one would pay much mind."

"How would I go about finding all this out now?" Emmitt asked, "We are talking a lot of ranches and I'm running out of time, roundups are coming soon!" he complained.

"Yeah, each ranch and farm raising cattle registers their brands with the county's they are located in aren't they?"

"I reckon so-----anyone who wants to prove ownership of their cattle would do so," Emmitt commented, thinking out loud.

"They could have a bill of sale for stock with a different brand other than the one they have on the books or an identical registered brand," he continued his eyebrows knitted together, "Or over brand them!

Well, they might not do this right away what with a good two years before the animals are ready for market," he stopped talking and thought for a moment.

"That is if they wanted to take the chance of getting caught with stolen beef on their land," he sighed, frustrated.

"Anyway, like I said, those young beeves won't be ready for market for a couple of years. The noise will die down by then. Hell, I'll bet Jenkins even sells his ranch real soon and skedaddles before he gets caught!"

Captain Lee shook his head. "He may not do that. He might not be planning any of this," he said, puffing out blue smoke, "Emmitt, you're too close to the problem, back off a bit. You're stuck in your thinking he is operating like the rustlers you encountered in the past, out for a fast dollar, right? If this was so, why is he taking only the yearlings and calves; not steers?"

"This is where I'm stumped. This part doesn't make sense!" Emmitt gestured with his hands palms up again.

"The point I'm trying to emphasis, Emmitt, is why would he be stealing calves and yearlings to sell now? I think he intends to establish herds of his own with these animals in the near future!" Lee stated, scratching the side of his nose.

"No one in their right mind would buy stolen beef and keep them for two or three years. Even if they had fake papers and identical registered brands in other counties, the chance of getting caught is too pronounced!

Branded cattle coming from anyplace besides his spread would be suspect; there'd be way too many to account for, plus there isn't a market for yearlings and calves, no money!!"

"Right," Emmitt broke in. "He sure couldn't keep them on his ranch---and if he is not selling to others--," McGowan's eyes lit up as a smile crossed his face, "Hell, he might have spreads further north or even west registered with those brands of his and similar ones which can be altered from the ranchers around here! He could be stocking them with these stolen cattle!"

Lee nodded in agreement, "I agree, if this theory is sound, he recently acquired some land or old established ranches. To acquire property he'd have to purchase public land, which is owned by the State of Texas, or privately held from an individual.

You understand, the State of Texas controls most of its lands through the State School Administration. Anyone wanting to set up an operation now-a-days must purchase the property from the School Administration or they must secure an established spread from a private land owner. Either way a record is made, however, a private transaction would draw less attention than dealing with the Administration.

Also, they might not be under his name. He may have used another name as a diversion and I'll wager they aren't far off the north trail. Crossing many properties with young beeves to reach his spreads would bring attention, something he wouldn't want.

Naw! He'll keep his purchases close to the trail and south of Fort Worth, maybe south of Waco.

It is possible Mr. Jenkins might be trying to unlawfully become an honest rancher. Not this hasn't been done before, or he is selling those young animals to others who are doing the same;" Lee said as he leaned back.

"Possibly; it sure seems so, if our theory is sound," Emmitt lamented. He twisted to get comfortable on his chair as he crossed his right leg over his left.

"Assuming we are, then this certainly cuts down on the amount of territory I'd have to cover. Still as I mentioned, I am

running outta time! If these--- theories are wrong-----!" he left the statement hanging in the air.

"I understand?" the Captain answered, "But why do that? I recommend a fella up in Dallas who did some work for us recently; goes by the name of Duncan. He helped us find Hardin in Florida.

He could do the investigating for you, examining county records and documents on ranch sales and actual cattle buys and transfers, the brands registered to those ranches, who bought them, how many and what kind of animal's are included in the purchases; all this type of footwork. Save you some time and effort. It's his expertise of work!"

Emmitt nodded agreement.

"I'll telegraph him inquiring to his availability and let you know what he says," Lee said, leaning back in his chair, "You staying in Austin or heading to Round Rock?"

"Thanks, I appreciate this. This's the kind of stuff I ain't good at," Emmitt replied, before answering, "I'll spend the night and ride out tomorrow but I'll stop by to see if you got a response. Otherwise, you can reach me at Gallagher's Inn," he said, taking a deep breath and relaxing.

"Again Captain, I do appreciate the help provided me. I sure felt I was getting in over my head," he repeated as he rose up to leave.

"Well detective, I reckon you're doing fine with your investigation so far. You needed a little refocusing is all! Hell, the Rangers used the detective up in Dallas to solve the Hardin problem!

The point is, if you're outta ideas, find someone who has new ones. You're asking for guidance, this is a smart move, shows you got more brains than most. You're a thinking man; you'd make a good Ranger. You ever thought about this?" Lee asked with a grin.

"Once," Emmitt grinned back, "But Texas doesn't pay as well as the Coalition," he said.

"The only trouble is we don't have the authority to make arrests like you Rangers, Sheriffs and Marshals; makes it more dangerous if the shooting starts."

"I see---," Lee stood up and scratched his stomach, "I understand your point but you are aware how that went. Those damn old Senators won't let loose of their stodgy ideas thinking if you fellas are granted lawful state law enforcement authority like the Rangers, you work for Texas, not the Coalitions.

Emmitt, I tell you, if y'all can keep up this type of investigating, with records and all, the government might look upon your profession a little different, as professionals instead of a bunch of, what did the old son-of-a-bitch Senator call you, irresponsible, gun toting cow herders?"

"Yeah, I know," Emmitt grimaced, "We'll do the best we can."

The Captain stood silent for a moment, thinking before speaking, "Emmitt, if you get the proof positive Jenkins is guilty, I'll deputize you as a temporary Special Ranger and let you do the arresting," he said smiling as he held out his hand.

Emmitt smiled back as he accepted the offered appendage, "Sounds fine Captain, real fine."

McGowan bade his leave of the Captain and walked out of the Rangers headquarters, a little more relaxed and with confidence that he didn't had hours earlier. He was doing everything right he thought to himself with relief!

And now armed with the theories they developed together; he could put to rest his uncertainty and proceed with the task the Ranchers had hired him for.

He stood on the headquarter steps, buttoning his coat against the cold, remembering how he grudgingly took this job, not wanting to be involved in a range war. And now with the information he and Ben had accumulated, he was developing an urgent need to bring the case to a close before such a fight started.

The responsibility of finding lost cattle and their abductors had grown into saving lives as well. Emmitt, for the first time since he took this job, sensed he could.

He stepped back in his mind, taking a large look and marveled at how big an operation Jenkins is running. Six months ago, he wouldn't have believed the things he learned concerning Jenkins and the effort the man was making.

As for his self, the work he is doing was evolving into something he never considered. Not just a tracker of cow thieves, but as a professional range detective.

He finally saw on the horizon, the future he figured his old boss, Charlie Goodnight, had envisioned. He grinned to himself; a professional investigator had a nice ring to it. He never thought about his work as anything other than a specialized hired hand.

He knew as long as there were cattle there'd be thieves and thus his job is a necessity. Businesses, fortunes and lives would always be at risk from rustlers.

He understood that he, Ben and the other men like them would become the front line of defense.

He felt pretty good as he smiled to himself all the way over to the county jail where he wanted to visit an old acquaintance one more time.

HARDIN

"Well, I'll be damned and I am! Emmitt McGowan, how the hell are you fella?" The tall skinny young prisoner called out, pushing his arm through the flat bars of the cell he and several others were kept in.

"Howdy Wes!" Emmitt took the offered hand and shook, banging Hardin's elbow against the iron cage. His nose wrinkling up to the stench filling the room the enclosure was centered in.

"It's been a longtime friend. How ya been doing? I understand you got yourself a job hunting rustlers around here. Find them yet?"

Emmitt knitted his eyebrows together; surprised word would have reached Hardin in this jail.

"Reckon I'm alright and no, I ain't caught them," he said, staring for a few moments into his erstwhile friend's eyes for several moments, "Seems like your luck ran out Wes," he added quietly.

"Sure did I suppose," Hardin mumbled back. He turned and glanced over his shoulder at the other cell inmates before he continued.

"Funny thing though. I'm convicted of a murder I didn't commit. It was one of my associates who did the shooting; plain and simple!"

Emmitt faked a grin, knowing full well John Wesley Hardin never allowed himself to be put in a position someone else was responsible for.

"I wished you'd convinced the jury of your innocence."

Wes shook his head, "Nope, I couldn't. Too many folks around here who were on the Sutton side and are hostile toward me. I'm surprised I got a prison sentence instead of the rope," he replied, trying to act cavalier about his future.

Emmitt remembered the Sutton-Taylor feud as the catalyst that began John Wesley Hardin's career. He always preferred the

revolver to his fists to finish an argument. Such as those Mexican's he shot down on that first and only cattle drive they shared together in 67; or with La Cosa in Kansas.

"Have you gotten married?" Wes broke into Emmitt's thoughts.

"Nope, I heard you did though! How's your wife taking in all this?"

"As well as can be expected I reckon," he dropped his eyes to the floor as he spoke, "She's still in Georgia. She'll be coming home soon though. It's rough on her but she understood this might happen," he shrugged,

"I expect I'm gonna lose her---sure hope not! She is a loyal lady; given me a couple of kids."

He stared hard at Emmitt, "Pard, if'n you find a good woman, one who'll stick by you through thick and thin, grab hold of her and don't ever let go or give her a reason to leave! Good loyal women are few and far between!"

Emmitt, surprised at Wes' sudden out of character confession, thought instantly of Verna.

He knew in his soul she was this kind of woman Wes was speaking of. He just didn't know what was in her heart for him.

A twang of loss gripped his chest as the thought of losing her to another man raced through his mind.

"Have you seen your family, they come to visit you?" Emmitt asked.

"Sure, my pa and my brother; Pa twice, my brother once but never since, too ashamed I reckon to enter into such a place as this," Hardin replied quietly.

"Both are Methodist Ministers, I suppose they need to be careful of their reputations," he said, thinking for a moment, "Their moving me this next week to Huntsville; going to be my new home for the next twenty five years; I'm looking forward to the change," he finished by lying.

Emmitt stared at Hardin, figuring he had a plan to escape during that move and shook his head in acknowledgement, not knowing what to say to his friend.

"You still carry the Hamilton?"

Emmitt grinned and pulled the engraved gold case from his vest pocket to show and replaced it.

"It keeps good time Wes, never had such a grand timepiece."

Hardin smiled slightly and with some sadness he looked deep into Emmitt's eyes.

"Well Pard, I reckon you better get on outta here. Spending too much of a spell with the likes of me will taint your reputation!" Wes said, holding his hand out again.

"I don't think so Wes. If you need anything, let me know. Perhaps I'll visit you after you move," Emmitt answered, taking the offered appendage, knowing his presence is torturing his friend.

"Thanks! Say, would you check on my wife and kids whenever you can? They live in Thurman County with her folks, the Hammonds."

"Sure, no trouble," Emmitt replied as the jailer rattled his keys, indicating visiting time is up.

"Take care Wes," Emmitt said again as he took a step back.

"You too pardner," Hardin answered, hiding his sadness with a smile.

Emmitt left the jail depressed. A sudden tiredness struck his body centered in his legs. It seemed as if he was moving through a raging stream of swamp mud, not gaining much ground.

He liked Wes Hardin and felt bad his old acquaintance chose the trail he did and now his freedom was gone. Maybe his wife next with his life squandered in prison.

But Emmitt also understood the man had forty one souls to account for.

Emmitt shook his head as he meandered listlessly down the street from the county jail, not seeing anything around him for a while as he walked. After some time, he stopped and surveyed his location and found himself a few blocks from the Black Horse Tavern.

He stood for a moment, his fingers fiddling with his gold cased timepiece, undecided on direction, before he made his way there.

He needed a beer and some idle chat with anyone to get his mind off of his old trail driver friend.

PRAIRIE HENS AND BRANDS

Captain Lee did not received a reply from Dallas by morning the next day so Emmitt saddled up and returned to Round Rock. He would wait there for word on Duncan.

It was just before three in the afternoon when he rode up to the hitching posts in front of Gallagher's Inn. Dismounting from Ol' Blu he overheard the cook speaking in very high, rapid Spanish from the back of the building and a woman replying with a slower, measured, but just as loud tone.

He recognized the woman's voice as Verna's. He had never heard her raised voice, except at Ben the day they rode in, let alone in Spanish and almost laughed.

She sounded like another young lady he once knew for a brief time down south of the border.

His stomach lurched a bit. He put the memory to bed before the recollection caused him any more harm and walked around the side of the Inn toward the loud conversation.

He found Verna standing next to the Inn's black hack, a one horse two wheeled buggy with a shotgun in the seat. At her feet lay nine or ten dead birds. Their mottled brown plumage splattered with blood

Prairie Hens! Large fat ones!

She had been hunting he realized.

Surprised at this revelation about her, he stood still and listened to the two of them argue over who should clean the fowl.

Several minutes passed before she noticed him standing behind her. so intent on the argument she didn't notice the cook's nervous glances over her shoulder.

"Oh, hello!" she said, turning with a smile. Quickly she glanced at the cook who shook his head as he stepped down from the kitchen steps. He was mumbled something in Spanish that Emmitt understood to be about a woman's place in the world and picked up

the birds. Verna ignored him and turned her attention back to McGowan.

"Problem?" he asked.

"Oh no!" she answered, "He didn't want to clean those hens. Our help in the kitchen is sick and he must do everything himself. I think he is a little spoiled," she laughed, "And has a hard time accepting instructions from a woman. My father is his only boss he thinks?" she said as she rolled her eyes to the retreating back of Juan.

"Yeah," he coughed to cover his own thoughts of understanding where Juan is coming from; 'Especially if the lady does the hunting,' he mused.

"I reckon you made a pretty good haul!"

"Yes I did," she replied, "I do hope you like wild chicken, baked with cranberry sauce? We are having this for dinner tonight!"

"Shucks! Some special occasion?" he asked, offering to carry her firearm as she retrieved it.

He glazed at the slim shotgun with approval when she handed it over. Stamped 'Baldwin' on one lock plate and 'Manufactured in New Orleans' on the other; the weapon was a 12 gage side by side, with expensive 32 inch swamped Belgian twist barrels, chambered for the new brass based paper shells and with extractors, mounted to a smallish rounded receiver box. Sporting fancy checkering on the grip and fore end, the long tom was lightweight and beautiful, like her.

He placed his right thumb on the near vertical rabbit ear of the left hammer and eased it back slightly. They had been worked on, he concluded; lightened enough for a delicate pull but not to light to not fire the shells.

"Oh no! I am tired of steak and smoked or salted pork every evening and yard chickens don't have the right taste. You know what I mean? Some thing's are positive about living in cattle country but not all---?" her voice trailed off.

"I understand," he said, "Well, I don't mind a little change every once in a while myself."

"Good!" she replied with a smile, stepping up to the kitchen door and taking the shotgun from his outstretched arm. "I'll expect you at dinner!" she finished, turned and entered.

Emmitt stood for a moment and stared at the closed screen door then glancing at the cook seated out under an old oak tree

pulling feathers with a vengeance, before he headed back around to fetch his saddle bags off Blu.

As Emmitt cleared the corner of the Inn he spotted young Jeffery crossing the yard of the Post Office across the avenue, dressed in a suit of clothes Ben had bought him. He was carrying a cane fishing pole.

He waved and pointed his new boots toward Emmitt, waiting for a team of horses and a farm wagon they were pulling to pass before continuing to him.

"Howdy Mr. McGowan!" he hollered as he drew near.

"Howdy yourself young fella," Emmitt answered, "How come you're not in school?"

"Aww, Mr. McGowan, you and Mr. Maxwell are always asking me that!" he smiled ruefully.

"Well?"

"School's out for the day, it's after three Sir. I's been fishin down on the creek, there's a honey hole just full of them fish a waiting for me but they ain't biting this afternoon."

"So it is. Sorry for the bad luck," Emmitt laughed as he gathered his saddlebags off Blu.

"How's your ma?"

"Ma's doing purty good. Have you seen Mr. Maxwell?"

"Nope! I just got in town myself pard," he replied turning to look at the blue eyed boy, "Want me to tell him you're looking for him?"

"Sure, would you?" Jeffery answered happily as he started up the street toward Kopperal's hardware store.

Emmitt shook his head in wonderment about this good looking kid; blue eyes, red hair and a Tejana momma, that boy was all mixed up racially but smart as blended blood folks seemed to be most of the time!

"Hey Jeffery!" Emmitt called out, a thought growing in his thinking.

"Yes Sir? Jeffery asked stopping and turning.

"Want-ta make two bits?"

"Sure do! What-da you want me to do?"

"Go around back and assist Juan Gonzales with some feather plucking," Emmitt motioned with his fingers, "Just don't say I paid you to do it."

Jeffery held his hand out and smiled as the three coins; two dimes and a nickel; clinked into his palm, pocketing the money quickly as if Emmitt would change his mind.

"Thanks Mr. McGowan, that's mighty generous of you. I appreciate the job," he said over his shoulder as he headed round the building.

Emmitt grinned until Jeffery disappeared and then slinging his saddlebags onto his right arm and his bedroll under his left, he proceeded inside.

That evening, after the meal of oven baked prairie chicken in cranberry sauce, black-eyed peas and potatoes, Emmitt asked if he could borrow use of the dining room table for his work.

Mr. Gallagher again offered the privacy of his study and desk.

After two hours of tedious writing and copying a report, his hand was cramping badly.

Wringing his fingers as he entered the kitchen to ask for a tumbler of water, Verna volunteered her services, claiming she had more practice at long hand than he, she could ease his burden while he rested. He accepted and after drinking the glass empty, followed her into her father's study.

They were sitting again, as before; across from one another other when she stopped to rest her hand from writing and picked up several of the drawings of the rancher's branding symbols.

"I've never understood what each of these represents," she said holding the sheets in her hands, "I mean, I know they represent a certain ranch but what do the symbols mean?"

"Well; the center letter or sometimes a number, signifies the name of the spread. It can be one or several symbols owned by a ranch and registered with the county to mark their property. Like this one," he pointed to the onion sheet she was holding which had a large letter S shifted sideways on the paper with a curved line drawn under the S.

"That represents a rocking chair runner," he indicated the line drawn in a smile under the Capitol S, "This is called 'rocking' on any letter or number when placed this way.

Notice the S is kinda leaning about ten degrees to the right," he showed her as she laid the paper down and followed his finger, "This is called a lazy S and with the rocker under it---."

"Oh I understand, Rocking Lazy S!" she exclaimed.

"Yep!" he smiled, "And here," he selected another paper, "With this straight line drawn across the top of this letter H, means Bar for Bar H on this brand."

He rummaged through the pile of drawings she had laid down. "This one," he showed her a square with a line over the top of the symbol.

"Bar Square?" she asked.

"Correct. You catch on fast," Emmitt smiled at her, "This is Kinkade's brand," he added.

"Who's the Rocking Lazy S?" she asked.

"Stephens."

"And this?" she held up a sheet with the S inside an egged shaped oval, "Who owns this?"

"That is one of Jenkins brands, strange huh? It's registered as a Pear S."

"Are these drawn to scale?"

"Scale? Oh no! They're the exact size, right off the branding irons."

"Oh," she said quietly, sliding and fitting two of the sheets of onion paper together. She stared at what she found for a moment before lifting her eyes to meet his.

"It fits over Stephen's, Rocking Lazy S, almost perfectly."

"Yes."

As if she did not hear him, she went on, "Here!" she handed him the two sheets of paper, "Place Jenkins brand over Stephen's and then tilt ever so slight to the right. The rocking bar at the bottom of Stephen's fits on the edge of the fat part of the 'Pear' and if you're real careful in your placement, the S covers Stephen's Lazy S."

"Yes it does," he whispered again, not taking his eyes off her.

Verna grew embarrassed as she realized he was aware of this and her face flushed red

"I---I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound patronizing. This is your job, your business and here I am trying to show you something you already know," She stammered as she started to stand up.

Emmitt reached over the desk and gently took her left wrist, holding her in check.

"Don't leave Verna," he asked, again almost in a whisper, "I'm just amazed you were so quick to pick this up," he continued as she relaxed and sat back down.

She placed her other hand over his and held him, not wanting him to let go. She realized he was in awkward position so she released him reluctantly.

He stared at her for another moment before speaking again.
“You realize knowing this places your life in danger?”

Verna’s eyes widen. How will such trivial information place her in danger she wondered.

“Only three people were aware of this information until a moment ago, now four.

“Why am I in danger now?” she asked, not really wanting to know as the reality hadn’t set in yet.

“These papers are damning on Jenkins. I just need to prove the reason he has these type of brands and to come up with the reasons he has so many?”

“But I don’t understand---.” she stammered.

“You’re now a witness to the information laying here. This is confidential evidence. I should’ve been more careful and not allowed you see this, let alone match the papers together. I am sorry!” he said a bit worried. He did not know why he allowed her to view the drawings. He acknowledged he wanted her to be interested in his work but this was stupid on his part.

“You will not speak about this in your report to the ranchers,” she stated.

“Yes, you’re correct. Reports have a way of getting read by some who put their noses where they are not supposed to be. My information on the brands will be personally reported when I’ve additional evidence.”

“Oh Emmitt,” Verna whispered, “I won’t tell a soul, not a soul!” she smiled and winked.

Emmitt understood she was trying to shrug off the fear but he didn’t let on or give in to her light heart response.

“You better not. Jenkins will skin you alive!” Was the best he could say and not lecture her which he knew instinctively wouldn’t work.

Verna stopped smiling.

He sat back and told her of his plans for the next few weeks; to travel via train to Dallas to meet a man about some matters relating to the investigation.

He didn’t want to elaborate on why he was going, for her safety and his; he insisted she not press him.

Verna agreed and asked him something she had wanted to do for some time.

“Will you teach me to shoot a revolver?”

“What?”

“Shoot a pistol! I can handle a shotgun and rifle, but they are so clumsy to carry around and besides, if you think I am in danger now, well, I need to be able to protect myself---; with your going off to Dallas and where else I have no clue,” she added with sour disdain.

“There’s not much time. I expect a telegram from Captain Lee any moment,” he replied.

“Well, you won’t receive an answer until tomorrow and you can’t leave until the next train which isn’t until Thursday.

You can show me the fundamentals and I will practice till you get back when you will teach me more,” she smiled in her convincing way that always worked with her father.

“Ok, we’ll do this tomorrow; providing the weather stays nice,” he caved.

“Wonderful, if the weather is good, let’s make this a picnic. You bring your guns and I’ll provide the chicken and beans and potato salad!” Verna smiled, finally breaking through this man’s reluctance to be around her for long periods of time.

In danger now, which oddly excited her, she reasoned who better to protect her and to teach her to defend herself with a revolver?

Emmitt reluctantly agreed and she left him alone to finish his reports. He only had a couple of pages to complete thanks to her. He stared at the empty chair she was sitting in a few moments earlier and wondered how all this had happened and so quickly? A smile grew on his face as he realized he liked the idea and finished the reports with a certain mirth in his heart.

TIME FOR THE TWO OF THEM

"So, you and he are old friends?" Verna said quietly as she handed Emmitt another cold drumstick of prairie hen.

The ever present Texas wind blew coolly the last week of March, but the day had turned out warm and comfortable; prompting her to remove her shawl.

The breeze played with the ends of the red ribbon circling her big brimmed straw plantation sombrero as reddish brown tresses of her hair, escaping from under her hat, danced across her face. She constantly brushed the locks out of her eyes, a movement she noticed Emmitt enjoyed watching.

Sitting on the quilt they had brought, her back propped against the oak with her legs pulled to one side, she was conscious she must be a pleasing sight. Emmitt was constantly sneaking peeks at her, from head to foot, as they ate.

She loosened the rawhide string under her chin which held her hat in place in the wind and waited for his answer.

Emmitt, leaning on his left elbow, legs stretched out past the blanket, accepted the drumstick as he glaze into her eyes. He was amazed at the softness he saw in them. He studied her without seeming to stare, noticing the tiny crow's feet reaching out when she squinted into the sun light and around her mouth as she smiled.

He noted her every motion, mesmerized by her economy of movement as she prepared the cloth table, serving him and feeding herself.

A quiet and gentle demeanor emanated from her, engulfing and spreading over him. It soaked into his heart and filling him with happiness he had not thought possible.

His life had been a colorless existence, much like a tin type photograph, he realized. But today she was bringing color to his existence, as an artist with oils, painting a wonderful portrait.

He had just been talking about his visit with Captain Lee and the short minutes with his unusual friend, Wes Hardin; Having already spent a good hour talking about his past with Verna nodding when appropriate and asking questions if not understanding a point.

She seemed fascinated with his descriptions of his range detective work the past two year's; of his accomplishments, the stock drives as a young man, the way the cattle are worked and some of the dangers he had faced.

She avoided asking the results of his investigations of rustling. He figured she didn't want to hear the grizzly details, which was ok with him. He'd rather not remember them.

His eyes searched off in the distance where the prairie grass moved lazily in the warm south wind as he recalled the meeting with Hardin in Austin.

"Yeah, I guess you can say that; but I wouldn't call us good friends. We shared the same adventures together for a while. We sorta have an understanding between us.

He went his way, which wasn't the direction I wanted to go. Now he has lost his freedom," Emmitt finished, his voice trailing away.

"I know his father," Verna said matter-of-factly.

Emmitt raised his eyes to hers questionably and she went on.

"Before papa sent me to finishing school back east, I attended the Methodist Academy, Wes Hardin's father the Reverend Hardin, ran in Austin. Papa sent me to the Academy when he had bought the Inn shortly after the war," she glanced down at her hands, as if studying them.

"I never met Wes Hardin though or his brother whom I understand is also a preacher. This must be hard on the Reverend, knowing his boy is in jail for the rest of the Reverend's life possibly."

"Yeah, I suppose," Emmitt replied as he rose up and took a drink of lemonade she had brought, "I thought you and your pa were Yankees. But I take it you were born in Texas?"

"Yes, Papa is from Pennsylvania. He served in the army as an officer for some years. Mother is from Galveston," she stared at him real hard for a moment, "I might as well tell you now. I am one quarter Tejana. You already know I am Catholic."

Emmitt sat up and put his hands on hers. "I am not concerned where your blood line comes from," he said, "Hell, I thought you a

Yankee---that should have made a difference but it didn't!" he smiled, eyes twinkling.

Verna took a big breath and exhaled, relived as she continued, "Papa met Mother when in the Army. He had fought in the War with Mexico and had been assigned to Fort Davis later to deal with the Apaches and Comanche's.

In 1850, he had been wounded in a fight with the Comanche's near El Paso and sent to San Antonio to recover.

Mother worked in the hospital as a nurse, living with her Aunt Montoya. That is where they met and married.

San Antonio is the birthplace of my brother and I," she let out a small laugh, "My middle name is Rose. Papa use to call me his Rosa Bonito de San Antonio, his Beautiful Rose of San Antonio," she said with an impish grin.

Emmitt grinned and repeated her name softly, "Verna Rose Gallager."

Verna, also smiling, continued, "Yes, my grandmother's name is Rosita, also from San Antonio, she is of the Montoya's, a prominent family in San Antonio before Texas became a Republic and still hold's much sway in politics there; they trace their lineage back to Spain.

My mother's father is French, his name is Maurice Lafitte. He owned a shipping concern in Galveston until he died three years ago," she looked away as if remembering something hurtful in her past before continuing.

"My mother's name is Rosa. Verna is the name of my papa's sister, my aunt, in Philadelphia," she laughed, "All my papa's families are third generation Yankees. Most are dead except for a few cousins and my aunt Verna whom I lived with while attending school in Pennsylvania," she giggled, covering her mouth, "Her middle name is Rosaline. I guess passing the name Rose in some form apparently is a family tradition on both sides," she said as she leaned back on her arms still laughing.

"When the war started, father stayed in the Union Army, but sent mother, brother Joel and me to my grandmothers in Galveston.

He thought it would be safer than in Pennsylvania where he is from and more secure than San Antonio due to the Indians. He was concerned there'd not be any soldiers to defend the town.

I remember grand ma-ma telling me that he said most of the fighting would take place back east. Mother died before the war ended and grand ma-ma kept me until papa returned."

Emmitt pulled his knees to his chin and crossed his arms over them. "I didn't reckon he served in the Army. To be honest, I thought of him as one of the carpet baggers when I first met him. He seems an affable fella though, although quiet.,"

Verna laughed, putting her hand over her mouth, "He'd laugh if you said that to his face. He hates the carpet baggers.

He bought our Inn through some friends who lived near here in 65 and he came home in late 66. I had turned twelve but I remember how he was angry at the northern attitude toward the south.

I guess mother had spoiled him," She touched her face as she thought into the past.

"Also, the war must have changed his thinking or maybe mother's death did. I don't remember much about him before the conflict; an officer as I said and away a lot. Home long enough to make me and Joel," she grinned, "But when President Johnson had been voted out of office and the reconstruction started, he grew to hate the north as much as a real live home grown Texan!"

"Don't get me wrong," she said, pointing her finger at Emmitt, "He cares about this country, he just doesn't like the way the Northeastern states are using the government to hurt the South and make themselves rich in the process."

She paused and thought for a moment before continuing.

"I don't believe father is a Yankee at heart. He's so much a gentleman and soft spoken. Not like the ones I met when going to school. Save for his Pennsylvania accent, you'd think he'd been raised in a Southern state!"

"Where's your brother?"

"I honestly don't know. He an papa didn't agree on many things; they had a big argument and he left home. He was eighteen and I was away at school. Papa hasn't said much about him."

"How did your ma die?" he asked quietly.

"I don't really understand that story. I remember her being awfully sick and she died; I was nine years old. But no one will tell me what was wrong with her, not even now! Although I heard a rumor that she had been ravaged and beaten to near death.

She passed after the Yankee occupation of Galveston. So I harbor my suspicions."

"I'm sorry for you and your pa!" Emmitt said, sensing her mother's death and her brother's whereabouts are not topics she is comfortable with.

Verna smiled slightly and continued, "Papa was miserable for a long time. I think he blamed himself for not moving us to Pennsylvania. He would spend hours sitting and looking at a portrait of her hanging in his bedroom. She was a naturally beautiful woman and my father once said the painting is almost life like.

Then about two years ago, right after I had returned from finishing school, he started to change, to be more talkative and he seemed happier."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure but he had received a letter from someone he said is an old army associate. I managed a glimpse of the envelope once; the post mark showed Washington.

He carried the paper around in his coat for a long time, rereading the thing constantly. He seemed to stop hurting and started to enjoy life again. He also appeared to be anticipating something coming in the future."

Emmitt didn't say anything at first, as he had no idea what the letter said.

"I am glad he found his peace and began to live again. Life is too short to carry around burdens for so long."

"You couldn't understand how much in love papa is with my mother, even though she is gone now," she said with tears in her eyes, "But I thank you for your kind words."

Emmitt surprised at her sudden show of emotion, sought to change the subject.

"Where'd you live in Galveston?"

"On Church Street, a few blocks off the Strand, my grand ma-ma ran a boarding house for seamen and she is still runs the place, at her age, imagine---in her sixties I believe," she remarked looking at Emmitt, pride on her face.

"I remember, vaguely, following the sailors down to the docks every chance I could and sat watching the big sailing ships in the bay and tied at the wharfs.

I thought it so romantic, even as a child, for those young men to go off, daring the Yankee blockades.

I know war is terrible," she looked down as if embarrassed, "But for me it was a wonderful time. At least when Galveston was not in Yankee hands," she smiled with a short laugh.

"Those Yankee soldiers weren't so brave after being confronted by Texans, the majority who were old men and boys too young to fight in the real army. My God!" she exclaimed. "It took all of three hours for those boys in blue to vacate Galveston bay after two of their ships had been destroyed or captured and seeing the troops in gray a-coming!" she cackled, embarrassed at her slip in speech.

"They sailed away so fast they left some soldiers behind on the big wharf," She giggled.

"Yeah I remember hearing that," Emmitt laughed with her.

"I crewed on one of those ships you liked to watch."

She looked surprised and smiled, "You did?"

"Yep, the last of the war, the year after the Yankees departed from Galveston, in 63. I hired on as a deck hand.

We ran the blockades, carrying cotton to Vera Cruz and Jamaica and brought back what the southern army needed; mostly gunpowder and clothing. Sometimes Galveston had too heavy a blockade, so we would sail in and out of Rockport, Corpus Christi or Brownsville."

"I'll bet I saw you on one of those!" she said with excitement, "And I didn't even know you!"

"Good thing to!" Emmitt retorted, laughing, "I was young, a loose cannon. Away from home and wild as a Comanche!" he grinned.

"If not for an old man on board, who helped me get a berth and who took me under his wing, I'd gotten slit open down in Vera Cruz.

He instructed me how to defend myself in various ways. He also taught me the most important lesson I ever learned at that age."

"What was that?" Verna asked quietly as she shifted herself against the tree.

"To value life; be honest, exhibit good behavior at all times and be not afraid of doing right."

"Sounds like a wise man. Who is he?"

"Ships cook, his name was Miguel, Mexican by birth. A year after the war, I found him looking for a job when my pa had my

brothers and me drive a few head of steers to Galveston to ship to New Orleans.

I ran into him at the docks. He asked me if I thought my pa would hire him. I brought him back with us, told pa who he was and from that moment on he became part of our family.

I reckon pa was thankful to him for taking care of his oldest son."

"I'm glad this happened," she pulled her knees up, crossed her arms over and rested her chin against them.

"A year after the war? I'll bet we passed each other. I remember lots of cattle being loaded onto the ships. Do you recall any little girls getting in the way? And this man Miguel; is he still with your family?"

McGowan's face grew dark for a moment before he answered, "No. A bandit named Rebe la Cosa murdered him."

"Oh dear, did anyone catch the killer?" she asked her eyebrows knitted in concern.

"Yeah, Wes did."

"Him again, I thought McNelly's Rangers would have taken care of la Cosa? What a funny name for a bandit." she added.

"This happened in 71, before McNelly's bunch cleaned out the Nueces Strip in 75 and 76," Emmitt said quietly looking off into the distance. "Yeah, he certainly was a thing!"

Verna took her turn to change the subject.

"Did your father serve in the war?"

"Yep, he rode with General Hood's Texas cavalry at Gettysburg; Pa got wounded there and they sent him home. After he healed, he returned and fought in Virginia with the 7th Georgia Cavalry.

He was at Falls Church when wounded a second time and later again when separated from Lee's army at Richmond. He got cut off behind enemy lines for a while with two other men.

He always says one of them, a James Henry Story from Georgia, saved his and the third man's life.

His cavalry unit rode guerrilla style after that until the end of hostilities," Emmitt recited his father's history as he stared off into the distance; his turn for pride to be written all over his face.

"He never really surrendered.....just came home."

"Has he made his peace with the war yet?"

"Peace? Oh, yeah I guess. He doesn't talk about it much. I suppose he still resents what happened after, with reconstruction and such, like your pa.

He rarely leaves home now. I suppose too, he gets a kick out of the Yankee gold his herds bring each year. But since he didn't surrender, he doesn't vote, at least not in his own name," Emmitt snorted as he laughed.

"Another of those damn Yankee laws which don't mean a damn thing," He snorted again.

"Your father has been in the cattle business for years?"

"Oh yeah, been raising and selling cattle for a long time. He took over from my grandpa after he passed on," Emmitt recited.

"Grandpa Daniel came to Texas in 32 with two brothers, Zachariah and Able and fought alongside Zachariah at San Jacinto. Grand Uncle Able died at the Alamo.

They received a large tract of land down on the Nueces for their services and started raising cattle. Uncle Zachariah died in 39 in a Comanche raid on the homestead. Nether deceased brother were married or had children, so Grandpa Daniel inherited all the land and passed it on to Pa.

When I got old enough to fork a saddle I use to help drive his and our neighbor's herds north; first to Rock Port and Galveston and after the war to Missouri and then Abilene Kansas.

My brothers took over when I tried a little buffalo hunting. Later I went to work for Mr. Goodnight. They run herds every other year."

"Buffalo hunting?" Verna raised her eyebrows in surprise. "My goodness, you've done a lot of things!"

"Yeah I reckon, had to make a living. After the stock market crashed in 73, the price of cattle dropped outta sight. We lost our shirts in 73.

I took to hunting for buffalo skins to help pay the debt my pa had incurred. The rest of that year and part of 74, I hunted until a bunch of us were ambushed by Quanah Parker and his Comanche braves at a place called Adobe Walls in the Pan Handle.

I decided after that little dance I didn't like buffalo hunting to much, so I hired on to one more cattle drive passing through Fort Worth going to Abilene; I met Charles Goodnight who was looking for men to work his new ranch in the Palo Duro Canyon."

"And you were a deputy?"

"Yeah, deputy sheriff for Jim Courtwright; didn't last long though. About six weeks as I recall till he lost his re-election."

"And your mother's family?"

"They're all buried back in Georgia as I understand; victims of Sherman's march through Georgia."

"Oh, I am sorry for her. That horrible war destroyed many families."

"Yeah, I reckon so," he answered quietly.

"I guess you're a real good shot?"

Emmitt smiled, embarrassed at the question, "I'd say fair. Many are better."

"Are you going to teach me to shoot?"

"Why? I thought you were pretty good, with all them prairie hens you brought home, which we've been enjoying today."

"Well, yes," she answered rising to her knees, "I can shoot well enough with a shotgun or a rifle but I don't with a revolver. I understood we came out so you could show me?"

"Sure I will," he laughed, "I still don't understand why a sweet woman like you wants to know how to do such a thing?"

"Oh, it never hurts to learn different ways to defend one's self; I am in danger according to you. Anyway, I want to know."

"Ok. When do you wish to start?"

"Did you bring a gun I may use?"

"Sure did. I've got my Colt, but in my saddle bag is what you should start with; my old .36 cal. percussion, a Griswold.

The thing shoots pretty light or loaded even lighter for beginners. After you get used to shooting and able to hit your targets, you can fill it up to full charges, or go to a more powerful caliber, such as my Colt," he replied as he stood up.

"Also, it's much cheaper to practice with percussion."

"Oh, ok. Can we start now?"

"Sure -- I'll get them," he said rising and walking towards Ol' Blu who had been grazing all this time on the rich prairie grass alongside Verna's mare.

For the next two hours they loaded and fired his Griswold revolver. They shot at rocks, fallen branches they stuck vertically in the ground and a paper napkin tacked to the big oak they had eaten under.

Verna took to the weapon quickly, hitting more often than not after the initial twelve shots.

"This is fun!" she exclaimed after shattering a stone with the first shot of a freshly loaded cylinder.

"Yeah, shooting can be on its own but an entirely different thing when you're having to kill," Emmitt replied, silently pleased with her ability to master the sidearm so quickly.

I would suspect so," Verna commented, squinting down the barrel. "I hope I never have to face that! It'd take the joy out of what, for me right now, is perfect fun."

"Perhaps someday this might be the only reason a gun is used for, to shoot for fun and not a tool to save your skin."

Verna lowered the revolver's muzzle and glanced at him over her shoulder, "Do you believe such a day will ever come?"

"Maybe, but not in our lifetimes and I don't reckon in our grandchildren's lifetimes."

Verna stared at him with a funny expression on her face as she observed his eyes; she asked slowly, "Our grandchildren?"

Emmitt realized what he had said and grinned, thinking fast. "I---, we both will marry someone someday, at least I reckon you might, uh, I hope for me as well. I expect our spouses' will want children; don't you think?"

"Of course!" she answered, laughing as she took aim at the dead branch sticking up out of the ground beside the oak and cut it in half with the second shot from the cylinder, "I want at least three!"

"Damn, you're catching on fast," Emmitt exclaimed, amazed at her quick learning ability and ignoring her last remark.

"I do at most things," she revealed, knowing she had done what she set out to do this day. Emmitt is paying attention her; in a big way!

"Emmitt, do you believe in God?" she asked, handing the empty revolver back to him.

