





The McGowans

FOR FADED LOVE

By
Michael Loyd Story

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*“Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, but
Lord, not vengeance --- not vengeance.
My wife’s soul, our children and I
demand justice. Forgive me, Lord, for
what I am about to do --- for my faded
love.”*

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Dedication

When I started writing this novel in 2014, I never fathomed that I would be experiencing my own faded love. The eleven-year hiatus has ended as I write.

I am dedicating this novel to my late wife

Rosa Elena Montoya de Story.
11/07/1958-09/23/2022
My Faded Love.



Disclaimer

This historical fiction novel takes place in the 1860's and late 1870's. There are some historical figures who are interacting with the main characters. In no way should the reader assume these encounters really happened. Nor should the reader assume the main characters are or were real people.

Note to Readers:

This novel is written in the Language of Texans. This is how we talk.
So, you Grammer Experts get off your high horses and relax to
enjoy the read.



Corpus Christi



The winter had finally reached the small Texas island. Icy winds blowing off the gulf moaned around the window sills, trying in vain to enter the bedroom. Dark outside, late evening, it was time to unwind, but she couldn't.

There's too much going on with her family and the world outside. She pulled the wool wrap around her shoulders, bent over, reaching for the first paper of a small stack lying on the floor next to her feet. Sighing after the long day, trying to relax in the dark of her daughter's bedroom, with only two candles to provide light, she read the first page of the newspaper.

GALVESTON WEEKLY NEWS
September 17, 1862, p. 1,
c. 2 Attack on Corpus
Christi
Yankees Gloriously Repulsed!
Corpus Christi, August 19th, 1862.

Dear News:

The Yankees having given us a respite; I impro the opportunity to give you a brief account of matters and things since their appearance before this city.
On Tuesday, the 12th inst., the blockading (Union) squadron, having removed all obstructions in the ship channel, entered this bay.

Chasing some of our boats, one of which they captured (the others burned to prevent a similar fate) and towards sundown they quietly dropped anchor within short range of the shore.

The next morning, the commander of the squadron came onto the wharf, under a flag of truce, for a conference with Maj.

Hobby. Strange to say, two armed gunboats accompanied his barge to the wharf, and covered the party during the conference.

He excused his conduct at the subsequent interview by stating that he had received information that the people of this community would not respect a flag of truce. Thus, this is where he was concerned.

I do not care to make any comment on this, further than to state that, in my opinion of the matter, the whole proceeding was a positive insult.

At the first interview, he claimed the right to come ashore and inspect the public buildings, a virtual, if not a formal demand for surrender. They informed him coolly and positively that they would attack him if he attempted to land. Then he says, "We must fight," but he expressed a great deal of hollow sympathy for the women and children, and he asks Maj. Hobby to designate some battlefield where they could arrange the differences without interfering with the city. Our commanding officer simply repeated that they would not permit him to land.

The Yankees arranged another interview for 4 o'clock that afternoon, and the Yankee officer acted like a braggart and a blusterer; he wanted to pick personal quarrels with some of our officers and hinted that when we saw his guns' range, which he intended to show us the next day, we would agree to his terms. After hearing his ultimatum and our reply, the conference ended, and they notified us to remove our women and children within forty-eight hours.

So far in the conduct of Maj. Hobby as a diplomat was excellent, and strongly in contrast with that of the blustering Yankee, Kittredge. The next day, he fired some shot and shell up the bay to display his capabilities, and he was undoubtedly surprised that we didn't immediately send a flag offering unconditional surrender.

In the meantime, the news had spread through the country, and the men of the neighboring counties flocked in—my neighborhood, San Patricio County, came here almost to a man. This proof of readiness by all to sacrifice everything rather than permit the foot of the invader to pollute our soil, was highly gratifying to the patriot, at the same time that he was called on to witness the disgusting struggle to go on betwixt property and patriotism, in the breasts of some owners of real estate.

I regret to say that more than one of the most respectable citizens of Corpus Christi would rather see the Yankees permitted coming ashore than that a shot or shell should perforate their concrete and frame buildings. May they receive their reward!

The forty-eight hours truce ended on Friday evening at 6 o'clock.

They did not do so, and we were afraid that Kittredge would act like Eagle,

at Galveston, and accordingly we opened fire on him at 5 o'clock on Saturday morning and fired some 4 shots at him before he got awake.

Someone who spoke with his engineer informed us he was thunder-struck. His surprise at our audacity was beyond description.

He poured in all his guns at the batteries and the town, and succeeded in killing three head of cattle and one dog, and slightly wounding one man. His boats were struck five times, as he acknowledges, but we don't know the result. It is not probable that his crews escaped without injury.

The next day both parties respected the Sabbath, and yesterday, he having his force of five vessels in line, succeeded in landing a gun and opened a heavy fire on our battery.

The party from the boats, numbering about 60, moved on the city as they fired. —but when our troops got on the beach, Maj. Hobby called for 25 volunteers, and at their head gallantly charged the gun; at about two hundred yards we poured in a volley and sent them to the "right about" in double quick time.

Warie's cavalry charged also in the face of the heavy fire from the vessels, but before they could get halfway, the Yankees were in their boats, and the disappointed horsemen rapidly retraced their steps under a dangerous fire of shell and grape.

We had one man killed, and none wounded. Of course, we cannot tell the (number of) Yankee boys, but I certainly saw them drag off two men, who were killed or badly wounded. Others say they saw four killed, but it is uncertain. I state what I saw. Our battery continued to pour shot into the steamer until she withdrew out of range. The steamer was struck five times in this engagement, and so were the sloop and schooner. They moved out of range of the battery quickly and commenced at a safe distance to shell the town.

After venting their spite and disappointment in this manner for two hours, they dropped down to take a position for shelling the battery. But one of our eighteen pounders fired at the steamer three times—two shots striking her, and they rapidly retired, thus ending as sharp a fight, all things considered, as any naval action of the war, and proving that Corpus Christi will neither be surrendered, nor can it be taken by any force that they can bring through Aransas Pass against us. Vicksburg has not acted more nobly than our little city.

Where all acted well, it would be invidious to specify individual instances of bravery. Suffice it to say, our men acted as veterans, and never did I see guns so coolly handled that were ours during yesterday's engagement.

You know, of course, it is impossible to please everyone, but I believe Maj. Hobby is generally considered "the right man in the right place." I know he is as brave as steel.