"Sure," he answered in surprise, taking the gun from her hand, "I don't know of many boys who don't. There's too much to see, working with cattle and such to not believe.

I have been in lots of incidents where the good Lord saved my hide as he has other fellas I know," he said remembering those times, the most recent with Kev Perry.

"Ma raised us as Methodist, even though pa is Catholic like grandpa," he added.

"Ok, I'm just curious. Remember I invited you to Mass last Christmas and you refused, I was concerned you did this because it was a Catholic Mass or you didn't believe in God.

God is important to me Emmitt," she said looking deep in his eyes, searching.

"I'm sorry you believed this of me. I thought you understood I needed to get on with the business I had been hired to do.

A Methodist is nothing more than a Baptist with a Catholic head. Don't worry about that," he continued, speaking softly to her.

"Anyhow, I did go to church Christmas. We're standing under its roof now. This big blue Texas Sky," he said, "For most men of the outdoors, this is the Lord's cathedral," he explained further.

Verna nodded she understood. Greatly relieved this fellow in her presence is a God fearing soul even though she disagreed with his concept of church. He is a good man, she decided, a little rough on the outside, but a tender and gentle heart.

The warm south breeze was cooling down fast as they stood staring at each other and Emmitt was first to break the pleasant silence.

"Verna, it's getting late. I reckon we best be heading back. Your father will have the sheriff out looking for us if we tarry any longer."

She agreed and turned to pack the picnic leftovers. Her day made and she hoped his is also. She liked this rough Texan with the heart and manners of a southern bred gentleman. She suspected she could thank his mother for that.

Finished packing, she helped him load the horses, tying her picnic basket to the back of her pony and the other items on his mustang.

Suddenly they are both startled as were the animals which reeled and snorted.

Emmitt and Verna glazed up at a flock of geese squawking overhead, their beaks pointed north.

Spring is coming back to Texas.

PANTHER CITY

Few rail lines existed in Texas in the arly 1870's and fewer direct routes via train connected to outer state commerce.

The majority of all the tracks owned by various operations originated from the Ports of Houston and Galveston and ran through the eastern side of Texas. These were east of Austin, Waco, Fort Worth and other smaller towns such as Round Rock.

However, by 1876, there was a growing influx of cash into Texas, mainly from the cattle industry and bankers taking investment risks. This allowed a spider web of tracks to be completed to some hamlets and cities further west.

Austin is one example; a track laid to Austin through smaller towns like Round Rock brought prosperity to these locations.

Other smaller townships, such as Belton, not wanting to be left behind from the growing commerce in Texas acquired spur-lines which connected to the main tracks. However, these were just a few by the late 70's as growth was only beginning to burgeon.

Progress breeds complication.

If one wanted to travel by train in Texas in late 1878 and they did not depart from the origination point of a particular line, they had, by necessity, to change not only trains but carriers as well.

Such as the 'Houston and Central Texas Railroad' from Houston in the south to Red River City in north Texas; the only rail transportation currently connecting these points.

To assist the travelers, a '*track map*' was published, which displayed the towns and cities where intersections from the various rail operations met and a '*schedule book*' of when transportation arrived and departed for each line.

The schedule also provided names of lodging for travelers who had to wait for the next ride to their specific destination.

Emmitt McGowan, having spent the night in the small connection town of Hearne, consulted his own '*track map*' and '*schedule book*' he carried while waiting for the line of coaches he was riding in, owned by the Houston and Central Texas Railroad, to pull away from the station that morning.

He had deemed himself fortunate this is the only connection he had to make. The International and Great Northern Railroad he rode from Round Rock did not go to Dallas but to Longview in East Texas near Shreveport Louisiana. The H&CT Railway ran right past Dallas, making a stop just outside of the city.

The two lines crossed each other in Hearne.

He noted the final call from the conductor and felt the jolt as the steam engine jerked the slack from between the cars. Emmitt relaxed a little as he folded his map inside his '*schedule book*', putting them away.

He pulled out his watch to check the hour.

Thirty minutes behind the published departure hour, added to the eight hours travel to the destination outside of Dallas, it'll be late evening he figured before he gets to Dallas

He shrugged and sat back in his seat and thought of Verna.

The picnic stayed fresh in McGowan's mind for the entire trip from the moment he boarded in Round Rock until the evening of the next day when it made it's second stop for water and wood outside of Dallas; his stop to get off.

Verna's fresh womanly scent clung to his memory as did the visual image of her standing; feet spread shoulder width apart, shooting his revolver. The Texas wind teasing her hair, dancing on her smooth face as it wrapped her dress around her legs.

He found himself constantly thinking of her, despite his efforts to put thoughts of her aside and concentrate on the upcoming meeting. He didn't have a moments respite until the train reached the station outside of Dallas.

The line did not run through Dallas proper; much to the dismay of the business people of that city and Emmitt, aware of this and not wanting to rely on local transportation to Dallas had brought Ol' Blu with him.

The sky had grown dark by the time the train braked to a squealing stop; with a faint orange/yellow glow from the depot lanterns at the boarding dock holding back the night. It was

unusually warm for this time of year, yet still cool enough to see your breath.

He waited for the ladies and gents to move from their seats to the end of the coach to exit when he overheard shouting and a couple of small thundering's which sounded like pistol shots.

One of the women screamed and everyone hurried back to the benches they had just vacated, shouting and questioning each other or no one in particular, noses pushed against the glass windows staring out.

Emmett rose and stepped quietly into the night air, carefully easing his head out past the side of the coach and looked down at the siding and depot platform. He spotted four men, their faces masked with bandanas. Two were on horseback with revolvers drawn and pointed at the engine crew and a pair of custodians on the loading dock. He overheard part of their conversation with the Engineer.

"Say, I recognize you!" one of the bandits said.

"Yeah, you robbed my train in Allen last week," the Engineer replied.

"Well, I reckon you know what to do!" the bandit laughed.

Emmitt didn't hear anything further as he ducked his head back and reentered the coach. The other two with rifles were on foot and moving to the mail car.

"May I have your attention please?" he requested, his voice rising above the panic and noise.

"It appears like a robbery is taking place. Everyone ought to sit still and do as they say; maybe no one will get hurt!"

"Are you one of them?" a white haired man, dressed in fine Eastern clothing and with a strong northern accent asked.

"No Sir!"

"So how do you know they will not harm us?"

"I don't Sir. Are you willing to risk gun play with these women around? Are you armed?"

"No, I am not young man."

"Then you don't have a chance in hell fighting them do you?"

"Why can we not escape off the other side? Its dark and I doubt they'll see most of us if we hurry!"

"Most of us?" Emmett glanced at the women.

"How do you figure they don't have that side covered too Mister? Like you said, it is dark out there. Best sit still and do as they say."

An older, heavy woman, sitting directly behind the Easterner, her white hair pulled tight into a bun under a fancy feathered hat, well dressed with a lot of brocade silk around her neck and appearing to be in her middle 50's, thumped him on his black beaver Derby with her folded umbrella and remarked.

"Do as that young man says you fool Yankee carpet bagger! These men are probably the Sam Bass gang, over a hundred strong. They've robbed several trains as of late and no one is ever been shot!"

"Sam Bass? Why I will not let that ruffian take any of my possessions; nothing!" the Easterner cried, "I will not tolerate this rebel trash!"

"You pull anything Mister, and I'll butt your head open like a melon!" another male passenger hollered from further on back in the coach. Several other men joined in loud murmurs of agreement.

The carpetbagger quieted and a few moments later two masked and armed gunmen, Emmitt recognized as the ones on the horses by their clothes, entered the passenger car. They were wearing baggy pantaloons, loose homespun shirts and vests, however, their sombreros were store bought new.

Emmitt figured they hadn't been too successful robbing trains if dressed this plain. He guessed the money only went so far for a hundred men.

He noted one of them had a boot coming apart at the seam of the sole and upper leather. The bottom, from the toe to the instep, flopped as he walked.

"Alright folks, y'all keep it quiet and behave your selves. Are there any Yankee carpetbaggers on board? We are not robbing good folk from Texas; only railroad Yankee gold and Yankee baggers!"

No one said a word for a moment until the heavy silver crowned woman sitting behind the Easterner spoke up.

"I can say without a doubt this here gentleman in front of me is not from Texas," she pointed at the nappy dressed old man, "In fact, I do believe he is a Yankee, through and through," she finished speaking.

The fellow with the floppy toe boot stopped and eyeballed the frightened white haired Easterner, his eyes smiling behind his bandanna.

"So you're a Yankee bagger huh? Well, I'm from Indiana myself, but been here in Texas since I was seventeen. Where're you from Mister?"

The Easterner nervously glanced at the two masked men. Frighten sweat poured from his face, staining his starched white collar.

"New York City," he squeaked.

"New York City? Frank, you got a rope?" the bandit asked his partner who shook his head and rolled his orbs. The Indiana train robber sneered, "You're a real damn Yankee huh?"

He pushed the empty flour sack he carried into the man's face. "All you've got mister, every damn thing!" he said harshly; his voice dropping two octaves.

The outlaw leader laughed again after the sweating obese, white haired man emptied his pockets of a fat wallet, gold timepiece and a few coins. He turned to glaze at the other men in the coach, his search settling on Emmitt.

"Where're you from fella?"

"Oakville, east of San Ann-tone," Emmitt drawled.

"Cattle?"

"Yep!"

"Ah-ha, did some of that myself once; damn hard work!"

"Yep, it is," Emmitt answered back, his stare never leaving the bandits.

"OK folks, I reckon y'all can say Ol' Sam Bass robbed this here train tonight. Something to tell your children and kin-folk," he cackled out loud, as he stepped backward to the door he and his partner had entered.

"Y'all know now to stay in your seats for a while till you can't hear our horses anymore," he instructed as he backed through the opening.

The noise of their boots stomping down the iron steps indicated they stepped off the train. Silvery laughter trickled in the night as they hurried to their companions.

A loud quiet hovered in the compartment for several minutes after the bandits left; the conductor finally entering the car and stopped, his eyes searching every one's face.

"Everyone all right?" he asked.

"No!" squeaked the easterner, "I've been robbed!"

Some of the men snickered and a few women giggled quietly.

An hour later, those who had been in the coach were standing or buzzing around the depot, laughing about the robbery. The shock and strain of the event had turned into relief and gaiety from surviving Sam Bass.

Everyone except the New Yorker, who after a heated discussion with the local county sheriff, climbed back on the train.

Emmitt, bemused with all this after he had unloaded Blu from the cattle car, was laughing to himself as he saddled the mustang when the lawman walked up to him.

"Howdy!"

"Howdy Sheriff!"

"Folks say you gave them some sound advice. I'm grateful. No one got hurt!"

Emmitt stopped and glanced at the peace officer, "Common sense Sheriff, that's all. Too many unarmed men and with women present. With armed bandits, outcome could have been bad."

"I reckon so but that New York fella thinks you are in on the robbery."

Emmitt glanced again at the county law enforcer as he finished pulling the front cinch tight and applied a cowboy knot to secure it. Done, he unhooked the stirrup off the saddle horn and dropped it down, turning to the sheriff.

"No, I'm not; didn't know who they were until one of the ladies started talking about Sam Bass. Even then I wasn't sure until one of them began bragging."

He stopped to study the sheriff's face a moment.

"I'm here on cattle business. I'm meeting a fella in Dallas, a detective, recommended by the Texas Rangers."

"I see. Well, the other folks seemed to think you are ok, so I reckon you can go on about your affairs. Better not let me find out different though," he added.

Emmitt swung up onto Blu and looked down at the up turned face. The man meant business he decided. This one is one of the tough lawmen.

"You won't sheriff," he said and reined Blu into the darkness toward the Dallas road.

Emmitt rode into the city about a half hour later. He found the place lit up as if there was a dance going on with people running back and forth across the avenues, shouting and carrying on something terrible; the commotion amazed him.

Emmitt realized some of the men carried weapons, mostly shotguns and a few rifles. He also noted, after a moment, that no women were in this crowd; however, he did note female forms in several windows staring out on the confusion in the streets.

He rode up Commerce Street and stopped at a saloon, dismounted, tied off Blu and entered. The place was crowded with a lot of loud talking and fast drinking men. The tavern seemed to be doing a bang up business with all the commotion.

"What-da you have Mister?" the bartender hollered over the line of faces at the bar.

"Beer and a steak!"

"Can't help you here with the steak; try across the way, Café Dallas, on the corner. Good steaks!"

Emmitt waved thanks and walked out, taking Blu's reins, he mounted and rode the short distance across the street and up to the corner, dodging several running horses and a hack carrying two men in business suits and shotguns.

He entered the café and an hour or so later, after finishing off a thick T-bone with mashed potatoes and refried beans, he washed the meal down with a nice cool local brewed beer.

After inquiring about the location of a good hotel, he stepped outside. Two men with shotguns slung in their arms, the long barrels swinging carelessly, brushed past him. They were talking quickly and quietly to each other, not seeing him in their path until they almost crashed into him.

"Whoa! Sorry fella didn't see you!" one of the men spoke up, his features hidden by the shadows of his hat in the faint street lamps.

"I can understand you fellers are in a hurry like the whole town, but tell me, what's all the hub-bub about?"

"Where've you been Mister? The train was robbed by Sam Bass and his gang. They took ten thousand in Gold double eagles and word is they are headed here to rob the city, take our women and burn the town!"

"Do tell," Emmitt quickly snuffed a smile from his face, "With four men?"

"Four? Hell there is way over a hundred of them! A damn army! How'd you get just four?"

"I was on the train. Only counted four and they didn't seem to be carrying any bags of gold off on their horses."

"Shoot mister, anyone from around these parts knows the Bass gang numbers in the hundreds. If you're going to stay in town tonight, I'd advise you to sleep with a gun by your side."

Emmitt had all the talk he wanted with these gentlemen and tipped his hat brim. "Thanks, I'll keep this under advisement, evening gents."

He walked off, shaking his head, amazed at the noise and fear stirred up by the Bass gang. He didn't cotton too much for big towns or cities and he was quickly losing any admiration he thought he could have for this silly place.

A town of frightened men he mused. He wondered if the women were made of sterner stuff. This is what money does for the soul he reminded his self. Wealth weakens a man's backbone and turns it into jelly; greed on the other hand---

Emmitt decided he needed to put this place behind him as quick as he could. He hoped he didn't need to wait for the detective too long tomorrow.

McGowan led Blu to the stables behind the boarding house recommended to him.

"What can I do for you Sir?" the tired looking old man behind the registration counter asked.

"I would like a single room, please!" Emmitt replied.

"I am sorry Sir, all that is available are two dormitory rooms, and there are three other gentlemen in each. One bunk is open in either."

"Are those fella's drinking?"

"That I couldn't say; you wish to rent the bed?"

Emmitt reflected long and hard. Outside was still bedlam and the thought of camping away from the city seemed the better idea if he wanted any sleep, but he needed to be in town to meet with the detective.

A solution cropped up in his mind.

"Can you point me in the direction of the office of John Duncan's Detective Agency?"

"Sure, it's just around the corner on East Street, but you won't find him, not tonight."

"Is that so? How do you know?"

"He stays here, rents a room on the second floor in back, however, he's over in Fort Worth on an errand; ---just received a telegram today." The old man stopped and studied Emmitt for a moment.

"You wouldn't happen to be Emmitt McGowan would you?"

"I am!" Emmitt answered carefully.

The aged clerk reached behind him to the pigeonhole rack and pulled a folded piece of paper from one of the square numbered slots.

"Mr. Duncan gave instructions, if you happened to come in, to give you this," he commented, handing Emmitt the note.

McGowan opened the message and read the short explanation and request. A grin spread across his face as he refolded the paper and stuffed it into his vest pocket.

"I reckon I won't need the room or bunk after all."

"You're sure Mister? Ain't many other places with empty rooms this time of night," he motioned to the clock behind him. It read 9 o'clock.

"I'm sure, going on to Fort Worth."

"In the dark?"

"Yes, I ain't scared of the dark old man."

"Even with that Sam Bass and his men running around?"

Emmitt grinned and glanced over his shoulder at the commotion in the street.

"I suppose if Ol' Sam Bass took a mind to actually hit this town he'd not be interested in one cowpoke riding alone in the darkness. Besides, I'd hear the hoofs of a hundred horses long before they rode on me."

The elderly man shook his head, "Well, good luck Mr. McGowan. I wouldn't venture out of Dallas tonight. No sir, not me!"

"Nor many other men in this city," Emmitt said on his way through the front doors.

He stopped and glazed with disdain on the people of this burg before turning to go fetch Ol' Blu. Sleeping out on the cold prairie with a big camp fire seemed like a wonderful idea right now.

The next afternoon, another warm sunny day, found Emmitt riding in from the south end of Jones Street in Fort Worth, past the back side of the jail to Forth Street.

The contrast between this quiet old cow town and the bedlam of Dallas is like night versus day. He wondered what happened here?

The town is dead quiet. So silent and peaceful he wondered if the old Black Panther, whom the place is nicknamed for, is sleeping in the middle of the street.

Absolutely no one visible; all doors closed on the stores, no horses tied to the rails or standing in front of parked wagons. Nothing!

A blur of motion danced in his eye as he rode up to the corner of 4th and Main. He caught a glimmer of someone sweeping out dust from a side door of a laundry house across the street; an old Chinese fellow, who quickly disappeared inside.

McGowan neck reined Blu around to the right, stopped in front of the red brick buildings on the left and dismounted.

As he stepped up on the walkway, the proprietor, the same elderly Chinese man he had seen sweeping, appeared in the doorway, a small porcelain pipe sticking out of the side of his mouth.

He made several short bows as he backed up with McGowan's entering the laundry.

"Howdy."

"Ello kind sir, you washy washy clothes?" the old man asked in bad English.

"What? Oh, no---where is everyone. The town seems deserted?"

"Eveey one gone, eveey one gone; fixy choo choo oad."

"Fixy choo choo?" McGowan caught himself, speaking like the Chinaman and laughed remembering most Chinese could not pronounce the R in the English language.

"Is anyone left in this town?"

"Saloon," the elderly oriental pointed at the wall to the saloon next door.

"Ok, it appeared closed but I'll try. Much obliged," he said, touching his hat brim and backing out of the laundry, he turned around and walked to the next building where he read the sign painted on the window fronting the street.

'White Elephant'; the name always reminded him of the one in Abilene, Kansas each time he would pass by when he was a

deputy for long hair Jim Courtwright. It did now as well. He remembered the Kansas saloon as rough by anyone's standards; however the Fort Worth version was not near as wild!

He turned the glass knob of the door and found it unlocked. He opened and entered, standing in the dim light squinting he looked for anyone who might be inside. The bare red brick walls cast a reddish hue on everything, causing some difficulty in distinguishing shapes.

"Bar's open if you're looking for a drink!" a hoarse voice called out from the back of the building.

McGowan took a few steps into the room, his boot heels loud on the wooden floor. He could barely make out the outline of a man sitting alone at a table next to the stairs in the far corner of the saloon.

"Are you the barkeep?" McGowan asked as he walked up.

"Nope, he's out back in the privy. I own the gaming room upstairs. The name is Short, Luke Short; you recently get in to town?" Short motioned for McGowan to a chair at his table.

"Yep, just rode in. Town's so quiet I was expecting to see a panther sleeping out in the street," McGowan answered smiling as he accepted the seat offer.

"Emmitt McGowan," he said holding out his right hand to Luke Short, who leaned forward with his, making a quick shake.

"Well, I'm not sure about that panther but if he is a mind to sleep out in the street he'd for certain not be disturbed."

Short continued to lean forward and placed an empty shot glass in front of McGowan, pulling the cork from a whiskey bottle that had been setting on the edge of the table.

"Not now," Emmitt covered his glass with his opened palm. "Too early for me, thanks anyway."

The man sitting across from him shrugged his shoulders and poured himself a shot, picked it up, saluted McGowan and tossed it against the back of his throat.

McGowan surveyed the fellow for a moment. Studying the rumpled, formerly white shirt now gone gray, red colored suspenders and what he took for the remains of a tie dangling from the corners of his collar piece; he surmised the man dressed clean shaven and rather snappy at one time.

Now bags hung under his eyes and he appeared he hadn't shaved in a few days.

McGowan's nose sensed a sour odor. Apparently the card shark hadn't bathed in some time either.

"Weren't you up in Abilene or Dodge a while back?" Emmitt inquired, "I seem to remember the name."

"I reckon Dodge, ran gaming tables with my pards, Masterson and Earp. They were also protection being they were town deputies.

I'm a thinking to go back there."

"Where are the folks who live here?" Emmitt asked quietly, not caring to learn anything further concerning his associates.

The fellow stared at him from glazed eyes for a moment before he spoke.

"They're all out east of this burg, digging and laying track for the railroad."

"Railroad?"

"Yep"

"Yeah that's right Sir, may I help you?" The bartender who returned from the privy broke into the conversation as he entered the saloon from the open back door.

He stood staring down at McGowan, wiping his hands on his dirty apron hanging from his waist, his mouth busy chewing a wad of tobacco.

"I don't know. I asked the fella here where everyone is. Said something about a railroad?"

"Yeah," the barkeep closed the opening and stepped behind his bar, "The 'Texas and Pacific Rail Road' is behind schedule laying track. They had expected to be here three days ago and are still nine out.

Their funding is due to expire in the next four. They have to be in Fort Worth by that time or lose their financing, which will ruin them.

Not good for Fort Worth either," he said as he stopped to wipe his hands again, "No railroad, no future for this burg for a long time."

"And the town folk?" Emmitt asked again, looking at both the gambler and the barkeep.

"The gents are out assisting the rail road labor gangs to lay track, working twenty four hours a day. The women are cooking and feeding everyone round the clock," the barman answered.

"Yeah a real community effort!" Short grumbled and swallowed another shot.

Emmitt stood up and laid his right forefinger against his hat brim in a salute.

"Much obliged for the information, I reckon I'll head on over to the Royal and get a room," he drawled.

"You ain't buying a drink?" the bartender asked, a disappointed look washing over his face.

"Not now; too early for me, I'll be back later. Your beer kept cold?"

"It's cool a degree or two," the gambler answered first.

"Mr. Short, barkeep," Emmitt nodded as he turned and walked out of the dim saloon; the bright sunlight hurt his eyes for a moment before they adjusted to the glare.

Sure bright for this time of year he thought as he untied Blu, mounted and rode the two blocks over to Throckmorton Street and the Royal Hotel.

After signing the guest ledger and taking his key, McGowan climbed the stairs to his room and spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing on the ornate quilt covering a horse hair mattress. The brass framed bed squeaked every time he moved.

The evening found him in the dining hall alone; he took his time eating and then enjoyed an extra beer after his meal before he decided on a stroll around the deathly quiet cowtown.

The only lamps in windows besides the Royal and one other were the White Elephant Saloon and the few cheap disorderly houses and dance halls south on Commerce street in 'Hell's half acre.'

Although they were quieter due to less business, he chose to not venture in. He must be getting old if that sort of thing didn't interest him anymore, he mused.

He thought of Verna, remembering the sound of her voice, her laughter and the light in her eyes. He realized he missed her.

Bored and lonely, he walked back to the hotel. The town had changed a bit since his days as a deputy for Courtwright, having grown some with many red brick buildings replacing the old wooden ones.

He crossed through the foyer to the staircase, passing on his right the double glass doors to the dining hall, when he noticed a

voice which sounded familiar. Emmitt stopped and glazed into the room where he caught sight of six well-dressed fellows seated around one table for a late evening meal.

One of the men glanced up from his plate of food, spotted McGowan, studied him for a moment and then nodded his head. McGowan returned the greeting and turned toward the stairs as the individual resumed eating.

The voice he overheard didn't fit the hombre who greeted him but something kept nagging him about it as he prepared for bed.

He straightened up his kit after washing his face and sat down to pull his boots off when a robust knock on his door startled him. Not knowing who might be visiting at this hour and not expecting Duncan until late tomorrow, he pulled his Colt out of his saddle bag, and held the gun behind his back before answering the insistent knocking.

The man, who had nodded at him from the dining room, stood in the hallway. McGowan noted the three other men behind him were also from the dining table. Their clothing looked familiar and they all were very young adults, the character in front appeared to be the oldest.

"Howdy!" he said.

"Howdy yourself; it's a bit late to be calling?"

"Sorry, saw you enter the hotel while I and my pards were dining and wanted to know if you knew what had happened to the town folks?"

"The desk clerk or waitress didn't say?"

"Didn't ask."

McGowan thought the fellow was lying but did not challenge him.

"I understand they are out on the prairie helping the Texas & Pacific lay tracks. Something to do with a bank deadline," he answered, gripping the Colt tighter, his thumb on the hammer ready to cock the weapon, as the three other men gathered closer behind the first man.

"Ah; are you new in town?"

Emmitt waited a few seconds before answering.

"You're asking a lot of questions for the hour?" He said slowly, his pulse speeding up. We're fixing to dance, he mused.

The speaker apparently realized he is pushing things with someone who would not be pushed and backed off in his manner.

Though supported by three of his men, he is in front, facing Emmitt who is half hidden by the door and has his right arm behind him, hiding something, a gun perhaps.

"I reckon---just me and my pards are careful who sleeps next to us."

"Y'all boys wanted?"

"Thought you might be," the hombre asked without answering.

"I'm here on cattle business, I'm leaving soon," Emmitt answered, saying more than he should.

"So are we! Sorry to disturb you, --- night!" the man said, taking a step back and moving out of sight, his associates following.

"Goodnight!" Emmitt replied as he listened to their booted heels clunking into the next room, their spurs jingling. He realized, as he locked his door, he hadn't heard them come up the stairs or approach his quarters.

He made the motion of putting his Colt back into his saddlebags, then changed his mind and placed it under his pillow. He sat down on the edge of the mattress rubbing his scalp and combing his hair with his fingers.

He didn't need this kind of excitement.

Emmitt pulled off his boots and his broad cloth riding britches and crawled into the bed covers. He had an idea who those fellows are but he couldn't prove it.

They probably recognized him too, if they are the train robbers from last night. Well, they aren't his business anyway and they hadn't harmed him or anyone he knew. Best to leave alone, he had enough troubles to deal with and getting mixed up with a bunch of poor outlaws isn't in his plans.

Most of Texas considered the Bass gang as a kind of Robin Hood outfit. They did their thieving in North Texas around the Johnson, Hood, Tarrant, Parker, Denton and Dallas counties.

All they stole were Yankee dollars from the Yankee railroads and spent it at businesses owned by Texans, who needed the gold.

The Rangers aren't even trying hard to catch them, not yet anyway. After someone gets killed or they start robbing banks and stores that'd change, but not tonight.

McGowan rolled over, blew down the lamp chimney on the table next to the bed, putting out the light and went to sleep instantly, his hand under his pillow, his fingers across the cold iron of his Colt.

Morning found Emmitt up early, sitting on the front porch of the hotel watching the sunrise, waiting for breakfast to be served, which was not a long wait.

After a huge plate of eggs, cream beef on toast, bacon and coffee, he took another walk around the town. He stopped at the livery to check on Blu and personally curried him as the horse contently ate a small bag of oats Emmitt gave him.

Later he walked behind the north side of the court house, between two of the remaining old vacant army post buildings, down the steep bank to the Trinity River and found a spot to sit under a big oak.

He spent the rest of the morning watching the birds, frogs and the animals that came to the water. He felt at peace. The quiet of the country met the cowtown here at the riverbank and he enjoyed the day to the fullest. He realized he might not get another morning like this for a while and relished every moment.

Three thirty in the afternoon, a half hour after Emmitt finished lunch at the Royal's, a large frame man walked into the foyer. After conversing with the desk clerk, he turned to face the dining room, his eyes and Emmitt's meeting.

Emmitt, who was still enjoying a second coffee, stood up from his table and started toward the big man who was approaching him.

"McGowan?" he asked, sticking his huge mitt out.

"Yep, Emmitt McGowan; your apparently Duncan!" Emmitt responded, grasping the offered appendage.

Duncan's hand felt like a slab of ham, fleshly but strong. The man was big, towering over him by a good foot or more. Broad shoulders, wide at the waist with no fat, square fleshy head sporting a boxer's nose and lips with thick brown hair and eyebrows. His small deep set eyes were light blue....almost grey.

"I am sorry for having you ride to Fort Worth," he offered as he sank into a chair at Emmitt's table, "But I got held up in Weatherford, business took longer than I expected."

Emmitt shook his head in understanding, "Some things never go as planned. I understand completely."

"I rode through here a week ago and this little cowtown was a busier than I find today. Wonder what happen?" he said signaling for the waiter.

"You eat yet?" Duncan asked as the attendant appeared.

"I did thanks, finished before you walked in. But go ahead, I'll entertain another coffee."

The big man made his order of steak and potatoes with carrots after which he turned to Emmitt with a smile, studying his face for a moment before he spoke.

"I gathered from your telegram, you need some help closing a case of cattle rustling?"

"You're correct; I and my associate have been investigating beeves disappearing down in the Williamson County area near Austin; mostly yearlings and two year olds, some mama's and their calves and four ranch hands who have gone missing. All this has been happening for over a year's and half up to last week."

"How many total?" Duncan asked, accepting his coffee as McGowan accepted a refill to his cup.

"Won't have an accurate count until the roundups start late next month, but the estimate is between one thousand and two thousand; all from eight spreads and a few farms."

"Good heavens, one or two thousand yearlings and two year olds? Lordy, sounds like someone is going in to business for themselves!

Which ain't anything new though; many big ranches got their start off others mavericks," Duncan said, "But this is on a grand scale if true."

Emmitt swallowed some of his coffee and replied, "Yep, this is looking like a major undertaking. Requiring more ground to cover than two cow detectives can do."

Duncan shook his head in understanding, "I understand why you contacted me. You're thinking them young cows are being relocated up this way?"

McGowan nodded affirmative. "We've a couple of theories. The first considers selling off to ranchers in the surrounding counties, but that could be risky for the buyers and since no steers of any quantity are taken, we don't think this is happening.

The other theory or idea concerns ranches recently established or old ones bought, all with new brands registered to them. If true we believe the critters are driven to these spreads as primer stock. As you said, someone might be trying to build their own herds off the young cattle of other owners.

I've drawings of brands which are suspected as possibly used for over branding. I need to know of any spreads increasing their registered stock or new homesteads being established with the symbols I have here," he tapped the table, "registered to them and who owns these properties."

"I see," Duncan replied as the waiter placed his lunch before him and refilled his coffee cup and Emmitt's.

"Well," Duncan stated as he sampled the potatoes, "I reckon this won't be too hard of a job, take some time, traveling to the various county seats and reviewing their records."

Emmitt relaxed a bit, glad Captain Lee referred Duncan to him. He felt good he had a third hand in this investigation. The clock is running against him and there was so much to do to acquire solid proof Jenkins is behind this criminal scheme which covered a large part of central Texas.

They agreed Duncan needed to get the records before Jenkins and his stolen cattle disappeared into a legitimate operation, otherwise proving anything would be near impossible.

The two men sat at the dining table into the early evening, discussing each piece of evidence Emmitt had brought with him; the theory's and possible investigative track to pursue.

The next morning they met for an additional four hours to discuss further what schedule Duncan would follow.

They both agreed the longest delay to gathering evidence is having copies made and certified by county clerks. Duncan was thinking maybe two months at the longest.

To narrow down the number of counties is the best way as traveling and doing the paper work will take time. Something McGowan is getting short of before the roundups, assuming his and Captain Lee's theory, to which Duncan agreed with, is correct.

Duncan acknowledged this and stated so, planning to stay in town for at least a week or longer, sending telegraphs to twenty eight counties the two of them determined most likely to be havens for stolen cattle and new start up ranches.

Tuesday McGowan bought a train ticket for Round Rock at the telegraph office, shook hands with Duncan and turned Ol' Blu toward the small town of Hutchins which lay south of Dallas.

Hutchins is a bit further out than Dallas, a two day ride, but at least he did not have to ride through Dallas.

Feeling better with things progressing, Emmitt relaxed as he rode southeast that early morning towards Hutchins, the tall winter dry yellow prairie grass licking his boot heels as Blu would grab a leisurely mouthful every few minutes.

He enjoyed this time to relax before returning to Round Rock and meeting up with the ranchers. He knew the challenge of their tempers and preventing them from taking matters into their own hands would be difficult.

Emmitt looked up at the blue sky; "Lord, I truly require your assistance these coming days. I hope you can take a moment from your great works to help me out here?"

Late in the twilight on the second day, he spotted on the Cedar Creek ridgeline above him, racing among the cedars, six riders pushing their horses hard. They were coming toward him. Too far to view them clearly, he wondered who they were and why they were in such a hurry?

An hour later he saw them ride past, a good mile away, not seeming to take heed of him. This was just as well as Emmitt would find later the next day, when he arrived in Hutchins, the floppy toed boot bandit Sam Bass and his gang had struck again! All six plus one hundred!

THE REPORT

Emmitt sat at the long table, in Gallagher's dining hall, across from the ranchers on April 18th 1878.

He really did not want to be there facing these stockmen as he acknowledged the tension from resisting the forming of a lynch party for Jenkins and his men, was draining their patience.

He did not have stolen cattle as hard evidence, only papers residing currently in Dallas; however, he hoped his presentation tonight would cool their heels until the documents arrived.

The round ups had started and the shortage of animals had been startling.

The ranch hands still had several hundred square miles of territory for each operation to ride as most of the cattle had taken refuge from the bad winter in the arroyo's, dry creek beds, cedar breaks and any depression which held grass and shelter from the weather. They expected the initial counts might increase, but the work proved hard and frustrating.

The rough country around the river canyon did not lend itself to the round up either. Two horses had broken a leg, spilling both riders, one who broke his right collar bone.

Still, the roundups progressed and most of the older steers were found; the drive north this year would be profitable. It was the following year that had folks worried.

Emmitt felt elated that Duncan is so efficient. He had his answers from the majority of the inquiries within a week. With this response Duncan requested copies of the deeds of the newly established ranches in 5 county seats, one in Burnett four miles from the town of Burnett, one in Williamson north of Liberty Hill, two in Bell county west of Belton and one in McLennan county east of Waco; all within thirty to forty miles of the North Trail. It appeared the second theory had been the correct one.

Duncan's inquiries had been further supported by a telegram, to each county seat, from Texas Ranger Captain Lee requesting they comply with Mr. Duncan's requests post haste.

Emmitt sighed, as the last of the ranch owners entered the dining room and took their seats. It helped to know the right people, Emmitt mused; makes work and life in general a lot easier.

He pulled the two most recent cryptic telegrams out of his vest one more time, just to reassure his self the theory Lee, he and Duncan established is indeed supported by the evidence Duncan discovered.

The first read: 'Confirmed theory, stop, no less than five to our boy, stop, with matching marks, stop, additional marks confirmed to cover all references, stop.'

The second read: 'holding company in Dallas, stop, faux bus owners to north, stop, many bank accounts, stop, name in our boy, stop, proceeds awaiting your arrival, stop.'

Emmitt understood the cryptic code meant the detective found five new established ranches with registered brands which match the ones Ben obtained.

The additional marks meant additional symbols which might be over brands to the rancher's registered symbols here in Williamson County, he surmised, or they could be coincidence but he doubted this.

His thoughts were interrupted as Kinkade was the first to speak. "Well Mr. Detective, what have you got? Is Jenkins a thief or not?"

Emmitt stared at Kinkade for a moment and then turned to look each rancher in the eye, before he spoke.

"Some of you may already know, I hired a detective by the name of Duncan, out of Dallas, to make inquiry's concerning our friend Todd Jenkins possible holdings in Texas. After several weeks of work, Mr. Duncan and his agency associates have collected quite a laundry list of acquisitions here in Texas.

My associate, Ben Maxwell will be traveling to Dallas on the Thursday train to retrieve these documents which portend, according to Mr. Duncan, an incredible criminal scheme. This scheme is apparently designed to establish a legitimate and large ranching operation."

The room fell dead quiet. Emmitt, expecting this reaction, continued.

"This will all pan out when the documents are introduced in a court of law, however the indication is pretty solid Jenkins is involved," he stopped for a moment, as some of the ranchers started to speak and held up his hand until all was quiet again.

"We have no red handed clincher, such as actual stolen cattle retrieved, other than Ben Maxwell's testimony, but there is enough findings, I believe it is called 'evidence of circumstance', to connect Jenkins and hopefully convict him."

"Hopefully?" one of the ranchers sitting behind the others at the table asked?

"I cannot say what will happen in a court room."

"Hell, if we have enough proof this bastard is a stealing our cows, I say we ride out and find his sorry ass and hang him from the nearest tree!" Kinkade blurted out, his red face growing redder.

"Now hold on here!" Mike Jarrell spoke up, "We don't need to start a range war, not when we're so close of doing this in court legal like!"

"I agree, let's wait for these documents to arrive and see where this takes us!" Carl Stephens timed in, supporting Jarrell.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, don't forget why we are here!" John Henderson, the oldest and richest rancher in the area, banker and the new President of the Williamson County Rancher Coalition, stood up as the room grew silent.

"Mr. McGowan and his associates spent a good deal of time and considerable amount of our money investigating the theft of our cattle. To drop this investigation and go off and start shooting and hanging people without legal authority behind us is a waste of Mr. McGowan's efforts and our gold. Not to mention we'd be outside the law!"

Henderson stopped and took his time looking at each ranch owner, stopping with Kinkade whom he spent several seconds staring at.

"Now, we could run out and find and hang Jenkins and his men that we don't kill, in what is sure to be a hell of a gun fight. But we will lose, most assuredly, a few of our boys and maybe some of your lives as well! Y'all want this?"

The room vibrated with the no's uttered from each ranch owner.

"Good! For God's sake let Mr. McGowan complete his work

and we will have the Rangers do the arresting and bringing to justice Todd Jenkins!" Henderson continued.

"Now for one, I'd like to know what this incredible criminal operation is all about!" the old man said, motioning Emmitt to continue with his report.

"I can say with reasonable certainty, Jenkins developed some big expectations for his future. I say that based on the facts the documents in question will support, according to Mr. Duncan.

Duncan stated he found no less than five new, purchased and registered ranches established in the past 24 months. These spreads are not owned by one man, family or a group of fellows trying to make a go; they are owned by a holding company based in Dallas.

Now, a operation held by a holding company is not unusual as, Charles Goodnight, my former boss's ranch is held by John Adair and Associates.

However, this company in Dallas is purportedly run by board members of several businesses with addresses located up north," he explained, taking a drink of water before continuing, "But only on paper; none of these enterprises are in existence. This has been checked out twice from different reliable sources."

The ranch owners scowled and murmured loudly among themselves.

"You trust this man Duncan? Who owns the holding company?" Mike Jarrell interrupted with multiple questions.

"Yes I do, he was recommended by the Rangers and to your second question, Todd Jenkins it seems," McGowan stated flatly to loud murmurings.

"These phony businesses, registered as the owners of the Dallas holding company, are funded by several different northern bank accounts. These accounts are in Todd Jenkins' name."

"Ok," spoke up Cass Worthington among more murmurings; "Jenkins went to extreme lengths to hide his ownership of these ranches. How does this tie him to rustling our cattle?"

Emmitt hesitated before making this knowledge privy to the ranchers. He still is not sure the information would stay within this group.

"Each of those ranches carries brand registrations which match the brands Ben Maxwell was able to get off the stolen cattle he followed!"

More loud murmuring erupted immediately. No one could believe anyone had the gall to pull such a grand conspiracy as just outlined by Emmitt McGowan.

"There are other symbols, as well, registered to these ranches," Emmitt continued, "I requested an artist to cypher and certify all of those brands to see if they can over brand the irons used by y'all's registered markings,--- they all matched up."

"Son-of-a-bitch, Jenkins does all that?" Kinkade exclaimed.

Henderson held his hand up for the men to quiet down before he spoke.

"This kind of thing requires a considerable sum of money! Do you have any idea where Jenkins gathered up such large sums or do you not have this information?"