The Yankee vessels put out this morning, but I am certain they will return again. The damage to the town was trifling—five hundred dollars would repair the damage. They have expended at least ten thousand dollars' worth of patent projectiles to do this trifling injury.

More anon. T. H. O'C. 'footnote'



Captain Johnson



Rosita Lafitte laid the paper down in her lap as she gazed out the window into the darkness.

Her mind reeling, exhausted from the last seventy-two hours of fear and worry for her daughter's health. She is thankful for the gratification from the account she just read.

Rosita looked down at the small stack of newssheets. She had been hungry for news of what was happening with the war, as most information now was word of mouth brought by the crew of the train that delivered foodstuffs once a week to the island for its starving inhabitants. Just today she had the time to read.

The past weeks since the blockade had almost turned the island into a ghost town, and with the landing Christmas Day, life for her family had turned into a nightmare. What happened to her daughter overshadowed everything else, and Rosita sought refuge briefly in the news. A respite from the anguish she suffered.

Much had transpired because of the Yankee blockade of the island. Not fearing the blockade and refusing to leave the island to abandon her boarding house/hotel, life was getting tough for the seven of them. Her daughter, granddaughter, grandson and the three servants; free Negro's who worked for her in the hotel; suffering like the many families whose men had gone off to fight; leaving them destitute now with the blockade, but still fiercely independent, refusing to become refugees on the mainland for someone else to care for. The servants had always been free since bought

in the slave market in New Orleans. Given their papers after boarding her husband, Maurice's, ship and leaving port for Galveston. Slaves that morning, liberated men and women that afternoon.

Her husband didn't believe in slavery, and neither did she. Three of the freed slaves decided it was safer to stay with her, working at the new hotel her husband built for her on Galveston Island, rather than taking the chance of being arrested. Their papers trashed and reintroduced into slavery. The fourth remained a crewman on her husband's sloop until he reached Jamaica.

As far as anyone knew, she owned the three. But in truth, she paid them a small salary in secret accounts at the bank and gave well-appointed rooms in the backyard quarters.

That was many years ago, and how things had changed!

Earlier this week on Christmas day the Yankees finally landed troops on the island. One of their missions was to account for all the slaves left after most of the white population had abandoned the city. The freedom documents proved quite handy, the soldiers turning away, but not before making comments and snide remarks concerning her daughter.

This had worried Rosita. Her daughter Rosa was a beautiful young mother by any measure. A mixture of French and Spanish heritage. Black hair, a heart-shaped face, a flawlessly beautiful light olive skin, long legs, an hourglass figure, even after two children, and educated like her mother, able to converse, read and write in three languages.

Rosita was proud of her daughter and her grandchildren. She had done well, marrying a soft-spoken but courageous American Army Cavalry officer. However, right now Rosita was not so proud of her son-in-law. Stationed in Texas before the war, now fighting the Southern army.

He had left them with her for safekeeping when hostilities began. He didn't want them near the war. However, the war came to them.

Observing her daughter's sleeping form, badly beaten and ravaged by several Union troopers belonging to the 42nd Massachusetts Infantry; her heart was breaking.

This took place near Orlando's poultry house on the southwest end of the island. Rosa had gone there looking for a few hens for New Year's dinner. Orlando, an old Frenchman, lived alone. His only company, the winged kind. Secluded out in the marsh, they didn't think the soldiers were aware of him.

Arthur, the hotel concierge, Rosita's right arm when it concerned running the hotel, and Rosa had ridden in the hotel carriage together on the morning of the 28th of December down the little used wagon trace, following the railroad tracks, to Orlando's. Six hours later, Arthur and Orlando himself returned in Orlando's old buckboard wagon, Rosa lying in distress in the wagon bed.

She was bleeding badly, her torso bruised and cut, several ribs broken. They repeatedly raped her.

Arthur and Orlando, held at gunpoint, could not intervene in the assault. They were beside themselves with anguish.

Rosa screamed constantly when they moved her from the wagon into the lodging house, then upstairs to her bedroom. Her eight-year-old daughter Verna, cried in uncontrollable sobs while Rosita's twelve-year-old grandson, Joel, held his little sister. Tears rolled down his face; fighting his own pain and fear for his mother.

With no doctor on the island, they did the best they could, bandaging her ribs and cleaning up her face and private parts. All the while, a burning rage grew in Rosita's heart. She mourned that her husband, Maurice, was not there but at sea, daring the

Union blockades every few months to bring in supplies for the South from Mexico and Jamaica.

Reaching the hundredth time, she felt Rosa's forehead with her palm as she recalled the latest events that had happened this New Year's Eve morning.

Eight Union soldiers stood in her front yard, demanding to search her hotel and wanting to know where her daughter was. They asked for Rosa by name, Mrs. Fred Gallager, which shocked her until she learned from Arthur that her daughter's purse, containing the last letter from her husband, was missing. Taken by the soldiers after the assault.

Rosita convinced them to leave, but she knew they would be back, probably in the dark. She surmised the soldiers knew they had assaulted a Union officer's wife and that they would be in danger. Rosa's own life was in double danger, along with herself, her grandchildren and the three employees. She also feared for Orlando's life, who had returned to his home.

She was holding the right hand of her daughter, whispering her motherly love of encouragement to get past this horror, when a light taps on the bedroom door brought her attention to the present.

"Mama Rosita?" Arthur called quietly, "There is a gentleman waiting out front. He claims to be a soldier for the Texas army under General Magruder."

Rosita turned to Arthur, taking in this tall, hulking black-skinned man's frame, clothed in wool britches and a dark heavy robe in the candlelight, his big sad cow eyes, peering out from his massive fleshy face, expressing sadness and caution simultaneously.

In his massive paw of a hand, he held a Long Tom shotgun as if it was a toy, with a shot bag filled with loose lead pellets and a few paper cartridges and a powder flask draped around his neck. She had armed everyone in the house after the soldiers' visit that morning.

“Texas?”

“Yasum mama, he said that; he’s dressed in a gray officer’s uniform, his britches and boots wet, like he just came out of the marsh!”

“Okay, I am coming, Arthur.”

Rosita turned back to her sleeping daughter as Arthur took his leave. She laid her palm on Rosa’s forehead again to check for fever before turning to go. Tears welled in her eyes, fearful that her daughter would not survive this beating.

Downstairs she found the man waiting on the veranda, his eyes nervously searching down the dusty brick road, called Church St., toward the city. There wasn’t much to see, no moon yet and the stars only seen between skittering clouds. For a moment he stared across the road at the half mile of sea grass covered sand dunes and out into the bay to the north.

“May I help you?” Rosita asks, her eyes noting the Mississippi short musket he was toting, lungcarelessly in the bend of his left arm. A revolver of some sort tucked away in a reverse flap holster on his left hip, a sheathed sword hanging off his right. He leaned lightly on a walking cane.

“Good evening, Ma’am,” he says as he touched his hat brim in salute, his cane tapping the hilt of his sword.

“I’m Captain Henry Johnson of the Texas Volunteers. I am scouting, with my men over there in the weeds,” he pointed across the road to the sand dunes, “the locations of the Yankee emplacements. Do you perhaps know where they’re bivouacked? And if so, would you note this on my map?” he asks as he retrieved a thick folded paper out of his coat pocket.

Rosita stared at him a moment, a smile slowly spreading across her face. God is good, she thought to herself.

The man was apparently in his mid to late fifties from his stance and weathered face. An officer in the army with a walking cane. Wounded before? Crippled

but not so much he could not fight to protect Texas apparently, Rosita thought to herself.

“How old is your map, Captain?”

“It is the newest we could find; the date is 1859.”

“Captain, I certainly can do this. I will draw you a new street map with the information you want plus some additional details. There were a few new buildings and several streets added since 59. I doubt your map is even anything close to accurate.

As I understand it, the Yankees took quarters in a warehouse at the end of Kuhn’s Wharf. The biggest wharf on the island. But they have positions all over the city; I’ll show you where.”

She held out her right hand to him. “Please come inside. There are patrols out occasionally; we would not want them to see us.”

“Yes ma’am. I do appreciate y’all’s help,” Johnson replies as he held the front door open for her.

“Thank you, Captain. My name is Lafitte. I own this hotel with my husband, who also owns a shipping company. He is currently at sea somewhere south of here, delivering cotton and bringing back goods for the war effort.”

“That’s fine, Mrs. Lafitte. I mistook you for a servant. Your accent sounds Mexican, but your last name sounds French. My apologies.”

“Unnecessary, Mr. Johnson. I am of Spanish descent, my family came directly from Spain, not Mexico, but raised me in San Antonio; my husband is French. I get mistaken for a servant all the time. I assure you I own this establishment.”

“Again, my apologies...Lafitte, is your husband related to the pirate?”

“Si, my husband’s uncle,” Rosita replies nonchalantly as she led the captain to the dining room table, producing a sheet of paper and pencil and began drawing a rough street map, explains to Johnson

where patrols venture and where Kuhn's wharf is located; what streets ending at the bay covered by the cannons of five Union gunships.

"They can shoot directly into the central part of town!" she exclaims.

"We're bringing our own artillery," the captain replied.

Rosita noted the location of a battery where the Confederate defense guns had been. Stating there may be Union soldiers stationed there now. However, believing that Fort Point at the northern end of the island, although abandoned, was not sure if they stripped it of its cannon. She also noted a large cannon mounted in the city.

"A huge cannon, a 32-pounder as I understand, rests on a rail flatcar on Market Street, centrally located, set up only a day ago," she says as Captain Johnson looked on over her shoulder.

Her explanation finished after half an hour, including extra details about her grasp of the situation, drawn on the old map for the captain, before she gave him the map.

As she looked at his eyes, she asked. "Y'all are going to retake Galveston?"

"Yes, ma'am," Johnson answers as he folded the updated map away into his tunic pocket. While observing this woman, he was startled at how deep blue her eyes were as he felt a strange and strong attraction. He buried it, but she seemed so alive. It troubled him.

"There will be a Major Lea who will be here later. We wish to use your tower deck as an observation point and your hotel as a hospital. We will provide a medical flag on the tower for some protection. I cannot promise the flag will stop them from putting shells into your hotel. They have continually proven themselves to be disrespectful bastards with no honor. New Orleans and Corpus Christi proved that. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, that will be acceptable, Captain. I expect y'all will have a doctor with you?"

"Yes, ma'am, we have two doctors."

"May I ask if you can request one of them to look at my daughter?"

The captain shrugged and scratched his chin. "Why I reckon so, it is serious?"

Rosita took the captain's arm and led him to the stairs. "Yes, it is serious; some Yankee soldiers assaulted her, beat her badly. I really need a doctor to look at her."

Captain Johnson took his leave after viewing Rosita's daughter's beaten body and promised he would arrange for one doctor to drop by as soon as possible.

"It would be early this morning as the troops were crossing the railroad bridge to the south as we speak, and the going was slow in the dark, but I will make sure one doctor realizes your daughter's condition and your request."

With that, he disappeared across the road, into the sand dunes and seagrass toward the beach bordering the bay.

Rosita glanced at the grandfather clock in the sitting room. It was five minutes to midnight.

"Happy New Year," she whispers to herself. "May God grant us a better year in 63."



The Battle for Galveston



At one thirty in the morning, Arthur gently tapped Rosita on her shoulder until she woke up. She had fallen asleep in her favorite chair, placed in her daughter's bedroom, with a heavy quilt thrown over her. As she looked up into his big cow eyes, she saw worry. Something was up; she felt this instinctively.

"What is it, Arthur?"

"Them Yankee soldiers that were here this morning are back. They is a wanting to see you; they is out on the front lawn," he answers quietly.

"Really, they're back?"

"Yasum, looks to be the same bunch."

"I see. Arthur, please tell them I am dressing and will be down shortly."

"Yasum, Mama Rosita. Shall I unlock the gun cabinet under the dining table?"

"Yes, and get everything ready, guns, shot, powder, cartridges and caps."

"Yasum, do you think those Texas boys will be here soon?" he asks as he started for the bedroom door.

"Lord, I hope so, Arthur, if not we hold them off until they do." She replied, knowing full well their lives hung in the balance.

"Yasum, Mama Rosita."

Rosita Lafitte threw off her blanket as she stood from her chair, checked her daughter and departed for her own bedroom.

There she stopped, set her candle down on her vanity and looked into her mirror at her reflection. She shivered slightly in the cold; there was no fire in the potbellied stove on orders from her, in any room not in use, firewood was scarce and fuel for the heaters and lamps was non-existent, the gas company having closed shop when the blockade began.

She took the comb out of her gray-streaked dark brown hair and let it fall past her shoulders; thinking of the warmth of days past with her husband at sea. Better times, she mused.

Older now, 42 years and alone without Maurice but with good company, Arthur, his wife and Nadie the cook.