Emmitt shook his head no, "Only speculation, Jenkins is known in northern circles to dabble in the cattle market; however, he is not acknowledged to be wealthy.

That said, do y'all remember the big Union Pacific robbery a couple of years ago up north; supposedly carried out by a Joel Collins and Sam Bass? I understand it was a large sum of \$60,000 in gold double eagles; some of the coins are now surfacing with merchants across northern Texas.

Collins was found dead a year later and no gold on him. It was assumed, by Pinkertons and other law men, he and Sam Bass had a falling out and Bass took all the loot after killing Collins. Now some of this currency is showing up in northern states as well!"

"You think Collins was killed by Jenkins? Worthington questioned.

"Possibly," Emmitt replied.

"Jenkins or his gun hand Calley!" Kinkade smirked.

The room was shocked into silence. To assume this theory is true, they realized again they are facing some very smart and ruthless characters; ready and willing to kill to achieve their goals.

"Lord of Mercy! Gentlemen, needless to say, we need to keep our big mouths shut until Ben Maxwell arrives with the final evidence and the Rangers can make their arrests! To do otherwise is folly!" Henderson stated, then standing up and offering his hand to McGowan, "Thank you young man for your efforts; we pray this enterprise comes to a swift and conclusive ending and soon!"

"Thank you," Emmitt replied, taking the offered grip, "I do hope everyone here can keep this to themselves until Ben arrives."

"Under the circumstances, I think they are aware of the dangers if they don't."

Henderson turned to the other ranchers and said, "We'll continue the roundups and prepare for the drives north. Again, keep what you learned tonight under you hats gentlemen. The solution to this problem is at hand."

Henderson then exclaimed; "Gents, it is getting late and I for one am hungry. The smells from Gallagher's kitchen are driving me to starvation."

Emmitt stood up, smiled saying, "I'll tell the lady we are ready to eat."

He opened the double sliding doors from the dining room and walked out finding Verna at the front desk, bent over a ledger.

"Ma'am, we are ready for supper."

"Oh!" she jumped, "You startled me! Ma'am? Is that what you called me?"

"Deep in thought?" Emmitt asked ignoring her question; he was trying to be polite he said to himself.

"Oh no, deep in work!" she smiled.

"Y'all finished your meeting?" she asked, slipping her proper speech on purpose.

Emmitt nodded yes as he stifled a yawn.

Verna turned toward the kitchen door as she said, "I'll tell Juan to prepare the plates for serving."

As she started to pass through the opening she stopped and looked back at Emmitt, a quizzical expression on her face.

"What?" he asked.

She stood still for a moment, smiled and finally saying; "Are you going to be in town for the dance?"

"Dance!" he asked surprised, "What dance?"

"Oh Emmitt!" she stammered, instantly becoming upset he had not paid attention to the preparations being done around the avenue, "The annual dance that we have before the drives start!"

"Sure, I'll be there," he replied, still not comprehending what she was talking about.

"You better because I will be expecting you," she said in a huffy voice, irritated she had to ask him!

"Well, if I'm here in--,," he never got to finish as he watched her disappear through the kitchen door.

As she left the room, her father appeared from his study. Emmitt turned and asked him about the dance and when. Mr. Gallagher laughed and explained what he needed to know.

"Did my daughter invite you?" he inquired at the end of his explanation.

"Yeah, I guess she did."

"A little advice Son," he grasped Emmitt on his left arm, "Don't disappoint her if you can help it. She's hard to live with otherwise."

"Thanks Sir, I'll remember your advice," McGowan commented before he passed through the double doors into the dining room. He suddenly realized he had more on his hands than just this job!

A DIFFERENT REPORT

No one at the Inn became aware of the shadowy figure slipping down from the oak tree outside the north window of the dining room. Nor did anyone realize behind the curtains, the wooden sash had been opened about two inches at the top, making the conversations easy to listen too from the old great tree just outside.

The dark dressed figure of a man, with the words of the men inside fresh in his memory, crept away from the back of the building and across the dirt road which represented the end of the last block of the town plat.

If anyone had bothered to look he would have been seen in the bright glare of a full moon but no one did.

Stealthily the dark figure crept east of the structure and crossed a small grassy field into a grove of trees toward a waiting saddled mustang. Moments later, the mounted rider goaded his horse into a quiet walk in the darkness away from Round Rock making a loop east, then west around the town on a little used wagon trail, crossing the Georgetown road a mile north of Round Rock.

Turning to Georgetown, the rider let his mustang fly.

Todd Jenkins sat in the shadows of a tree line on a gray dead oak, which had fallen over years ago, rolling his third cigarette since darkness fell and waiting for his man to return. He was comfortable as a predator at the top of the food chain observing his domain, his soul soaking in the night as he took stock of his surroundings.

Although the weather was changing, the evening was still a bit cool and damp with clear skies and moonlight so intense every detail could be seen.

The ground, moist from last night's rain, showed deep imprints from his boots and the hooves of his horse. Two cigarette butts lay next to a fresh opened but empty can of beans, all signs to anyone interested someone had been waiting in this spot.

A gentle breeze came up and died down every few minutes while an owl hooted several times before flying off into the blackness. In the distance the yelping of coyotes broke the stillness of the night as they chased some unfortunate prey which would be their dinner tonight. No crickets chirped as they had yet to recover from the winter and thankfully the mosquitoes were not hatched either.

It was a peaceful and comfortable night to Jenkins. He loved the dark.

After three hours of waiting, a lone rider rode up to his small camp on the ancient tree, located a few hundred feet off the Georgetown road. Jenkins stepped out of the shadows as he lit another cigarette; he grabbed hold of the reins of the rider's dancing spirited horse near the bit as the animal was reined to a stop, his face up turned, listening to the news the rider was giving him.

They conversed for several moments, Jenkins expression growing more serious and worried the longer they talked.

After ten or fifteen minutes of discussion, Jenkins flipped a gold coin to the mounted horseman who saluted and galloped off as Jenkins forked his own horse.

They traveled in different directions; the messenger went east off the Georgetown road, his final destination Kinkade's spread. Todd Jenkins headed west back to his ranch.

ICE CREAM AND FIDDLES

Saturday, the early spring sun began setting in a blaze of colors, throwing streamers of yellow fading to burnt orange and then black up into the heavens.

This strange evening light shimmered mischievously off the white stone buildings surrounding the growing crowd that gathered for the spring dance, held every year for the past five years, before the cattle drives started up the north trail.

Still cool but not uncomfortable, the winter having been relatively mild the past two months, even for this part of Texas, the air carried a reminder of what passed the previous fall but was still comfortable, perfect for dancing.

People dressed in their best Sunday clothes mingled, talking softly to each other, hollering on occasion over heads at someone they hadn't seen in ages or laughing out loud around the tables which held the punch bowls, sweet cakes, cookies and ice cream.

Young boys and girls took turns sitting on canvas blankets' covering the ice cream churns, holding the buckets down in place with their weight, while fathers turned the iron cranks against the freezing crystals' in the wooden buckets and thickening cream inside the tin canisters.

Still younger children stood fidgeting, wooded bowls and spoons held tight in their little fists; their excited jabber amongst themselves, about the treat hidden in the freezing cans, deafening.

The gaiety filling the air proved contagious to anyone who walked up and entered the happy crowd.

A few smaller boys played keep away on the low wooden dance floor which stood in the middle of the avenue.

The wood used in the structure was donated by Kopperal's lumber yard next to the train station. The long platform stretched from Kopperal's mercantile store past the barbershop across the street and three buildings down.

Designed to be assembled quick in one afternoon but safe enough for forty or fifty couples to dance at the same time, served the smaller boy's as an ideal playground, chasing after one another on the floor, laughing as they nimbly avoided each other's attempts to snatch a red kerchief tucked into their britches waists.

Emmitt McGowan and Ben Maxwell, both dressed in the suits they purchased in Austin last fall, found themselves smiling and greeting as well as being greeted by folks they didn't know, yet who as local citizens of Round Rock or inhabitants of Williamson county, acknowledged who the two men were.

Folks went out of their way to accept the two into the festivities. Before they had stepped twenty feet into the happy crowd, a cup of punch was shoved into one hand and a sugar cookie in the other.

However, they found if they didn't consume their spiked fruit drink quick, the cups would empty themselves from the back slaps from everyone they passed.

A momentary gap in the throng gave Maxwell time to turn to Emmitt and comment, "Right friendly crowd; don't reckon I've seen anyone I recognize yet but it seems they all know us!"

"Yea, ain't it something? Is Jeffery and his mother supposed to be here?"

"Yep, said they would. I'll likely run in to them soon," Ben answered, smiling at a couple who passed them.

No sooner had he spoke when he jerked his head to the call of his name.

"Ben! Ben! Over here!"

Maxwell and McGowan turned to the hale and after a moment of searching through the crowd, spotted Jeffery sitting on one of the ice cream churns, his legs dangling awkwardly over the edges; his feet just missing the ground. The treat apparently near ready, as each time the crank turned, the wooden cask jerked or twisted, almost throwing Jeffery off.

"What're you doing boy?" Ben asked as he walked up to Jeffery.

"I'm helping Mr. Goodman make some ice cream; this here bucket sure wants to jump a lot and he needs me to sit on it to hold it down!"

"I see! Well Mr. Goodman, is Jeffery doing you any good?" Ben directed his question to the man turning the handle while keeping his eyes on the child.

"Sure did! But I think that I don't need his services anymore," Goodman replied, standing up, stretching and messaging his lower back, "I believe it is ready!"

Jeffery hopped off the bucket, rubbing the backside of his britches; his bottom had grown numb from the cold ice, even though the canvas blanket, "Can I have some?"

"Why sure, you earned it. Your friends want a taste?" Goodman smiled at Maxwell and McGowan, as he disconnected the crank and axle from the canister.

"I'll pass thanks! I suspect these here children will finish off what you have in no time!" Ben replied, rubbing Jeffery's red hair and nodding to the lengthy line of young faces behind him.

"You Sir?" Goodman turned to McGowan.

"No thanks, I'll pass too," Emmitt said shaking his head.

"If you fellers change you minds," Goodman stated as a matter-of-fact as he stooped to spoon out the frozen delight into Jeffery's bowl.

"Well! This's where you're hiding!"

McGowan and Maxwell turned again to a familiar voice as did Jeffery. Jeffery spoke first, around a mouth full of his treat.

"Howdy Miss Gallagher!"

"Hello Jeffery," Verna returned his greeting, "Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked, bending slightly to rub her fingers through his hair.

"Yes um," he grinned, "I helped make this here ice cream. You want some?"

"You did? My goodness thank you Jeffery, but not now. I ate a little bowl a few minutes ago," she replied and turned her attention to Ben and Emmitt.

"Mr. Maxwell!" she acknowledged coolly, her eyes leveling with his, "You certainly are dressed nicer than I have ever seen you. I hope you have a good time tonight and as a matter of fact, I believe a certain lady is looking for you over at the table in front of the general store!"

"Miss Gallagher," Ben tipped his hat, his perpetual embarrassment around this woman rising again in his face.

"I'm pleased to find you in such a good mood this evening. It is a pleasure; you're looking right nice tonight also," he stammered, "And I thank you for guiding me to where Maria is. I think I need to skedaddle on over. I sure don't want her to be a looking for me for long!"

"Emmitt!" he slapped McGowan on the shoulder, "Enjoy yourself pard! Miss Gallagher," he touched his right hand to his hat brim as he excused himself from her presence.

He turned and hurriedly made his way through the crowd, Jeffery following him, holding on to his now empty wooden bowl and tin spoon.

Emmitt grinned, amazed how quickly she had cornered him away for herself. He looked her over as she addressed Ben and found himself impressed with her choice of evening attire.

Her pale green dress, shimmering in the late twilight, clung to her body lightly, caressing her womanly shape with every move. He assumed it was of silk, he knew of nothing which shined like that material.

She wore a matching hat, adorned with bright ribbons and tied under her chin with a similar band.

Her hair pulled back under in a loose bun. A black lace shawl and gloves finished her outfit. Emmitt smiled, she was beautiful!

Verna noted him grinning and cocked her head questionably. "Are you amused?"

"Well Yeah, you sure cleared my company out in a hurry!"

"I see; if you would prefer to spend this lovely evening with Ben and Jeffery, I can find someone else to talk to, even dance with," she smiled, her eyes searching his.

"Ah, no!" he replied abruptly. He had nary an interest in doing anything of the sort; he didn't want to part company with her at all, "I don't think I'd care to do that. You said something about dancing?"

"Dancing Mr. McGowan, this event is about dancing. The big ball; before the boys start driving their herds north to market," she lectured, a funny smile spreading across her face.

"You do know how to dance?"

"Uh huh, sorta," he answered, rubbing his chin with the back of his left hand, "My mother taught us kids to do a few steps, when there where nothing else to do in the evening. She was from Georgia, her father owned a planta---," he stopped and grinned, "I told you

this already, she wanted us boys and my sister to acquire some civilizing during our growing up."

"Oh yes, I remember. You said a lot about your mother. She sounds like a wonderfully loving woman. Wanting the best possible for her children. So you do dance?"

"This is what I'm getting at. It's been a while. Not much call for dancing out on the prairie. Ol Blu did not have a desire to frolic with me and I certainly would not with any of them mangy drovers I had the misfortune to work with!"

Verna covered her lips with her lace gloved hands as she started to laugh, shaking her head.

"Well, Mr. McGowan, I will help you," she said demurely as she slipped her arm under his right and led him through the mass of people.

"We'll start with some practice steps without music and see if we can jog your memory; ok?"

"Sounds fine to me," McGowan replied, as she guided him to the empty lot between the barber shop and the broom factory; away from the crowd in the street.

Several other couples were practicing also, the women counting as the men they held in their arms struggled to remember their foot work.

McGowan relaxed, he wasn't the only one who had not danced in some time.

"You think we have enough room? Seems a lot of fellas who don't recall their steps," he said, stopping inside the alley. The area seemed full for the moment as couples crisscrossed in front of them.

Most were ranch hands, dressed in their best clothing, their newest or cleanest sombreros canted jauntily on their heads. He recognized several from the ranches he had visited. They nodded to him as they passed, their lips silently counting along with the girls they practiced with.

"Why, of course. How much room do you need to practice?" Verna replied, grinning. She gathered this man was use to the wide open spaces.

"Don't know, I recollect my ma made us young ones dance outside; said it was safer for her furniture in the house."

Verna took him by the hand and led him to a vacant spot, helping him assume a waltzing posture.

"What kind of dancing did you and your brothers and sister do? Indian war?" she asked in mocking surprise, her eyes growing big as she finished the question.

"No, I only remember my little sister spent a lot of time with her feet off the ground. We'd swing her pretty fast I reckon."

Verna threw her head back and laughed and said, "Let's start with a slow!" she empathized the word slow, "Simple waltz, ready, left foot first, one, two, three, four and one, two, three, four, good! One, two three,"...

They spent most of the next half hour dancing around the alley, on occasion bumping into other practicing couples; McGowan missing a step or more, often stepping on Verna's toes. After a while, he relaxed and fell into the easy sway taught to him by his mother years ago, his confidence and old learned movements returned.

He stopped and held Verna at arm's length, studying her pretty face,

"I think I got it now," he felt good about remembering his steps, but he found it difficult holding this woman in his arms while concentrating on his feet.

When he touched her, his pulse quickened; never in his life had a female affected him so; excited and scared at the same moment, (not something he would admit to anyone).

"You're sure? There is more than the waltz, there's---," she started to list off the types of dances she knew when the music began playing from across the street.

She suspected this man could learn quickly what she wanted to teach him. He already showed returning skill and confidence in the few minutes they practiced. He held her proper, light enough yet with the authority a good lead required.

"I reckon we must make do with waltzing for now; if you don't mind. I'll need to get my dancing legs back before I try to do anything else," he replied, as he led her out from the alley into the circling crowd of dancers on the elevated dance floor.

Emmitt stopped short of the platform when he noticed the ensemble of musicians playing at the end between Kopperal's and the Broom factory. He figured at least twenty assorted instruments. From where he stood he counted four French Horns, two Clarinets,

five fiddles and one base fiddle; four guitars, two cornets and three flutes.

He heard the sound of a piano but did not see it, which would make twenty one people.

"There are a lot of musicians for this small town," Emmitt commented in amazement.

Verna laughed, "It isn't only Round Rock; there are folks from George Town, Bee Cave and Austin here. Those men have been practicing for the past six or seven months, preparing for this gathering.

They had the first five years ago in George Town, next Austin and now here tonight.

Each township tries to outdo the others and this is the biggest dance I have seen between these towns."

"It is certainly a splendid sound those boys are making."

The first song finished and the orchestra started playing another entitled 'Good Ham'.

A young man, singing into a large megaphone mounted on a pole in front of him, belted out the words to the music.

Not much to waltz too, Emmitt and Verna waited until the next one. The next proved more to their liking; The Skidmore Fancy Ball.

Emmitt took her hand and led her up to the floor. They danced to this piece and several others while Emmitt limbered up like most of the folks did.

He managed to not step on Verna's toes but three times. She would just smile each time, holding back the pain her slipper'd feet screamed at her from this man's boots.

She soon realized she should have worn heavier, sturdy shoes, despite how she is dressed.

The small orchestra played several more songs before they stopped for a break. Emmitt led his dance partner off the platform and over to the crowded tables for some punch and cookies.

"That was fun," Emmitt said, handing her a small cup of the spiked fruit drink; cherry and bourbon according to the taste.

"I agree," Verna answered, "You're improving with each song we dance to. I think you're better than you believe."

Emmitt smiled as he sipped, "I've got a good partner who helps me a lot. How're your feet?"

Verna giggled and looked down at her toes, "I'm not sure I will be walking tomorrow."

"Aha, I am sorry Verna. Perhaps we should not dance anymore tonight."

"Oh' no you don't," she said with mocking sternness, "You're not slipping out of this that easily! Besides, you are getting better. I don't recall you stepping on me the last three songs!"

"All right gal," Emmitt laughed, "But let's stay with the waltzes. I'm more in control of my feet this way."

Verna agreed, finished her punch and took his arm to pull him back to the promenade deck.

'Silver Threads among the Gold' became the next song the orchestra played after they regrouped and Emmitt and Verna waltzed to the slow beautiful music. They sat out 'Traveling Back to Georgia'; and Grandfathers Clock; then danced to 'The Blue Alsatian Mountains'.

When the next piece started, Verna jumped up and with Emmitt in tow, climbed onto the platform.

The Orchestra played the 'Tennessee Waltz' followed by the new Spanish piece 'La Paloma'. The couple waltzed around the floor, along with others, swaying to the soft music. The two became so immersed with one another they hardly paid any attention to the other couples.

Emmitt sensed he was in a dream, with this woman in his arms waltzing and swirling around.

Verna was ecstatic with joy dancing with this man who just seemed to want to please her and did with each footstep, every movement and twirl. She could not think of any party she had so much fun and joy than this night.

The waltz finished and they waited with the others for what would come next. The little orchestra broke into a racy number everyone spoke excitedly about as they crowded into the platform, forming a rough circle of lines radiating from the center.

"I remember this; the Cotton Eye Joe!" Emmitt exclaimed, "The last time I danced this jig was in Galveston in 65, it is fun. You want to try it?"

"I reckon!" Verna said laughing as she slipped her reply into the local dialect. McGowan remembered this type of jig from his youth as well as the song. He recalled folks had told him it

originated on the docks of New Orleans with the slaves years ago and later put to music.

Linking arms and shoulders with Verna and the woman next to him who linked to her partner, they stepped cross legged sideways to their left, then to their right, kicking their toes out and skipping up a cloud of dust off the wooden planks as they moved around on a radius in a wide circle; everyone laughing at each other and their impromptu jigging and being merry.

After another run to the tables for punch and snacks between orchestra breaks, they stood munching on sugar cookies as the children climbed upon the platform and tried their hand at dancing, imitating the adults.

The two found themselves standing in front of the Williamson County Bank, its white stone walls still radiating heat from the day long turned to dark. Emmitt and Verna leaned against the building absorbing the soothing warmth into their bodies.

"Are you having fun?" Verna asked quietly, knowing he is, but wanting him to say so.

"Yep, I ain't had this much excitement in a long time. I even have surprised myself I remembered my footwork!"

"Sir, you waltz very well for someone who said he had forgotten!" she smiled and continued, "If I were a suspicious woman, I'd say you were not saying the truth!"

Emmitt laughed, "I sure don't want you to think I'm like that Verna. I don't tell lies; ain't my way."

"I know," She replied, inside reprimanding herself for even saying such a thing.

Emmitt shrugged his shoulders and smiled into her blue eyes. What he didn't say is she is the reason he is having fun. When they danced, she was so light on her feet; he could spin around the dance floor with her all night and never get tired.

She kept him laughing, talking and enjoying the evening; with her and with the other folks. For the first time in quite a while, Emmitt was at ease and peaceful, which he attributed to the presence of this beautiful woman.

The piano player; Emmitt recognized as Davey from the saloon; started playing alone. Emmitt listened to the beginning cords and realized this is the song Davey played the night before he was almost killed by Kev Perry.

The young man who did most of the singing that night, stepped up to the megaphone and started crooning; "Give me land, lots of land under the starry skies above, don't fence me in."

"I like this song," Verna said taking Emmitt by the arm, "Reminds me of you."

"Oh?" Emmitt grinned as he took her hand, "I do too."

They stood together, leaning against the bank building, listening to the words as the singer and piano played continued until they finished. Emmitt noticed the musicians in the orchestra returning to their places when he asked.

"I haven't seen your pa all night. Is he here?"

Verna laughed and pointed toward the men seating themselves next to their instruments.

"Yes, he is right there!"

Emmitt followed her pointing finger and realized one of the French horn players as Mr. Gallagher.

"I'll be; I didn't look close at their faces. I am impressed."

"Why?"

"Did not occur to me he would play an instrument with him being a former military officer and now running y'all's Inn."

Verna looked at him strangely, "Just because my Papa was an Army officer and now owns and runs a hotel, doesn't mean he cannot do other things."

"I know," Emmitt coughed, sensing hostility from her, "He didn't strike me as musical."

"My Papa has many talents." Verna stated, dropping his hand from her grasp.

"I understand. I wish I had musical ability's, but I don't," Emmitt countered trying to defend himself and ease the rift between them. They stood for a time staring at anything except each other as the orchestra began warming up.

"They have been working on this song for so long," Verna said quietly. She took Emmitt's arm again and led him to the dance floor as the band started playing; Verna asked, "You know this music?"

Emmitt listened for a moment and then spoke, "It sounds familiar, but I do not remember the name."

"Blue Danube Waltz!" she replied, "The piece is beautiful."

The French horns began their introductory annotations as the fiddles responded each time until the tune crescendos' and sped up

faster then again slowing until the familiar notes of the classic waltz flowed over the couples swaying on the wood platform.

Emmitt was a little stiff at first, recovering from this glimpse of this woman's temper. But she seemed to not to be bothered now over their conversation and intended to enjoy this waltz so he relaxed and flowed with the music.

Almost everything he had learned as a young boy and man returned at this moment. Confidence surged through him at each step.

Verna swayed with every movement as he guided her over the floor, her face quiet, dreamy and blissful.

They glided to and fro, dancing feet moving in unison with the flow of the tone, spinning around one another in a whirl of coat tails and dress hems.

The couple twirled so grandly and large they were given the center of the deck by the other participants who continued circling about them, watching in admiration and wonder as this duo glided seamlessly with what seemed as no effort.

Verna, at one point, held her dress out, leaning back laughing with glee, as Emmitt twirled her. The other couples, spinning by in a rush of colors and smiling faces, seemed far away.

They were alone in their joy of this dance. Physically and emotionally connected in a way both had never experienced before. Their souls joined together as one for a brief moment; not of sinful pleasure, but of pure ecstasy.

Around the center of the dance platform they twirled, lost from the world, detached from time; with nothing except each in the others' arms and the music.

The orchestra crescendos' then stopped as the twirling couple slowed to a halt. The faint cry of the French horns and Cornets sounded as if in the distance as the song continued again, joined by the fiddles, flutes and clarinets; faster and faster as the duo twirled with the ending notes.

The couple were unaware the folks who had waltzed circling them now had stopped and were watching the silent swaying couplet in the center. The music building up to its final cords as the two swirled around and about, caught up in their fever.

It reminded some folks of the mating dances bird's exhibited.

The song ended and silence covered the crowd. Emmitt and Verna slowed to a stop after the last sounds of the waltz died away in the cool night air as they held one another.

They couldn't speak, they didn't need to. Their eyes said everything necessary. Nothing mattered to them but the other.

In the brief waltz a moment ago they found what they wanted for the rest of their lives.

The couples standing around them started clapping; a few at first followed by everyone joining in. The duo realized they were the focus of attention and grew embarrassed in an instant.

Ben Maxwell walked up and slapped Emmitt on his back, bellowing, "Why Pard, I don't believe what I just saw. You're one hell've of a dancer!

And you Miss Verna," he said tipping his sombrero, "Are one mighty fine lady taking this young cowman here and turning him in to a master of the old ballroom floor!"

"Why Ben, thank you! This is awful sweet of you to say so!" Verna replied her face and neck still flush with the excitement of the waltz and the embarrassment following.

"I was certainly surprised by Emmitt, very pleased," she added, glazing up into his eyes.

The emotions transpiring between them previously were gone; replaced now with something she never could put into words.

Emmitt blushed, "I only danced as I remembered from my younger days. Weren't nothing; but I suppose I did well enough!" he grinned back at Verna, taking her by the elbow and leading her off.

"Damned right you did Pard!" Ben called out as Maria stepped up and led him from the platform also; "I ain't ever seen anything like that!" he hollered out as Maria put her arm around his waist, guiding him away.

Verna giggled, "I think Ben has had a little too much punch," she said stepping down onto the brick sidewalk in front of the bank.

"Yeah, he gets a bit loud and excited sometimes. He knows when to stop though," Emmitt replied, taking her by the hand and squeezing it, "Are you hungry?"

"Oh yes, I'm famished. There are several tables set up for food up past the hardware store," she pointed, "I hope something is left. This crowd is big; bigger than last year."

Emmitt glanced down May Street where she was pointing, the yellow glow of the numerous lanterns, hanging everywhere; cast

a pale orange hue on the buildings, sidewalks and the unpaved street; broken by the gala streamers that crisscrossed over the party below. All topped by a jet black star filled sky.

Emmitt took it all in, content with life, never so light headed and happy.

"Let's go!" Emmitt pulled her into the street, swinging around and between couples who congratulated them on their dancing as he negotiated a path through the throng of people. Big smiles and gestures of approvals and best wishes followed them, as if everyone knew of what they, themselves, had yet to figure out.

Verna, as lucent and ecstatic as he, tried to comprehend and absorb every drop of this magical moment. It was as if the two of them had been singled out and given a placed in time all of their own.

They both were eating fried chicken drum sticks when the orchestra director announced the next singer and song.

"Folks, can I have y'all's attention?" He had to yell into the bullhorn to get heard by the chattering crowd.

"We have a special treat for y'all trail drivers who are about to start up to Kansas.

Miss Molly Worthington, daughter of Cass Worthington of the Rocking W ranch has a song for y'all. Miss Molly!" he said and turned the megaphone over to a young blond haired woman.

"Thank---," Molly had to wait until the crowd stopped clapping, "Thank you Mr. Bedford. I want to say this song, as Mr. Bedford said; is for all you men starting the herds from the ranches in the counties around here in the next two weeks.

It is not only from me, but from all the women; your wives, sweethearts and mothers, who will be left behind again as every year; wishing y'all a safe journey and return to us in one piece!"

She turned to the director who raised his arms and the music began.

"Oh, from Texas they say you'll be going. I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile. For they say you'll be taking the sunshine' that has brightened our pathway a while.

Come and sit by my side ere you leave me. Do not hasten to bid me ado. Just remember the blue skies of Texas and the woman who loves you so true."

Emmitt felt Verna press against him and he put his arm around her as they listened to the soft, strong voice of Molly, singing the song away. He saw many men, who held their women, listening to the music with that far off look of the tomorrows coming, which is so common with cattlemen.

"Won't you think of the home you are leaving? Oh, how lonely how sad it will be. Oh, think of the fond heart you are breaking and the grief you are causing to me." Molly continued to sing. "Soon you'll be riding the north trail from Texas. Do not gamble your life while away. Darlin, remember your love is here waiting. And prays' God keeps you safe for these days."

She finishes the song by repeating the last verse with all the women singing along to their men.

"Come and sit by my side ere you leave me. Do not hasten to bid me adieu. Oh, remember the blue skies of Texas, and the one who loves you so true."

Molly and the orchestra finished to a crowd of weeping women and cattlemen with moist eyes. They understood that some will not return.

Much can happen in three and half months on the trail, handling animals which are for the most part wild and tend to be dangerous to handle, not to mention horse wrecks, illness, weather, outlaws, rouge Indians and prairie fires.

Many men and boys have not come back from previous drives, their lonely graves littering Texas and the Indian territories. Thus the quiet emotions Molly brought up with her song were understandable and accepted by everyone.

A few more songs were sung and played before the dance finally drew to a close. Good nights were bid by all as those who had children packed their already sleeping youngsters off to bed.

Some of the women helped clear the tables of the leftover food, not there was much left, as a few of the men moved the benches off the sidewalks and stood them against the sides of the buildings fronting the street; to be returned to their owners after a good days sleep.

Tired and sleepy, Emmitt and Verna quietly walked hand in hand back to the Inn, as the heavens started to lighten in the east. Faint streamers of pink stretched across the horizon that increasingly darkened to an orange-red.

'Red sky in morning, sailors warning,' he mused to himself, remembering his year and a half at sea as a young deck hand, the last months of the war. Those were the days he thought, smiling to his self; hard but good.

He tapped Verna on her left arm and pointed silently to several ranch hands, asleep under the oak trees that surrounded the Post Office across from the Inn.

Their quiet snoring so evident from the opposite side of the avenue even with their big wide brim sombrero style hats covering their faces. Their saddle blankets thrown over their stomachs and chests to ward off the chilly morning air, their ankles crossed to also provide warmth.

With most drunk, it was too far to ride back to their respective ranches without sleep; they would spend the best part of the day under the oaks.

As they entered the hotel, Verna brushed close to him. Her perfume still lingered strongly and Emmitt checked himself at the onslaught to his senses.

In the foyer before, Emmitt could say goodnight, Verna asked him if he wanted a glass of apple cider juice or milk before he went off to bed and led him into the kitchen.

As she stood with her back to him at the counter, pouring the golden juice, he contemplated how beautifully her neck flowed from her head to her shoulders. He remained silent as he felt the strongest and strangest feelings he ever had for a woman.

Verna turned around, smiled and then her eyebrows knitted together at the strange smile on his face.

"Something wrong?" she asked, handing him the tumbler of cider.

"No," he said softly and with gentle movements took the glass and set it down on the countertop behind her. He glazed deep into her eyes for several moments; her smile disappearing and her countenance heighten as she sensed the same electricity forming between them.

Emmitt took her gently by her shoulders as if it was the most natural thing and kissed her lightly on her mouth.

Verna held her breath, her lips parted ever so slight and eyes closed as Emmitt leaned his head back a moment, studying her face.

She opened her eyes, smiled and put her arms around his neck, pulling him to her and they kissed again; for a long time.

STOP BEN MAXWELL

The lone rider made his way, in the early morning hours, through the rough country bordering the Colorado River and the George Town Road. He had been riding since the dance ended in Round Rock, and was still a little light headed but sobering up as he inhaled the damp morning air.

His mustang, ever mindful of the goings on each side of the trail to Jenkins ranch, shied sideways several times at noises in the cedar breaks and brush growing along the way.

The young pony, a two year old red roan named Strawberry, still bore its winter coat of hair which gave it the name. Come summer the horse would shed to a more white dominant color.

The rider didn't treat the animal well; continuously digging his spurs into the mustang's flanks. This in turn irritated the horse causing it to buck in rebellion. They were in constant conflict and the owner was continually thinking to trade him off for another. But this animal was fast! He could beat every pony in the Kinkade remuda, so the rider kept him.

The sun was starting to show itself over the eastern horizon when they rode up to the main house of Jenkins ranch.

Jenkins, up early and standing on the end of the porch wearing only his britches and in his bare feet, was relieving himself, a half burned cigarette hanging from his mouth.

"You got your nerve coming here boy!" Jenkins growled, tossing the smoking roll into the puddle of urine.

"Yes Sir, but I thought this be the best time as damn near everyone is passed out drunk, including my boss. I can ride straight to his place and no would know the difference."

"Well," Jenkins grunted, "What information do you have for me?"

"The word is official; Ben Maxwell is leaving on the two o'clock train Thursday. He will be gone a week, back on the Friday run from Dallas. It'd be a perfect time to stop him!"

"This is good to know; now you get on outta here; I don't want my men to see you hanging around a talking to me," Jenkins pointed his hand toward the way the rider came from.

"Go on git! I'll send for you if'n I need you boy!" Jenkins said, flipping the informant a five dollar gold piece he pulled from his britches pocket.

"Much obliged Mr. Jenkins," the young man saluted as he caught and pocketed the coin, reined his strawberry roan around and rode away.

The front door opened behind Jenkins as Calley stumbled out in his bare feet and long johns to relieve himself when he noticed the backside of the mustang and the rider as they disappeared into the cedar breaks surrounding the building complex.

"Who's that?" he mumbled, scratching three day old stubble on his chin.

Jenkins glared at Calley, "None of your damn business!" he replied stomping through the door Calley left open as he said over his shoulder, "Rouse up Albright, Keen and Hartman, they's a going on a trip!"

Calley turned, throwing a frown to the back of Jenkins as he disappeared in the doorway before turning toward the direction the rider rode off, a quizzical look growing on his features.

He was not accustomed to the boss keeping secrets. This was odd he mused as he finished his toilet business.

He scratched his bottom through his faded red flannels as he walked back inside.

Calley threw another glance over his right shoulder at where he saw the nameless rider disappear and shrugged. He understood his boss too well to ask again.

WRECK OF THE SOUTH BOUND FREIGHT

On Thursday, a day before Ben Maxwell was scheduled to ride the train from Dallas back to Round Rock, three men under the cover of early morning darkness, pulled the spikes from the rails belonging to the Houston and Central Texas Railroad, four miles north of Hammond Texas.

They worked with heavy hook bars and levers they deposited a day earlier by wagon in a dry creek bed close by; accomplishing their tasks in about an hour, they had removed the rail spikes from two consecutive sets of rails on each side of the track, leaving the iron road bars in place to avoid any sign of their efforts.

As they finished, the sun had began rising like a fiery ball from hell with clouds resembling wreaths of red and orange feathers radiating out from it. They hurried from their evil work and hid in the same place they first deposited the tools; out of sight behind a thick stand of black jack oak trees.

They sat there, rolling and smoking cigarettes; waiting.

Two hours later, the noise in the distance indicated the first sounds of the south bound freight that originated from Denison. The on coming train moved along on its weekly trip to Houston, near empty, rolling at high speed; too fast according to rail company regulation's. The engineer and firebox tender pushing the lightly loaded steam engine fast for entertainment..

The three men behind the stand of trees stood up and moved to get a good view of the piece of track they had altered. They stared in amazement as the huge smoke spewing machine ran over the loosened rails which spread apart quickly with a snapping metallic sound foreign to their ears as the bars blew out from under the drive wheels; the rails making a whistling sound before crashing with a thwack into the edge of the tree stands of oak on each side of the track line.

The locomotive, firewood tender, and the freight cars dropped onto the bare wood rail supports, plowing them up as the black machine rolled to the right.

The engineer and stoker jumped from opposite sides of the engine as it started to roll over; the tender car, full of fresh cut oak, crushed the locomotive driver who bailed from the right side.

The cars following, including the caboose ran to the left onto the uprooted wooden cross ties and over the firebox-stoker who broke his leg landing on the torn rail bed, unable to move quickly to safety.

The site of the wreck, over in two minutes, grew quiet as the dust and smoke blew away in the wind. The only remaining sounds came from the ruptured boiler as escaping steam screamed into the morning air, slowly dying down as the pressure reduced.

Soon all the saboteurs could hear was the ticking of cooling metal and the screams of the brakeman who regained consciousness in the collapsed caboose.

The three nodded their heads in amazement at the damage they caused, shook hands, mounted their horses and reined them toward Waco, leaving the tools they used lying in the dry creek bed.

They arrived in Waco late evening, two days later, rented rooms in one of the hotels in the center of town, ate and after visited one of the saloons.

Waco, noted for its nick name Pistol City, lived up to its reputation with several shootings that night among the strip of watering holes lining the Brazos River.

One of the trio, Jacob Keen, became involved in one of the gun fights indirectly. He received a stray bullet in his heart.

The next morning, the remaining two, Jim Albright and Tham Hartman, walked from the hotel they stayed the night and visited the town undertaker to pay for the burial of their late partner.

After paying their last respects to Keen, laid out on a flat table under a white blood stained sheet, they made their way to the telegraph office. There they informed the key operator that they are expecting a wire from an associate in Dallas and where they will be when said telegram came through.

Two days later, while enjoying a big steak and egg breakfast on Jenkins' expense money, a young boy of fifteen or sixteen found

them, handed them the wire from Dallas, received a twenty five cent tip and left.

An hour later they were back in the signal operator's office sending a message to Georgetown, care of Todd Jenkins. It read 'Stage on way here tomorrow, stop, Keen dead in Waco, stop, will complete job, stop.'

The next afternoon the Wells Fargo stagecoach, from Fort Worth, rolled into Waco with six passengers and their luggage.

Hartman stood across the street from the office as three women, a boy and two older males climbed down from the coach. Ben Maxwell was one of the men. He carried a small leather pouch by its handle and a bed roll.

He immediately made his way to the stagecoach hotel to wait for the departure in the morning.

Hartman took note of Maxwell walking away, but did not move; he was more interested in the driver and his shotgun security whom sported a short double barreled ten gauge Greener.

Hartman studied with interest the carriage-driver until satisfied what the fellow looked like, with his big brimmed hat and without.

When the coachman finished with his chores, putting up the horse drawn vehicle and the horses taken care by the groomer; he walked into a small boarding house for Wells Fargo personnel. Half an hour later he reappeared and made his way to the strip of saloons along the river.

Hartman followed, passing Albright who fell into step beside Hartman. They entered the saloon where the chauffeur sat eating his evening meal and enjoying a tall glass of dark beer.

The two men bellied up to the long bar and ordered their own beers and bid their time; occasionally glancing into the direction of the driver; waiting like coyotes for their prey.

SMOKE OF A RIFLE

Calley had been sitting for several hours, high up in an ancient live oak he had found; the perfect perch to view the Georgetown, about four miles north of Salado. Pleased with himself on finding and choosing this location after leaving Belton hours ago; he figured this is far enough to not connect him to what he planned to do in a few hours.

He sat on a wide limb of near two feet in diameter with his back against another branch slightly smaller in width. Almost like a wooden chair, if he went to sleep he wouldn't be afraid of falling out of the tree.

Sitting silently, he ticked off in his mind the chain of events leading him to this spot.

He was in Belton anticipating Ben Maxwell to ride into town; just as his men said he would in their telegraph message two days ago.

He spent most of his hours in the saloon on Main Street, bidding his time, watching the comings and goings of the town and listening to the conversations concerning a train wreck north of Hammond and how it had shut down the entire primary line for the Houston and Central Texas Railroad.

When a curious bartender questioned his lazing around the watering hole, he mumbled about waiting for a friend to ride into town.

That afternoon Maxwell showed up, driving a buggy with the Surry Head folded down! Calley almost missed him as he was expecting Maxwell to be riding in on horseback and became a bit disgruntled at his men for not indicating in the telegram Maxwell was driving a hack!

He noted Maxwell pulling up next to the Wells Fargo building and releasing the duo wheeled carriage; a rental he acquired through the freight agency in Waco.