Turning to an old copper-sheathed sea trunk in one corner, she opened the heavy curved lid, lifting out the top tray. Beneath were two quilts, and from under them she pulled out a carefully folded set of white cotton sailor's blouse and trousers, laying them on her bed.

She removed her dark red robe and slipped the trousers on under her nightgown after she lifted the gown over her head, tossing it to her bed, and slipped the blouse down over her upper body.

Next, she pulled a three-inch-wide leather belt, festooned with a gilded silver buckle, out of the chest; uncurled it to the floor before wrapping it around her waist and securing the buckle.

She smiled; everything still fit. A little snug, but still fits. Dropping a pair of deck sandals to the floor, she slipped off her rabbit fur lined house shoes into the basket weaved sandals. The feel of the cold, smooth, worn leather brought back many memories.

Last, she found at the bottom of the chest her knife, an eighteen-inch, jeweled-handled, Arab-style scimitar weapon that she slipped inside her belt, across her belly.

She thought of Takis the Egyptian, the ship's doctor on her husband's old twin-masted sloop, who saved her life and later gave her the jeweled short scimitar in honor of her bravery.

Dismissing the memories. She collected off her dresser top two loaded .36 caliber Colt Patterson percussion revolvers. Her fingers brushed over the ornately engraved gold-plated barrels, cylinders and skull crusher Tiffany grips.

The pistols, gifts of long ago from her husband. She thought again of the times past. She slipped both under her belt on each side, butts forward; remembering the last time she used them in battle when she suffered her wound.

Also, remembering the horror as her husband in his rage hacked the offending Panamanian pirate to pieces with his cutlass after the pirate shot her.

Finally, she collected her robe and draped it over her left arm and exited her bedroom.

The grandchildren, Joel and Verna, were standing in the hallway, wakening to the moving about downstairs and the voices outside, ventured from bed to see what was about.

"Mama Rosita, you look like a pirate!" little Verna exclaimed.

"She was a pirate," Joel chides her. Excited about the weapons around her waist.

"No, she wasn't," Verna retorts in a child's disbelieving voice.

"Yes, she was, weren't you, Grandma-ma?" Joel asks, not about to be outdone by his little sister.

Rosita smiled and patted her granddaughter on her head. "That was a long time ago, mi amor, many years before you were born."

"You two go to the hurricane room now and stay there until told to come out. Go quietly, please!"

"Storm coming, Grandma?" Joel asks, not sure of

the reason for this order. The weather seemed quiet outside.

"Yes, a dreadful storm, but not the kind you are familiar with."

The two grandchildren ran down the stairs ahead of her as she donned her robe, tying the sash as she walked down the stairs. She was feeling the cold and needed her muscles warm and loose.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, Rosita stopped and murmured to herself, "God let us survive this night!" as she surveyed everyone busy with their respective chores and making sure the children entered the thick oak-walled centrally located storm room.

Closing her eyes, she reached into her inner being, lifting the other woman, the one she had buried long ago, out of her resting place, preparing her for war!

"So long ago, yet such a short time. I wonder if I'll die tonight? Well, if this was the Lords will, I will accept it, but some heathen men are going with me!" she concluded under her breath as she made the sign of the cross and kissed the silver medallion of Saint Mary, that always hung around her neck.

Rosita stopped at the front door and glanced over her shoulder at Arthur and his wife; she had Arthur send Nadie to the kitchen to guard the rear door of the building. With a smile for them, she opened the door and walked out onto the veranda, moving to the right side of the steps next to the nearest roof column.

Hidden from view in the shadows of the brilliant winter half-moon light was a loaded shotgun Arthur had placed there earlier.

Arthur and his wife followed, spreading to the left, each next to their respective roof columns, each with a shotgun.

Each of the six Union soldiers held a rifle while spreading along the white-painted waist-high

fence bordering the front yard. The seventh one had entered the small gate and stood on the brick sidewalk leading to the veranda.

Rosita realized there were eight this morning. Where is that one?

"So, you have armed your slaves?" The soldier, a Sargent standing on the sidewalk, spoke.

"They're free men and women." Rosita replies.

"Yeah, so what. We want the woman, Rosa Gallager." He stated, moving closer.

Rosita smiled and untied her robe. "You can have me," she says, dropping the garment.

"We don't want you, old woman!" he stated before he realized what she was doing, an incestuous smile forming from his lips when he saw her shapely, full figure in the moonlight but caught his breath when he glimpsed the two glistening pistols and cutlass tucked under her belt.

The thick wool robe fell to her feet as she reached for the shotgun and pointed it at the soldier.

"Woman, you'd better put that thing down before someone gets hurt." He cries out, confused by her behavior.

Rosita let off one barrel, missing the trooper's head but lacerating his left ear.

"Owww, you damn bitch, you shot off my ear!" he cries, doubling over and backing away, his free hand holding the bloody side of his face.

"Oh, you poor dear, I am so sorry—I was aiming for your nose!"

The soldier standing closest to the injured trooper raised his rifle to his shoulder as Rosita swung and let loose the second barrel, hitting him in his chest. A fist-sized hole appeared where his heart was.

She pulled her pistols and started laying down a withering roar of flame and lead as she backed to the open doors. The clean, salty air quickly filled with the acrid smell of gray gun smoke.

Arthur and his wife let off both of their barrels at the scattering soldiers, who did not expect this resistance, before running past Rosita and back inside the boarding house.

"Joel, I need you, come here...now!" Rosita cries as she, with Arthur's help, turns the dining table on its side.

"Get behind the table and start reloading for us," she commanded, handing him her two pistols and shotgun as Arthur pulled up the hidden door beneath the table, revealing the small box of paper cartridges and shot bags with powder.

The twelve-year-old boy ducked down behind the heavy wooden overturned furniture and took the first shotgun handed to him. Joel was tall for his age, but the shotgun was still difficult to handle.

Heavy rifle fire boomed from the north side of the veranda. The Yankee soldiers had found cover behind a derelict wagon off the side of the road, some fifty yards away, and began shooting at the windows of the hotel.

Lead bullets splattered against the outside brick walls, some shattering the window glass before embedding on the inner walls of the sitting and dining rooms.

Verna had followed her brother into the dining room, squealing as the smack of lead embedded in the walls behind them.

"Get down, —get down!" Rosita commands the two children.

"Help me," Joel cries to his sister!

"How?" she cries.

"Take the cartridges from the boxes."

"Okay," Verna cries as she unwraps the paper seal of the wooden cartridge boxes and removes the nitrate paper pistol cartridges.