Calley stayed in the saloon and continued to observe until Maxwell exited and walked to the restaurant four buildings down before Calley ambled over to the ticket office.

"Howdy mister, can I help you?" the clerk behind the counter in the front room asked.

Calley hesitated a moment, not sure what to ask and before he inquired, "I've a friend that's coming down from Waco in one your buggies. Has he arrived here yet?"

"I believe you are speaking of Mr. Maxwell. Yes, he drove in about twenty minutes ago. He is in the Fargo restaurant, having dinner and taking a rest, I think this is what he said, before he rides out this evening for Salado," the agent answered, willingly offering the information Calley needed.

"Tonight, did he rent the hack for tonight?"

"Oh no; he rented a horse for the remainder of the trip. The buggy has a broken spring on the right side and is in need of repairs.

The gentleman is satisfied with the four legs. He would be picking it up at six pm as he wanted to make the eleven miles to Salado before midnight. He said his destination was Round Rock!"

"Ok, you stated he's in the Fargo eating?" Calley asked, turning toward the door.

"Yes, I believe you can find him there."

"Much obliged," Calley tipped his hat brim as he opened the portal and walked to the left, away from the restaurant. He had to put himself some distance from Belton and found this ambush site with daylight to spare.

Calley Longman leaned back in his tree perch, yearning for a cigarette but not willing to give away his position. Several travelers had already passed by on their way south or north and he did not want to be seen.

The road was not heavy with travelers; however, there were still a number of folks using the hiway. Fortunately, Maxwell sought to travel this evening to Salado as Calley understood.

He smiled to himself, Maxwell won't reach his destination he reasoned and his boss, Jenkins, will rest a bit easier about things.

He relaxed and glanced up through the tree leaves at the darkening sky fingering the rifle in his lap, a prototype Whitney Kennedy large frame in .40-60 Winchester caliber.

He loved this weapon, an accurate long arm which reached out a good distance with its twenty eight inch barrel.

He grinned as he remembered the gun salesman and how he obtained the piece.

The Whitney Kennedy Arms drummer he met in Waco last year, didn't know what he was doing when he agreed to go with Calley some five miles from Waco and the safety of the town to 'hunt deer and try out' the newly designed prototype'.

The man had been looking for potential customers and their orders by offering an opportunity to shoot this thunder stick. He touted it as superior in design to the Winchesters and he was right in many ways.

The long arm is lighter and smaller than the Model 76 Winchester in the same caliber; an excellent firearm with which Calley took a deer at three hundred yards and afterwards he asked the salesman to post a whisky jug at four hundred.

That was the last time anyone saw the man. The drummer never returned to his room in Waco and Longman carried a new rifle.

Calley had a need to relieve himself when hoofs drummed in the distance and then a lone rider appeared in the light of the rising half-moon, riding at a fast canter on a buckskin colored horse. Calley could tell by the way the fellow sat in his saddle it was Maxwell.

He laid the Whitney Kennedy's long octagon barrel on a branch in front of him, following Maxwell in his tang mounted peep sight under the full moon.

Maxwell had just passed directly across from him and had started to show his back when Calley squeezed the trigger of the .40-60.

With a roar, bright red flame and sparks followed by thick gray smoke of the rifle, crowned the end of the barrel in the moonlight as a millisecond later Maxwell spun off his pony onto the side of the road.

His hands clutched the reins as the animal dragged him a few yards trying to get away from the thunder in the trees.

Finally the buckskin quieted and stood motionless, still afraid with legs taunt, eyes wide, nostrils flared.

Calley climbed down from his perch, leaned his rifle against the trunk of the tree and relieved himself, lit a cigarette and walked casually the one hundred yards to where the horse stood and Maxwell lay on the ground on his left side.

Calley thought Maxwell might still put up a fight and pulled his .44 converted Colt. He placed his foot on the wounded man's shoulder and pushed him over on his back.

Maxwell moaned and opened his eyes but said nothing, passing out moments later.

Calley saw the dark stain growing under Maxwell's right armpit and the one on his chest. 'Good shot,' he thought to himself, 'Direct through the lungs; he'll be dead in a bit.'

Throwing his cigarette down he turned toward the rented horse and locating the leather pouch he opened and discovered it filled with papers. Not taking the time to examine the documents due to the dim light, he checked the pony for other baggage and found only the bedroll and saddlebags.

Satisfied with what he wanted he returned to Maxwell, took the downed man's pistol from his holster and examined it, the moonlight glinting off its oiled barrel, frame and cylinder; a .44 caliber Remington Army conversion. He tossed it away into the dark.

He turned to the sound of a horse neighing, followed by voices over the evening air. Someone is coming, at this hour in a wagon. Time to go!

Calley hurriedly untied the leather pouch from Maxwell's saddle and made his way to the tree; collected his rifle and walked to his horse tied behind the ancient oak.

He was quickly down the road toward Salado, passing through the small village at the same time the man and woman, who Calley heard in the distance, began loading Ben Maxwell's body into the bed of their wagon.

RIDE TO SALADO

The noon sun shone brightly between swiftly moving clouds, throwing fleeting shadows across the greening Texas prairie. Light winds out of the south rustled the budding leaves on trees as their branches swayed to and fro, showing off their colored flowers.

Small mammals poked their snouts up from their burrows, testing the air with their noses for predators before crawling out to find food to feed their new born young. Spring is blossoming with a vengeance, bringing renewed life into the world.

A week passed since the big dance in Round Rock. The cow men, rested and now back hard at work; are finishing the branding, rounding up strays and cutting the four year old and older beeves out for the market and turning out the younger ones to keep on the range to age and breed.

The temperature was cool with the light winds blowing, sometimes gusting but even this did not stop the cattlemen from sweating. Their sweaty faces streaked with caked dust and salted mud.

Mama cows bawled for their young, calves cried for their mommas or when the hot iron is put to their hide.

They hollered even more if they were males and lost their scrotums. Their short lives to end on the butchers block up in the northern states in a few years.

The canopy of noise joined by horses neighing and cow men cussing and hollering continued the whole day, as the day before and the day that will follow; a litany of sounds one would expect from a round up prior to a drive to market.

Bedlam at its best!

Between the eight ranches, over five thousand head of steers are to be driven north in three separate herds; one which had already

started toward Fort Worth six days ago its final destination Fort Dodge, Kansas, the new shipping point for the drives.

The beeves are, however, about one thousand short of what the total had been estimated to be from last year's roundup.

This had the ranch owners fuming, as they gathered together on the eastern edge of Worthington's spread approximately ten miles off the Austin-Round Rock road and the North Trail, to discuss their problems and shortages.

This is how McGowan found them as he rode up after inspection and recording brands all morning for Stephens and Worthington's herds. He took a break to eat lunch and intended to return to inspect, count and record the symbols of another group of cattle as he listened to the complaints over a tin plate of beef stew and corn biscuits.

"Yearlings mostly; some steers, about half as many calves as should be and maybe the same for the mommas! They just ain't there!" One of the ranchers moaned as he paced back and forth in front of several who sat and some who stood eating, too nervous to sit and eat himself.

He then described what his foreman had reported to him earlier. The news was not new to the stock owners; almost all of them had experienced similar loses.

"I figured this would happen! Just knew it!" another drawled around a mouth of stew.

"Well, this don't seem to affect your appetite none George!" Kinkade quipped. He sat on the chuck wagon tongue with a cup of coffee, holding the metal mug gingerly, having just poured it.

"Why, I get mighty hungry when I'm upset. This here stew helps my stomach!" George Paterson, one of the smaller rancher/farmers replied.

"I ain't got as many cattle as you big ranchers, y'all know that. My herd is gone for next year. I'm ruined if them critters aren't returned!"

"Your stomach is a going to get real full I suspect. I don't think they is gonna be found!" Kinkade spat out as he turned to McGowan and all most yelled.

"How about it McGowan, when is your pardner gonna arrive here so the Rangers can arrest Jenkins?"

Emmitt McGowan lowered his fork, rested his head against the trunk of the oak tree he was leaning on and closed his eyes for a

moment before answering. He had grown very wearisome of Kinkade.

"Ben should be arriving any day now. You heard the railroad had a wreck up near Hammonds. Ben is coming by stage."

"When he arrives, I want to be in on the arresting. I---Hell, we all need to recover our property which are missing or we're all gonna be ruined come next year!

Hell, I say's we relieve Mr. Todd Jenkins of his stock and divvy up amongst ourselves, what-da-ya say boys!" Kinkade turned to the other owners, pleased about this grand idea.

"How in Hell are ya figuring on going to do that legally Kinkade?" One of the men asked.

"Hell, think on it! We each got animals for this year's drive, but next? Maxwell arrives with the proof and the Rangers arrest Jenkins. We file claims to what is rightfully ours then divvy up his herd!" he replied.

"Jenkins trial may take time. His steers and such are his until he is found guilty; he could sell them off to pay his lawyer if'n he wanted to!" one of the other ranchers spoke up.

"Not if we make claims, then all them doggies are kept under lock and key until the jury makes their decisions!"

"How the hell you gonna put a herd of animals under lock and key?" another laughed.

"I is speaking in a general sense. I am tired as hell a waiting for the law to do their duty. I want to make sure we get our animals back!" Kinkade said, standing up and dusting off his britches. Adjusting his gun belt he looked down at McGowan.

"I hopes your pardner gets here soon; I'm about loosen my patience!"

McGowan nodded, preferring not to answer Kinkade least there was a reason for Kinkade to say more. He expected these ranchers to find their cattle missing and told them so not three weeks ago! Things are moving well, he mused, and as soon as Ben arrived, they could wrap this investigation up and turn everything over to the Rangers.

Kinkade did not take Emmitt's head nod quietly.

"McGowan, you and your partner has been eating our grub for several months now and taking our money, yet we still lost cattle after you started investigating.

And you know what; I don't believe your pardner is a coming. I think he lit out of here because he knows y'all ain't got nothing!" He said almost yelling.

"You're nowhere closer today than you were when you started!" He continued, having walked over to where McGowan sat, fists clenched on each hip.

McGowan put his empty tin plate down and uncrossed his legs, forcing Kinkade to step to one side. Emmitt did not like being challenged in such a manner, nor in a position sitting down with the challenger towering over him. He stood up, slowly, carefully, before he answered this hot head rancher.

"I seem to recollect back in February, I suggested to all of you ranchers, to not run cattle down along the river without several of your men with them. Worthington was already doing this' but the rest of you?

Yet many times I ran across steers, with each of y'all's respective brands on them and damn near all the calves and yearlings with their mommas you're missing now and with no hired hands around.

The river valley has more places to hide than one can count, plenty of spots for rustlers to wait for the right opportunity to rustle a few hundred heads.

I told you this back then, not to let your cattle down there alone but you did anyway. If you're too damn smart to take my advice until this thing is settled and want to blame me for y'all's loses, that's fine; I reckon I'll be packing up and lighting out tonight!" McGowan growled his body tense, ready for anything.

He was tired of this man's constant bellyaching, of the frustration caused by the lack of evidence on the trails along the river and of the apparent refusal of these ranchers to follow his advice and of their crying because they now reaped the rewards of not following his direction.

He stood facing them, ready to walk away.

They did not understand the magnitude of the rustling or the character of Jenkins as he did. He worried why Jenkins is constantly a step ahead of him. He had nothing solid but too many incidents of late seemed to delay the investigation.

The train wreck for example, changed their plans for Ben's return to Round Rock and delayed everything. His suspicions of a spy grew stronger every day he waited.

True the ranchers had lost many beeves, disappearing a few at a time. They did have a right to complain, mostly because they are scared of what the next year will bring if their animals are not recovered.

His biggest failure is not being able to find the cattle or track them down on the river. The muddy bank and swampy grasses hid and filled in the tracks of anything passing within two or three days. To score any success with tracking down on the wet bottom, he needed to discover a fresh trail in the same amount of time.

He acknowledged now Ben's discovery of stolen cattle being driven north in the canyon was a fluke, a lucky opportunity, which damn near cost Ben his life.

Emmitt remembered Captain Lee's comment the rustlers might have an inside man or men. And with the lack of cooperation from some of the ranchers this past winter, his belief the Captain was correct increased.

Something is not right but McGowan could not place his finger on it. Not yet anyway. He prayed the documents implicating Jenkins will be enough to put a stop to this rustling enterprise.

"Now just wait a minute!" Cass Worthington spoke up. "Kinkade, McGowan is right, if you had done what he requested back early this winter, you and you others," he argued, looking at the other ranchers, "y'all wouldn't be missing this many beeves!" He continued: "We ain't been so lucky on our own we ever discovered who the rustlers are. All we got are our suspicions, no matter how strong they be.

We've over two hundred men total from every ranch in this area working for us. There's only McGowan and Maxwell. Yes with two it's been slow, but we weren't getting anywhere with two hundred, so I think we did the right thing by convincing Emmitt and Ben to do the investigations," he preached.

"Jenkins appears to be the culprit who's been stealing our cattle, as we figured. However, this ain't some dark night operation. The characters behind this are smart, slick and dangerous. Four of our friends and employees have disappeared.

And yes, if what Emmitt told us less than three weeks ago is accurate and the papers, his partner Ben Maxwell is a bringing here from Dallas, prove not only is Todd Jenkins out to build his own cattle empire at our expense, but to put us out of business also. No

competition means he gets better prices on the market in the future. Think about that"

Worthington stopped to survey the men around him, who were nodding to each other.

He continued, "Now, Jenkins seems to be our man, but we do want proof for the law and even if it ain't Jenkins, we'll need confirmation of whoever they are and McGowan with his partner are the best way to find this.

We still got some time and herds and we ain't down an out yet. But we gotta cooperate with McGowan and use our God given senses."

All the cattlemen agreed, even Kinkade, who returned to his perch on the wagon tongue, a plate of stew in his hands and a sour expression on his face.

Emmitt dropped his tin dish into the wash barrel and turned toward where he tied Ol Blu off, grazing next to several other horses.

Worthington followed him, fearfully anxious McGowan would keep his threat.

"You're not really going to quit are you?"

McGowan shook his head no and took Worthington by the elbow and guided him away from the ranchers.

"There might be someone around here in cahoots with the rustlers." McGowan said quietly to Worthington as they walked off together.

"What the hell does that mean?"

Emmitt shrugged slightly before he answered. "Either these bandits have a crystal ball to tell them when they can safely rustle a few head without interference and stay one step ahead of me and Ben or they have help from one of you!"

"Now wait a minute McGowan, I can't believe that. Everyone here has lost a considerable number of animals. I don't think---."

"Really? How do you know some beeves are not moved elsewhere for safe keeping, making it look like they are stolen?"

"Do you have an idea who?"

"Who has the most to lose and who is making the loudest noise?"

Worthington stared at McGowan in shock before he answered the question, "Henderson, he owns a good piece of the

bank where just about everyone took a loan to buy cattle a few years ago.

Wait a minute; you figure he and Jerry Kinkade are a part of this? Kinkade is a hot head, I agree, but I've known him a long time. I cannot believe he would do this to me and his other friends!

And Henderson, no way he could be in cahoots with Jenkins!" Worthington exclaimed.

"Ok, I only asked a question, I'm not fingering anyone. If you vouch for them, I'll accept that but I want you to understand I believe a rat is in this wood pile!"

"Why do you think one of us is in cahoots with the rustlers?" Kinkade demanded; he had followed them several steps back, but within hearing distance.

McGowan turned, irritated their conversation wasn't private.

"Jenkins is always a step or two ahead of me, someone is keeping him abreast of this investigation and its direction."

Kinkade stopped and stared hard at the stock detective, his face flush with new anger.

"Do you have any idea who this is? Just what is in them documents your man is a bringing here?" he demanded as he turned to Worthington, "Cass, I appreciate you standing up for me, but I don't take kindly to being accused of ---what did you call me; a rat in the wood pile?"

"No, not yet," Emmitt answered Kinkade's first question. "Concerning the papers Ben is carrying here, I'm only privy about Jenkins."

"When will you know?"

"I already told you, after Ben arrives!" Emmitt replied exasperated, "As far as my suspicions on who the spy is, I accepted Worthington's vouch for you. I apologize!" he concluded, realizing he should just keep his thoughts to himself.

He held out his open palm, fingers spread.

Kinkade stood motionless, glaring.

"Take his hand Jerry! Stop this before it goes further. Emmitt has reason to think that of you with your hot headed manners," Worthington retorted.

"I reckon you're right Cass, my temperament does get the best of me sometimes," Kinkade defeated, took Emmitt's offered hand.

Worthington laughed. "Sometimes---you mean most of the time, don't you?"

Kinkade grinned. "Yeah, I meant to say most."

Emmitt smiled at the banter between these two. He never really had gotten to understand Kinkade and seeing and hearing them talk, he began to think he misjudged Kinkade; somewhat at least.

Time will tell he surmised.

The three of them continued to discuss a few more minutes about the roundups and the shortages perceived when Kinkade began staring at something in the distance over Emmitt and Worthington's shoulders.

"Big cloud of dust over yonder," he said, pointing past the two men facing him, "Appears someone is in one hell fire hurry!"

McGowan and Worthington followed Kinkade's pointed finger to the boiling dirty haze that threaded its way through scattered clusters of cattle spread out on the prairie.

As the yellow and gray cloud drew closer, they saw it was following a black horse pulling a hack, bouncing dangerously over the rough ground; the driver whipping over the animal repeatedly as the hack's wheels bounced high, throwing the operator around in the small cab; the individual's head often hitting the black wood framed canvas parasol.

The repeated sound of the crack from the whip even though it was several hundred feet away from where they stood, was evident and numerous.

"Seems to be that little lady friend of yours McGowan, she's a coming in a mighty hurry. I got a feeling she ain't out here to visit either," Kinkade remarked, recognizing the Inn hack and its cabbie.

"You still have strong eyes Jerry; damn near as good as Ol Perry's years ago!" Worthington exclaimed finally discerning the hack and the driver.

McGowan didn't say anything; his forehead was wrinkled as he squinted into the sun, wondering why Verna is in such a hurry to drive that dangerously through the scattered cattle.

Kinkade's implication started to worry him as Verna pulled hard on the reins of the horse and stood on the brake lever before she nearly ran over the three men.

Kinkade and Emmitt each grabbed a side of the horse's bridle and helped stop and calm down the sweating, heavy breathing

animal, McGowan taking in the look on Verna's face, immediately aware something was terribly wrong.

"Oh Emmitt!" she cried. "We were telegraphed this morning from Belton. Ben has been shot!"

McGowan, a sudden piercing pain like a knife in his chest, asked her quickly, fearing her answer. "How bad is he?"

He's alive, but just, according to the wire. He is at the Shady Villa Inn in Salado!"

"How did it happen?" Kinkade interjected, still holding the halter of her sweat covered black mare.

"I don't know, the cable only said a family found him on the road next to his horse, between Belton and Salado, shot. They carried him to Salado." She replied, almost in tears.

"Horse? He was riding a horse?" Emmitt stammered.

"According to the wire!" she exclaimed.

"What happened to the stage?" Kinkade questioned.

"Nothing about a stage!" she replied.

"You think Jenkins is behind this?" Kinkade asked, searching Emmitt's stricken face.

"Probably, but I don't understand why Ben was not riding coach? He knew those papers were important; too important to be riding alone."

He stared at Kinkade and Worthington. This changed everything; a deep sense of guilt spread through him. He should've gone to Dallas, not Ben.

"When did you receive the telegram?" he asked Verna.

"We received it around eight a.m.; I left shortly after to find you!"

"I'm leaving for Salado, right now," he said to both ranchers while looking at his timepiece. The Hamilton showed almost three o'clock.

"I reckon if I ride all night I'll be in Salado by morning."

"Emmitt I'm going with you!" she stated.

"No, the shooter could be lurking about, waiting for me."

"Your right, it might not be safe. I'll send my two boys who rode here with me along with you; they can wait in Salado until the herds pass by.

We'll be heading our bunch out at sunrise tomorrow anyhow! Mine will reach Salado in about four or five days," Kinkade said, not volunteering but telling Emmitt he would send men to protect him.

He also noted the expression of Verna's after McGowan told her she was not going.

McGowan stared at Kinkade for a moment contemplating what he had said. Then Worthington volunteered a couple of his own men having read the concern in Emmitt's eyes.

He offered his foreman Riley and the young ranch hand Billy, the two Emmitt and Ben had met the first day at Worthington's place.

McGowan couldn't find in himself to trust Kinkade yet but with Worthington's men, he relaxed. He nodded acceptance of both men's offers, as he searched Kinkade's eyes. Despite what assurances Worthington gave him about Kinkade, Emmitt was still not sure himself.

"I'm going with you!" Verna stated a second time, raising her voice, as she sat listening to the three men. "He is my friend to!" she added, before McGowan could object.

She grabbed her big floppy brim of her plantation hat as a strong gust of cool wind ripped over and around them.

"I'm riding all night, not stopping except for privy time," he replied, not wanting to argue with this stubborn woman. He didn't think she has strength enough to ride for hours and he had no time to coddle her.

"I'll keep up. Mr. Kinkade, please help me unhitch my horse, I've a saddle behind the bench to put on him." She stated as she stood up in the hack and was nearly knocked off balance by another hard gust.

"Damn this wind!" she cried.

All three men glanced at each other, the lines of worry marked on their faces.

"Ma'am, your steed is already tuckered out," Kinkade remarked, rubbing his hands over the sweaty animal, "It appears like you drove him hell for leather all the way out here. I don't reckon he'd make it to Round Rock without rest much less to Salado.

Why don't you take one of our mustangs from the remuda? Our boys will get one for you and drive your hack in to town after the mare here has rested over night?

Our mustang can be collected when the herds pass by Salado! This ok with you Cass?" Kinkade turned to Worthington not asking McGowan as he offered to help her off the two wheeled carriage.

"Sure, I'll get the boys to pick a strong but gentle one."

"I would appreciate this very much Mr. Kinkade, Mr. Worthington," she replied, straightening her riding clothing after stepping off. Her eyes followed McGowan's lanky form as he walked away and she acknowledged she just barged into his world without asking.

'Well' she thought to herself. Ben was her friend also and like it or not she was going. Verna intended to stay in Emmitt's life; aware in her heart he would eventually need her.

She recognized she loved him after he had kissed her the night of the dance and the following days, when he traveled to Dallas and after, this love just grew. Yes, she loved him and nothing would keep her from his side.

Verna also understood to win his heart, she had to prove she will fit into his world and turned to the business of getting prepared for what she already knew will be a hellish ride for her.

McGowan was tying his bedroll and saddle bags on to Ol Blu as Kinkade and Worthington's sent for their men and helped Verna get a mustang saddled; a worried frown rode on his face, mixed with anger at himself and the shooter.

He should have wired Ben to wait until the train ran again instead taking the stagecoach back. It didn't occur to him Jenkins would be so bold as to actually cause a derailment to get at Ben; and what happened to the stage, why horseback?

If Ben had not been robbed of his possessions, only the documents, this proved this is certainly Jenkins' doing! Emmitt felt a fool again.

One thought after another flashed across his mind, filling his head with worry and anger.

His friend is down, dying or already dead. His fault he kept thinking. He was responsible for putting Ben in harm's way! Yet they both understood the dangers of this type of work.

What he was thinking didn't make him feel any better and he pushed it aside.

He saddled up and trotted Ol Blu over to where Verna had just climbed onto a dapple gray colored mustang.

"Getting to the North road through those breaks will take some time, it's not far, about ten miles of rough country; and after it is near forty to Salado. I want to get there as early in the morning as possible without killing our animals.

We ain't driving them hard like you did your fathers horse, but we will be in the saddle near ten or eleven hours. No stopping to eat, only to rest and water the horses and take privy time for ourselves, nothing else, understand?" he explained to Verna the rules.

"I understand; I drove around the breaks to get here!" she answered. "Took me almost five hours."

"Ready?" he asked her rather coldly, ignoring her comment.

"Yes." She replied, avoiding his eyes.

"Well let's ride!"

He spurred Blu and broke into a quick lope as she followed behind, not interested in riding beside him.

The two of them rode quickly for a mile around one of the herds, crossed through a small dry creek and skirted the second herd three miles away, before they pulled up as the riders from Kinkade's and Worthington's outfits joined them.

Each of the four men, faces serious with the knowledge of what might lay before them, sported a pair of revolvers. The pistols strapped crisscross over their hips in separate belts and scabbards. All had a rifle slipped under the right fender of their saddles.

Emmitt relaxed a little more. He only carried his Colt; his rifles in his room at the Inn.

"Mr. McGowan, we're ready to ride with you to Salado!" Riley, Worthington's foreman, said; his dark, almost black skin, shining with sweat in the spring sun.

"The woman riding with us?" the other younger man, about Brushy Bills age asked; his red roan dancing around as he tried to quiet the animal.

"Yes I am!" Verna replied sharply.

"No disrespect ma'am, but this here trip ain't nary a place for a lady," Riley said, "Might be some danger besides riding at night!"

"None taken, however, this has already been discussed and settled!" Verna retorted harshly as she turned away, not wishing to discuss the matter further.

McGowan shook his head. "Her choice.....Y'all know what to expect?"

"Yes Sir Mr. McGowan!" Riley replied. "I kinda think we all will be disappointed if nothing does happen, but getting you to

Salado in one piece is what we are told to do!" he finished, implying the adventure before them a welcomed change from the daily labor as a ranch hand punching cows; even if the entire trip turned out to be only a hard ride.

"I hear Ol Ben Maxwell is the reason for all this. He hurt bad?" Brushy Bill asked.

"That's the understanding but not for sure. Verna received the telegram," Emmitt nodded to her.

"I like him, although he is an old cuss sometimes; so does Billy here," Riley indicated to the younger rider.

"We like him too," the cowman on the red roan quipped, "We'd also are itching to get hold of the feller or feller's which done the shootin!"

"I'm afraid I don't know your names," Emmitt said to the two Kinkade men.

"This here is Billy Johnson," the older rider pointed at the young man on the Roan, "And I'm Jake Culberson. We're ready for whatever troubles come our way, Mr. McGowan."

"I'm glad to have y'all with us; two Billy's? Brushy Bill, mind if I call you by this?" Emmitt asked Roberts.

"Yeah, Brushy is my handle and we're steady for it too!" Brushy answered, petting the butt of his six-guns.

"Appears the Misses is packing also. You know how to use that hog leg ma'am?" Riley pointed toward the percussion revolver, tucked in a Slim Jim holster, under her riding jacket.

Emmitt, just now noticing the Griswold he had loaned to her, started to say something when Verna spun her dapple grey around and glared at the men.

She couldn't bear any more of these men's chatting. They talked as if they had all day! "Are you men going to just sit here jabbering like old women while Ben lies dying in Salado? I thought we were in a hurry?" she cried in anger, as she whipped her mustang away from them and sank her spurs into the animal so hard it reared up!

Verna leaned forward, hanging on the saddle horn as she threw her booted feet back, almost standing vertical in the stirrups; the partly tamed bucking creature making known its displeasure of her treatment.

She regained control of the half wild cayuse and spurred it again, causing the grey to leap into the air a full horse length and

into a gallop toward the cedar breaks a mile away which lay between them and the road to Salado. Her plantation hat flew off her head, catching on her throat by the tie down thong, as it danced around on her shoulders and back.

McGowan grinned in stunned amazement at her riding ability; a small smile slowly crossed his face then disappeared. He had just told her they needed to conserve their horse's strength, not wear them down in the first half hour!

"We'd better catch up or the little lady will be in Salado before us!" Riley hollered, "And that would sure be an embarrassment!"

The five men, spurring their own mustangs, yahoosed and galloped into the dust left by Verna; they caught up with her as she slowed, approaching the green scrubby breaks between them and the north road.

They spent the next three hours picking with care their way over the rocky, cactus littered terrain, weaving around the clusters of cedars; their animals hooves clacking loud on the loose shale and limestone, until they came upon a well-used, dusty game trail that enabled them to push their ponies to an easy gate, single file, until they broke out onto the Georgetown road and turned north.

Once on the highway, their pace increased as they let their mounts to an ambling walk until they reached Round Rock around sunset. From this point on they reined them back to alternate with a fast and then slow trot, as they made for Salado.

They continued between these gaits in the twilight reining to a slow walk in total darkness until the moon rose around 1 a.m. when they again alternated their mustangs betwixt a fast and a slow trot.

Their goal was to reach Salado by early morning, not to kill their horses as Emmitt had stated or have a horse wreck in the blackness and injure themselves.

The highway, little more than wagon tracks across primarily open prairie, was dangerous in the wooded places, even in the moonlight, due to tree limbs sticking out from the roadside or over hung from above.

They rode in this alternating manner through the night, stopping for nature calls and to water and rest the horses and themselves only three times, the men assuming turns standing guard.

With next to no conversations, every rider kept to their own thoughts as they remained on alert, fearing an ambush at any moment. They moved as one, taking the cue when needed from one another, effortlessly riding down this dark road as one being.

Even Verna was handling herself well, not complaining and always doing what was instructed of her. However, Emmitt could see the pain registered on her face from the long hours in the saddle.

The only sounds they were aware of were the breathing of the mustangs and the crashing of hooves against the earth.

This low growl rolled away from the horses like a blanket of distant thunder, quieting the night creatures of the prairie and wooded areas bordering the road from their activities until the dark thundering menace had passed.

The temperature dropped unusually low for this time of the year with the setting sun but the gusty wind plaguing them during the day turned to a whisper.

The riders were uncomfortable. Their stomachs growled with hunger, their fingers, noses and ears chilled and their backs ached from the tension of waiting for the unknown. Early morning frost collected on their horses and stuck to the front of their clothing, creating ghostly images of the riders.

Brushy Billy Robert's mustang started limping with a stone wedged in the soft part of its left front hoof. A quick stop and swift action with his folding Barlow knife solved the problem and they resumed their journey moments later.

Verna never once complained, even though the pain from her knees, thighs and buttocks increased every hour. She held herself in the saddle like a trooper, guiding her animal with a skill and grit McGowan was not aware she possessed.

He grew to realize as the night wore on she is more than an Eastern educated woman with dancing, cooking and hotel skills; he acknowledged she had an interest in his work and wanted to be participating in his life and carried more sand than some men.

Both amazed and uncomfortable with this, she revealed the kind of stamina and courage he expected from these men who rode with them. Tonight she revealed the character in her, up to then, only she and her knew.

The other four men, who road with them, also realized the character and strength demonstrated by this woman and they would

forever remember this night ride, never missing an opportunity in later life to retell the experience.

"WE RODE FROM ROUND ROCK"

The six rode into Salado minutes before five a.m. with the sun poking its predawn light over the trees surrounding the Shady Villa Inn, the last stage connection and rest stop between Waco and Round Rock.

A small boy of twelve or thirteen was carrying a bucket of water across the Salado creek foot bridge when he stopped and watched with curiosity the riders as they crested the low hill beyond the stone Salado College building bordering the road; two abreast.

A woman in the second row, riding a Dapple Gray pony rode with them.

They appeared as ghostly images; the horses almost white with the morning frost stuck to their fur, their blowing breath visible in the cold air; the horsemen were covered in the same dusty frozen dew and visibly tired, their eyes red, faces haggard from no sleep; the near fifty mile ride from the staging of the cattle for the drives below Round Rock had taken its toll.

The boy had stepped out on the road but froze in his tracks as this fearful apparition split and rode around him as wraiths; up to the Inn where they stopped under the giant oak trees on the south side of the main building.

They rested for several minutes, staring at the peculiar live oak that had one huge branch no more than four feet from the ground and running parallel for several yards before branching out and up again.

They remained resting, motionless, not speaking, until a man stepped out on the covered wooden front porch and greeted them. The clerk for the hotel, summoned by the young boy who moments earlier carried the bucket of water.

He gave a quick glance at the travel worn riders as he buttoned his shirt up under his fat double chin and made a futile attempt at flattening his thinning hair.

He appeared as if he had just crawled out of bed. He stood in the cold morning air without a coat for several moments before speaking; he started to shiver; the morning temperature was unusually chilly this time of the year he realized.

"Gentlemen?" he asked with a pleasant greeting, hiding his uncertainty of who these people are. The stage from Waco isn't expected till nine a.m. and he and his wife had looked forward to sleeping late, which wasn't going to happen now he realized.

"You the owner?" Emmitt asked.

The clerk shook his head no, "He is in Dallas, but is expected to be on the 9 o'clock this morning."

"Ben --- you've a man with a gunshot wound here? His name is Ben Maxwell! Is he still alive?" McGowan, his throat dry, croaked out the question they all wanted to know.

"Umm, who are you Sir? The Inn keeper asked suddenly worried that they might be here to do harm.

"His partner --- I'm Emmitt McGowan. These ---," he waved his right arm toward his companions, "are friends of his. We rode from Round Rock; rode all night!" he answered stiffly crawling off Blu.

Emmitt walked over to assist Verna as the clerk realized a woman is with them. Assisting Verna down, McGowan turned again and asked in a louder tone.

"Is he still alive?"

"You damn right I'm alive!" A muffled hoarse voice cried out from inside the low roofed building that stood north of the hotel. Its single wood frame window swung open from its recess in the stone wall.

"You took your damn time a getting here!" the weak cry came again.

Verna glanced up at Emmitt with a big surprised smile, her eyes lighting up; her exhaustion fading away with the sound of Ben's voice. She walked stiffly but quickly toward the window, with Emmitt close behind her, she called out.

"Ben, Ben, it is Verna and Emmitt, we've come!" she cried out as she searched through the tiny wooden framed opening into the

dark interior. She just barely made out a figure of a man lying in a small bed.

"Thank you kindly Miss Verna," the voice in the dim room said weakly.

"Ben, its Emmitt, are you ok?" Emmitt asked.

"Hell no I ain't! What kind of damn fool question is that?" Ben cried out in pain. It was difficult o talk, move or even breath.

The other riders, all save Billy Johnson, smiled and slapped one another on the back as they overheard the conversation.

The clerk stepped up to Emmitt's side and exclaimed, "Oh yes, Mr. McGowan, yes as you can hear, Mr. Maxwell is alive. Badly wounded I am afraid, you know, and to compound things he is with a high fever.

I surely do not understand how he is still able to talk, let alone give my wife grief for all she's done for him," the clerk continued, pointing toward the window and then over his shoulder to the hotel behind him; to emphasis his words.

"The doctor from Belton will be here later this morning, as he has for the past five days since the gentleman was brought in.

The doctor is doing everything he can, you know, and my misses has been nursing him as best she can. Dedicated woman, you know, always helping someone in need," he said then asked as the four trail men stepped up on the covered porch, their boots clumping hollow on the wood.

"Do you gentlemen require rooms?"

He eyed Riley, whom eased himself down on the swinging chair hanging to the left of the front door and began rubbing his knees.

"Yes, one for the lady and whatever remains for the rest of us," Emmitt replied.

"I'm afraid only one room in the Villa is vacant," the clerk continued to look back at Riley in the porch swing, "but we have two in this building. Mr. Maxwell, of course, is in one."

"That'll do, one of us will be sitting with Mr. Maxwell so two are fine," Emmitt said, realizing this fat man was worried about Riley.

"And him?" The clerk pointed to Riley.

"He will stay with us; you've a problem with that?" Brushy Bill asked, walking up to the gathering outside Ben's window.

The clerk glanced at the young cowpoke hands resting on his revolver butts and realized he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Oh no, no that will be fine."

"I want to see Ben; I want to see him now. Where is the door to this building?" Verna called out, impatient with all this battering

"So do I!" Emmitt added. He was tired, but he needed to check on Ben before he took his rest.

"Oh, yes, yes of course," the Inn keeper replied nervously, pointing his hand to the end of the building, "The door is on the north side, around this corner. Mr. Maxwell is in the second, ah, back apartment."

The boy from the road appeared in the hotel's front porch prompting the clerk to say to Verna, "Ma'am, as soon as you're available, young Jason will show you to your quarters, an upstairs and very comfortable apartment."

"I'll visit when I am ready, please put my saddle bags there now. Thank you," Verna replied to both the keeper and the small boy, Jason, as she hurried around the edge of the building to enter.

Riley called out, standing up from the swing, "Mr. McGowan, Brushy and I'll take the horses over to the stables and get them fed and rubbed down good. I'll bring Miss Verna's and your gear over after," he finished, walking toward the tired ponies.

"Y'all can go with me or assist Emmitt and Miss Verna," Riley said to the two riders from Kinkade's outfit.

"We'll help you take care of the mustangs," Jake answered for both of them.

Emmitt called out before he turned the corner of the low stone building, "Thanks, there is a horse blanket in my bed role. I'd appreciate it if Ol Blu is covered properly," he replied as he followed Verna through the door.

The first thing McGowan noticed was the stink. The strong odor was a mixture of old dried blood, old urine soaked cloth and sweat. He wrinkled his nose involuntary as he entered into the small room at the back behind Verna.

So did Verna as she covered her mouth and pinched her nostrils in disgust. With a quick glance at Emmitt she moved to Ben's side in the center of the quarters, taking his hand.

Ben Maxwell was lying in a small bed, smaller than he, his bare feet hanging off the end. His skin as white as new sheets, a far cry from his usual weathered tan, had Emmitt worried.

He had fallen asleep since they first exchanged words. Lying on his back; blood stained wrappings covered his chest. His breathing quiet but short and fast, beads of sweat rolled off his forehead.

Gunshot fever Emmitt acknowledged.

He scanned the room as he moved to the right of the iron framed mattress, across from Verna.

He noted only two chairs on each side of the bed and a small table next to the window. He observed storage shelving along two walls; this totaled the entire furniture appropriations.

The room appeared to be used for storage, not guest rooms as the clerk suggested, for there are stacks of folded bedding and tableware stocked on the shelves.

"This is disgusting!" Verna cried quietly, as she sat down in the chair next to her, placing her left hand on Ben's forehead.

He opened his eyes at her touch.

"Miss Verna," he croaked with a hoarse voice, "Mighty good to see you!"

He turned his head and smiled at his partner. "It's about time you got here pard! I have some information you might want to know," he whispered weakly.

"I came as quick as I could after receiving the telegram. How you feel?"

"Tolerable, just barely though," Ben wheezed.

"Did you see who shot you?"

"Calley," the one word Ben whispered before drifting off to sleep again.

"He's in bad shape," Emmitt said in a sorrowful voice to Verna as their eyes locked.

"He'll get better," she replied, examining a half empty bottle of laudanum on the floor next to his bed; then growled, "I want him out of this cold damp room to where he can breathe fresh air and be warmer. He requires a bath and clean bandages," she said, listing off on her fingers all else she wanted.

"Emmitt, I need you to make that silly clerk comply with Ben's needs please!" Verna stated, reaching deep into Emmitt's eyes, knowing the pain he suffered for his close friend.

"He has not been given adequate care. He is extremely weak and requires much attention.

Why, I do not think he has even been fed proper! Look at that plate sitting there!" she exclaimed, pointing toward a tin saucer of cold meat and potatoes, apparently left on the small table from last night.

"He can't eat solid food now! He should be fed liquids, beef bouillon and later beef stew---lots of beef for strength! And thick potato soup! Look at this!" she pulled Ben's blanket off and pointed to a bedsheet balled up and stuffed between his legs. The once white sheet yellowed in color and the odorous tang of urine strong.

"Not even a chamber pot to use?" she exclaimed, returning the blanket over Ben's body.

"Absolutely disgusting!" she cried, getting mad, her tiredness from the long night contributed to her anger.

"Find that damn fool idiot and get a room for him! Or move him into the apartment the clerk said he had for me. I'll sleep in this pig sty," she ordered Emmitt.

"Yes ma'am!" he answered, having never heard her curse before until yesterday and today; he's instincts understood not to argue with her as he rose and exited.

He was not happy about Ben's care either; he'd seen better from rough trail hands tending one of their own in surroundings worse than this.

Emmitt sought out the little fat man. Cornering him and demanding suitable lodging, not a cold storage barn and preferably one adjacent to the room the clerk had offered Verna.

The representative stuttered and resisted Emmitt's demands, unwilling at first; he had guests from the stage's which would object to sleeping next to a dying man, especially with the associated odor.

McGowan told him that Ben will not die and he'll be cared for in a proper manner, with no smells of death. If, however, the inn keeper refused to comply, and Ben succumbed to his wound, it would fall on the hotel's responsibility and most notably on he and his wife for failure to prove care when they first took on the task, accepting money for their efforts.

He explained Maxwell is a State's witness to a major crime and of special interest to the Texas Rangers; so he had better survive to testify in State court.

All of this frightened the man but he was quick to be put at ease; his ruffled feathers smoothed when McGowan made things clear the Villa would be compensated.

The clerk scurried off to order his spouse to prepare the south front corner upstairs apartment; next to the quarters he had offered for Verna earlier.

McGowan smiled grimly and turned to seek out the boys to help him move Ben as soon as everything was ready.

He felt tired but angry; his eyes burned from the cold air during the night ride and he did not mind taking his discomfort out on that asinine clerk!

He needed some coffee he mused. It was going to be a long day.

He marveled at how Verna held up so well. She had been all business the moment she stepped into Ben's room and took the responsibility for Ben's care.

Glad he didn't stop her from coming along; he definitely needed her with him.

Emmitt noted the jingling of spurs then the scrapping and heavy thudding of four pair of boots on the front porch before the trail drivers entered the hotel. He was also thankful they had been sent with him though he had doubts at first about two of them.

They were good men. The kind one usually found in Texas.

Emmitt met them at the door.

"We're moving Ben to a better room," he pointed his right forefinger up; "Verna will be ramrodding his recovery, so listen to her good. She knows what she's doing."

The four men nodded their understanding, with Brushy Bill handing to the young Jason, Verna's saddlebags.

"Mr. Leery said to tell you, both rooms are ready," the boy reported.

"That was quick!" Emmitt replied.

"No, not really; them apartments are always waiting for the stagecoach folks but most never stay here on the morning run," Jason answered back as he carried Vern's saddle bags up the stairwell.

"Room's four and five," he called out as he disappeared past the bend in the staircase.

The tired dusty men eyed at each other shaking their heads for a moment before turning to pass through the front door again.

Emmitt glanced at the floor standing Regulator clock. It was only eight am. The stage should be rolling to a stop in an hour and he wanted to speak to the owner of this establishment.

When the four riders entered the low stone building with Emmitt and followed him to the back room, they each made disgusting sounds at the smell.

"Lordy, you sure he ain't dead?" Jake spoke up saying what the others were thinking.

Verna glared at him, "No he is not!" she turned and stroked Ben's hair, "He is dangerously weak-----and filthy! I require you men to help me get him cleaned up and after we move him.

Riley, find a litter or something flat, strong and big enough to use as a stretcher. I need two of you to assist me in removing these filthy rags, bathe him and into a clean gown."

She turned to Brushy Bill. "Find the clerk and have him give you a full bottle of his finest whiskey and bring it to me!"

Turning toward Emmitt she commanded. "Emmitt, have that woman boil up a pail of water and provide a bar of lye soap. We'll wash him here before moving him."

"Ma'am, I don't think Ben's gonna be in a drinking mood for some time!" Brushy quipped.

Verna vacantly glared at him for a moment before answering, "The whiskey isn't for consumption. If his fever gets much higher, I'll use it to rub on his body. The alcohol will cool him down."

"Say, I reckon I ain't never heard of that before!"

"It is done in the hospitals back east. Now you men get on with your chores! You two help me undress him!" she pointed to Billy and Jake.

The cattlemen all jumped at the same time, bumping into each other as they hurried to their various duties, after a few moments the room grew quiet.

Verna threw the dirty bed covers off Ben and began unbuttoning the gown he was wearing. With the garment open, she picked one of the sheets stored on the shelves, draped the clean cloth over the balled up linen between Ben's legs and gingerly removed the urine soaked fabric away with the second sheet; making

disgusting faces as she handed the mess to Billy, she instructed him to take it to the burn barrel behind the hotel.

Quickly, she covered Ben with the blanket up to his waist until Emmitt returned with the steaming water and soap.

She motioned Jake to assist her in removing the sweat and blood stained wrappings from around his upper torso. She needed him to turn Ben on his side as she pulled the strips of cloth from under his body. Next she gingerly removed the two compression bandages from his chest and armpit.

At that time they both discovered the severity of his wounds; a small swollen entry wound on his right below his armpit, an inflamed channel under the skin and muscle which ran from the back under his right arm and around to his chest where the bullet exited under his right nipple.

Neither entry or exit wound was bleeding having been sewn by the doctor, however, the wounds were dark red and swollen.

The skin over the channel circumventing half his torso was bloated and inflamed bright red.

"This explains why he is on his back!" she whispered to Jake, pulling the compression pads off, "He doesn't have a punctured lung as I feared. The projectile never entered his body!

It apparently hit at a glance and followed his ribs around until it came out here!" she murmured pointing at the larger exit laceration.

"I don't understand Miss Verna. You mean the round didn't pass through?"

"No, thank God!" she gave thanks with a short laugh, "The bullet looks to have hit bone, deflecting and digging this furrow around his ribcage. See the swollen bulge? This is where it plowed through his muscles under his skin;" she cried quietly, pointing again, "And came out here!"

"So this is why he's still alive?" Jake commented wonderingly.

"Praise the Lord, if the bullet had gone straight through, entered his torso, he would have been killed almost instantly or probably not survived these past five days!" she replied, applying the new compression bandage. She glanced up at Ben's face when he groaned, but he continued to sleep.

"He needs to rest and recover; he will be ok soon if he doesn't get an infection."

"How do you know these things, Miss Verna?" Jake asked, marveling at her knowledge.

"Back east, I volunteered in a soldiers hospital as a nurse's assistant while in school. I nursed a couple of patents with wounds similar to this; not many; they were the lucky ones."

"From the Yankee war?"

"I'm not that old....the Indian wars!" she replied glancing up at Jake a little insulted, "Soldiers who were shipped back east to recover if they could."

"No ma'am you're not, you'd confused me. That bullet wound won't hurt him none?"

"I don't know Jake," she answered, wiping her forehead and pushing a strand of loose hair off her face with the back of her left hand, "I don't know what he will be like recovering. Some men recover from accidents and get on with their lives, others don't."

"Miss Verna, this weren't no accident," Jake reminded her.

"I understand Jake," she made a small laugh, relieved at what she found. Providence was shining on Ben she realized.

"But with accidents or deliberate assaults on the body the end results are the same. A man recovers or does not. All depends on them," she said, sitting down waiting for the other men to return.

Emmitt arrived first carrying a pail of hot steaming water and sat it down next to the bed and handed Verna a bar of lard soap. Moments later, Brushy Bill walked in with a flask of whiskey.

Verna took the bottle, opened it and put a drop on her finger and tasted it. Next she poured a nickel size puddle on the table top that was against the wall. She loosened a cork from a small brass cylinder she had in her coat and pulled out a wood match, ignited and applied the flame to the splash of whiskey. It burned.

"This will do, has about 70 percent," she commented to herself.

Pulling the blanket off Ben, she washed his body with the hot water and soap up to his chest, after his face, neck and under his left side. With Emmitt and Jakes assistance, she had him rolled over on his left so she could wash his back and buttocks.

Gingerly she addressed his right arm, being careful not to move it, and around the injury's on his back side and chest. Done with the washing, she towed him dry.

With the help of the three men she finished placing clean wrappings over the compression bandage covering his wounds and dressed him in a fresh sleeping gown she found on the shelves.

As she worked, she explained again the extent of Ben's injuries to Emmitt and Brushy Bill.

She noticed Emmitt's stoic expression as she talked and wondered about his feelings. She understood males were ashamed to show their deep emotions among other men but she sensed something else in him.

Guilt, anger or relief she suspected.

Riley returned with a stretcher he made up of fresh cut saplings tied into a long rectangular frame and canvas stretched over the structure.

"You did this?" Emmitt asked.

"Yep, ain't it good enough?"

"Damn right it is," Emmitt exclaimed, "You just did it so quickly, I thoughtnever mind....it'll do nicely," he smiled. He liked this big dark skinned man.

"Time to move him up to his room," Verna ordered tiredly. The previous day and the past night were catching up on her.

Ben woke with a groan, as they carefully lifted him from the bed to the stretcher, mumbled something no one understood and went back to sleep.

They hoisted the litter and carried him out of the stone building, careful not to jostle him; Verna leading and directing the operation until they reached the front door of the hotel.

She suddenly felt light headed and had to sit down in the foyer while the men continued to carry Ben on his stretcher up the stairway. Emmitt glanced down twice, concern written on his face.

Only a few minutes were required to put Ben Maxwell into bed, with clean sheets and blanket. A cool, gentle morning breeze blew the red curtain's pulled back to the open glass pane door that led out to the upper veranda, giving the room the fresh air Verna wanted for Ben.

Verna appeared in the doorway, smiled tiredly at them, nodding her thanks and motioned the cowmen out.

She spoke quietly to Emmitt, requesting a chamber pot, and beef bouillon soup be sent up within the hour.

"Send someone to Belton and telegraph Maria that Ben is alive and will recover," she said, realizing the poor woman must be

in hysterics. She sat down to the business of watching and nursing the wounded man.

McGowan quietly ordered the four men in the hallway, "You fellas get some sleep. We'll need to spell her. She can't do this on her own."

The trail drivers nodded and headed downstairs and outside.

"Y'all can share the front room. I ain't a going back in until the place is cleaned of the stink," Riley said to the others as he started down the stairs.

"Where are you to sleep boss?" Brushy Bill asked, looking up at the foreman who was behind him.

"With my horse; the hay in them stalls is cleaner than that shack he was in," he answered.

"I reckon I'll be joining you," Brushy stated. "Y'all?" he turned to the two Kinkade men, Jake and Billy who were stepping off the stairwell landing.

"I suppose I'll sleep in the front room. I'm too damn tired to worry with the stink!" Billy stated.

"I will too," Jake chimed in, "And I'll check with Mr. McGowan on the times for our watching over Mr. Maxwell."

With that they all separated and went their different directions as the Waco stage pulled in, an hour late, changed horse teams; the passengers making toilet runs and then they were on their way thirty minutes later.

One passenger stayed however, the owner of the Villa.

MR. CRANVIEW

Emmitt McGowan woke around three in the afternoon and immediately, after visiting the outhouse, checked on Ben. He was still picking hay out of his hair, having opted to sleep with Ol Blu as Worthington's two wranglers did rather than put up with the stench in the stone storage building, when he opened the door of Ben's lodging.

He found Brushy Bill sitting with Ben, reading a book. Ben was asleep but he appeared better than he did earlier in the morning. He wasn't sweating as much nor did he breathe as fast as before.

Emmitt, from experience, understood the danger from gunshot fever would last a while. Ben isn't out of the woods yet he mused.

Verna repeated to him, before he left her alone to watch Ben, the extent of the wounds Ben suffered.

She felt he needed to be reassured his friend had an excellent chance of recovery and all they had to worry about was the fever and possible infection.

Relieved Ben is not suffering from a lung wound and realizing things could have been much different had Calley's aim been more accurate. He was able to relax some as he took his rest.

"How is he?"

"Seems to be better, he was awake a while ago; wanted to speak to you," the young cowpoke replied.

"Verna?"

"I came in around two, after I woke; she was still in here, a sleep in this chair. I offered to spell her and she went off to bed I reckon." then after a moment Brushy Bill remembered something Verna said.

"Oh, Miss Gallagher stated the doctor from Belton arrived around noon, spent about a half hour here looking at Ben. Says what

we did, getting him outta the cold storage house, cleaned up and up into this room will probably save his life."

"That's Miss Gallagher's doing. I am not sure we could have done better without her," Emmitt replied.

He realized how intuitive Verna is with her grasp of wounds and nursing as he remembered the things she mentioned of her studies in Pennsylvania.

She had a lot of knowledge he surmised.

"She sure wore tarred looking," Brushy stated.

"I know she was," he replied as he studied the young cowpoke.

Brushy Bill sat with his left leg crossed over his right, his booted ankle resting on his knee, brushing his brown hair as is his habit, his beat up dirty sombrero hanging on the back of the chair provided an interesting image.

The young man appeared tough and weathered for his sixteen years. Carrying his two ivory stocked Colt 51 Navy conversions, Emmitt recollected he has never seen the boy without his pistola's, wearing them butt forward like some preferred.

"I heard something about this place," Brushy said, straightening up in his chair. "Jason told me that Ol' Sam Houston stayed here, either in this room or Miss Verna's. He gave a speech out there on the veranda against Texas leaving the Union."

"Really?" Emmitt replied with a smile. "I bet that did not go well for him."

"You eaten?"

"Not yet, been here since I got up and spelled Miss Gallagher; you going to spell me? I need to piss," Brushy Bill said as he stood and stretched.

"Yeah, go ahead. Get yourself something to eat if the cook in this place has anything."

A light knock on the door interrupted their conversation as Brushy opened it to a nicely dressed gentleman in an Eastern cut suit.

"May I come in?"

"Who are you?" Brushy questioned.

"Why, I'm Mr. Cranview, the owner of this establishment."

"Brushy, let him in," McGowan requested.

Roberts moved to one side and allowed the proprietor of the hotel to enter then stepped behind him and out into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

"And you Sir are?" the visitor asked, but looking at Ben in the bed.

"Emmitt McGowan."

"Oh yes, good, very good. I'd like to speak with you Mr. McGowan," he said turning to face Emmitt.

"And I with you as well," Emmitt did not invite him to sit but stood facing him.

"Oh, yes, yes I expect so. I was in Dallas when all this happened. My man, Gerald, a good employee as clerks go, did not wire me we had Mr. Maxwell here until yesterday.

You understand Salado does not have a telegraph office, nor a doctor, sheriff or marshal for that matter. And it was difficult for him to find the time to travel to Belton to contact me.

Anyway, I spoke with Miss Gallagher, and quite frankly Sir, I am dismayed by the treatment your friend endured by my employees! They are carpet baggers from up north.

I apologize for this, especially for Gerald's wife. She is a difficult woman at best and not a nurse by any stretch of the imagination. She can cook and clean yet possesses little skills beyond, including empathy for her fellow man."

"Yeah, do you understand Ben is a State witness and needs to be cared for."

"Yes Mr. McGowan, however Gerald and his wife were not aware of this, not until Mr. Maxwell woke up for the first time two days ago and spoke to the doctor."

"What did Ben say to the doc?"

"Oh, I have no knowledge of their conversation, other than who he is and to contact you in Round Rock at the hotel you stayed at."

"Mr. Cranview, I suggest you find others to employ to run you establishment!" Emmitt replied firmly.

The statement about not knowing who Ben was irritated Emmitt. The implication; an unimportant man would not be cared for, which is the case with Ben, until they rode in this morning, angered him.

"I already did so. This is my reason for being in Dallas. Gerald and his wife were given their discharges today. They will be gone a week after their replacements arrive in a few days."

Emmitt shook his head in acknowledgement, "I expect we'll be here for a spell. Even though Ben's wound is not mortal it is bad enough with the gunshot fever; he needs to beat this and mend a bit before he can travel."

"Of course; well I understand the Williamson County Ranchers Coalition will cover the expenses?"

"That's the agreement. You want to change that?"

"Oh no, no, the agreement is fine."

"Ok, now I don't want Miss Gallagher complaining to me about the service here," Emmitt said.

Aware Cranview could call his bluff, Emmitt did not consider him to be a gambler, only a bookkeeping business man; worried for the hotel's reputation and his bank account.

He didn't want to ride roughshod over the gentleman, but Ben's life is on the line. He is not interested in excuses for lack of service or resources from this establishment.

He was thankful he had the Rangers behind him; not caring to guess how agreeable Cranview would be otherwise.

"Absolutely Mr. McGowan; anything I can do for you now?"

"Yes, order the cook, Mrs. Leery? Tell her to prepare something to eat for the six of us, besides the orders the lady made for Ben.

I want it kept warm for we'll be eating at odd times. Also, keep lots of coffee hot. We will be sitting up in shifts all night until Ben is out of the woods with this fever."

Cranview turned but stopped when Emmitt remembered something else.

"Did Miss Gallagher ask for a chamber pot? There was not one in the other building he was first kept in and I don't find one in here."

"Really? I swear," the owner replied, disgust showing in his voice and on his face, "We have several; I'll tell my son Jason to deliver one immediately. If anything else comes to mind later, please inform me Mr. McGowan," Cranview said as he opened and passed through the door, closing it quietly.

Emmitt sighed as he eased himself down into the chair Billy sat in and stared out the window, thinking. So much has happened

and this small problem with the people, who originally accepted and took in Ben even though the nursing was minimal, was a frustration.

Ben's life is in the balance and this kind of nonsense is inexcusable. He never met nor heard of anyone like the two who accepted Ben's care. Who are these people he wondered; certainly not Texans or any westerners. No one he could think of would treat an injured man this way!

Emmitt contemplated a small flock of grackles gathering in the tree across the road from the hotel, their shiny black feathers glistening in the sunlight as his mind turned to what his partner had said earlier when awake.

Calley, according to Ben, is the shooter. If so, he needed to see the sheriff in Belton to swear out an attempted murder petition.

He realized this will cement the rancher's belief Jenkins and his wrangler's are behind the rustling, complicating his investigation.

Emmitt stood up and looked for Ben's baggage. He spotted a set of saddle bags in the corner, next to the foot of Ben's bed.

With a quick search, he uncovered no documents. Looking further around the room, he found nothing else which held any papers. Ben was robbed after being shot it seemed, but he still carried his money belt as it was in one of the pouches of his leather bags.

Assuming he had the documents, they are gone now.

Emmitt sat back down in the chair in a slump. His only hope Duncan had copies of what he gave Ben. If not, everything would have to be redone and Jenkins may disappear before then.

Ben bushwhacked and the paper's taken are a pretty good indication Jenkins is again a step or two ahead of him. Emmitt shook his head; he would not be surprised if Jenkins proved to be behind the train wreck near Hammonds.

Calley took those papers and he shot Ben for them on orders of his boss, Todd Jenkins, Emmitt had no doubt. Jenkins feared, and rightly so, the information would link him and the others to the cattle rustling.

McGowan understood also, with Ben being able to identify Calley as the man who shot him; Ben is still in harm's way from Calley. Anyone who is with Ben, during his recovery, is also in danger.

Emmitt shuddered when he thought of Verna.

He viewed the flock of black birds flying off as someone passed below on the road; the door curtain's moved gently in the soft breeze as his thoughts settled on Verna.

She had proven herself these last couple of days and he was rather shamefaced to admit he had not shown his appreciation of her nerve and strength. Not to mention her skill in nursing his partner.

He chastised himself for treating her the way he did on their journey here. His early justification for racing to Ben's aid, the danger and long ride are for men to face, even taking care of Ben when they arrived is their responsibility as well, not a female.

She invaded that; she is a woman for God's sake!

To him, her insistence to come was foolhardy. She had no business subjecting herself to the kind of jeopardy and stress which is traditionally a man's++. It just isn't done!

However, now he surmised his justification as ridiculous. He acknowledged in his heart he'd never meet another woman like her.

If he rode off and tried to forget her, he would regret it the rest of his life. Yet he also knew his feelings for her had changed his attitude toward her and her coming.

Oh the quandary he is in!

Emmitt realized he is in love with her and he did not know what to do about this. Surprised how much she meant to him, this thing made him miserable and yet happy; but his love for her is allowing him to expose her to the dangers he faced and this worried him.

Not convinced she had the same thoughts about him, although she sure insisted on involving herself in his life and putting her own in jeopardy to ride with him meant something he figured but did not justify what he allowed to happen.

He knew Ben is the reason she came. She is like that, willing to help someone who is in need.

He'd been seeing this trait in her the last few months, since he first rode into Round Rock.

Yep! Emmitt shook his head smiling to himself. Nothing happened to her on the ride and maybe she is in Salado for Ben's sake, he concluded, but she is here in his life, despite the danger and the hardship of the past days.

What are her feelings for him?

He mused over the question for several minutes. She has been acting cool toward him, but Emmitt realized this may be due to his treatment at her during this trip.

Emmitt bobbed his head closing his eyes. He could anticipate what an animal might do; the way some men behave and he had a knack for putting things together and solving problems. This led him to fall into the occupation he is doing now.

He was acutely aware of his own behavior toward others generating behaviors in response. He learned this from his mentor Miguel, during his sailing days as a youth.

However, understanding a woman, especially one he found himself wanting? Impossible! Life would be better assuming he was able to forget his feelings. These emotions are too much trouble!

He sighed and relaxed a bit. He grasped a long time ago if not understanding something right away, he should leave it alone until another thing happened to show him the answer. So he put his thoughts about Verna aside, difficult as it was, and concentrated on the problems at hand.

RECOVERY & CONFESSION

The next few days were filled with worry for the five men and Verna. Ben's fever increased forcing Verna to twice pull out the whiskey bottle Brushy Bill had obtained from Mr. Leery and rub his body down, bringing his temperature back under control.

He smelled so much of the corn liquor the men all made laughing comments about having a drink of 'Old Ben' corn whiskey.

They agreed to work in pairs until the sickness passed but Verna stilled worried over infection. She changed the bandages every six hours, more than instructed by the doctor; her own instincts telling her differently. Occasionally, she poured the alcohol on the wounds, both the chest and the back during bandage changing.

Ten days had passed into the first day of June when the last herd of eight hundred steers on the drive north, passed west of Salado.

Jake Culberson rejoined the trial drivers and Billy Johnson was ordered to return to Kinkade's ranch. They were replaced by two new men, Rangers Hamilton and Gordon, sent by Captain Lee.

Riley and Brushy Bill returned to Worthington's operation a week later.

By then Ben was sitting up for a few hours, better, but weak. Not able to lift his right arm due to the pain in his chest when he tried; this worried him and Emmitt.

Verna, working with the new cook and clerk, kept Ben filled with beef stew, so much he began asking for chicken, rabbit or squirrel; anything but that 'damn beef soup'!

One evening Verna told both men after Ben's wounds healed he will need to exercise his arm in order to loosen the muscles in his side and chest.

She told them that he needed to do this for several months up to a year before he regained its complete use.

The doctor from Belton concurred with her assessment and by mid-June, with faith in Verna's nursing skills; he stopped driving down from Belton.

Another week passed and Emmitt found Verna sitting in the wooden swing on the covered porch of the Villa watching two squirrels chasing each other in the road in front of the Inn.

Gently rocking, serene and relaxed; she enjoyed the afternoon breeze coming from the south. The fragrance of hackberry and honeysuckle blooms filling the air.

She glazed up at him as he walked up to her and smiled, her thoughts miles away from what had happened the past few weeks. She was at ease with the world and with this man.

The passing days as they worked together to support Ben's recovery had become electric for her.

Constantly up close to him, not talking about each other, doing solely the work at hand with the occasional bumping into one another as they dressed and cleaned Ben's wounds, sent shivers through her.

The tenderness Emmitt showed her, not scolding or commanding, only encouraging her when she became frustrated and letting her apply her nursing knowledge with no doubting from him, with complete trust in her skill, warmed her soul.

He followed her orders and made sure everyone did what she needed done.

But how she felt went beyond that. They worked well together she thought, better than her and her father, whom she adored.

Emmitt was in her heart and mind. She must not resist any longer or she would go insane. It was time to talk to him.

"You want to take a walk?" he asked, holding out his hand to her.

"Yes --- yes I do," she answered surprised; she smiled as she grasped his fingers and stood up from the swing.

They stepped down off the porch and searched up and down the road; north, toward the low stone buildings of Salado on the east side of the roadway and south pass the State College campus on the hill. Emmitt took her arm and directed her to the right.

They walked in silence for some distance, both with their hands clasped behind them, soaking in the warmth of the sun on their backs; lost in their thoughts about what to say.

Verna spoke first.

"I think Ben will be strong enough to travel to Round Rock in two or three weeks."

"You do? Good, I'll tell the Rangers so they can make arrangements to guard him on the trip back."

For another few minutes they continued their walk not saying anything until she spoke again.

"You were not nice to me the day we rode here," she stated, looking at him.

"Yeah, I know. I need to apologize for my behavior. I didn't think you were able to handle the ride nor did I want you in danger," Emmitt replied.

"Is this because I am a woman?" she asked.

"Partly; women don't normally do things like you did then. Men --- ah ---I am not accustomed to that."

"I understand. I invaded your domain, this world of yours. I apologize."

"Apology accepted," Emmitt responded as he glazed down at her smiling, relieved she did not take this subject further.

"Your apology accepted as well," Verna replied watching Emmitt's face.

They laughed and continued to up the slight hill toward the college campus, looking at the open windows, listening to the students being lectured from within.

The two watched as a dog ran across their path, stopped, glanced at them and then continued on its way, Verna calling to it to come to her; finally giving up and laughing.

They listened to a single Scissor-Tail singing for a mate; sitting in a small sapling growing by the road, as both of them, bursting with feelings inside, searched for words to express to each other but not finding the right ones to begin with.

They passed the main two story stone building and toward the top of the hill from whence they rode that early morning, over a month ago.

"You said partly. Is there another reason or reasons?" Verna stopped and grasped his hand, looking deep into his eyes, searching

for the answer. What she found took her breath away. Her heart leaped as she waited for Emmitt to reply.

Emmitt smiled at her for a moment then answered.

"I've found myself experiencing feelings like never before Verna," he was amazed how easy this was to say.

"And what are those feelings Emmitt?" she asked with a soft voice, waiting, her chest pounding.

"Both troubles and excitement, all this confused me.

These last days, working with you, tending Ben; gave me time to understand I've a love for you Verna," Emmitt replied, his heart too was racing which he thought would burst out of his chest.

"Oh Emmitt," she cried softly.

"Yeah?" he replied, some doubt to what was happening.

"I find myself in love with you also. You're the man I have been waiting for all my life. But," she stopped and glazed into his eyes, searching, reaching for his love.

"But what?" he asked, afraid of her answer.

"Your world is as big as Texas and so full! Is there room for me?"

"Verna my darlin; until the good Lord calls me home, you are my world!" Emmitt replied, kissing her hand, relieved from the fear of rejection.

She let go of the embrace of his fingers as she raised her palm to caress his face. She lifted her other hand up and pushed his sombrero off, slowly pulling him down to her and kissed him softly.

Emmitt encircled his arms under hers as he lifted her gently off the ground, feeling her firm bosoms pressing against him, her heart beating strong and the warmth of her lips pressed to his.

Her arms circling around his neck, one hand cupping the back of his head; they held one another for several minutes, ravishing the enjoyment of this first confession of love for each other.

Never again would they experience this moment. Both knew this and drank in the joy, the happiness of this confession, consuming to the last wonderful drop.

Young voices, whistling and yelling cat calls came from the upper windows of the State College as the students finally interrupted their moment. A few recognizing the two;

"They rode from Round Rock to save their friend," some of the classmates murmured to the others.

"They are the ones?" many would question in admiration. Everyone in Salado was aware of the five armed cattlemen with one armed woman and their night long ride, the topic a major conversation piece at any gathering for some time.

Verna and Emmitt laughed together as they realized they are being watched. Holding hands they started back down the hill towards the hotel, waving at the student scholars hanging out of the windows who were continuing to whistle and yell out suggestive comments.

The two didn't care, the wall between them, this barrier of false indifference, is shattered; their love for each other will now only grow.

RETURN TO ROUND ROCK

Ben healed fast through all of June. In early July plans were made to move him, via train, boarding in Belton for Round Rock. But before the end of the month of June had arrived, a stage passenger from Austin surprised all of them.

Detective Duncan knocked on Ben's door. When Verna, sitting with Ben, along with Emmitt, opened the threshold, Ben let out a whoop.

"Damn, I've been expecting you a lot sooner pardner!" Ben cried out.

"I got here as soon as I heard Ben," Duncan announced as he walked in, removing his derby as he acknowledged Verna and Emmitt.

"Ma'am," he bowed to Verna as she craned her head back to glaze up at the tall man.

"Emmitt, good to see you," Duncan bellowed, sticking out his huge hand.

"Howdy Duncan, I guess you got my telegraph?"

"Sure did, the office forwarded it to me in Austin."

"Austin? I am afraid I don't understand. You've been to Austin?"

"Yep, visiting with your Captain Lee," he replied, grinning at Ben, "Ben, everything worked out like we figured, except'n you getting nearly killed."

Ben smiled, looking at the confusion on Emmitt's face.

"I kinda expected someone would try something, but bushwhacking never crossed my mind. I did not consider that now I look back on things." Ben said grinning, trying to move in the bed to view everyone better, winching in pain at the movements.

Emmitt started to comprehend but only a little, "Help me understand, you two planned what?"

Duncan sat down on the edge of Ben's mattress, "Well, after Ben's departure from Dallas was detained by the train wreck in Hammond, which we figured wasn't an accident; we concluded whoever was behind that wanted Ben slowed so they could send enough men to Dallas and steal the papers from our office or from Ben direct.

We decided he should take the overland carriage, stay ahead of them.

Our thoughts were Ben had his gun, the coach guard up top and several witnesses for his protection. We figured robbing the stage would bring the Rangers in to this and they'd not want that.

However, Ben's trip was delayed in Waco due to the driver being beaten and unable to work, so Ben telegraphed me he was not waiting for another coachman but intending to press on."

"So I rented a hack in Waco and switched to a horse in Belton when the buggy broke a spring," Ben spoke up to finish the story.

"I figured the closer I got to Round Rock the better my chances of avoiding a holdup; I expected perhaps two or three boys with drawn guns to give chase after me, so I had asked for a fast cayuse.

The country is wide open through there, easy to notice folks a coming; still I didn't figure on someone like Calley sitting up in a tree sharpshooting my sorry hide outta the saddle at night!"

"You took a terrible chance Ben, what made you think they would not harm you after you and Mr. Duncan decided they were responsible for the train derailment? These men will do anything it seems," Verna said in horrified disapproval, "I understand this Calley has been trying to kill you for some time now!"

"I know Miss Verna, but I survived and the papers...."

"Are gone!" Emmitt cried out in anger, "You played the game and damn near got killed for what, Ben? The documents?"

Calley must have taken them after he shot you. The papers were not on you after the old man and his wife brought you here. I asked them and I searched the area you were found in!"

"Not true Emmitt," Duncan spoke up in Ben's defense.

"Ben carried just paper, mostly Dallas newspapers. He was a decoy, I delivered the real documents under armed Ranger escort, the ones I telegraphed you about and you sent Ben to collect.

They are in the hands of your Captain Lee. A state judge issued an arrest warrant sworn out for Jenkins, just before I left Austin," he announced with satisfaction, "I suspect Rangers are out now looking for Jenkins!"

"And Calley? I met with the Sheriff in Belton who had a county warrant made out for Calley but he may be already out of the state," Emmitt stated.

"The Rangers consider Ben a state witness. Attempted murder of a state witness comes under the Rangers jurisdiction. There's a warrant out, from Austin, on Calley for this also," Duncan replied. "It's good for extradition in many states and territories!"

"Oh thank God!" Verna spoke up, bewildered at all that was confessed.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Emmitt asked Ben.

"Well pard, I figured Duncan to have been here sooner. And I wanted to be a might stronger before I knew you'd lite in to me for this plan Duncan and me hatched," Ben said grinning again.

Emmitt shook his head. With everything falling into place he couldn't believe the luck that followed both him and his partner.

"Have Calley and Jenkins been detained yet?" Verna inquired.

"No Ma'am," Duncan replied, "At least not when I left Austin and that was a day ago."

"Too soon," Emmitt growled, "Jenkins and Calley could be on their way out of Texas right now, or they're hold up somewhere; possibly down on the Colorado."

"You and Ben are still in danger?" Verna asked.

Emmitt nodded yes to her question.

"Then so am I," she reasoned, fear registering on her face.

Emmitt took her hand and stared into her eyes. "No one will hurt you my darlin. Not as long as I am alive," he said with a reassuring voice.

Duncan glazed out the window, embarrassed, as Ben smiled at the love between these two.

His work finished, Duncan took his leave and returned by stage to Dallas; Ben, still unable to raise his arm any higher than mid chest, was eager to "get outta" the Shady Villa Inn and Salado.

Cranview's new employees had been of enormous service and excellent helpers in Ben's recovery and Emmitt stated so.

He also telegraphed Worthington requesting a small bonus be included in the employee's names, Sarah and Samuel Owens, when the coalition wired the final payment for the use of the rooms at the Shady Villa.

The group, packed and ready to depart, said their final goodbyes to the owner and staff at the hotel. They were to travel to Belton to catch the short spur line train to Hearne and from there on to Round Rock and for Emmitt on to Austin with the Rangers,

They rented a Surry carriage for the trip to Belton with Blu tied off and following obediently from the rear.

Although it was only a few miles up the north road, they wanted to make the ride slow and easy for Ben's comfort. A stage would be too fast and reluctant to stop if Ben needed to rest.

The two state lawmen rode point, searching the country side and stopping travelers coming south and questioning them before letting them on their way.

After reaching Belton, they waited in the only restaurant in town for the three o'clock train to Hearne, eating a late lunch and spending the remaining time drinking coffee.

Ben was becoming uncomfortable and he laid down on the red and gold laced sofa located in the foyer of the eatery. One Ranger sat with him and the other established guard outside of the restaurant.

Before the train arrived, twenty minutes late, four more Texas Rangers, from Waco, rode in and introduced their selves. Two armed with double barreled ten gauge shotguns and the others with .44 cal. Winchester short rifles.

Emmitt noted Jenkins wouldn't dare attack them now.

An hour and a half later, the entourage with its ensemble of heavily armed Rangers, State Witness, one range detective and one woman, debarked onto the passenger platform at Hearne, walked across the tracks and boarded the International and Great Northern Railway bound for Round Rock and on to Austin, catching their ride with only minutes to spare.

Five hours after leaving Belton they arrived home and debarked onto the depot landing.

Emmitt shook the hands of the four Rangers who were staying in Round Rock, kissed Verna several times before the departure whistle blew from the smoking, noisy steam breathing iron horse.

The conductor called out the last boarding call and Emmitt reluctantly jumped back on board as the iron wheeled coach started to move away. He stood on the black steps of the platform between the cars, watching and waving at Verna until out of sight.

His job was nearly finished, he only needed the arrest and conviction of Jenkins and Calley and the others. He was feeling good, very good.

The happiest man alive at this moment; he decided he would ask Verna to be his wife.

Yep, he thought to himself, as he sat down on the coach bench, his eyes observing the darkening land that was passing by, things were falling into place! His future looked good!

"NEXT ONE IN THE FACE"

Sunday July the 14th grew hot, as stifling as the winter at its peak was cold. With the sun setting in the evening, temperatures dropped a bit but it still proved uncomfortable.

All the windows that are operable were open in Round Rock as every building in the Lone Star State. There continued some breeze, never-the-less the inhabitants sweated heavily with their final chores for the day.

The women and a few men, who were working in their kitchens cooking suppers for their families, suffered even more from the additional heat coming off their cook stoves. Those who had fire pits outdoors prepared their meals there.

Horses, cows and dogs sulked in the swelter, their tongues hanging out, panting hard; as did the wild animals out in the woods and prairies around the small town.

It wasn't a good day for riding either, if one could help it; however, four men on horseback, wearing hot ankle length dusters rode into the west side of town.

After depositing their horses at the old town livery stable, they visited the saloon, had a drink and asked about the hotels. After being told only one existed on the far end of the new business district; they took their leave and strolled down to the shanties and looked to buy rent on three rooms.

They found no lodging but a young and pretty Negro woman said they may camp behind her house under the oak trees, close to the creek; only if they are not afraid to sleep near the old cemetery, 'Wid all them daid folk!'

The boss of the group agreed if she would agree to cook for them and wash their clothing. A deal is struck along with a budding romance between the leader and the young Negress.

Two other men, in the saloon when the travelers entered and then left, took their leave also as they made for their horses and rode off, pulling a third empty saddled pony toward the new part of Round Rock, past the white limestone stores of the business district, until they reached the end of the avenue with the last buildings, the post office and Gallagher's Inn. They reined to a stop facing the lodging.

One of them dismounted, gingerly climbed the porch steps on the balls of his feet, crossed the landing and eased opened the front door, peering into the foyer with its empty couches and chairs and at the reception desk. Seeing no one, he motioned to the other to come as he entered silently.

Voices are overheard from the dining room, women's voices and occasionally a man's. The duo walked in to the eatery with guns drawn and stopped about four feet from the diners.

Silence grew loudly as each person seated at the table noticed the two armed men standing in the sliding door opening. No one moved or breathed.

"We want Ben Maxwell" the man who first entered the Inn stated.

"Why?" one of the ladies asked.

"None of your damn business woman!" he replied, looking at the faces of each individual.

"I'm right behind you," Ben called out. He had been dosing in a corner chair next to the front window. The two gunmen did not see him sitting asleep when they entered.

They spun around pointing their revolvers at him.

"You're a coming with us!" the lead pistol man ordered.

Ben, unarmed and still weak, didn't argue as he lifted his hand's as best he could, taking a step back to allow the kidnappers to exit out of the hall.

The second gunman pivoted, closing the heavy wooden sliding partitions as he said, "Y'all stay seated and nobody's gonna get hurt!"

The duo turned Ben around and pushed him to the front exit. They were about six steps from the double doors when a woman's loud voice behind them commanded.

"You're not taking him anywhere!"

They and Ben spun and found themselves facing Verna Gallagher standing in front of the reception desk, feet shoulder width apart, both hands holding Emmitt's .36 cal. percussion revolver.

Ben started grinning.

"Lady, put that damn old thing down fore you hurt yourself!" the lead gunman said.

"Turn him loose and leave this place!" Verna answered him, cocking the Griswold.

"Lady, I'm warning you to ---," he never finished his statement as Verna fired, hitting him in the upper right extremity, causing him to drop his pistol as a cloud of grey/white smoke drifted to the ceiling.

"Ahaaa, you broke my arm!" he cried. "You damn bitch, you broke my arm!"

"And the next one will be in the face!" Verna exclaimed loudly re-cocking the Rebel pistol again.

"You," she pointed the Griswold at the other kidnapper.

"Drop that hogleg!"

The second man, dumb founded complied instantly, the big .44 clunking on the carpet.

"Now get out of here!" she commanded again, louder.

Both men backed up hurriedly, their eyes focused on the smoking barrel of the Georgia made firearm; the injured one holding his shoulder as his arm swung loose like a rag; blood oozing between his fingers.

They stumbled out the front door, getting into each other's way in their haste to reach their horses. In moments they are gone, their horse's hooves drumming noisily in the baked summer dirt, up the avenue and out of town.

Silence dominated the foyer and the dining room. The folks at the dining table dared not speak or move, not knowing what had happened behind the ornate sculptured sliding doors.

Verna stood quietly, unmoving, her feet apart, her arms still up, pointing the revolver; contemplating what she had done. It was all automatic; she had not stopped to think how to do, she just did.

She remembered walking out of the kitchen, observed Ben being forced to the door by the two gunmen. She reached for the loaded Griswold that was on a shelf in back of the reception desk, then stepping around and drawing down on the duo.

Amazed, her eyes wide, she stared at Ben as she started to shake.

"Damn Miss Verna, please don't ever get angry at this Ol' man! I've been shot enough for one lifetime!" Ben stammered, stepping out of her line of fire. She continued pointing the weapon at the front door.

Her father was standing in the doorway he had opened from his study, staring at his off spring; an incredulous expression on his face. He heard nothing of the disturbance until the gun shot.

"Oh Father," she exclaimed, "What did I do?"

"What did you do daughter?" he asked, looking at the Griswold.

He remembered facing those rebel made pistols years ago and it bothered him she was holding one; having just fired it!

"Lordy gal," Ben replied to both of them, chuckling lightly as he stepped up to her and pushed the weapon's barrel down, "You saved my sorry hide---again!"