“Here!” she says, her hands shaking as she handed him several paper cartridges in her small fists.

Rosita Lafitte emptied two Colt dragoons, previously positioned on the lamp table next to her window.

Focusing on the flashes of red flame behind the wagon was where she directed her shots.

After emptying the Dragoons, she retrieved the Kammerlader breech-loading rifle propped against the wall behind her. She emptied the Norwegian long gun with rapid fire until she was out of paper cartridges. She ran back to the overturned table, left the Dragoons and grabbed her Pattersons from Joel and continued the battle.

Arthur continued his shooting until empty, collected the spent guns and handed them to Joel for reloading. He saw Joel was quickly becoming overwhelmed with his duties. The guns were hot and Joel wore no gloves; he knelt down to assist.

Arthur’s wife delivered her spent shotguns and dragoons to Joel also, then pushed her husband out of the overturned shelter. Instructing him to return to the windows. He was too slow reloading was her comment. She would assist Joel and Verna.

The fight eased up for a moment as all sides reloaded and contemplated their next move.

Unbeknownst to the defenders inside the boarding house but expected, one of the Yankee soldiers had stolen his way around the back and entered through the kitchen.

Nadie, not guarding the back door as instructed, was staring down the hallway toward the front of the house when the Union soldier struck her on the side of the head with his fist, shoving her dazed body out of his way.

He had made it as far as the dining room, creeping up

behind Rosita when Joel saw him. With both hands, he lifted the heavy Dragoon he had finished loading and fired at the man’s back, hitting him in his right shoulder, spinning him around facing Joel, taking aim with his own pistol.

Rosita turned at the gunshot, surprised at the soldier behind her. She quickly pulled her Egyptian cutlass and shoved the sharp drop point of the blade into the man’s left kidney.

Unable to make a sound from the intense, horrible pain, he ran from the room, dropping his revolver. With a silent scream, he lurched back down the hallway into the kitchen, where Nadie slammed a six-inch kitchen paring knife into his belly as he stumbled past her. The wounded man turned his head, staring at her in disbelief as she stepped back out of his way. The soldier dropped to his knees, rose and staggered forward to reach the backdoor, before falling through the wire screen framework, splintering the frame as he fell face down on the back porch. The tip of the paring knife pushed up against the cloth of his tunic like a tent pole.

Another volley of rifle fire laced the hotel bricks, shattering what remained of the glass in the windows and ripping the wallpaper off the inner wall; sending the defenders to the floor for cover.

Suddenly a second volley of fire erupted, but this came from across the road in the sand dunes, directed toward the wagon and the six Union soldiers, killing one of them.

Scattered shots continued for several moments. Suddenly it was quiet. The Union soldiers were gone, running north toward the center of town.

Captain Johnson appeared at the small gate, noted the dead trooper next to the fence and called out Rosita’s name.

“Mrs. Lafitte, are y’all right in there?”

Rosita stepped through the shattered front door, picked up her robe where she had dropped it and slipped into it as she replied.

“Si, Captain, thank you for asking and thank you for your timely arrival.”

Captain Johnson grinned seeing her attired as she was. He shook his head and touched his hat brim in a salute. “My pleasure, ma’am. You sure y’all’s folks are, okay?”

“Yes, I believe everyone is fine, a little shaken and excited perhaps, but we survived,” she smiles as she stepped off the veranda and walked toward the captain.

“Did you bring your doctor?”

“Yes, ma’am, he will be along shortly. Now, if you will excuse me, we must proceed up this road. The battle has begun,” he says reluctantly, not wanting to leave the company of this woman.

“Vaya con Dios, mi Capitan.” She blessed him in Spanish.

The old man smiled and touched his hat brim in salute again.” Gracious Señora Lafitte, may the Lord be with you and yours as well.”

Throughout the dark morning hours, the hotel caught the sounds of fighting in the city while men continued to pour into the island city from the south end on their way toward the roar of the guns.

The Texas volunteers and Rangers, consisting mostly of old men and young boys, some of whom were no taller than their muskets and Mississippi rifles, engaged the 260-odd Union troops of the 42ⁿ Massachusetts infantry entrenched in the city.

Battle harden Union troops versus Texans accustomed to fighting marauding Indians and bandits. The union troops fought by the rules; the Texans fought like they did with Indians. No rules, no mercy.

After much heavy block by block street fighting, the Texans had forced the enemy to retreat to their

bivouac shelter; an enormous warehouse on the end of Kuhn’s wharf.

The Union soldiers had taken up some of the thick planking of the wharf earlier to reinforce the walls of the warehouse. This proved to be a brilliant idea as the shot from rifles and the small field cannons failed to penetrate the warehouse walls.

The Confederate forces, having realized this, attempted to assault the warehouse from the water using makeshift ladders. However, the ladders were too short. Some not rising two feet out of the deep water around the end of the wharf. The depth of the water, underestimated with the tide coming in.

Several men perished attempting this, and more died as dawn gave the six Union gunships, stationed in the bay, the ability to fire on the docks and into the city of Galveston with some accuracy. The ship’s guns made the streets running down to the individual wharfs deadly kill zones.

A few shells punched holes in the red brick of the local bank and other buildings. This drove off the attackers, who sought shelter from the naval bombardment further away from the line of cannon fire.

Shortly after nine in the morning, two Confederate River steamers, the Neptune and Bayou City; each fortified with compressed cotton bales, strapped to the decks, for protection from cannon fire and sporting heavy cannons of their own, attacked the Union ships.

They first attacked the Union ship Harriet Lane.

The Neptune, with its cotton bales burning on the starboard side from hot cannonballs embedded in the fabrics, suffered damage below the waterline during the assault. Sinking; the skipper ran her aground on the beach.

The Bayou City, even after its main guns had burst from too much powder and shot in hot barrels by over exuberant and hastily trained gun crews, with its cotton bales also aflame, closed on and rammed the

Harriet Lane. Assault troops boarded the Union vessel.

The Texas fighters, armed with pistols, tomahawks or Bowie knives, veterans of many hand-to-hand fights with Indian marauders, overpowered the Union sailors and Marine snipers, who were unaccustomed to this kind of close-quarter battle.

Rosita and her hotel staff with the two grandchildren watched much of the sea battle from their sun deck surrounding the tower on the hotel roof in the company of Major Lea, who was continuing to dispatch notes to his orderlies. But when two errant naval shells overshot the city and crashed into buildings on the street behind the hotel, he sent her and the children down to the hurricane room.