"Are you ok?" she asked, noticing he was swaying a bit.

"I reckon, but this here weather and this excitement tonight has wore me down. I think I'll go lay down," he said, moving toward the landing.

Verna slipped her left arm around his waist and started to the staircase with him.

"Let me help you," she offered as the doors to the dining hall slid back; the diners peeking into the foyer; questions on their faces.

Verna glanced at them, remembering they also faced these two gunmen moments earlier. She put her hand up to Ben, motioning him to wait for her at the bottom of the stairs and turned to the guest diners. Sorry about this folks. Everything is ok. Those two bandits are gone now," she explained as she walked toward them.

Several started to speak at the same time, wanting to know who shot who; the women chattering away at each other and her; the men silent, waiting for her answer.

Mr. Gallagher, holding his hands up palm forward, trying to control and quiet the group, was not being successful.

"Now, now folks, please calm down," he pleaded.

"I did. But they have rode off," she repeated to the gasping of the ladies. She realized she was still holding the pistol and handed it to her father.

"If you folks are ready for dessert, we have pumpkin pie tonight," she continued, trying to make light of the past moments and to calm the guests and diners.

Two of the three men, grinned shaking their heads in amazement, as they turned back into the dining room. Of the four women, two stood for a moment with open mouths before they returned to the table. The others scurried past Ben and up the stairs to their rooms, visibly shaken by the events that occurred.

Mr. Gallagher walked into the kitchen and ordered the cook to fetch the sheriff or his deputy.

Verna returned to Ben's side and they started up the staircase, Ben holding fast to the railing and to Verna.

"By God Verna!" he exclaimed half way up on the corner landing, "If Emmitt doesn't marry you, I'd sure like you to consider me!"

"What about Maria?" Verna asked laughing.

"Aw hell, I'd marry the both of you," he guffawed with her.

"I didn't see her tonight. Did you?" she inquired trying to make lite conversation to calm their nerves.

"Yep, she left about five minutes before them characters appeared. Went to feed Jeffery and put him to bed.

Glad she did. Don't know what I would have done if'n she wore still here when those two showed up," he replied, concern crossing his face.

"Well, it didn't turn out that way. So don't think about it," Vern said as she opened his bedroom door and let him loose to enter alone.

"Goodnight Miss Verna. Thank you again."

Ben took her hand for a moment. Their eyes meeting, knowing that their friendship was forever sealed with an unbreakable bond.

"You're welcome Ben. Emmitt should be here in a few days and we'll have a great story to tell him," she laughed as she turned toward the stairs; the front door had open and closed with voices chatting excitedly from the foyer.

Deputy A.W. Grimes had arrived with support.

Verna stepped off the stairs on to the landing and walked over to the Deputy and Ranger Gordon as they were talking to her

father and the three men from the dining room. Her soul was still shaking, not believing what she had experienced and had done.

Twenty minutes later, Deputy Grimes tipped his hat and left the Inn. The Ranger stayed, sitting down in the chair in the corner that Ben had fallen asleep in. He'll stay the night and tomorrow he will be replaced by Ranger Hamilton.

In his room dressed for bed, Ben stood at the dresser fingering the Rangers star given to him a week ago.

He stared at himself in the mirror, at the white hair and mustache enhancing his tanned leathery face, the color having returned. His strong square jaw and long, sharp nose gave fierceness to his appearance but was handsome also. At least he thought so as apparently did many women in his past.

He remembered when the Captain rode up from Austin with Emmitt. Emmitt was wearing a Rangers badge. It sure did look good on him, and Ben said so.

But he was surprised as Captain Lee produced a Bible and told him; he didn't ask him he recollected; to put his left hand on it and raise his right as best he could.

"Special Ranger," Lee had finished, "For the State of Texas; so help you God!"

The good Captain swore in Ben that afternoon he and Emmitt arrived. Even though he is not able to perform any duties right now, he was a Ranger again. A Special Ranger!

He and Emmitt finally achieved what they and Goodnight wanted when they first rode to Austin last fall. Even though it is temporary, it gave them the authority to arrest Todd Jenkins, Calley Longman and their men.

Ben realized Jenkins would probably throw his hands up and allow his self to be arrested.

Calley? Ben had no intention of arresting him.

Ben looked at himself closely. In his eyes he saw the old strength and coldness returning from years on the prairie, driving cattle, Rangering with McNelly, riding for Goodnight and working with Emmitt.

A full life some shit tried to end!

He realized getting shot by Calley confirmed his thinking about his change in direction. He never gave much thought to the future until now.

He found himself wanting more than he currently had.

He remembered those recent cold nights on the Colorado; his thoughts of Maria and the decision he made.

He wanted a family, to grow old with Maria if she is obliged. He didn't want to die in some lonely piece of nowhere, with no one to say goodbye.

It is time to make the change, he mused.

His mind drifted to the two women in his life now. Tonight Verna showed her other side. She is one hell of a lady he realized. Emmitt needed a female partner like her; strong, smart and fearless as well!

He thought of Maria. She is different. Soft and gentle and caring as Verna, but not having the same gutsy strength Verna possessed.

He did not need those traits in a woman. Maria's courage is a divergent kind, perhaps better and stronger than Verna's. She suffered great hardships Verna apparently never did.

He could to change this for her.

Aware of her situation from what she told him but not revealing all, he understood she'd been banished by her family when she married the Irishman who is Jeffery's father. A poor ranch hand, whose only crime in life was in loving her as she did him.

Attempting to provide for her, he left on a cattle drive five years ago and never returned. His body buried up near the Red River.

Stubborn pride kept her from returning to her people even after they begged her to come home. She struggled ever since to make a living and raise her young son. Not taking any handouts from anyone; insisting on earning her own way.

Ben knew she is in love with him as he is with her. Perhaps not like what she had with Jeffery's father, he realized. He guessed she felt safe and that was enough for him.

He wanted to settle down and live quietly and if Maria will have him, he would give up his roaming and put down roots and provide her the things she deserved.

And raise more children besides Jeffery, he grinned into the mirror. Maria was still young enough being in her late twenties.

Before any of this happened he acknowledged he must take care of some business. He did not want her to face the danger Emmitt brought to Verna.

Calley is a killer who had his chance at him. Ben a killer also, acknowledged this, but he reckoned himself as a killer of killers; the hammer of hard justice. That is what most of his years of work produced.

Lifting his arm up as far as possible before it stopped, he grunted in pain. To push it higher hurt his back, side and chest muscles. He pushed anyway.

"I got to get healthy!" he murmured to the reflection in the mirror.

"Calley's gotta die!"

"VAYA CON DIOS!"

Emmitt McGowan found himself sitting in the dining room with a Major Jones who just arrived from Austin, Captain Lee, Cass Worthington and Mike Jarrell.

Jarrell looked up at the Regulator clock, its pendulum swinging as its hands moved toward the twelve o'clock mark.

"Time I get moving on back to the ranch," Jarrell said, "I'll have four of the boys ride in tomorrow to help spare your Rangers a watching over Ben and I'll send out riders to Kinkade's and Stephens asking for assistance. Henderson's men, about eight I think, will be here tonight to guard the bank."

"I'll do the same this evening, four or five; that's all I can spare, many of my boys are still on the drives and won't return until September---October," Worthington chided in with his own comments.

Captain Lee shook his head in acknowledgement and leaned back in his chair, sweat running off his forehead from the heat. As he wiped his face with a kerchief around his neck he said.

"If it weren't for the information the Bass gang is heading to rob the Williamson County Bank, we'd not bother you; with this short notice under the circumstances, our officers will not be here until Sunday or Monday."

Major Jones interjected as well, "We'll have three Rangers in from Austin on the train tomorrow. Twelve were ordered to San Saba from Lampasas but are redirected to this location; Lord knows when they will arrive. The rest in Lampasas won't make it until Sunday.

I have just five in town now, Lee and McGowan, Ware, Hamilton and Gordon; six counting myself. I can't depend on the sheriff but maybe his deputy and another who arrived this morning from Austin.

We are spread thin with Gordon and Hamilton watching the main roads into town. Never-the-less, if you ranchers can provide some men, it would be greatly appreciated.”

“We’ll do what we’re able Major. Again, most of our boys are still up north finishing the drives,” Worthington replied.

Finished, Jarrell stood up and shook hands around with everyone and took his leave.

Emmitt leaned against his chair, a trickle of sweat running down his spine. Tired; he had spent the past three weeks riding with Rangers Gordon and Hamilton, searching the Colorado River for signs of Jenkins and his rustlers.

The Rangers had ridden out to Jenkins ranch to serve the arrest warrants, but found no one.

Again Jenkins was a jump ahead of Emmitt, clearing out his belongings, horses and men from the ill kept home of Kev Perry; left on the property only a smattering of cattle drifting around and a few lame broncos’, little else.

Afterwards, they split up and visited the ranches in different locations that had been documented by Duncan as owned by Jenkins through his false business operations.

They returned with nothing on Jenkins where-a-bout’s; Emmitt and the Rangers started to think that Jenkins had left the state, having been warned somehow in time to disappear.

Someone is spying on him and on the Rangers. He couldn’t figure who and he didn’t know how. He just had this gut feeling.

He remembered how he felt down on the Colorado. It seemed as several set of eyes were watching him and the other Rangers.

Jenkins would be seeking revenge on him and Ben. If they, as witnesses, are dead then the courts will have less to convict him and Calley. Especially Calley, as Ben is the only eye witness to his own shooting. They all knew down on the river is as good a place as any for an ambush.

His fears proved to be founded when he returned to Round Rock yesterday and learned about the attempted abduction last Monday.

Very grateful he had taught Verna how to shoot a pistol. He realized her thwarting the abduction had dragged her deeper into this; placing her in more danger.

So many things are happening, unraveling. Emmitt so confident a month ago this investigation would be completed, the end results are not panning out like he expected.

Verna walked into the meeting with a pitcher of liquid.

“Do you gentlemen want a glass of lemonade?” she asked, “I’m afraid it isn’t too cool, but the water is pumped from our well so it is cooler than what is in this jug,” she motioned toward another decanter sitting in the center of the table.

“Yes ma’am!” Major Jones and Captain Lee both exclaimed together, holding out their empty tumblers.

Worthington stood up and picked up his half full glass of water and Emmitt’s, walked over to the window and tossed the contents outside; returning and setting the crystal mugs down in front of Verna.

“Much oblige ma’am,” he murmured, too hot to talk more.

Emmitt picked up his drink after Verna finished pouring, nodded his head smiling and receiving a knowing smile back from her.

The Major having drained his, sat his empty tumbler down and surveyed the men sitting around him.

“Gentlemen, I don’t guess we have anything else to do right now, but wait,” he said, picking up his big brimmed hat laying in front of him and catching Emmitt’s eyes, “Until Sam Bass and his gang are captured, it looks like we will have to put the search for Jenkins and his rustlers on temporary hold. Man power, you understand, or the lack there of.”

Everyone agreed and began standing up, chairs scrapping on the wooden floor when a ranch hand burst through the front door and asked in a loud voice where Mr. McGowan and Mr. Maxwell were.

“In here!” McGowan called out.

The cowhand from Kinkade’s, Billy Johnson, his brow dripping with sweat, his clothes soaked, entered the hall, nodding to Verna as he took off his Texas sombrero.

“Ma’am,” he said turning toward Emmitt, aware of the two Ranger officers standing in the room as well.

Mr. McGowan, I was just taking a piss,” he glanced at Verna and seemed to blush. “Sorry ma’am.....I was behind some cedar breaks not visible, when my boss Mr. Kinkade, Jake and Toby were captured and taken by Mr. Jenkins men.”

"Are you sure it was Jenkins' hombres?" Captain Lee queried.

"That character Calley were with them," Billy replied, nervously squeezing his hat brim.

"Where'd they take them?" Major Jones asked, leaning his bottom against the dining table and crossing his arms.

"I followed them for a while, till they dropped down the trail to the promontory over the river," he answered, "I didn't see where they went after. I rode as fast as my horse could run here."

"I know this place," Emmitt stated, putting his Stetson on.

"Wait Emmitt," Captain Lee commanded, laying his hand on Emmitt's shoulder, "Don't go riding off alone; allow us to gather some men together."

"Captain, Gordon and Hamilton have better knowledge for this part of the country, more than I do. Have them lead a posse to the ridge over the river. I'll wait for them."

"Ok, but don't handle this alone, let us catch up with you first; It'll be early in the morning before we can get enough guns from the ranches."

"I will Captain. I'll snoop around with Billy until we find them and keep an eye on them until you arrive."

Emmitt nodded as he turned to Verna, taking her hand and leading her into the sitting room. Her face covered in worry.

"Darlin, I'll be alright. I can't let Jenkins and his bunch get away again. This has to be brought to an end."

"I understand my love but I am worried. Please be careful!" she whispered kissing him on his lips as he put his arms around her.

"Sorry, I'm a bit wet here," he said as he pulled back, looking at the sweat stain from his body on the front of her dress.

"Don't fret about that," she laughed, "Por favor, vaya con Dios mi amor!"

"I will Darlin," he replied, surprised as she had never spoken to him in such strong Spanish before. He glanced over her shoulder at the Major and the Captain. Those words gave him a chill down his spine of what was coming as he looked at their blank faces.

"Don't take too long following behind me. I want this bastard captured."

"We'll be behind you, don't worry," Captain Lee answered.

"I guess I'd best be heading back to my place to send my boys on their way here," Worthington remarked, taking his leave and exiting the Inn.

Emmitt ran up the stairs to his room to retrieve his saddlebags, Colt and two rifles; the Henry and Sharps. He returned to the main floor buckling on his gun belt, he gave Verna a quick squeeze of her hand and kiss before following Billy Johnson out the door as he nodded to Worthington driving off in his buggy.

McGowan ran quickly over to the stables on Liberty Hill Street and picked up his saddle from the barn while the livery boy fetched Ol Blu from the large corral where he stood under an ancient oak, out of the sun.

He stopped to consider if he wanted to ride Blu so soon. They had been back only one day and the aging cayuse needed to rest.

But Emmitt didn't have a lot to choose from in the corral therefore he saddled Blu up, swung up and directed the mustang out of the stalls onto May Street where Billy waited.

Together they rode west cutting across May Street to Georgetown Ave and into the old part of town. As they cantered past the older wooden businesses, they passed the saloon as a white man exited the front double swinging doors.

Emmitt glanced with his eyes at the individual, not turning his head and continued to ride. The face appeared familiar; however, he was not in a mind to think on who it might be.

His thoughts were on Jenkins holding Kinkade; probably to lure him out he mused. He knew this would be dangerous but he had the Rangers and others following up behind him by morning.

He witnessed the easy lope of the red roan Billy rode and admired its strength. The boy and the pony had already run the distance from the canyon and now they are going back the same way.

Strong horse he acknowledged. The cayuse reminded him of Ol Blu in his younger days.

He remembered the ride to Salado with the strawberry colored mustang always out in front; never seeming to tire.

Good pony the boy had, if he would only learn to understand the animal and get better control. Billy punished it too much and the critter seemed to be in constant rebellion.

They rode on for the next four hours, saying little, until they reached the cedar brakes surrounding the river canyon.

They followed the wide game trail, for two more hours, through the cedars that lead to the decent on to the promontory.

A few yards from the wide bluff sticking out from the rim on the east side like a finger, they finally dismounted and walked their horses up toward the rim of the gorge.

Not much daylight left he mused, treading as softly as possible on the broken shale and granite leading up to the edge.

Those were his last thoughts before the body hit him hard, knocking him to the ground as a big meaty fist smashed into his face and he lost conciseness.

Major Jones sat down and poured himself another glass of lemonade before it lost the cool temperature. Taking a sip, he called Captain Lee to the table and asked him to sit down.

"Captain, we just discussed our limited man power and now you've gone and promised McGowan support?"

"Major, we cannot let this pass up! I can send Hamilton or Gordon or even Wade and get some volunteers from the citizens; perhaps the two county deputies as well."

"No! Only one Ranger; you pick who. It is up to the deputies if they want to go. As for any civilians, I'm not too happy about this. Who in this damn town is good enough with a gun and brave enough to face these rustlers?"

"I'll find them Major. Jarrell's four men and the ones he is sending out for from the various ranches won't be here until the morning nether will Worthington's.

Maybe I can convince a couple of Henderson's when they arrive tonight. We can't abandon McGowan after we told him we would be there."

"You Captain; you promised him. Remember that," Jones snapped.

Lee nodded and fell back in his chair and stared at the clock.

"I've got to amble over to the telegraph office to check when 'my' Rangers are coming," Jones commented as he poured another glass before he took his leave.

Captain Lee turned staring at the Major's humped over shoulders as he walked out then turned his glaze to Verna who

appeared in the doorway. He read her fear and worries on her face and eyes. He knew she had overheard the conversation.

He stared at her for a moment, an uneasy twisted feeling settling in his stomach. He glanced up at the Regulator Clock again and then a calendar hanging on the wall. It was one o'clock, July 19th.

He stood and collected his rifle leaning against the wall next to the double doors, stepped out and sat down in one of the wicker chairs on the front veranda.

FRIDAY, JULY 19, 1878

The weather grew hotter in the day as the population of Round Rock and surrounding towns and cities suffered under an unbelievable cruel sun. The sky was bare of any clouds, breeze or hint of rain to alleviate the hot temperature.

By noon no one is seen outside working. Most are either under a big oak tree somewhere or inside a building, sweating. All with their clothes soaking wet.

Even Brushy Creek was dry, the round rock in the center, which gave the town its name, seemed taller now with no water flowing around it.

Both saloon's, the old one and the new one down by the depot station served warm beer as even the bartenders were not able to find ways to cool their kegs.

Sam Bass chose to drink his brew in the older saloon.

The warm wet suds in this, weather, went to the head fast as well as out the kidneys just as quick, thus he nursed the liquid slowly so as to not be affected too much by the alcohol content.

Drinking alone, the only company the bartender, came to an end when two Negro men stomped in, tired and sweaty; light grey body salt caked on their black arms and neck; straw from their work, stuck to their wet, dirty clothing and in their short cut curly hair. They bellied up to the banister and ordered their own hot beers.

Bass glazed at them for a moment, as they in turn took glances at the man standing at the opposite end of the bar.

Bass raised his mug in salute and nodded his head. They returned the gesture, and then put their heads together, talking to one another in hushed tones before turning their attention again to Bass.

"Warn't you in heah tha other night?" one of them asked.

"Yep, me and my friends," Bass replied.

"Yeah, I's remember you an them!"

"Why is you drinking in heah? They is another saloony up en Naw Town," the second one spoke up.

"I like it here!" Bass answered with a flat and firm voice.

That was enough to satisfy them and the duo returned to chatting together quietly.

Bass finished his beer and ordered another. He knew how the hot brew would affect him in this heat, but he needed a reason to stay.

Receiving the mug he turned to the two men, "Y'all work in New Town?"

"Yow-sa, at the broom factory; we makes sweep brooms," they both said, picking off a stick of straw from their shirts and showing to Bass.

"Where's this factory located?" Sam asked.

"Why, it's on the corner of May's & Georgetoonee across from Mr. Kopperal's mar-chan-teal store and the bank opposite," the first replied.

"The bank?"

"Yow-sa, the Williamson County bank," the second black man answered.

"Y'all are off from work early; what time of day do y'all quit?"

"The boss-man's been letting us off at noon cause of the heat!"

Hey, you hear about the shooting at the hotel? The woman she owns the place, plugged two robbers. Got both them in their arms!" the second man replied.

"Huh! Do tell!" Bass quipped not showing any concern for the news they offered, "I guess I need to go; pleasure taking with you gents!" Bass said, tipping his hat and excusing himself.

He left his tankard half full on the bar as the two men reached for the mug before the bartender retrieved it and split the warm beer between them, laughing over the white man and their good fortune as he walked out.

Bass stepped out into the noon day heat, worry lines creasing his brow. So much happening in this town, he mused; too many lawmen and a shooting; what is going on here?

Bass didn't like the anxiety he felt, a sense something is brewing and it ain't good.

As soon as he stepped out on the boardwalk he saw two riders coming fast down the avenue. He recognized one of the men as the cattleman from Fort Worth and on the train they robbed near Dallas.

A flash of silver on the rider's chest startled him.

He quickly turned facing to the swinging saloon doors as they passed by. They seemed to be in a hurry and didn't look his way as, over his shoulder, Bass observed them ride on.

The man he recognized never glanced back as Bass spit into the dirt in disgust; the son-of-a-bitch is a damn lawman he realized!

As the two rode off into the distance, the county sheriff exited his office down on the next block and across the street. The big bellied law officer took a quick glance at Bass standing in front of the saloon then walked off in the opposite direction.

'Too many damn lawmen,' Bass mused again in disgust. He turned to his left and meandered slowly back to Mary's Matson's shanty home, trying to portray he is in no hurry in this heat as he passed between buildings to stay out of sight from anyone who might be curious until he found himself near Mary's.

Bass liked her; a pretty Negro laundry woman and prostitute; not too inquisitive about who he is or his partners and very good at love making, he mused. And could she cook! The boys were getting fat from her meals.

They were also restless. The shooting in the new part of town, the night they arrived, brought in several Rangers, who wandered around Round Rock for a couple of days until they rode out again. His boys had to stay out of sight and this bothered them.

Bass knew they will not have long before someone questioned their presence in this burg. Therefore, he decided to hit the depository around three tomorrow.

He acknowledged their planned getaway in this heat would be hard on them and the horses, however, the same conditions will affect anyone following them, thus providing them an edge, he calculated.

They also needed to stock up on supplies for their escape tomorrow. Making a visit the mercantile store this afternoon necessary.

He only hoped that Williamson County bank is full of cash; he is running out of the double eagles he stole from the Union Pacific with Joel Collins.

They had been on the road for a month, seeking relief from the pressures of the law in North Texas and looking to change their luck by finding a bank to rob instead of a train. Waco had three but they were in the middle of that town, too much chance of getting shot off their horses in a getaway. So they drifted further south until they arrived here.

He glanced down at his boots he wore, the old ones with the torn toe, in order to carry the image of a down and out cowboy, with no money. He would change to his newer pair before going to the store he decided and start carrying his irons as he was tired of feeling naked and insecure without them.

His twin Colt pistols and Winchester are brand new, having been bought just a few months ago; all in .44 Winchester. He didn't wear them now, choosing to keep the two Colts and the rifle in its scabbard, out of sight from inquisitive eyes.

His only defensive weapon in his pantaloons pocket; he carried a Pennsylvania derringer, like the one that killed Lincoln.

Bass reached Mary's shanty and stepped around back and found Barnes, Murphy and Jackson lazing under the huge oaks, waving their big brim hats to create a breeze.

"Damn it is hot Sam!" Frank Jackson called out.

"Yeah, too damn hot!" Sam Bass replied, "Pack up your stuff boys, we're leaving tomorrow."

"What about Possibles for the trail?" Seaborne Barnes piped up, "I need some bullets and smokes and we are near out of salt pork and coffee."

"Yeah I know. We'll visit the general store this afternoon, around three.

Right now, I'm taking a siesta. It is almost one thirty, wake me in an hour Frank," Bass directed to Jackson as he walked into the shanty.

Five minutes past the half hour Frank Jackson shook Bass's shoulder.

"Sam...Sam, its time. Two thirty as you asked."

Bass woke in a sweat. The heat of the day had continued to climb; under the trees it was stifling and inside the little two room shack, unbearable.

"Lord, it's hot!" Sam complained.

He sat up and pulled on his newer boots as Frank stood there. As he put on his twin gun belts, Frank spoke up.

"We a-goin armed?"

"Yeah, too many lawmen wandering around; wear your dusters to hide y'all's irons," Bass replied, pulling on his own duster.

"Sam, it's awful damn hot to dress in them dusters. Can't we go unarmed?"

"Frank, do as I say! Tell the others to do so as well!"

Frank Jackson walked outside not saying another word but shaking his head.

As Bass exited the backdoor of Mary's small home, he found his men ready, standing by their horses, dusters covering their guns and heating up their already hot bodies.

"Sam?" a woman's voice called out.

Bass turned to Mary Matson exiting in the back door of her shanty home. She had just returned from delivering laundry.

"You a leaving?" She asked, a frown of concern for being left alone again spreading across her face.

"Tomorrow Mary; we're going to the general store to get some supplies."

"You can't stay a few days longer? I was gonna make you a cake for your natal day on the Sunday," she pleaded, her large brown eyes welling in tears.

Bass remembered he had told her his birthday date, July 21, during one of their love trysts. Now he regretted deciding to hit the bank tomorrow, but there are too many lawmen coming and going to change his plans and seeing that cattleman he recognized who appeared to be a lawman upset him.

They'd make their play the next day, Saturday around three as he had decided. With the broom factory closed for the afternoon, they will find less folks in the street. He figured this as good a time as could be had!

Bass walked over to Mary, kissed her on her cheek and gave her three twenty dollar double eagle gold pieces.

"Why don't you give me this tomorrow?" she asked.

"No Mary, you take this now!" Bass replied, folding her fingers over the coins as he kissed her on her lips.

The four men mounted up and drifted out from under the big oak trees, out on to the dusty road between the shanties toward the newer business district of Round Rock.

The time was near three o'clock Friday, July 19th, 1878 when they rode into history.

On the edge of the new district, Jim Murphy pulled up his horse and said to Bass.

"Sam, why don't I ride around old town and scout for Rangers? We don't want to be blindsided from the rear because we wasn't careful," he finished saying.

The outlaw leader stared at him for a moment before he nodded, "Ok Jim, wait for us at the saloon and keep your horse outta sight."

Murphy touched his fingers to his hat brim as he wheeled his pony around in the direction they had come.

Bass knew he would never lay eyes on Murphy again as the boy rode off.

"What'll be your age Sam?" Seaborn Barnes asked as they cantered on down the Avenue.

"Why, I'll be twenty seven Seab. I'm getting old," Bass answered as he watched Murphy ride away.

"Well, I reckon there ain't nothing to growing old Sam," Frank Jackson quipped.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I care for that," Bass replied as he straightened in his saddle and led his men into the new part of town.

They turned left on May's street, Bass taking care not to glance at the bank on the corner and then right into an alley between the stables and the buildings fronting Georgetown Ave.

They tied their horses off on the back side of the livery corral fence, looking at each other in confidence as they crossed the backstreet, passing through the vacant weed filled lot that separated the barbershop and the broom factory.

They spotted Koppere's mercantile store athwart the avenue from where they were and more important, the bank on the opposite corner, across May Street where they just passed.

They stopped at the end of the empty lot, surveying both ways on the road then crossed, angling to the right toward Koppere's store, stepped up on the red brick landing and walked in.

Parked in a chair in the barber shop next to the front window, waiting his turn for a shave, A.W. Grimes turned to his friend, Maurice Moore, a Travis County Deputy Sheriff sent to Round Rock. They had rangered together under Major Jones and were good friends.

"Hey Maurice, look at this! Three hombres just stepped out on the street wearing dusters."

Deputy Moore walked over and leaned over Grimes shoulder, looking through the glass window.

"Ain't it a bit hot to be dressed in them long coats?" Moore asked.

"Yep, but I suspect if you're going to hide your guns, that's one way. In this heat though, I reckon a dead giveaway!" Grimes replied as he stood up and put on his wide brim hat. "Might as well ask them, huh?"

Moore stated the obvious, "Only three though, ain't enough for the Bass gang."

"Don't matter, pistols are not allowed in the town limits," Grimes retorted, walking out the barbershop door, Moore following.

"You boys be careful," Ranger Ware, who arrived an hour ago from Austin, suggested from under a big apron as he sat in the barber chair, waiting for steaming shaving cream to be lathered onto his face.

"Do it need to be that hot?" he asked as more foam was applied.

A.W. Grimes and Deputy Moore stepped quickly across the avenue toward Kopperal's as they felt the sun's heat bearing down on them. Powdered dust kicked up around their boots as they slid off the tie downs from the hammers of their pistols and closed their tan linen jackets over the pistol butts.

A young man, no more than sixteen, had just pulled his farm wagon up to the corner of Kopperal's and sat there waiting for someone. He removed his old sweat stained straw hat and wiped his face; his yellow hair shining in the afternoon sun.

The boy glanced over his shoulder and waved the dirty headpiece at the two peace officers as they entered the mercantile.

Inside Kopperal's, Sam Bass had taken notice of who was in the store the moment he stepped through the entrance. He spotted the

young cashier, parked on a stool behind the counter, a pretty Mexican woman working at the shelves behind the clerk and a small red haired boy, no more than eight or ten, sitting against the wall and corner of the first row of cupboards, chewing on a liquorish stick.

"May I help you Sir?" the teller stood up and asked Bass.

"We're in need of some items. I guess we can start with tobacco," Bass replied.

"Chew or smoke?"

"Smoking, get me six bags."

The cashier turned to the young woman, "Maria!" he said motioning to her.

The store door opened, its small brass bell tingling, as Grimes and Moore entered. Moore stopped inside the entrance, leaned up against the stone wall, crossed his ankles and started to examine his fingernails, looking out into the street and then at the three men in dusters.

Bass was standing at the counter with his palms flat on the dark wooden top as Grimes walked over and put his elbows down on the scarred surface and leaned forward, his hands cupped together in a prayer fist.

"Howdy," Grimes said to the clerk who nodded, a worried smile spreading on his face.

Several seconds passed with no one speaking.

"Hot today it is," Grimes said finally.

"Damn hot," Bass replied without looking at Grimes.

Some additional silent moments passed as Maria handed six bags of smoking tobacco to the clerk who sat the pocket size sacks in front of Bass, both employees' eyes on the two men, sensing the tension growing between them.

In an easy slow movement, Grimes turned to Bass, noting his riding habit and questioned as he pointed his left hand at Bass's cloak, "It's too hot for a duster, don't you think?"

Bass stepped back with his right leg and pivoted to face Grimes. He stared through the deputy, his eyes seeing nothing but darkness in his future.

He did not answer.

"Y'all wearing a pistol under there?" Grimes pressed, motioning down to Bass's waist.

"Yeah, I got one!" answered Bass as he reached inside his cloak and pulled out his Frontier Colt, pointing the long barrel at Grimes chest, cocking the pistol.

"No, no, wait feller, no, no, don't shoot!" Grimes screamed as he put his left hand up in defense trying to knock the gun away from him, in the same movement he right grappled to clear his linen jacket from his own pistol.

Bass fired, quickly thumbing the hammer and blasted a second time watching Grimes, wrapped in a cloud of grey smoke; fall backward to the wooden floor; blood stains spreading on his shirt inside his now open coat.

Deputy Moore pulled his own .44 caliber Army Colt and blazed at Bass, the bullet hitting him in his gun hand. Then he quickly disappeared in a grey fog as Jackson and Barnes expelled their revolvers multiple times at him.

The room was thick with the sulfuric stench of burnt black powder, almost impossible to see in the grey/white cloud; the only sound the unimaginable loud ringing in their ears from the roar of the revolvers in the confined space of the stone building.

Bass, in pain from Deputy Moore's bullet, reached with his left hand and jerked out his second Colt, his right hand useless, missing the middle two fingers. His first Colt lost somewhere under the smoke on the floor.

"You're Sam Bass!" the red haired youngster bellowed as he ran to the opposite side of the counter, pointing his finger at Sam over the top.

Bass nodded his approval as Maria grabbed the child around his shoulders and pulled him away from the front of the store. The clerk was nowhere to be seen.

"That's right boy, I'm Sam Bass!" he yelled back. "Keep him safe Momacita!" he instructed the woman.

Frank Jackson took hold of Bass's injured arm at the elbow and guided him toward the door.

"Let's go Sam!" he hollered into Bass's ringing ears.

They stepped through the smoke and nearly tripped over Deputy Moore's legs. He was slumped on the floor, his back against the wall.

Not knowing if he was dead or alive, they passed over him not checking in their haste to get out of the store. They burst out the front door and ran into a hail of bullets.

At the first sound of loud but muffled gunfire, Ranger Ware shoved the barbers arm holding the razor out of the way, jumped up from his barber's chair and dashed outside, the left side of his face still covered in lather.

Stopping on the brick walkway, he jerked the white and pale blue checked barber apron from around his neck, pulled out his long barreled Colt Peacemaker from its scabbard and focused on Kopperal's establishment across the way.

A wagon blocked his view of the door.

He motioned to the blond headed boy sitting in the buckboard to move but the boy's attention was on the store and did not see or hear Ware.

Down the avenue to his left, Major Jones had entered the International and Great Northern Railroad telegraph office then quickly spun on his heels and returned to the dusty road when he heard the muffled thundering.

He searched with his eyes for the source of the noise and spotted Ranger Ware standing in front of the barbershop, he weapon drawn. Jones raised his hands out in question, his face and manner asking where the shooting was coming from.

Ware silently pointed his pistol at the hardware store.

Captain Lee jumped off the porch of Gallagher's Inn into the middle of the street and started jogging west toward the sound of the guns, his 66 Winchester carbine in his hands, not sure what was happening.

He spotted a man standing in the back of a wagon across from the telegraph office with a shotgun but wasn't sure why.

A one armed farmer named Stubby, having just arrived in town in his buckboard, stopped across from the telegraph office and reached down beneath his bench and pulled his long barreled shotgun up off the floor boards. He had just taken cover in the bed behind the seat back when the Ranger Captain observed him.

The owner of the livery stables on Liberty Hill Street grabbed his .44 caliber Henry rifle upon hearing the thundering from a city block distant and began crossing the open corral from the barn toward the fence where three horses were tethered in the alley.

His suspicions about the men and ponies tied off behind his stock pen proving founded.

The other customer in the barber shop, a man named Connor, followed Ranger Ware out of the business, carrying his own Henry rifle.

When all of these men, save for the Captain, spotted the three figures in dusters, smoking guns in their hands appearing in the doorway of Kopperal's store, they opened fire.

Sam Bass, Frank Jackson and Seaborn Barnes ducked down with the first onslaught of lead flying their way as bullets bounced off the store's stone walls with a splat, shattering the front window and the door glass.

Barnes sombrero, shot off his head, hung by the lanyard around his neck as they took cover behind the wagon the yellow haired youth still was occupying. They returned fire for a moment before reloading. Frank loaded for Sam.

In side on the floor in the smoke filled store, Deputy Moore, shot through his left lung, raised up on his left elbow, his chest bubbling out of the wound and discharged his Colt at the three men outside the open door, missing his mark.

Seaborn Barnes spun on his right booted heel and fired back at Moore, hitting him in the top of his right shoulder breaking his collar bone. Now out of the fight he crawled painfully from the opening, over the broken glass, to the safety of the buildings front stone wall beneath the now shattered window and passed out.

The yellow haired youth in the buckboard was screaming "Whoa" as he stood up and leaned back, trying to hold tight the reins to his horse as it reared up several times in an attempt to bolt away from the shootout.

A big Negro worker, running from Kopperal's lumber yard behind the mercantile to aid the teenager, vaulted onto the carriage, taking the harness from and yelling at the boy to hide behind the store.

The young man, obscured in the acidic smoke, jumped from his dangerous perch into a bullet fired from one of the citizens or rangers and collapsed in the dust.

All this happened in less than two minutes!

Jackson glanced down at Bass's injured hand; the blood oozing from where his fingers had been, as he handed the freshly loaded pistol back to him.

"Hurt'n much?"

"Damn straight, can't use it at all!"

"We got to get across the street and to the horses!" Seaborn Barnes cried out.

"No shit!" Frank Jackson said, "You want we go now?" he asked heatedly as bullets thudded into the wood of the buckboard.

"No time like the present!" Bass answered the two of them, cocking his revolver in his left hand. He looked up at the big black man fighting to hold the horse and yelled.

"Go on... get the hell outta here!"

With that, the trio, five fresh loaded Colts in their hands, dashed out into the hot dusty street as the wagon pulled away, yelling and firing in every direction as thick gun smoke rapidly filled the heated dry air between the buildings lining the avenue, making targets difficult to discern.

Bullets whizzed past or kicked up dust around them as shots are fired blindly by all into the grey cloud.

The three began to wheeze, the air becoming hard to breathe as they ran through the stinging fog; their vision blurring.

Barnes had the best eyes and quickest reactions as he spotted Stubby shooting at them with his shotgun and he returned one shot, hitting the buckboard seat back.

The one armed farmer jumped from the wagon and ran to the side of the building on the corner next to him.

When Ranger Ware could make out in the cloud the forms of the three men crossing in the middle of the avenue, he pulled the trigger on his .45; nothing happened.

Realizing his revolver was empty he ducked quickly into the tonsorial, expecting a bullet in his back as he raced for his rifle.

Connor retreated likewise after firing eight of his sixteen rounds stored in the magazine under the barrel.

He found himself standing alone and it seemed these three crazy outlaws were running right at him through the fog; screaming like insane demons and shooting in every direction, heading into the vacant lot between the barber shop and the broom factory.

Major Jones had fired his pistol at the bandits as they disappeared into the smoke and stopped to eject the spent shells and reload.

Three bullets crashed into the stone of the telegraph office above him, showering him with pieces of tiny rock. He ducked his head as he dashed around the corner and out of sight.

Captain Lee ran up the Avenue, he had not fired a shot yet. Drowned in sweat and blowing from the exertion in the heat of the day, he raced to the side of the building where Major Jones sought cover.

"Bass I figure, three of them I think," the Major explained as he started placing rounds into his pistol; unaware, in his excitement, that four of the five ejected shells were unfired. He had only fired one bullet!

"I can't tell a damn thing with all the smoke!" Lee cursed, stealing a glance around the corner of the telegraph office. He realized that the shooting had stopped for a moment then started up again behind the barbershop on the backstreet.

He dashed across the avenue, past Stubby and down the side of the building toward the alley entrance on Lampasas Street.

Sam Bass and his partners reached the vacant lot opposite Kopperal's and dashed between the buildings. They almost reached the back lane where their horses were waiting when they faced rapid rifle fire from behind the fence surrounding the corral.

The shooter was hidden behind their ponies which danced back and forth, screaming in fear, pulling in vain against the reins that were tied to the railing.

Jackson spotted the rifleman shooting at them, who was now fiddling with his rifle; it had jammed. Frank fired, hitting the edge of the top rail, missing the rifleman.

The man ducked down, scurrying back across the horse pen to the safety of the barn.

A big boom echoed between the buildings from a large caliber rifle. It came from the front of the vacant lot; from Ranger Ware and his .44 Winchester model 1873 as he stepped out of the cloud of lingering grey smoke.

"Ohhhhh!" Bass cried at the same instant.

Barnes turned and fired at Ware but missed as he struggled to mount his spinning, dancing pony.

Conner appeared alongside Ware with his Henry and took aim as Frank bounced a bullet off the stone building next to his head, peppering his face and eyes with debris, causing him to drop to the ground.

Another volley of fire from the two rifles and Seaborn Barnes, who had mounted his horse, was flung hard out of his saddle, blood, flesh and bone splashing over Jackson and Bass and everything else within ten feet.

Bass grew weak; a .44 caliber bullet had entered his back, just over his pelvis and had exited out below his stomach, about six inches above his left groin. He tried, with no success, to mount his Bay mare as Jackson came to his aid.

Bullets sprayed around them, smashing into their saddle pillions and cantle's, bed rolls, pommels, saddle bags and slicing round holes in their dusters but strangely not hitting the horses or the two men.

"Leave me Frank; I'm done, save yourself!" Bass cried to Jackson, his arms and legs growing weak.

"Get on your horse Sam!" Jackson ordered, lifting Bass up by his armpits. He was just twenty years old and did not expect to see another birthday at that moment as he stood with a cool head behind Bass and helped him mount his steed.

The shooting stopped again; Connor was out of ammunition for his Henry and no spares; Ranger Ware busy reloading his Winchester.

Jackson finally succeeded in helping Bass fork his bay mare and he mounted his own panicking horse. He spun his animal around and found Barnes spread-eagled in the dirt on his back, a bloody mess of flesh and bone where his face had been.

Shots boomed out again, this time from the east end of the alley on Lampasas Street, echoing off of the buildings, as Captain Lee started running up the lane toward them, levering the action and firing his rifle from his hip as he ran.

Ware, reloaded, joined in with Lee as the two bandits made their way west out of the backstreet.

Bullets again zinging around them, striking the wood fence and ground, kicking up dirt and splinters, showering the duo and their horses as Jackson grabbed Bass's horse's reins, leading him out of the ally while propping his leader up in his saddle; somehow he managed to reload his own pistols as they rode on to May Street.

Frank led Sam across May Street turning onto the diagonal entrance of Round Rock Avenue, riding fast into and through the north side of old town, past Mary's shanty and then a larger residence with a little girl sitting in a tree swing next to it.

"Get in the house!" Frank yelled at the child, remembering the blond boy, afraid of bullets striking her from their pursuers.

Eight minutes had passed since Bass had shot the deputy.

The two crossed Brushy Creek and finally turned north on the Georgetown Road for a few miles and west, out into the countryside.

"We need to follow them as soon as possible!" Major Jones yelled at Captain Lee as he ran up, gasping for breath in the hot polluted air. "They'll get away if they reach the cedar breaks!" he cried out.

"I think Bass has been wounded," Lee replied.

"No matter, assemble the men and let's go!"

"What about McGowan, we promised him support!"

"Can't help that now; Bass is a bigger prize!" Jones answered over his shoulder as he walked away; yelling to Ranger Ware to get some men to pick up the body of the dead bandit in the alley.

Lee understood what the Major meant, Bass was political. Capturing him would prove to the Texas Senate the Rangers are still an effective police force.

"Sorry Emmitt," he whispered, shaking his head.

He made for the corral and climbed over the fence. He scanned the horses for useable ones; all were prancing about in fear from the shooting and none appeared strong enough to ride today.

Most were spent from the trip in yesterday and needed at least a day to rest; only three mules seemed fit to saddle.

That didn't mean anything.

The adrenalin finally spent in his body, he started to settle down. To ride out after Bass today will not be rewarding. There was much to clean up here, tallying the dead and wounded.

There was plenty of time to chase after Bass tomorrow; besides Bass had been hit, maybe more than once.

Pulling his sombrero from his head and wiping the sweat that flooded down his face, he stared up into the sky and worried for Emmitt McGowan.

He should have ordered McGowan not to go and never promised him support, he mused sadly. He didn't like breaking a promise, especially to a fellow Ranger, even one who was a temporary one.

What will become of him, Lee worried.

THE EVIL OF MEN

McGowan crawled out from unconscious sleep violently; he fought and clawed his way to reality, his face and head on fire. He tried to sit up and discovered he was bound, his hands tied behind him and his legs at the ankles.

The rough rocky surface he laid on pushed sharp points into his back, buttocks and skull. The setting sun shined direct in his eyes, blinding him to what or who is around him. He heard voices, but did not recognize any.

He found himself chewing on something that he tried to spit out and couldn't. He finally worked a tooth from the left side of his jaw and pushed it out of his mouth along with thick congealed blood; from his nose he realized.

Emmitt began to feel pain, his face, head, chest and stomach burned with what seemed like fire. It hurt to take a deep breath, his ribs on his left screamed at him each time he sucked in deeply.

He had been worked over good he mused as he groaned involuntary.

"Hey boss, he's coming around!" a man cried out.

"Stand him up and bring him here."

Fingers roughly untied the leather strips from his ankles and other rough hands grabbed his arms and stood him up, pointing him toward the sun and pushed him forward.

He stumbled over some small rocks, regained his balance and continued to walk as his vision started to clear revealing the promontory overlooking the Colorado River, several hundred feet below.

"Sure seems like I've the final laugh Mr. Ranger," Todd Jenkins remarked as he drank deeply from his canteen.

Emmitt stood and glared at Jenkins.

"Hey, your tongue forgets how to work?" Jenkins said as his men laughed.

"I think you're sure in a particularly bad way, with all the effort you did trying to ruin my enterprise," he continued, "And now here you are with me and the boys. No help, not a soul gonna come rescue you."

"I don't think so," Emmitt retorted, "A posse is on their way."

The rustler leader laughed as his men followed suit, slapping each other on their backs.

"You are wrong Mr. Detective Ranger! Shortly after you lit outta town, there were a big shooting in that little burg," Jenkins sat down and leaned back against a small sapling, crossing his arms and ankles, relaxed as he enjoyed his moment of triumph.

"Them Rangers are out now looking for Ol Sam Bass; seems they done forget about you," Jenkins replied smiling.

Emmitt didn't believe this at first but remembered the familiar face coming out of the saloon in the old part of town. 'Bass' he thought, 'should've known when he rode past him!'

"And I've another idea for you. Me an Ol' Calley here is gonna have our way with that young woman friend of yours," he laughed, "Right after we finish off your partner. That son-of-a-bitch won't get away this time!"

Anger and fear swept across Emmitt's face. With the Rangers out looking for Bass; Ben and Verna would be unprotected!

"Goodness, you don't look so good Mr. Detective Ranger. Something I said?" the rustler leader laughed again, along with the other bandits.

"Hey boss, you want we cut him up like the others?" one of the rustlers, Jon Rogers asked.

Jenkins didn't respond at first, thinking and looking at McGowan. His hate for this man immense; this detective and his partner had completely ruined his operation, plans and dreams.

"Yeah, and make sure y'all distribute the pieces so when the animals finish feeding his bones can't be located," Jenkins answered after a few minutes, then turned and glanced behind him toward the noise coming from cross the canyon. His men did the same.

Thunder rolled over the landscape and the river canyon to the west. A thunderstorm was building, growing and moving fast. Bolts of lightning could be seen striking the ground three miles past the far rim.

The storm's dark black clouds rolled upward, as the frontal gust raced over the gorge and toward the group on the promontory.

"Hot damn!" one of the rustlers hollered out, "Rain!"

Jenkins rose to his feet, continuing to eye the storm brewing on the other rim before motioning to Calley, who stood behind everyone, enjoying the show.

"Pay Billy; he needs to stay here and help distribute our guest; after he can ride with us."

"Right boss! Boys, take McGowan over yonder and get ready," Calley ordered to the four men in front of him as he pointed toward a old oak tree growing near the edge.

As he turned to Billy, he put a twenty dollar gold piece in his hand, "You did good boy. But now you gotta prove to us you got the stomach to ride with us."

Billy shook his head up and down in acknowledgement, a sickening look growing on his face.

"We gonna kill him first?"

"I reckon. I ain't that un-human."

"Ok," Billy Johnson sighed, showing some relief, "It is just I ain't never cut up a man before."

"Well boy, it's like cutting up beef! No different," Calley eyed the young man coldly.

The storm was moving fast and had passed over the west side of the river canyon, barreling toward the promontory as Jenkins walked to collect his bay tied off near the trail up to the rim above them and retrieved Calley's as well.

Ol Blu was secured to the same tree and was jumping around, snorting, agitated. Blu lashed out with his hind hooves and almost connected with Jenkins who avoided the flashing missiles.

"Y'all finish this job and meet us in the box!" he hollered at the men over the growing thunder as he handed Calley the reins to his mustang.

"And shoot this damn horse!" he cried out into the wind.

Jenkins and Calley guided their ponies, toward the north edge juncture of the rock promontory and the east main canyon wall, to a path that lead off along the wall below the rim and meandered around down to the river bottom. A tricky switch back trail, narrow in places, large rocks to pass between and steep drop offs.

The two disappeared down into the canyon as Emmitt's hands were untied and he was backed up against the lone oak growing on the south edge of the jutting piece of rock they stood on; behind him was a sheer drop of at least one hundred feet.

No escape that way!

As the rustlers struggled to push his arms around the trunk of the oak; the frontal winds of the advancing storm finally swept across, blowing off everyone's sombreros.

"Yee-haw let it blow!" Tham Hartman exclaimed excitedly, looking into the approaching gale.

Jon Rogers and Hartman, not attending to McGowan, ran to grab their hats which were still on the promontory, not over the edge like the others, when Rogers straightened up and viewed the blue roan reeling and snorting, agitating the bandit's ponies.

"Where you going?" Albright called out as he and the fourth man fought their struggling prisoner.

"The boss said shoot this damn horse, and that's what I'm about to do, before he scares off ours!"

Still fighting the men who had his arms and suffering the fists throw into his face, Emmitt could not believe his eyes as Ol Blu rose up on his hind legs, breaking free from the scrub brush he was tied to and charged Jon Rogers who had pulled his pistol.

Everything seemed in slow motion to Emmitt as the shooter took careful and deliberate aim at the charging pony, firing one shot.

The blue roan reared up, snorting and fell over to the right, skidding forward up against a large rock protruding from the earth, the saddle striking the stone, breaking off the pommel and part of the cantle along with destroying Emmitt's Henry rifle; the butt stock smashed off and the top tang bent.

"Noooo!" McGowan cried out, enraged beyond anything he has ever felt before.

He jerked free from the grasp of Jim Albright and back handed his fist into the man's nose. To his left, he spun, shoving his knuckles into the surprised accomplice's mouth, breaking off his front teeth.

In pain, Albright turned away as his hands went to his face, exposing a flat glass whiskey flask tucked in the waist band of his pantaloons.

McGowan grabbed the container and broke it against the temple of the second man who stood in shock holding his bloody mouth with one hand, McGowan's left arm with the other, collapsing like a deck of cards.

The rustler Albright staggered around toward Emmitt as Emmitt spun free and jammed the broken flask into his neck, severing his carotid artery.

The bandit reached for his throat, choking and stumbled backward close to the edge. Billy Johnson, watching all this, moved forward and pushed the dying cattle thief on to the rocks below; the rustler letting out a gurgling scream until he landed with a splat.

The young trail driver stepped around Emmitt, Colt in hand and fired. The bullet striking the man on Emmitt's left in the chest as he was rising from the ground, a Bowie knife in his grasp.

The single shot killed him instantly.

At the same time Billy arched his body and fell backwards, dropping his Colt. The third rustler Tham Hartman, who was holding his sombrero in one hand, his Starr .36 caliber revolver in the other, had fired and hit Billy; the bullet severing his spine.

McGowan dropped down and picked up the first rock he could put his fingers on, a sharp flat one, half the size of his hand and threw it spinning vertically like a mill blade, striking Hartman in the forehead above the bridge of his nose.

The rustler fell on his knees, mouth opened wide in surprise. As his eyes rolled up he sank sideways to the ground, the stone embedded deep into his skull.

The remaining cattle thief, Jon Rogers, began firing his pistol wildly while running toward Emmitt; lead hitting the tree and whining past Emmitt's ears until he stumbled over the same rock Emmitt had earlier and fell to his hands and knees.

Emmitt knelled and picked up the revolver next to Billy's limp hand, pointed and fired one bullet at the rustler, exploding the top back of his head off as he was attempting to standup.

For a moment Emmitt stood staring at each man then at Blu as the wind quieted down.

Fresh pain grew in his heart as he dropped the gun and ran to Blu's body. He sank to his knees by the animal, cried out again in anguish as the blood oozed from Blu's forehead, dead center in his white diamond marking.

Rain started falling, a few drops at first, followed by a sudden deluge as if the sky had opened up from the Angels weeping on him and the bodies of the fallen.

The wind kicked up a tremendous blowing, pushing the rain sideways and beating against Emmitt as he took in the damage to his Henry and his leather hardware.

The Sharps rifle appeared to still be in good shape.

His eyes red with rage as the deluge washed them clear of tears; Emmitt retrieved his Sharps from its scabbard, reached into his saddle bags and grasped a tin of .50-70 cartridges.

Head lowered to the downpour, he began to load the heavy weapon as he stumbled toward the north edge of the bluff. His mind on Jenkins, he handled the rifle not thinking but with learned habit as he thumbed the hammer to half cock, levered the breech down, slid in a copper cartridge and closed the breech-block into place with the lever; he completed the process by cocking the weapon to fire.

McGowan began searching through the blowing rain for signs of the two men.

The storm had moved over the canyon blocking out the remaining rays of the setting sun; becoming dark on the jutting finger of a bluff and its bloody scene.

Down in the gorge it was pitch black with only flashing bolts of thunder and lightning revealing the river and minute glimpses of Jenkins and Calley struggling down the steep, narrow trail toward the bottom of the abyss.

Emmitt was rewarded with one glimpse with a bright flash and raised his rifle. Moments later, he received a second look as the sky lit up; the gun roared, he reloaded and waited with the Sharps at his shoulder.

Again a flashing bolt simultaneous with thunder; he glimpsed the rustlers and fired as the dark closed in once more; unsure if he was landing his rounds close or not in the darkness, but even with rain in his eyes his rage wouldn't let him stop!

The third bolt flashed, splitting into three fingers, shaking the air and ground. Emmitt spotted the white glistening faces of the bandits. Their heads turned up so he knew the two were aware of the shots directed at them.

A forth flash and he stood raising his rifle above his head and bellowed at the top of his voice.

”JENKINNNS!”

He fired again.

Jenkins and Calley had traveled down less than one hundred feet below the promontory when the winds crashed into their side of the canyon. Their horses, nervous and jumping around, caused them difficulty in negotiating the narrow trail.

As the deluge started falling, the decent became worse in the growing darkness with the storm passing over them in the early evening. In less than a heartbeat they are soaked to their skin, a welcome relief, however, washing away the dirt and salt from weeks of sweat accumulated from the hot summer sun.

At first not aware of the gun fire nor did they notice the sound of the bullet whining off the stones behind their horses; the second shot grabbed their attention but unsure what it meant. Their two sets of eyes searched in the wet darkness along the jutting bluff, expecting to find their gang.

The third bullet smashed into the rocks in front of them. They glanced at each other with surprise before staring up toward the promontory, not believing five men can be defeated by one man who had been bound and tied when they left.

The fourth lightning flash revealed Emmitt towering above them, his rifle held high over his head, bellowing. For a brief second his image morphed, in their eyes, into an ancient winged warrior more than ten times the height of a normal man, dressed in strange armor with shield and raised sword, before reverting back to the magnified figure of McGowan.

Jenkins' name echoed all around them.

A dagger of fear lanced through their hearts.

McGowan's form had been enlarged and enhanced by an unusual quirk of nature as the windblown, driving rain created a huge prism fostering an illusion making him seem to appear almost sixty feet tall; his voice amplified by the same phenomenon. The image that momentarily appeared, boiled up from the fearful recesses of their dark souls and childhood images of St. Michael in Bibles long ago discarded.

Moments later another bullet ricocheted off the rocks around them.

“Oh Lord!” Calley, not given to faith, cried out. His body jerked in fright as he perceived the face of death.

“Let's go!” Jenkins exclaimed, fear almost stopping his own heart.

What kind of man is this McGowan? Jenkins shuddered. Never in his life had he run into someone like him! No doubt his men, all five, are defeated, lying lifeless above him in this rain.

He resisted believing it, but he couldn't fathom any other answer.

The cattle rustling master shivered at the phenomenon he witnessed. Fear griping his soul; he knew he had to kill McGowan soon or he would be dead himself.

They eased themselves down on the dark slippery trail below eyesight of the promontory. They felt safer the lower they dropped into the canyon but badly shaken of what they had witnessed. Each planned his next move.

They did not, for the first time in ten years, consult one another on their respective plans.

For Jenkins and his gunman, the end of their ranching plan was apparent, all because of McGowan and Maxwell they reasoned.

The master cattle thief swore to himself as he sensed the walls closing in, his options dwindling as desperation griped his soul.. He began slowly to lose his rationality and his mind.

Calley became lost in his own darkness!

DISPAIR!

The rest of the night was cool and quiet, almost serene, compared to the scorching hot days preceding the violent storm. Water dripped off tree leaves and small little run offs continued to gurgle for several hours until the excess had been exhausted.

The animals on the river rim, from large predators to the smallest rodent, came out from their caves, shelters and burrows to enjoy the moisture and cool air.

Of course, dinner is served all night as some of the rodents and other small mammals are devoured by the predators.

Emmitt McGowan paid no attention. He sat leaning against Blu's still warm carcass, knees up with his arms around them, head bowed in defeat. The greatest sorrow he had ever experienced racking his body, over shadowing the pain from the beating he had just received earlier in the evening.

Despair consumed him, anguish clamped down on his heart. All had gone wrong! Life seemed lost! He was as helpless as a child with no parent.

Blu is dead and the other horses, belonging to Jenkins' gang, had run off in the storm.

Verna and Ben were, without a doubt, not protected and at the mercy of these two mad men.

Emmitt cursed himself for not thinking things through before riding out with Billy Johnson. So obsessed with capturing Jenkins, he left the woman he loved and his closest friend, who is injured, alone. He could not forgive his own stupidity for this; never!

If what Jenkins said is true the Rangers will not come this way for a day or two.

He laughed at his self, shameful of his giddy planning three weeks ago on the train to Austin. How things can change in a heartbeat, he mused.

As he remembered the worry and love on Verna's face, he wondered about her reaction to the events in town and the posse not following him as promised.

He knew she'd give Captain Lee and Major Jones hell over this!

He chuckled lightly at the thought of her voicing her indignation, 'God, how he loved her', he realized as he started weeping. He would probably never see her again.

"Lord," he prayed as he peered up into the clear summer night sky.

"Give me the chance to make this right. I need your help Lord!" he said earnestly.

Emmitt put his hands down beside his hips and leaned his beaten and bruised body back against Blu's wet carcass. Moments later he fell into a fitful sleep, oblivious to the movement of Blu's chest rising and falling gently.

SUN RISE

The early morning sounds of nature coming awake around the rim of the Colorado Canyon gradually grew louder as birds flew in the quiet stillness chasing insects. Animals, large and small, scurried to their lairs, burrows and dens. Some with full stomachs of food and all filled with fresh water.

Emmitt woke to the warming but still damp air and to the snorting of a horse. He searched over his shoulder and spotted the red roan Billy Johnson rode, standing next to the tree where Johnson had left the animal tied yesterday, looking at him.

The strawberry colored pony had returned after breaking loose in the storm with the others.

Emmitt stretched his legs and rolled over on his side to rise, stiff from sitting on the hard rock all night asleep. His ribs ached from the beating he received yesterday and his face hurt.

He knew his lower lip is busted and his nose was twice in size but he did not think broken. His mouth seemed strange with the missing tooth and his jaw on the left swollen.

‘Lord knows what this face looks like!’ he mused to himself.

He jumped up suddenly, hearing the same horse snorting again. He had assumed the sound came from the red roan when he first awoke, but he was wrong.

He stepped away backwards, staring in bewildered amazement as Ol’ Blu rolled upright, gave Emmitt a quick glance before pulling his forelegs under his chest and straightening them to raise his body up, followed by his backside with his hind-legs; his hind legs collapsed.

The horse made three attempts to push himself off the ground; finally succeeding to stand, he shook his head several times as if he was clearing it.

Emmitt stood frozen. He could not believe what he was seeing.

“Thank you Lord!” Emmitt said in quick prayer towards the blue sky as he walked slowly toward Blu.

He took the reins hanging from the bit in Blu’s mouth and pulled his nose down to examine his wound.

Where Emmitt thought a bullet hole, instead he found a piece of skin and fur of the white diamond forehead marking missing and a slight hint of bone showing, gouged out of the mustang’s skull.

“Old boy,” Emmitt whispered quietly, “I reckon you have one hell of a headache!”

Blu shook his head again and nuzzled Emmitt’s face.

McGowan laughed as he rubbed the animal’s nose and neck; he stepped around Blu, examining the animal for other damage, exploring the scrapes and cuts in the mustangs right side, checking his hooves and legs as he untied the chest halter, girth and tie down strap of the ruined saddle; allowing the wreckage to drop as he continued the survey.

He pulled the horse-blanket free of the mangled leather and wood and used it to rub down the still wet mustang. After, he let Blu graze on the sparse grass growing near the trail leading up to the rim.

McGowan walked over to the red roan and checked him out, untying the lead rope, which had broken during the storm, from around his neck and dropped reined him next to Blu to eat.

Emmitt took a quick glance at Billy’s saddle, stopped and examined it more closely. Expensive furniture he realized; too costly for a regular ranch hand. He wondered if Kinkade ever noticed one of his hands with this; at least pay some interest in how the boy afforded such a saddle; but Emmitt realized he didn’t take heed of it ether.

The mount is plain enough to not attract attention yet its construction, at close look, showed many features of a ‘Sunday’ throne. Something a foreman or a ranch owner could only afford.

Emmitt finally turned toward the spooky scene on the promontory; the bodies washed clean of their blood from the rain lay as they dropped yesterday. He examined each man, checking if life existed in any; he removed their gun belts and weapons and tossed them into a pile as he determined they carried poorly maintained firearms.

Three were the 1851 Navy Colt cap and ball, converted to the .38 Colt cartridges; one a .36 caliber Starr percussion, all of them dirty and rusty.

"Junk!" he said. He wondered where his new Colt is. Surely they didn't toss it, as his was a better firearm than what he recovered so far among the dead.

On one of the men, the last man he shot, he liberated his gold timepiece which had been taken from him the day before.

When he reached Billy Johnson's body, he discovered the boy still breathing and shivering in his rain soaked clothing, even in the warming air.

Emmitt hurried back to where he dropped his saddle blanket after rubbing Ol' Blu down and brought it to Billy and covered his body.

"I can't feel my legs or arms and hard to breathe!" he groaned hoarsely.

Emmitt rolled Billy on his side, tore his shirt open and saw the small dark gaping wound in the middle of the upper back, a palm width from the base of his neck.

"I believe your back's broke Billy. You got a hole the size of a dime dead center between the shoulder blades."

"I was a thinking it wore something like that," he sobbed quietly, "I'm done for, ain't I?"

"I'm afraid so son," Emmitt sat back on his haunches his eyes searching the young man's face.

"I want to thank you for what you did yesterday," Emmitt said.

"I reckon I did the right thing," Billy whispered.

"Why did you do this Billy?"

"I didn't like the idea of cutting a man up. Not decent; knew I wore on the wrong side."

"What made you spy for Jenkins?"

"Excitement, money and Kinkade," he cried ruefully.

"Kinkade?" Emmitt replied, startled, "I figured he thought the world of you!"

"Yeah, he treated me fair until one day he whipped me in front of the men," he murmured, "After; I wanted to get back at him."

"Big mistake Billy," Emmitt said, shaking his head.

"I reckon so, considering things now."

"For what reason did Kinkade whip you?"

"I was with a darkie woman in town. Kinkade found me and made me walk to the ranch where he proceeded to whip my back and legs with a bull snake yelling at me to never bed a black again."

Emmitt shook his head. He could not understand some people's hatred of Negros, they were just people.

"Billy, you should of quit Kinkade and found another job."

"Kinkade is my pa. I couldn't leave."

"No shit?" Emmitt snorted, trying to not laugh. 'What a mess that family is in' he thought.

"And your mother?"

"She didn't live with us, she was a mulatto woman down in Galveston. She serviced sailors when they're in port. Before I wore born he and her lived together and beget me," he answered and started sobbing quietly before continuing.

"I found out from two of the hands as they a-tended the wounds on my back. I did not understand why Kinkade did that to me is the reason they broke their silence. Kinkade had made them swear not to tell me, he would when the time was right they told me.

They said he owned a general store in Houston and she stayed with him till I was in her belly. He left her to buy the ranch after she bore me and never sent for us.

She did what she had to do to feed me.

She died when I turned ten years. I lived a hard life after that, working for folk's for food and a place to sleep; usually a shed or chicken coop; something with a roof.

Kinkade found out she had died and come to Galveston to find me two years later, on the streets. He had brung me to his spread and put me to work. I was twelve at that time."

"Your age today Billy?"

"I just turned nineteen."

Emmitt tied the remaining pieces together without Billy's help. What a sorry tale this child is telling. He understood now how Kinkade's selfish anguish about his own family had affected the lives of all the ranchers, him, Verna and Ben. The man is some piece of work.

"Billy, you ought to think on getting yourself right with the Lord, he's giving you the chance these other boys did not get." Emmitt offered, feeling an odd compassion for the dying young man.

"I've been thinking on that, what do I need to do?"

"Ask for forgiveness, you've given your life for me, I reckon the Good Lord will listen to you."

"I don't know how, would you help me?"

"I'm no preacher understand, I can tell you what I think you should say, are you ready?"

"Yeah, I am."

Emmitt sat with Billy for a while longer, anxious to ride back to Round Rock but just not willing to leave the boy like this, he stayed by his side.

Later in the morning he heard horses and men talking. Grabbing Billy's revolver from where he had dropped it the day before, he looked toward the trail off the rim and observed about twenty riders coming down.

Rangers, by the glint of silver off their chests but only two; one of them Captain Lee. The rest he realized as Jarrell's and Kinkade's hands and he recognized Worthington's men; Riley and Brushy Bill.

He patted Billy on his head and laid the Colt down next to his dying body before rising up and walking the thirty yards to the posse who had stopped near Blu and the red roan gelding.

Everyone stared at him and the scene on the protruding bluff with open mouths until he reached the Ranger officer, a questioning look on his face.

"I'm so sorry Emmitt. Major Jones put the hunt for Sam Bass over you," the Captain said as he held out his hand to Emmitt who took it.

"There are more Rangers in town now than any place in Texas I believe, and still some coming tomorrow!" Lee continued, "And none of their horses are fit, having ridden them all day and night in this heat."

"Yeah, Jenkins said Bass struck the town; how many dead?" Emmitt replied as he nodded his head, understanding Lee's position, he could not fault him for yesterday.

"What happened here?" Lee asked instead of answering Emmitt's question.

"Billy worked for Jenkins and led me into a trap," he replied noticing Kinkade stopped halfway in the dismounting of his horse, disbelief on his face.

"I see, a rat, so we were right all along," Lee answered, his eyes shifting momentarily to Kinkade.

"In Round Rock we have three deceased and one wounded. There's a Deputy Moore from Austin who is shot in the lung and shoulder; dead are Deputy A.W. Grimes and a bystander; a kid who got caught in the cross fire and one of the bandits.

"Grimes is gone? That's bad, I liked him; he was a good lawman and decent fellow," Emmitt interrupted before Lee continued with his report.

"We found Bass this morning early, about three miles outside of town, shot through. He ain't long for this world. Some boys are still looking for the last ones."

"The hundred men?" Emmitt said sarcastically.

"Yeah!" Captain Lee laughed.

"Who was the kid?" Emmitt asked fearing for Jeffery.

"Didn't learn his name only he is about twelve or fourteen, blond headed boy."

Emmitt reported, pointing to the bodies; his heart relived the child the Captain spoke of isn't Jeffery. "Four dead; three here and one over the edge over yonder,"

"Billy Johnson is over next to the oak, still alive. His spine is broken, shot through by this one; he motioned with his hand toward Tham Hartman's body.

He turned on these men, killed two before he got it. I don't think he has long," Emmitt again pointed to Billy, lying under the saddle blanket.

Kinkade, grief and utter disbelief written on his face, started walking to Billy when Emmitt took him by the right arm.

"Your son needs to make peace with you. You should understand he saved my life yesterday," Emmitt said, staring hard into Kinkade's eyes.

In shocked acknowledgement at Emmitt's comment, he nodded silently and moved hesitantly toward the boy, pulling his gloves off.

"How exactly did all this happen here and what happened to you?" Captain Lee asked, looking at the swollen nose and bruised face of Emmitt's.

"Too much to tell now Captain; just say, we had our last dance; Jenkins' boys and me," he answered, opening and closing his right hand; it was stiff.

"Kinkade's boy said these four are the core of Jenkins gang. Anyway I learned where the rest of his men are hiding; mostly drunkards, petty thieves and drifters he uses to move his cattle according to Billy.

Jenkins and Calley are on their way there as of last evening, leaving me with these boys," Emmitt said as he nodded his head toward the bodies.

He gave a short version of the events and the story Billy had recited to him about Kinkade as his father.

He did not think it made sense to discuss the tale further concerning the whipping and Billy's mother. The boy is dying and he should be left in peace.

The Rangers and ranch hands moved the dead to the south edge of the promontory. They began to cover them with rocks for a rudimentary burial; digging was impossible. The work took two hours to complete.

They had almost finished when Kinkade walked up carrying Billy's gun belt and Colt, his eyes wet. He nodded toward the Ranger Captain who instructed his men to carry the boy's corpse to the other side of the bluff away from the rustlers.

The men placed the saddle-blanket Emmitt had covered the boy with over the body and began covering him with stones.

"I'll come back later and fetch him home. He deserves to be buried next to where I'll lay when my turn comes," Kinkade said to both Emmitt and the Captain.

"I owe you a deep apology McGowan. I never considered Billy would do such a thing. But I reckon I didn't treat him like a son and I got what I deserve."

"Your hot headed anger drove him to this," Emmitt hissed and walked off, the rage from last night growing again.

"I know, I know!" Kinkade cried out at Emmitt's back, the anguish he felt almost too much to take.

"We're going after Jenkins and his men. Billy told McGowan where they are hold up. Are you able to ride?" Captain Lee inquired of Kinkade.

"I am; I need to make it right for my boy."

Kinkade turned to Emmitt who was caressing Blu's neck grazing next to his son's horse, "He said your mustang was dead?"

"Yeah, I reckon he would think so. Blu got shot in the head last night during the fight, but only a glancing blow, just knocked him out. He's a bit loopy right now, not fit to carry me."

"Billy willed you his horse Strawberry and his saddle. Here's his six-shooter and his holster. You can have them too, along with his rifle in the scabbard," Kinkade said as he handed the holstered weapon to Emmitt, motioning with his other hand to where Strawberry stood.

Emmitt remembered using the revolver the night before, firing at the man who shot at him, "Thanks Kinkade. I appreciate this," Emmitt replied as he took the offered appeasement.

He pulled the pistol from the elegantly tooled Mexican double looped pouch and closely examined it for the first time. A fairly new Colt Frontier Six Shooter, chambered for the same round as the 73 Winchester rifle, he remembered it had quite a kick. The .44 Winchester cartridges are potent.

"How did---" Emmitt started to ask why Billy could afford a gun like this. Twenty dollars is about two months' wages for any ranch hand, and the fancy saddle on Strawberry is more than a year's!

Kinkade, fighting to keep the tears from his eyes as his men turned their heads, some sad or in disgust, sensed McGowan's question before he asked it, "I bought the pistol for him, he chipped in for the fancy holster as he wanted this.

You understand how young boys are? Always a-wanting the latest and newest things,"

"And the saddle?"

"You noticed? Yeah, that too; but he caught the red roan himself and tried to tame him alone. The damn horse still needs attention."

"I'll handle that," Emmitt replied, sympathy and contempt for the man crowding his emotions. The man's world is completely turned over, all his own doing McGowan mused.

Lee interrupted, "Emmitt, two of the boys will escort your mustang back to town if you can ride; you appear like you're done in."

Emmitt cocked his head around to the Captain and laughed sarcastically, "Yes, I can ride. I've some arresting to do. I want to end this thing now," he answered as he returned his attention to Blu,

caressing him on his nose and kissing him, murmuring to the mustang to be a good boy and he would see him in town later.

Emmitt put his arms around the animal's neck as he gave a strong hug. Blu dropped his long muzzle over Emmitt's left shoulder and pulled his masters body against his chest. They stood for a moment, human and animal embraced, as the other men stared in amazement, embarrassment or understanding envy.

McGowan picked up his saddle bags and scabbard for the Sharps, strapping them on the fancy rig of the red roan. After sliding the heavy rifle into its leather pouch, he tightened the girth and belly strap and swung up on to Strawberry as the mustang twisted his neck around, inquisitive of his new rider.

Captain Lee reined his mount up next to Emmitt a quizzical look on his face, whispering, "Is Miss Gallagher aware you're in love with your horse Emmitt?"

He smiled as a small laugh deep from his lungs escaped; he winced at the pain from his right side.

"Yeah, she understands there is a history Captain," he replied as they rode back up the trail to the rim in a single line.

SHOOTING AT RATS

Billy Johnson had told Emmitt the location of Jenkins hide out along the eastern rim of the Colorado River Canyon. Hidden by thick cedar breaks, sycamore, cotton woods, hackberry, some mesquite and big live oak trees around the top and down by the entrance it was difficult to find.

Billy had discovered the place three or four years earlier after he wounded a buck deer and tracked it into the box canyon cut back into the wall of the east rim. The hideout proved invisible; a cave gouged out by water eons ago, now with a collapsed roof and hidden behind a huge rock slab.

Impossible to see due to a switch back entrance and only found by placing one's self between two points located across the river at Hudson's bend. It proved to be a perfect place to hide men and horses.

Johnson had shown Jenkins the hidden refuge last year.

The easiest way down to approach the hideout is from the upper canyon edge using another game trail about a mile north from the natural enclosure. As Billy Johnson explained before his death, the path was easy enough to find with two live oaks guarding the decent entrance, one on each side.

He stated he had not provided Jenkins that information.

They had ridden in silence for almost two hours, twenty plus men, their eyes scanning their environment, listening for man made noises over the sounds of the wilderness enveloping them.

As they moved along, Brushy Bill pulled up even with Emmitt and leaned over a question on his face.

"Mr. McGowan, can I ask you something?"

"What's that Brushy?"

"When we wore back yonder,

burying them boys were killed last night, one of them had a flat stone stuck deep between his eyes.”

Emmitt looked at Brushy and nodded his understanding.

“Did you throw the rock or did he fall on the thing?”

“I recollect I threw it Brushy.”

“Damn!” Brushy exclaimed. “David used a sling shot, you just throw’d it!” he said in amazement.

Emmitt grunted uncomfortably. He didn’t like to talk about killing.

“I understand David stood at some distance and Goliath proved a lot bigger,” he answered, “I wasn’t nor were he!”

Brushy shook his head in wonderment.

“I don’t ever want to make you mad Mr. McGowan, never,” he said again pulling his mustang back to rejoin Riley, whispering to the other men what he learned.

Emmitt thought about the conversation for a moment and decided he didn’t want to have to prove himself in another rock fight. Once is enough.

Emmitt McGowan, the Rangers and ranch hands rode along a larger game path running parallel to the canyon; occasionally leading away from the rocky edge into the dense brush, cedar, oaks and other trees common to the area which blocked the view of the abyss.

Every so often, the large path came upon small clear areas where the western rim is easily seen, but the majority of the time the deep gorge was hidden.

In one of those clearings they noted a prominent point on the west side indicating they passed the small boxed-canyon and are not far from the twin oak trees. They reached the twin live oaks and stopped to draw up their plan.

Emmitt agreed to lead some of the men down and back south to locate the trail leading up to the base of the rim and the hidden canyon. He would leave them in place to block anyone who attempted to escape and return to join the larger group who are to take positions on the top amongst the cedar breaks surrounding the rustler’s hideout.

As the small clutch of eight men tied off their horses, they clambered down on the caulk colored path to the floor of the

Colorado River. Half way down one of the ranch hands whispered, “I smell smoke.”

Emmitt stopped and motioned them to be silent but then he could sense the odor of burning wood also and made a sign to that effect.

This was good to know for two reasons, they are down wind so any sounds from them would be harder to hear and this proved someone was indeed in the area.

After reaching the bottom, they left one man to watch their way out. The rest made the trek along the muddy and rocky bank, repeatedly looking up at the western rim until they found the two land marks as described.

On their side, a well-used game trail, its entrance wide enough for a deer or horse to pass through, as Billy said, proved easy to miss as they back tracked a few times before they finally discovered the opening in the brush, behind a cedar.

The trail up had a thirty degree angle of shale and dirt from the actual river bank to the foot of the wall of the rim towering over them, a good four hundred feet from the river’s edge.

After waiting for a while to determine if lookouts were on guard, they made their way up toward the base of a white and gray stone wall towering up ninety feet. They found the solid slab bare of any vegetation save for the cedars and small oaks growing around the bottom.

“Where’s the entrance?” one of Kinkade’s men asked.

Emmitt pointed to his right.

“I don’t see it.”

“Quiet man; you can’t from here!” Emmitt scolded him.

As they got closer to the face of the vertical slab they spotted many tracks from horses, boots and an occasional cigarette butt.

The temperature rose, becoming hot and humid after last night’s rain, everyone sweating and cursing silently as they made their way up, sometimes slipping on the loose shale and mud.

No breeze presented itself amongst the oaks and cedars and the air became thick with buzzing insects; a miserable climb.

Reaching the grey slab, Emmitt looked back at the river several hundred feet below; he took stock of the men and motioned for them to wait where they stood before he crept along the massive

stone, revolver in hand; passing into a clutch of cedars he found the rock slab suddenly ending with its corner cut back into the true canyon wall

The massive monolith turned out to be about a thirty foot thick slab, standing on its edge as related by Billy; behind the monolith he discovered the corridor Billy spoke of; between the outer slab Emmitt and his men had climbed to and the primary face of the rim; much like a hallway measuring almost ten feet wide and forty long before ending.

At the end of the passage appeared another opening to the right into the true canyon buttress. The light brown muddy floor in the natural hall way reveled recent activity of many horse and men passing.

McGowan showed each man silently the opening and making hand signals on what to do, they pulled back to where they could monitor the natural hallway but out of sight from anyone coming out of the opening. From this vantage point they would stop any rustler from escaping.

Emmitt retrieved his Hamilton from his torn vest, trying not to think of the night before, and noted the time. He showed the timepiece to the only other Ranger in the group and indicated one hour. The Ranger nodded his understanding as he glanced at his own time keeper.

Quietly shaking hands with everyone for luck, he crept down to the river bank and then returned the way up to the horses where he took Strawberry by the halter and retraced the path to the location he expected the others to be waiting. He did not find them.

Mounting Strawberry, he rode a short distance up the trail they had previously followed until one of the ranch hands stepped out of the brush suddenly, put his finger to his lips to indicate Emmitt not speak, took the reins of his mustang after Emmitt dismounted and walked the horse off to the other horses he was guarding in a hasty rope corral set up among the trees.

Captain Lee appeared, then led him to the foot of a thick clutch of cedars.

"Turned out easy enough to find this grove after we knew what to look for; the damn things grow right up to the rim," he whispered as he led Emmitt through the scrubby trees, "We need to

crawl from here, the drop off is close," Lee said dropping to his hands and knees.

Emmitt surveyed around at the men lying prone with their rifles, "Where're Kinkade and his bunch?"

"Over the way somewhere," the Captain pointed across to the greenery in the distance.

Emmitt peered over the lip for the first time and was amazed at the sight. Huge jagged blocks of rock were arranged around the box canyon walls like fallen dominoes, leaving the center open and vacant of most rocks save for what apparently are the original pieces of the cave roof; each no more than a few feet thick.

The distance seemed to be about three hundred paces from where he laid to the other side. This cavern would have been huge thousands of years ago; carved out by the spring that meandered on the canyon floor and maybe others long gone in time he mused.

He searched to his right and down for the exit he had seen in the corridor. Finally he found it; a dark square, nothing more than a shadow in the stone.

Emmitt took a moment to consider how Jenkins fed his horses and his men.

A small fire, visible with what looked like two coffee pots sitting on the coals, is all he spotted. No additional cooking equipment or other utensils were in view; perhaps they are hidden in the shadows he concluded.

He noted also little grass existed, having been stomped into dust, leaving the shadowed walls to support any vegetation. Something was missing in this picture he felt.

"Seems to be about fifteen -- sixteen men as best we can count," Captain Lee whispered, "But only seven horses," he added.

"Where are the rest of the mounts?" Emmitt questioned.

"Your guess is as good as mine. They must have them grazing somewhere else."

"No matter; have you spotted Jenkins or Calley?" Emmitt asked.

"Not yet, the boys on the far rim might have. I've given orders to shoot Calley when they spot him but not Jenkins. We want him alive for trial," Lee replied, looking at Emmitt.

Alarm sounded in Emmitt's brain, if the head rustler and his gunman are not present, they are on their way to Round Rock!