Earlier, Mama Rosita had shown the army doctor to her daughter, whom she recognized immediately as one of the local physicians practicing in Houston.

He spent a good part of the early morning dark hours examining Rosa and replacing the bandages and wrappings around her chest and stomach before addressing the wounded that trickled in.

Rosita, pleased to have offered her hotel as an aid station for any wounded, not that there were many, less than a 120 total, kept her servants busy with boiling water and shredding bed sheets for bandages.

The shooting stopped, giving a welcome relief to the inhabitants of the boarding house and time for Rosita to confer with the doctor about her daughter.

"Doctor, if you have a moment, how is my daughter? Will she recover soon?"

He sat down, wiped his face, he gazed up into her eyes, not knowing how to tell her. He motioned for her to sit next to him.

"Mrs. Lafitte, I am truly sorry. Your daughter has internal bleeding, severe bleeding. There is nothing I can do. She will not survive."

Rosita covered her mouth and inhaled involuntarily.

Trying to control her emotions. This was her only child! She could not bear more children after she suffered the shot in the lower abdomen during a ship boarding off the coast of Panama; the ball had entered her uterus, making it impossible to have more children.

The swift surgery by Takis the Egyptian, on her husband's ship, had saved her life, but doomed her to only one child, and now she would lose that child.

"How long?" she asks, her voice breaking, betraying her stout control.

"Hard to say, given the care and not letting her move around, two months, maybe three."

"I am truly sorry," he stated again, patting her knee. Moments later, a corporal raced into the hotel and interrupted their conversation.

"Sir, I am looking for Major Lea. I was told he was here."

"Yes, that is correct, Corporal. He is on the tower deck."

"Sir, Major Lea's son, a Union officer on the Harriet Lane, is mortally wounded. He has asked for his father."

"The stairs to the tower are at the end of the hallway on the second floor." Rosita says, her eyes locking on the doctor.

"So many families torn by this war, so many," she murmurs as the Corporal salutes and races for the stairs.

Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion that shook the whole island city, shaking dust, tiles and glass down from the roofs, ceilings, windows and rafters of every building on the north end of the island.

The Union flagship, the Westfield, had run aground on a sandbar and later exploded. The fleet commander had elected to destroy his ship rather than let the Confederates have the vessel.

Unfortunately, he died in the explosion along with thirteen sailors.

The explosion woke Rosa, who called out for her mother. Rosita ran up the stairs to her room and kneeled down beside her bed.

"Mama, what was that thunder?"

"I'm unsure, darling; I think something big exploded."

"I was dreaming a bad dream and then I woke to this big thundering. Is there a storm? I'm scared."

Rosita ran her fingers through her daughter's hair. "I understand, mi amor, but the thunder you heard was not part of your dream. And yes, there was a storm, but not one of weather," Rosita exclaims. "You slept through a titanic battle."

"Battle? Here on Galveston?"

Rosita smiles. "Yes, dear, the Texas army is retaking Galveston. They attacked last night."

"Who is winning?"

"That I cannot say. The shooting stopped about three hours ago; now there was this enormous explosion that woke you. I do not know what is happening right now," she croons quietly, smiles on the outside but cries for her daughter's life in her heart.

"They're retiring. They are retiring! The damn Yankees are running!" cried men's voices downstairs and out on the lawn and street.

Heavy, rapid footsteps were heard on the stairs. Moments later, Arthur appeared in the doorway of Rosa's bedroom. He took in the two women and politely announced.

"Mama Rosita, the Union ships are leaving. Smoke is coming from their chimneys, and they are pointing their noses out of the bay."

"Oh, thank God!" Rosita cries, sinking to the floor, her arms supporting her shaking body.

Rosa tried to rise to console her mother but could not and fell back onto her pillow.

Arthur walked over and helped the older woman up and into her chair. "You alright, Mama Rosita?"

"Yes, yes, I am fine, Arthur, just tired, that's all. This news is wonderful, isn't it? —isn't it?" she cried twice.

"Yasum, those Union sailors are running away.

Looks like they are abandoning the soldiers left on the island."

"Oh, thank you, Lord," she repeated. "Thank you."

The doctor from Houston walked into the bedroom as they were talking.

"Mrs. Lafitte, there is a Captain Johnson downstairs asking for you."

"Captain Johnson? Is he hurt?"

"Yes, he's injured, but I think not mortally," then he stated,

"I guess you heard the Yankees have given up the fight and are steaming out of the bay," he happily announced.

"Yes, yes, we heard. Wonderful news, isn't it?"

At the same moment she spoke, they heard a strange reverberating sound rolling from the city; it came from every Texas soldier on the island of Galveston crying out in a roar of victory. Suddenly, the bells from the many church steeples throughout the city joined them, ringing in victory.

Morning of January 1st, 1863, New Year's Day; heralded the occupation of Galveston, Texas ended. The battle was over. The small island city would remain for the duration of the war and forever after in the possession of Texas.

Two more major battles on the Texas coast would take place.

The Confederate forces repelled the Union Navy once more at Sabine Pass. And defeated the Union Army at Palmito Ranch near Brownsville one month

after the war officially ended in the east. While there were skirmishes all along the Rio Grande River, including Brownsville changing possession five times and a minor battle in Laredo; Texas never fell, and the Union occupied it only after the South lost the War of Northern Aggression in Virginia.



I Miss You Darling



Fred Gallagher sat at his desk in his study going over his accounting books. He noted the date, October 31, 1878, then checked the figures and rechecked, noting the final total for the month at the bottom of the page. Satisfied, he closed the brown leather-bound ledger and put it aside.

He sat there motionless for a moment, thinking as he stroked his graying mustache down the side of his mouth with his left index finger, before searching for a small desk key at the back of the center drawer.

Finding it, hesitating again as he fingered the key, thinking, then unlocked the right bottom drawer that held his private papers, locked, even from his daughter.

He opened, pulling out several telegrams he had received in the past two months plus a small stack of envelopes; letters from his late wife. Written to him during the war, bound with a faded red ribbon.

All the telegrams were from his old army associate and close friend, Colonel Edward Handley, who was now stationed at Fort Dodge, Kansas. They had soldiered together, from West Point through the war with Mexico, and at Fort Davis in southwest Texas. Fighting the Comanche and the Apaches. However, the War of the Rebellion sent them to different units in President Lincoln's Army of the Potomac.

Each telegram provided a little more information about three men he and the Colonel had been looking for since Gallagher had returned to Texas after the war.

Rereading the telegram he had received in 1874 from his longtime friend. Sent from Washington DC,

concerning a former corporal who had served under both of them at Fort Davis in the early 1850s.

The man was dying of pneumonia in Buffalo, Maryland. He had sent for the Colonel to give a deathbed confession. This concerns his actions and those of seven other comrades during the short occupation of Union soldiers on Galveston Island during the last seven days of December 1862. Three of them had died in Galveston when the men tried to take the captain's wife and the others at his mother-in-law's Inn and murder them.

Handley sought the other four men who had survived the war, but they'd been discharged from the Army, with three completely vanishing; the fourth, he learned, had hanged for murder in New York a year earlier in 1873.

Handley, at that time a major, had sent a telegraph and then a letter stating these facts, noting he would keep a lookout for the three remaining men, sending the notarized deathbed confession from the corporal to Gallagher.

Gallagher understood Ed was doing this out of remorse for convincing him to leave his wife and family in Texas as he believed there would be less danger from the war.

He also knew Ed had been in love with Rosa and was heartbroken but accepted as a gentleman her decision when she chose him over Ed.

It had been many years since his late wife Rosa had sent her last letter to him. It was in the spring of 1863; April 22nd, she had penned it, a goodbye letter he did not receive until 1864.

She was dying when she wrote that letter and was gone three days later, as informed by her mother, Rosita, in a separate note included with his wife's letter. Filled with her thoughts of him, her love for him and her regrets that they could not live out their lives together.

The news devastated him; draining all his life out of

his body! He remembered actually collapsing; fellow officers had to help him into his tent to lie down. Three days later, the unit received orders to move out and engage the Rebs. Still weak from the emotional shock, he had to be helped onto his horse.

With no longer a reason to survive the war he thought, he was aware his mental condition was the primary cause of his war injury at the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House in May 1864.

He had become indifferent and careless of the flying lead and hell around him: receiving a medal for bravery that he said was not true. He wanted to die, to be with her! He was trying to get himself killed but became a hero instead. Receiving the medal anyway.

Wounded, he sat out the rest of the war, having lost the will to recover. Gallagher lay on his back for months, teetering on the edge between life and death.

Only through the visits of his widowed sister, Rosalyn Verna Mayfield, and her insistence that he remember and live for his children, did he finally overcome his depression and healed; both in body and partly in mind. Racked with guilt for not being with his wife, he carried that grief for sixteen years.

Gallagher folded the telegrams and placed them back in the drawer. Then, untying the faded ribbon, he removed from the stack the yellowed, tear-stained and wrinkled envelope addressed to him in his wife's handwriting.

Removing the heavily creased paper inside the envelope, he opened it as he had so many times before and read her words.

Tears rolled down his face, even now, as he read the sweet last words she had penned for him. Her love expressed in the now-faded ink.

He could barely hear her voice in those written words, and that bothered him. Her memory was fading to black and white as time passed, and he was afraid of forgetting her and her love for him.

Distressed, he read on. She asked him if he remembered the two of them walking on that hidden path between the rose bushes near the old Alamo mission chapel under a full moon; of his dropping to one knee and having an old dead rose branch with thorns bite him in his knee as he proposed to her. Of their laughter concerning his pain as he begged her for her hand in marriage.

Again, she asked if he remembered what his first words were after the birth of their daughter? He called her his Rose of San Antonio.

She wrote about the stubbornness of their firstborn, their son Joel, and how he was so much like his father.

The letter described her gazing from her bedroom, observing the pairing of two birds in the nearby tree, and recalling their initial night as a married couple, along with each shared night.

Her words tore into his heart as they did each time he read that letter. To revive the suffering, it was the sole method he could use to keep her diminishing recollection vibrant. They were her last words; he could vaguely hear her soft voice as he read, his heart leaping in agony and despair.

She asked him to care for their two children and to please not let her death affect how he carried on; not to cry for her, that he must survive the terrible war and come home.

Her last words were so poetic, loving and yet final, as was her way when she put an end to things.

I miss you, my darling, every single day; the same way I guess Heaven would miss the stars in the sky. No woman could ask for a better husband as I think of you with each breath of air, each pulse of my heart. Please, as I am remembering our wondrous love, never give up my darling. I'll be waiting for you, my love, in Glory. All my Heart; Rosa'.

Gallager laid the letter down, tears quietly washing his cheeks as he looked across the room at her portrait on the west wall, thinking of the strength of the woman and the love he lost; their love, even though faded by time, was still there beating within his own heart.

Shaking his head slowly as tears continued to roll down his face as he read the last page, not in Rosa's hand but her mother, Mama Rosita. She wrote a few words, telling him her daughter had passed on to Heaven three days after she wrote to him. They had a nice funeral, and she's buried in the Olelaner cemetery on the outskirts of town. She wrote that his wife's last words were,

"Tell him I love him. And to take care of himself."

Fred folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope and put it away in the desk drawer.

He stood up and straightened his coat and tie, wiping his eyes clean as he walked over to the window facing the avenue in front of the Inn.

He considered what he was going to do when he arrived in Dodge. His plan was unexpected, dangerous and some would say impossible or foolhardy. Vengeance is what he was planning, but convinced himself the plan was about seeking justice.

A hotel owner now, soft and slow, not like the Cavalry soldier he once was. He realized his plan was simple and had many issues.

Aware of his softness, he had taken two-to three-hour rides each day on Emmitt's crazy wild red roan mustang, Strawberry, which was helping him reacquire his riding skills and toughing up his body.

Originally practicing with his old Army Colt to sharpen his shooting skills, he was woefully unprepared. Even purchasing the new .45 Frontier Double Action Colt revolver, the latest design from the gun manufacturer, showed him his weaknesses. His arms and hands were weak, and that new sixgun was heavier than his old Army model.

After a few shooting sessions, he had his Army Colt converted for metal cartridges, by the local gunsmith in Austin. Keeping his new one as a second gun. Hopefully, the trail drive would help him get to the level of physical fitness he felt he needed to be at.

He needed his son-in-law to return with his daughter to begin this venture. He expected she would not approve, but the plan was already in motion. All that remained was Emmitt's arrival and, of course, his commitment. He had better sense than to tell of his plans to his daughter or even Emmitt, until they were far on their way to the herd, waiting for them east of Waco.

Fred Gallagher stared outside for several minutes, watching the traffic on Georgetown Avenue. Much had happened this year, and much was to come before the year was out or even into the new year.