Emmitt remembered Jenkins promise and prayed the two men are still here in this natural trap.

McGowan glanced at the sun and realized they only had about three hours left in the day. Shadows are already growing in the canyon.

He checked his Hamilton, sixty minutes had passed, "I told the men down at the entrance to expect the shooting to start in about an hour."

"Yeah, any time after my signal," the Ranger leader replied.

"And what is that?" Emmitt asked.

"This," Lee answered, motioning to one of Worthington's men, Brushy Bill, laying prone several feet away.

The ranch hand stood up with a bow and a rag wrapped arrow soaked in lamp oil. Another man Emmitt did not recognize struck a match and lit the wrapping, watching the fire catch before lying back down and mounting his rifle to his shoulder.

The Bowman glanced at Lee for a moment; who nodded again and he shot the burning arrow up over the rustler's hideout.

The Ranger Captain stood up and bellowed between cupped fingers, "Texas Rangers, you boys are under arrest, raise your hands up!"

The outlaws in the canyon, a few who were lying down, some walking around, stared up, frozen in surprise. Several suddenly tried a grab for their pistols or rifles. They were cut down immediately. The event was like shooting rats in a barn as smoke started to fill the air around the small box canyon.

Two rustlers, nearest the only opening, attempted a dash to the exit. The sound of pistol and rifle shots erupted from outside the high wall of rock that hid the entrance/exit; one of the men, who tried to escape, staggered back inside the canyon and collapsed onto the ground.

The rest, not wanting to continue the fight, hoisted their hands and surrendered.

The shooting took no more than a minute, leaving only the echo of gun fire across the river valley and drifting smoke.

Emmitt and Lee stood and watched as the eight men he had led up to the hidden entrance entered and began gathering the

survivors, tying the rustlers arms behind their backs and looking for others who may have hid themselves under the large stones fallen centuries ago.

Emmitt counted ten outlaws down, eight not moving.

Another two hours passed, the sun was about to set before the Ranger left in charge of the group waved his hat over his head indicating they had everyone they could find.

Captain Lee bellowed back, "Jenkins and Calley?"

The Ranger signaled no.

"Aw shit!" Emmitt stated with worry to Lee, "I gotta get to town; Verna and Ben!"

"Go, go! There are Rangers all over the place, but those are slippery characters."

McGowan stared back at the Captain and didn't answer. He remembered the two men who rode up to the Inn in the dark to capture Ben not a week ago with six lawmen in the town at the time.

He ran to where the horses were tied off; found and mounted Strawberry, all the while thinking of the fastest way to return. Reeling the mustang around, he rode back on the trail they had followed in.

He understood it would be early morning before he cleared this rough country, having to go slow or risk the chance of wrecking the horse and himself.

He prayed he will be on time to prevent Jenkins and Calley from keeping their promise.

THE RECKONING

The sun was illuminating the horizon when Emmitt and Strawberry cleared the brushy cedar and rocky country following a long, dark and dangerous ride through the rough territory surrounding the river canyon.

He pushed the mustang pony as hard as he dared, but in places he had to stop and walk the animal in the moonless night, snaking their way around the maze of cedar breaks and other growth.

It was very easy to get off the game trails in the pitch dark and Emmitt did several times, having to back-track. The going was slow and the anxiety in Emmitt's heart grew with each hour.

Finally, out of the rough country, he let the pony fly.

The Cayuse, sensing Emmitt's urgency, glided over the ground as if on air, his gallop was smooth and fast; not needing any encouragement from the spurs on Emmitt's boots.

Strawberry was young and loved to run and he ran indeed. Perhaps, if Emmitt hadn't been so worried about his woman and his friend, he'd enjoyed the fast easy gallop this pony gave.

The sun rose in their eyes as the mustang covered ground quickly with absolute sure footedness and agile body. He took Emmitt across the country side turning on to the Austin road north towards Round Rock with little guidenace.

Again the early morning proved to be the beginning of another hot day, but despite heavy white lathered sweat rolling off his neck and flanks, Strawberry never wavered or slowed. Emmitt would not let him if he did. However, there was no need; Strawberry was enjoying this long run!

Close to seven in the morning they reached the outskirts of Old Town. Emmitt guided the tiring, heavily lathered pony through the dusty streets lined by the wooden shanties and businesses when he noticed several Rangers camped near a weathered shack. Two

waved at him as he rode pass before shortly entering into the newer side of town.

He observed the boarded up windows and door of Kopperal's mercantile store and the barber shop diagonally across the street; new white spots showing on the buildings. Glaring in the early morning sunlight, reminders of the shootout chipped into the stone walls.

He passed the telegraph office and on toward Gallagher's Inn when he became aware of a group of armed men, Rangers and other lawmen, gathered on the steps of the Post Office to his right.

He ignored them as he focused his eyes on the Inn and pointed Strawberry in that direction when a Ranger stepped out into the dusty thoroughfare and waved him toward the men gathered to his left.

Fearing the worst, he slid off the mustang leaving him ground reined and walked over to the group standing on the Postal building porch and yard.

Ben was among them.

"Howdy pard!" Ben called out, not smiling.

"Is he in there?" Emmitt asked, not exchanging pleasantries.

"Yep, since around nine last night," Ben answered, "He just showed up, walked right in and took Verna, her father, Major Jones and some others hostage. He let a few folks go this morning, but he kept the Major, Verna and Mr. Gallagher.

A Ranger by the name of Ware tried to enter from the back through the kitchen, Jenkins shot him for his efforts."

"Dead?"

"Naw, leg wound, he won't be dancing for a while."

Emmitt glanced at all the men standing around talking or staring at the Inn across the street.

"No one else tried anything?"

"Emmitt, I can read what you're thinking on your face, but let me tell you pardner, the bastard promised to kill everyone if anyone stormed the place," Ben said as he laid his left hand on Emmitt's shoulder, "We got him surrounded Pard, he ain't getting away.

The windows are closed and the shades are drawn, so we can't get any look see what is happening inside. I reckon they is hot as hell right now and gonna be hotter, they can't handle much more before Jenkins does something."

Emmitt stared at Ben for a few moments, trying to understand what was happening through his cloud of fear for Verna. He wondered if Ben's health had improved in the past two days.

"How's your condition?"

"No change, I still can't raise my arm any higher than this," Ben raised his hand to his chest, "But I can damn well hold a pistol."

"You don't have one," McGowan replied, reminding Ben his was missing since Calley tried to kill him.

"I reckon I'll borrow one if I need one. Appears to me like you took a bad beaten yourself Emmitt."

"Yeah, some of Jenkins boys and me have already danced," Emmitt replied, then sighed and surveyed the group again, "What is y'all's plan?"

One of the Rangers, Gordon, spoke up.

"We were just discussing that. Seems Jenkins wants you to come in alone and unarmed; says he'll let the others go if you do."

"He aims to kill you Emmitt," Ben added.

"He already tried. Now it's my turn."

"Without a gun, you won't get much of a chance!" Ranger Gordon spoke up. "Best to wait them out, the heat will drive Jenkins--."

"You got a better plan? You said you were making one."

McGowan interrupted, not satisfied with what he was hearing.

The Ranger didn't answer shaking his head he did not.

"Ok," Emmitt replied and asked, "Where's Calley?"

"Don't no, he ain't showed up yet---" Ben answered worriedly, his voice trailing off when he spotted Maria running down the middle of the avenue, her long dark brown hair flinging from one shoulder to the other, unrestrained bosoms bouncing under her white peasant blouse, as her ankle length colorful skirt flew around her legs. Her eyes were wide with fear, the whites visible from fifty feet away!

Ben stepped out from the men and grabbed her as she fell into his arms. She gasped for air in the morning heat as she stared up at Ben with fearful and pleading eyes.

"María, Qué pasa?"

"Oh Señor Ben, mi hijo, mi hijo!" Maria cried out.

"Jeffery?" Ben said, a growing fear crowding his heart.

"Sí, sí, el hombre malo Calley, ha llevado a mi hijo!"

"Where?" Ben growled.

"Las caballerizas de pueblo Viejo," she sobbed, "Dice que estás solo."

Ben, his face dark with anger and fear, turned to Emmitt and the other men as he held Maria tight in his left arm.

"That answers where Calley is! He's got Maria's boy hostage down at the stables in the old part of town and wants me to come alone."

"I guess you'll need this," Emmitt said unbuckling his gun belt and handing it to Maxwell, "It's one of them new ones, bored for .44 Winchester, kicks a might," he explained.

"I reckon," Ben replied, nodding thanks as he pulled the Colt from its holster; checked its balance and opened the loading gate and spinning its cylinder to confirm the number of rounds ready.

"Where'd you get this?" Ben commented, buckling the leather around his waist.

"A gift," Emmitt answered, "Long story; I'll tell you later."

"You're going alone?" Gordon asked.

"Calley wants me that way, but I would welcome company," he replied, and added, "You need to know, I ain't gonna arrest him."

"We aren't either," Hamilton answered as he stepped out from the Post Office, the door closing behind him.

"You walking or riding?" Gordon questioned, "Ours are yonder," he pointed to the two saddled mustangs dropped rein near the west side of the Postal building.

Emmitt motioned with his left hand at Strawberry, "Take him, he is a good horse."

"Riding!" Ben answered Gordon as he nodded at Emmitt.

He turned his attention tenderly to Maria and untangling her arms from around his waist, he cupped her chin, leaned over and kissed her.

"I'll get Jeffery back, Maria; don't you fret none!"

"Oh Señor Ben, mi hijo," she cried in a whisper, a little more calm now, but still very scared. She trusted this tall gringo, her man, to bring her child to her safe.

"Be careful mi Amor; Vaya con Dios," she said in English and Spanish as she pulled him down to her, kissing his lips again.

Ben mounted the red roan and joined by the two Rangers, one on each side, pointed their horses west, in a slow trot; down Georgetown Ave. towards the old town livery stables.

Those words Maria said to his old friend bothered Emmitt as he watched for a few moments Ben riding off to face Calley. Twice, from two women, he had heard that same blessing in less than forty-eight hours; he prayed Ben did not have the trouble he ran into.

He surveyed again the men around him before taking a deep breath and started across the dusty road toward the Inn.

Emmitt took a quick check of the time, eight o'clock. So much had happened since he rode into town, now he must face Jenkins who held Verna and her father.

He thought about the date, perhaps he would die today; Sunday, July 21st, 1878, but not before his love is free of this killer.

Alone and unarmed he sucked in another lung full of air and prayed God will continue to be with him and Ben as he stepped upon the veranda, crossed it and turned the knob of the front doors. He entered the unknown darkness.

Inside the Inn was stifling. The rain storm had not reached the town and the day began heating up the same as the past few days.

All the Inns windows had been closed on Jenkins orders, cutting off any chance of a cooling early morning breeze, turning it into an oven.

Not wanting someone sneaking a shot through an open window or entering from the upper floors. He had the backdoor and the kitchen door locked and pots and pans placed on the floor to alert him to any intruders.

However, it was becoming unbearable even for him.

Mr. Gallagher had enough of Jenkins after the hostages suffered a long hot and tense night. He challenged Jenkins who immediately clubbed him across his head with the barrel of his pistol, dropping Gallagher to the carpet in front of the registration desk.

The severe blow rendered him unconscious for some time and he only started to regain consciousness when Emmitt began his walk across the street.

Verna had spent those remaining hours, before Emmitt rode up to the Post Office, nursing her father's wound before she was commanded to stand up by Jenkins when he spotted Emmitt walking towards the Inn.

She refused, continuing to attend to her father.

Jenkins grabbed her by her hair and pulled her up and back to him. They stood between the end of the reception desk and the landing at the foot of the stairs partly hidden by the center wall and its small double opened fireplace.

He knew the building was surrounded by lawmen and he would not get out alive, but that didn't matter. He wanted McGowan and he acknowledged the range detective as the kind of man who will try to save his woman and her pappy. Jenkins counted on this particular trait to be in his advantage.

He jerked back on Verna's hair and whispered into her right ear, "Just you be quiet little lady, and maybe, just maybe your pappy and yourself will live through this."

"Emmitt's going kill you!" she growled pass clenched teeth as he pulled her hair again.

"I reckon on what you think may happen, but I doubt it, since he's a coming in here without a weapon."

The front doors opened as he finished promising her a short future for her man, who slowly walked in; his hands held shoulder high to show he is unarmed.

A moment passed as Emmitt's eyes adjusted to the darkened room. He glanced around and noted where the Major sat, on the settee to his right against the dining room wall; his glaze meeting McGowan's, acknowledging he is up for anything.

Emmitt glanced at Gallagher down on the floor, sitting with his back to the inn's registration desk, sweat ran down his brow as he held a bloody rag to the top of his head.

He could not be counted on in a fight.

As his vision adjusted even more he spotted Verna, a frightened but confident ire on her face now he is here.

She stood on the polished wooden landing of the stairs adjacent to the front desk. Behind her was Jenkins, holding her somehow, probably by her long hair. He did not see anyone else, Jenkins was alone.

He stopped and faced the rustler, still with his hands up, as Jenkins motioned him to advance. Emmitt did as indicated, throwing a quick glance through the open dining room doors. No one there either.

"Now what?" Emmitt asked, looking for an edge.

"So we meet again Mr. Cow Detective."

His attention focused on Jenkins, he continued to advance slowly toward Verna and the rustler, "Look, I'm here," Emmitt said, "Now let them go."

"Not hardly, they is my ticket outta this burg! You think I came in this damn town without a plan to leave?" Jenkins laughed in a peculiar way, knowing his scheme is full of holes and he would not exit this place alive.

Again he didn't care; his aim is to take this stock detective to Hell with him.

"Give it up Jenkins, while you still have a chance," Emmitt demanded.

"You're wasting your time McGowan," The Major said, looking comfortable on the couch, "I've been trying to convince him of that all night."

"Chance? No way am I giving up anything. You've ruined my life and I want satisfaction. I'm gonna get it --- here --- now --- today!" Jenkins spat out the hatred he had for McGowan, ignoring the Major's comments. His only focus was on the range detective and his revenge.

He's gone crazy Emmitt realized. He should have seen this yesterday on the river bluff. "Ruined who's life?" Emmitt spat out, "Remember the ranch hands you killed or crippled and the ranchers and farmers who may lose their homes because of you? Give it up Jenkins, the dance is over, your men are dead or captured; in custody of the Rangers."

"No matter; I've little use for them now! Besides, I can get more if I needs them. This country is full of fools like those!"

Emmitt moved closer to Jenkins but spoke to the Major behind him.

"You're right Major; Jenkins doesn't want to be free! He didn't know only Calley will hang. We ain't got enough on Jenkins to convict him," Emmitt lied, hoping his lie would confuse the rustler.

The Major picked up on the ruse quickly, "Emmitt, I did not want to spill the beans about that, but now it appears you've gone and done it."

"What'd you mean?" Jenkins asked, the topic did confuse him, just enough for him to relax the pressure on Verna's hair; relaxed sufficiently so she was able to turn sideways and with all her

strength raised her right leg and stomped her lace boot heel on top of Jenkins foot, smashing the bony part, just behind his toes.

"Ahoow!" he cried out, "You damn bitch!"

Jenkins was dancing on his left leg as he held up his right; the pain distracting him from Emmitt as he shoved Verna against the reception desk then took aim at Emmitt.

But Emmitt was faster, stepping into Jenkins quickly, knocking his gun arm away as he pulled the trigger, the bullet hitting the ceiling with a thunk!

The deafening boom from the Colt was almost directly in Emmitt's ear but it didn't deter him as he body slammed Jenkins to the floor, giving three quick blows with his fists into Jenkins face as the Major jumped up and pulled Verna away from the fighting.

Jenkins brought his own right fist up smashing into Emmitt's ribs, knowing they were sore possibly cracked from the beating Emmitt received two evenings before.

Emmitt reacted like he expected and he hit him repeatedly in the same place, pushing Emmitt over against the first step of the stairway, seeking the advantage.

Emmitt took the pain and planted his fist into Jenkins nose, all the unspent rage from the last forty eight hours welling up and channeled into each blow.

Kicking, kneeling, gouging, biting and pounding, they rolled in the narrow area between the stairs landing and the reception desk. Not having enough room for either to achieve an advantage.

Emmitt was weakening; his body, bruised and tired from the past two days, was on its final ounce of adrenalin. Jenkins sensed this but before he was able to take the benefit of the moment when he was on top, Emmitt reached up and sank his teeth into the rustlers chin as he grabbed the screaming Jenkins by his hair, rolled him over and slammed his head into the wooden floor several times dazing the cattle thief.

Emmitt pushed off the man's body, spitting blood and flesh out of his mouth and picked up the pistol Jenkins had dropped. He thumbled the hammer back as he straightened up; pointing the revolver at Jenkins head, standing there a moment to catch his breath.

He wanted to shoot the man but knew this would be murder and hesitated; Verna made his decision for him.

"Emmitt --- not on the carpet!" she yelled in desperation, not wanting to see him kill.

McGowan, stunned and confused by her words turned his head to her slowly and asked, "What?"

While Emmitt was distracted by Verna's nonsensical crying out, Jenkins took those few seconds to pull his over/under .38 caliber derringer from a leather scabbard sewn inside his pantaloons; cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger.

"Emmitt!" screamed Verna and the Major too late.

Emmitt, slammed by the low velocity bullet, absorbed the blow as the wind was knocked out of him. He doubled over and staggered backward, his legs wobbling, pivoting in a half turn and fell. His upper back struck the center wall near the fireplace, his hands seeking anything behind him in an effort to prevent his falling to the floor.

As he was catching himself, his right arm knocked over the brass stand that held the hearth tools, the poker, sweep and rake; his fingers feeling and grasping the handle of the log-poker.

Jenkins, having fired the first shot from his derringer, rolled over and attempted to stand up. Upon his knees, he raised his left hand and placed it on the reception desk as leverage to push his body up as his eyes burned in anger at Emmitt then looked down at his tiny pistol, fumbling to cock it for the second barrel.

In the moment he was looking down and attempted to stand up, Emmitt pushed away from the wall, stepped toward Jenkins and swung underhand as hard as possible, like a cricket club, the bronzed handled iron hook and spear; the heavy pointed end of the hearth tool striking Jenkins in the center of his forehead with a sickening crack of metal against bone.

Jenkins' head snapped backward as he continued to slowly rise; a large patch of skin torn from above his eyebrows.

In slow motion, he fell back, dead weight crashing to the floor with a thunderous thud; his boots going up and coming down with a second but lighter thump.

McGowan put his left arm out to catch the corner of the wall next to the stairwell before he collapsed himself, exhausted from two days of fighting and the heat and now the bullet strike to his midsection; he was close to passing out.

His eyes drawn down to his waist, he wearily searched for blood or evidence of where the small lead projectile struck him, confusion crowding his mind.

Verna was frozen, unable to move. Terrified at watching Jenkins shoot the man she loved; the last seconds after Emmitt was shot seemed like an eternity to her.

Finally, after the master rustler had fallen to the floor, she dashed the short steps to Emmitt's side as he fell against the wall and helped him to the couch with Major Jones' assistance.

Frantically she pulled his shirt up, jerking his britches belt off to search for the bullet hole to stop the bleeding, crying and screaming at him not to die.

The Major approached Jenkins and knelt to check if he was alive or dead, satisfied he hurried to the front door and motioned for the Rangers across the street to come.

"Take him into custody and have the doctor look at him. I want him living for a trial!" Jones said roughly to several Rangers as they entered the Inn and followed his pointing finger to Jenkins.

He turned his attention to the couple on the couch, inquiring how badly McGowan was injured from the gun shot.

"Where's the wound, I don't see any blood?" Jones inquired as he stood over Verna's right shoulder peering down at Emmitt's exposed torso.

"Nothing, there's nothing!" Verna cried out with tears running down her cheeks, not believing Emmitt did not have an injury to his body.

She witnessed him shot!

Confused, Verna and the Major searched his clothing finding the squashed lead bullet lodged in the leather belt where it slipped through the buckle. The projectile had been stopped by the thick leather and thin round metal prong which fit in the small holes punched into the belt for closing the clasp.

Verna let loose a short happy squeal of laughter and wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his bare, sweaty chest crying in uncontrollable relief and happiness.

Emmitt, near to passing out, held his sobbing woman as Jones sat down next to him; both stared at one another before they started to laugh. They could not believe his luck.

Mr. Gallagher watched in admiration from where he resided on the floor; impressed with this fellow his daughter had fallen in love with.

‘Well,’ he mused to himself, ‘If this hombre is going to be his son in law, Verna couldn’t have chosen a better one.’

He smiled and leaned his head back against the desk. “Someone will remember me and help me up, eventually,” he said to himself quietly, smiling.

At the time Emmitt approached Jenkins, before Verna stomped on Jenkins’ booted foot, Ben Maxwell, Rangers Gordon and Hamilton found themselves two blocks from the old livery stable in Old Town.

Maxwell, relishing the sensation of a horse between his legs again even if the movement of the animal was giving him some pain, took stock of the situation.

The sun is at their backs, so that meant the light would be in Calley’s eyes. The perfect position for an attack for centuries prior and those to come, Ben mused.

“You gonna try to talk the child loose first?” Ranger Gordon asked Ben.

“No, just kill Calley.”

“You reckon the kid will be safe doing that?”

“I reckon so,” Maxwell replied.

Gordon glanced over at Ranger Hamilton and slightly shook his head, not sure this would work, but he knew the recent bloody history about Calley and the strength and resolve of the man riding next to him and didn’t know of any other plan possible.

A bit dangerous for the kid he felt, these two men are intending to kill one another and the boy is caught between. He worried about the outcome.

One block from the stables, Maxwell pulled his revolver, cocked the hammer and held the weapon behind his right leg against his saddle fender. He found he was able raise the Colt high enough from where he is mounted on horseback to do the job he needed to do. The two Rangers followed suit.

Calley stood inside the doors of the livery barn; his arm around Jeffery, the Open Top Colt he liberated from McGowan nudging Jeffery’s right ear.

He sometimes had to struggle with the youngster as he was continually trying to get away from the killer. The boy proved a handful and Calley had whacked him twice with his gun barrel already.

He spotted three riders coming down the dirt street from the east. Unable to make out who they were with the sun in his eyes, he stayed inside out of sight.

He smirked at his own craftiness; making the young boy the bait that he knew would bring Maxwell to him alone.

He could have taken the Mexican woman as well, but he did not want to handle the two of them by himself and he needed a messenger anyway.

Jenkins had given him hell for not confirming Maxwell's death the night he shot him and being duped over the leather satchel full of nothing but newspapers! So today he is going to make damn sure the old son-of-a-bitch is dead!

The three riders, almost in front of the livery barn door, turned and walked their horses directly at Calley. He recognized Maxwell and realized he had not done as instructed and brought two Rangers with him!

He pulled the child up to him closer, the child’s red hair under his chin.

“I told your woman you wore to come alone!” he yelled out, pushing the barrel of his Colt into Jeffery’s ear with the youngster shaking with fear and pleading as Ben and his companions continued to walk their steeds slowly towards him.

Ben didn’t bother to reply. He stared directly at Jeffery, catching his attention.

“Jeffery --- Jeffery!” Ben called out in a loud voice. Jeffery’s eyes grew wide, frighten but trusting this old man he had grown to love; he focused intently on Ben.

“Cierra los ojos, hijo!” he said, ordering the boy to close his eyes as he and the other two Rangers raised their Colts from behind their legs and aimed them at the gunman when the mustangs came to a stop.

"Don't open them until I say so!" he finished, and said, "I've the center of his face."

"I got the left ear," Ranger Gordon countered.

"And I the right," Ranger Hamilton ended the conversation.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Calley yelled as the three pistols were leveled at his head. He relaxed his grip on Jeffery as he tried to turn the barrel of the stolen Colt into the direction of Ben; the boy fell away from him, clearing the field of fire as Ben had expected.

The simultaneous roar from the Ranger's guns ended any further conscious movement from the soulless killer.

Jeffery was so scared of this man he shook constantly from fear. The place Calley took him to after tearing him from his mother's arms, smelled strongly of manure from a stack of the dung next to the barn. Flies buzzed persistently around; sometimes they landed, crawling on his face.

The pile, as high as he was tall, appeared to be still fresh. It was not like the stables in the new part of town where the business district demanded the operation be cleaned daily. This was a filthy place.

Calley seemed to enjoy tormenting him with comments how he is going to kill his mama's man and have his way with her before he killed her too.

He said Jeffery would never have a father or a mother. He repeatedly told Jeffery he will grow up like he did, fighting kids in the street and getting beaten every day of his life.

Jeffery, deathly afraid, saw hope to his plight in the distance as Ben and two other men rode toward him and Calley.

When the tall Texan and his associates came closer, Ben ordered him in Spanish to close his eyes; he did so as hard as he could. He did not know what would happen but he trusted Ben to make it right and he will be away from this bad man.

He remembered Calley cursing as the tight hold of the evil man's arm relaxed and he started to fall when the hombre screamed more angry words.

Suddenly a terrible roar shook him, at the same time fire began burning his skin, like many bees attacking his flesh. His nose, lips, eyelids, cheeks, chin, forehead, and neck were stinging; his ears rang with a high pitch scream, as he sensed himself falling and

falling until the ground hit him in his back and head, free of the restraint and sweaty body of Calley.

Some time passed it seemed to him before gentle hands picked him up and cradled him in strong arms. He felt and inhaled the odor of a sweat soaked shirt against the side of his head; he recognized who it was.

Ben!

With Ben holding him, everything is going to be ok he thought as a wet cloth wiped away the burning on his face. Some of the stinging remained; burnt black powder imbedded in his skin will leave dull specks like freckles Jeffery didn't have naturally.

As he grew older they'd fade, but the nickname he acquired would remain with him the rest of his life, 'Powderburn'.

"Jeffery, ahora puedes abrir tus ojos," Ben said to him over the ringing, the voice seemed some distance away.

Fearful at first, he opened his eyes to find Ben's face close to his. He reached up quickly and put his arms around Ben's neck and held on so tight he was choking his savior.

Ben laughed with joy as he pulled on Jeffery's limbs to loosen them up, but he didn't try to pull the boy away. He enjoyed this child's total trust, need, acceptance and gratitude as his own love grew for the boy as well.

After a few minutes passed, the two Rangers helped hold the youngster as Ben remounted Strawberry and they handed him up. Jeffery sat in the saddle in front of Ben and started to look down at Calley, but Ben pushed his head back.

"Don't son, it ain't pretty," he murmured.

"His horse is over there," Ranger Gordon noted, pointing into the livery at the saddled pony. The Whitney Kennedy Calley used to shoot Ben tucked away in its scabbard.

"I want that rifle," Ben demanded, nodding at the horse.

Gordon nodded his understanding while he and Hamilton covered Calley's near headless body with a wagon canvas from the barn.

"Let's go find your momma my son," Ben said as he wheeled Strawberry onto the dusty street and rode the way they had come.

DEATH OF AN OUTLAW

Another hot Sunday afternoon, July 21st, 1878, found the population from miles around Round Rock, down in the old part of town standing in the sun, a vigil for Sam Bass who lay on his death bed in a vacant shack; guarded by a detachment of Rangers.

No one paid any attention to the commotion or the small band of lawmen outside of Gallagher's Inn. The arrest of a cattle rustler and the death of an unknown gunman are of little interest.

Bass is interesting, a folk hero to some, a bandit to many and to others the killer of AW Grimes, a popular local deputy.

The Rangers, guarding the shack, thought it amazing that people dressed in their Sunday church clothes would stand in the hot sun and heat of the day for this famous bandit.

The crowd gossiped with idle chat, repeating such things as today is Sam Bass's birthday, only twenty seven years old and there are Ranger patrols still combing the country side looking for Frank Jackson and the hundred men in the Bass gang!

Around 3:58 in the afternoon, silence stilled the crowd as a Ranger stepped out on the shack's front steps and announced that Bass had passed away from his wounds received during Fridays shootout.

The outlaw was dead and the legend began.

In later months and for years to come, a song will be coined for him; plays written and produced on stage, mostly in England, of the Robin Hood of the West, yet no one would remember A.W. Grimes and eventually, as time passed, few recall an outlaw named Sam Bass.

None of this mattered however for the folks inside and outside Gallagher's Inn. Lawmen and a several on-lookers stood around the Post Office and on the lawn of Gallagher's, talking about

the day's events; but mostly they rested and tried to stay out of the afternoon glare.

Inside the Inn the curtains are now pulled back and the windows opened to a slight south breeze. Even if it is hot, the moving air made life bearable.

Jenkins, on a stretcher, had been carted off late that morning to the town jail to wait until he was in condition to be transferred to the county lockup in Austin.

When asked of the doctor by Major Jones, 'will he live,' the physician replied as Jenkins is carried out.

"I reckon until y'all hang him."

Calley's body lay at the undertakers, waiting for burial.

Captain Lee's group of Rangers, ranch hands and captured rustlers are not expected back for another day.

Emmitt McGowan, beaten and bruised and in constant attendance by Verna, sat in the dining room of the Inn; a pitcher of fresh lemonade resided in the center of the table along with the remains of a steak lunch in front of him.

He'd had a bath earlier and now relaxed, dressed in his comfortable old black sail cloth trousers, moccasins and a new light cotton shirt Verna had bought him weeks ago in Salado.

It was her gift to him after their confession of love for each other.

He fought the exhaustion that is soon to overcome him as he recited the events of the previous day on the promontory and the capture of Jenkins men in the hidden canyon on the Colorado.

The Major wrote the information down in his small note book for his report to headquarters of the action on the river, just as he did when interviewing the dying outlaw the day before.

After they finished and Jones slipped the notebook into his linen coat pocket, Emmitt asked him what happened with Sam Bass and his gang.

"As you know, Bass we found outside town early yesterday morning sitting under a big oak, about half dead from a gunshot through his back and out his front, some distance west of the Georgetown Road.

One of his men, Seaborn Barnes died during the shootout and Frank Jackson got away.

Jim Murphy was our Judas, we just paid him off and he lit out yesterday evening. Someone will find him and gun him down for working for us I expect," he remarked, lighting up a cigar.

"Jim Underwood never was here, having left the gang and the state two months ago, according to Bass.

Arkansas Johnson we killed at Salt Creek up in Wise County and the rest are gone also or captured," he continued, ticking off each name and incident as if he was an accountant reading a ledger.

"We have Bass under guard in a shack in the west part of town. Don't expect him to last much longer," Jones finished.

Minutes later, a Ranger walked into the dining room and up to the Major, whispered into his ear and then left. Jones looked at Emmitt and the other people with a certain sadness written on his face.

"Sam Bass passed away a few minutes ago."

Silence reined. There had been so much death this weekend, the demise of one more man, especially a famous outlaw, didn't elicit smiles or rejoicing, only sadness.

Ben Maxwell finally walked into the Inn later as the sun set, accompanied by Maria and Jeffery; they were grinning from ear to ear, Jeffery most notably, hanging on Ben with both arms.

"How're you doing pard?" Ben asked as he sat down at the dining table next to the Major and across from Emmitt.

"I'm better Ben. Things worked out for the good it seems," he replied, fighting to keep his eyes open.

Relaxed and very tired; the last few days seemed a bad dream to him right now. He looked at Verna sitting beside him as she glazed at him lovingly and smiled; concern over his health showing on her face.

"I didn't expect any different," Ben laughed then he turned serious.

"I want you to know that I would never trade the years we rode together," he announced, taking his Ranger badge off and placing it in front of the Major, "I'm getting on in age and this kinda work ain't for me anymore; especially the get'n shot part.

So my days of doing this sorta thing are over; I'm gonna settle down with Maria and raise a family.

Verna was the first to ask. "Y'all getting married?" she slipped her proper language on purpose.

"Yep!" was the answer.

"Congratulations!" she cried as Ben and Maria smiled at each other and laughed as Ben put his left arm about her shoulders and pulled her to him.

Verna jumped up and ran around the table and hugged Maria then Jeffery; excitement and joy for Maria and her child exploding out of her heart.

She turned giving a big hug to Ben after which she pushed him from her and glazed happily into his eyes.

"You got yourself a good woman."

"I know, I know," Ben replied, happy with everyone's acceptance of his wife to be.

The Major rose up as did Ben and took his hand, congratulating him and thanking him for both his early service, later with McNelly and for the work he and Emmitt had done for the citizens of Texas.

Emmitt also stood up and even though his hands were sore and swollen, he took Ben's across the table shaking it, a big smile on growing as he said.

"Pardner, I'm gonna miss you riding alongside me, but I'm happy for you!"

"I'm sure I'll miss the new adventures with you to Emmitt, anyway I've my memories and I got Maria," he stated as he searched Emmitt's smiling eyes; the bond between the two men cemented for the rest of their lives.

Ben watched Emmitt and Verna for a minute, a glint of mischief developing in his glaze.

"When are y'all gonna tie the knot?" Ben asked, dropping the question like a cannon shell.

There was total silence in the dining room. Verna and Emmitt turned to each other with the same quizzical look in their eyes.

"I donno," Emmitt finally answered, "I---," he stopped as he walked stiffly around the table to Verna.

"What'd you think?" he asked as he reached her.

Verna studied the bruised and swollen face in front of her for a moment before replying.

"I don't know Emmitt," she said and let the statement sink in, "you're pretty beaten up, even a little ugly right now," she

continued. Another instant passed before she smiled, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Besides, you haven’t asked me yet!” she exclaimed!

Emmitt dropped immediately down to one knee, wincing in some pain and oblivious to many oh’s and ah’s of everyone in the room, he said in front of all of them.

“Verna my darlin; I ain’t never met a woman like you and I do not believe I ever will again. I haven’t much to offer you, only a love as big as the Texas sky,” he took a breath, his head spinning. He had been planning this moment and did not want to miss it before he totally collapsed.

“Will you be my wife --- marry me?” he asked.

Verna didn’t waste time to think; she had already done her thinking weeks ago. Glazing down at his barely recognizable face, swollen and bruised, her heart swooned

“Yes Emmitt, I’ll marry you,” she answered quietly with a smile.

“Hot damn!” Ben hollered out as he and Verna helped Emmitt stand back up laughing.

The couple kissed and hugged one another with Emmitt grunting in pain from his ribs, followed by a second round of handshakes and congratulations with everyone.

Verna’s father, his head wrapped in a big bandage, walked into the dining room to see what all the noise was about when he was given the news. After shaking Ben’s and Emmitt’s hands and kissing and hugging his daughter and then Maria, he asked.

“So, will this be a double wedding for you two cousins?”

Verna and Maria started giggling as Ben and Emmitt stared at each other in shock.

“Cousins?” they said at the same time.

EPILOGUE

Colonel Edward Handley, commander of C troop of the 5th Cavalry stationed at Fort Dodge in Kansas, observed three men who seemed familiar as they entered the Long Branch saloon while he rode past it on the streets of Dodge City. His destination was the telegraph office for Military business but he couldn’t believe his eyes and decided to stop and have a second look.

Quickly pulling his army mule off the busy avenue, he secured the animal to a hitching post on the first side street past the saloon. From there he proceeded to walk down Front Street. Sweat trickled down his temples as he pulled off his black cavalry fedora and wiped the heavy moisture from his forehead before entering the drinking hall.

He stopped for a moment inside the swinging doors, surveying the darken room before walking up to the bar. He ordered a beer and when served turned and found a table to sit at with a good view of the three who were standing at the far end of the chest high drinking bench.

The men, dressed in business suits of eastern cut, two wearing black derbies and the third hatless, were talking amongst themselves.

He monitored them from the corner of his eyes, not wanting to draw attention to himself as he noted several men enter and talk to them for a short while, before leaving. He was almost sure what their names were, but he also knew that he could be mistaken.

Finally, a man he considered a friend, town Marshal Bat Masterson, entered the saloon walking up to the same three fellows, spoke for a few minutes with them, slapping one on the back laughing and turned to leave as had the previous visitors before he stopped upon seeing the seated Colonel and walked up to his table.

“Colonel Handley, what brings you into town?” Masterson said in greeting as he held out his hand.

"Hello Marshall Masterson. Military business at the telegraph office, but I thought I'd cool off with a beer, this is a hot day! How are you?" he replied, taking Masterson's outstretched appendage and shaking it.

"Just fine, town's pretty quiet today; most of the trail boys are sleeping off last night. That'll change again tonight I reckon," Masterson laughed, "And your right, it's been a burning summer!"

"That reminds me," he continued, pulling out his pocket-watch and noting the time, "I need to make sure Ol' Wyatt and his brothers are up. They have the evening shift tonight, Good to see you Colonel!" the Marshall said, tipping his bower derby.

"Wait up Marshall; I'll walk out with you," Handley requested, standing up and pushing his chair back under the table.

He glanced nonchalantly in the direction of the three men who were intently discussing something among themselves and did not seem to be aware of him or anyone else in the saloon.

Outside, they walked down Front Street toward where the Colonel had his mule tied off; chatting about the weather, the trail drivers, and the number of cattle driven up to Dodge that year when Handley took Masterson by his arm and stopped him in front of the General Outfitters store.

"Bat, I need some information and I don't want this to get out from this conversation."

"Sure Colonel," Masterson answered a quizzical expression on his face, "What can I do for you?"

"Those three men back in the Longbranch you were talking too. Who are they?"

Marshall Masterson smiled and scratched his nose laughing lightly.

"Their cattle buyers, down from Illinois I believe. Names are Wilcox, Hammonds and Cannon," he answered, "Are they Army deserters?"

"No, no I was just wondering. They seemed familiar; guess I am mistaken," Handley replied, lying.

Bat Masterson held out his hand once again, "Well, Colonel, I'll keep this to myself as you asked," he said knowing the Colonel just lied to him.

"Thanks Marshall. I'll be seeing you around," Handley took the Marshall's strong grip.

Colonel Handley stood watching the Town Marshall walk on up the street, twirling his silver tipped walking stick, toward the hotel where Masterson and the Earp brothers kept their quarters before mounting his mule.

He felt the lawman was doing ok, considering his brother Ed had been killed only a few months ago on these streets.

After forking his mule, he sat in the saddle for moment thinking before wheeling the animal back out on Front Street and heading to the telegraph-office.

Thirty minutes later he completed his official business in the office; writing four requests for various items the fort personnel needed and signed the government voucher receipt for the wires.

He stopped to think a moment before he wrote out a cryptic dispatch that he gave to the operator. He handed over the coins to pay for his own telegram and left.

The telegraph-operator completed the military messages first and after reading the personal message, proceeded to tap out the cryptic words to a small town in Texas.

He tapped out on the key: 'To Fred Gallagher, care of Gallagher Inn, Round Rock Texas, stop, found final three, stop, cattle buyers, stop, Dodge City Kansas, stop, come at once, stop. Ed Handley.'

END

Authors Disclaimer

This is a novel of fiction, set within a historical time in Texas. Almost all the characters are fictional and are not intended to be or to resemble anyone who lived in that period.

Never-the-less, 1877 and 1878 was an active time in Texas history as was all the 1800's. There are some real people included in this novel that I have tried to keep the historical record accurate as possible concerning major moments in their lives, at the same time taking literary license, perhaps to a great degree, to fit in with the story line.

This includes Bass and his gang; Deputy Grimes, Deputy Moore, Major Jones, Detective Duncan, John Wesley Hardin and Ranger John Armstrong, Ranger Ware, Farmer Stubby and Citizen Connor while also referencing Charles Goodnight, Luke Short, Bat Masterson, Sol West, Mrs. Lou Gore, Ben Thompson, Hickok and Cody.

John Wesley Hardin's arrest in Pensacola Florida, The night of fear in Dallas, Texas concerning the Bass gang and the robbery of the trains by the Bass gang ending with the shootout in Round Rock; all are a part of Texas history.

The Shady Villa Inn was in business in Salado at that time and exists today as the Stagecoach Inn. The name of the owner and staff are fictional. The State College in Salado existed, but burned down in the early 20th century; only the foundation and some outer wall stone's remain.

Michael L Story

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