Gallagher made the Catholic sign of the cross over his face and chest as he prayed a brief prayer.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, but Lord, not vengeance —not vengeance. My wife's soul, our children and I demand justice. Forgive me, Lord, for what I am about to do —for my faded love."



The Elissa



Summer in 1878 Texas was finally over, and fall was halfway to completion by early October.

The temperatures at the height of the day were bearable. One could sleep comfortably at night. If one were to sit in a wooded area and pay attention to nature, one would see the small animals, such as squirrels, gathering nuts and other foodstuffs for storage for winter. A cold winter that was sure to come. The young were venturing out, playing with their siblings or exploring the new world they were born into in the early spring.

In the sky, flocks of various types and species of birds had migrated south. Some got an early start, and in later weeks others began their seasonal trip south.

On the Texas coast on a barrier island and a peninsula north of the small meat packing town of Rockport, one could find the gathering place, for the winter, for various winged fowl: large Whooping Cranes, several species of Herons, and many smaller bird species.

A haven for hunters who could afford the time and money to travel there to hunt, however, there were no accommodations or easy access to the peninsula or island, it was a true wilderness and sanctuary for fowl from the winter winds and predators.

Emmitt McGowan and his wife Verna, newlyweds for almost

eight weeks, watched the birds from a half mile out at sea as they stood on the deck of the new Scottish built and British owned, iron hulled, three mast, Baroque cargo-passenger schooner, the 'Elissa', as it passed by the conflagration of water fowls, on their way to Galveston.

The Elissa, sailing on strong winds that were coming off the backside of a late-season hurricane born in the middle of the Gulf, was making good time.

The hurricane, the eighth one that year, was moving to the east, in the opposite direct of the 'Elissa's' track, to eventually cross northern Florida several days later, taking twenty-seven lives before it spun out into the Atlantic Ocean and expired.

The ship's captain and some of the crew, who only acknowledged their worry among themselves, finally relaxed when they were many hundreds of miles from the storm clouds and making good time up the Texas coast.

Emmitt, no stranger to the sea, kept a watchful eye himself until the clouds of the storm were peaking over the horizon, after inquiring of the captain his thoughts on the storm.

Satisfied they were safe, he saw no need to mention the storm to his wife. In fact, he never said a word to Verna about this storm in all the years they were together!

They were returning from a brief visit to Veracruz, Mexico, that Emmitt had surprised her with, to visit friends he had made when he sailed there as a young man during the war with the North.

Pedro Sanchez, Emmitt's best friend there, who was sweet on Jessica Lopez during those days that he partied with them, the short times his ship was in port, now married to her with a half-dozen children. Her slight frame showed the effort but, to his amazement, still kept her figure.

Jessica and Verna hit it off right away, jabbering like two old friends in rapid Spanish. Too fast for Emmitt to keep up.

His spouse wished to discover the locations he had seen before their marriage, she had mentioned before their union, and to journey on a vessel similar to those she viewed as a youngster from the Galveston piers.

A surprise wedding present that she did not expect had won her heart all over again. Verna could not fathom life without Emmitt McGowan, no matter what happened in their future.

From a mile out at sea, they could still hear clearly over the wind the incredible noise of millions of birds that were gathered on the island off the port bow of the Elissa. The captain had provided Verna a telescoping eye glass to enable her to see the scene better, that lay before them.

"This is amazing, mi amor. I never imagined such a gathering of birds in one location. And the noise even from out here! I cannot imagine what it is like among them. It probably would hurt my ears!" she laughs as she scans again the fowls in the distance with the telescope. She held it up to her right eye until her arms gave out from the weight of the instrument.

Emmitt laughed with her. "Yep, it is loud. You would think you would lose your mind."

"You've been in there?" She asks, closing the telescope and leaning against the ship's rail as the wind blew her dark auburn hair around her smiling and cheerful face.

This entire trip was one big adventure for her. She was so happy to have met and married this man. Still, she could not have imagined a year ago that she would have experienced the events that took place over the past year. The nightmare involving Jenkins seemed only that, a bad dream, yet now here she was, safe, in love and married; standing on the leaning deck of this beautiful ship, the

'Elissa', sailing from Mexico to Galveston. Her right hand dropped momentarily to her midriff as a slight grin crossed her face.

They had a double wedding, as her father had suggested, she and Emmitt and Maria and Ben. It had taken some explaining about Maria and her, as cousins, to both men, who had no inkling up to the moment Emmitt proposed to her.

It was a simple explanation; their randmothers were sisters, but the daughters and granddaughters of those two women experienced different upbringings.

They had a private conversation about Maria's life. Widowed, her family did not accept her former spouse, a red-headed Irishman. After his death on a cattle drive, she chose not to accept help from any close family members because of their disapproval of that marriage. Choosing instead to make her own way and raising her red-haired son on her own. The news didn't faze either of the men; it seemed to cement the relationship between the two now that they were actually family, instead of just good friends and partners.

The short days leading up to the wedding day were busy as both men needed to be converted to Catholicism. The two received their sacraments in the church on the same day that they all were married. Both Verna and Maria insisted this take place or there would be no wedding.

Despite the two men's grumbling, they complied with their women's wishes, which delighted the two brides to be.

On their wedding day, both women laughed when the priest stated that the two men only lacked the sacrament of becoming a priest and the sacrament of Last Rites; they had everything else.

Ben held a look of horror on his face at the thought of becoming a priest, which drew much laughter. At which time, Emmitt informed him he had

to be unmarried to do that; encouraging Ben to turn and signal the priest to continue, more eager than ever to complete the ceremony so his single days would end forever.

After the big wedding party, the two couples met the next day and traveled by train to Austin and then by stagecoach to San Antonio, where Ben and Maria said their goodbyes for the moment.

They left with her mother and four brothers and their wives. Ben and Maria were apprehensive about that meeting, but it seemed to come off well. Because of Maria's late husband, Ben, towering over everyone, worried if the family would accept him, but the males took to this 'gringo viejo' (old white man) quickly. He had a reputation the males admired. Their women were attracted to his age and height.

Maria's family gave a warm welcome. As Verna's mother's family warmly welcomed her and Emmitt. The two-family groups held another big party two days later, and Emmitt met more cousins than he could keep up with.

After that, she and Emmitt traveled by stage to Oakville, where they met two of his brothers and then south by buggy, to visit his family ranch next to the Nueces River. Ol' Blu, trailing a long, made his last trip to live out his days in the country he was born and grew up in.

That was an experience for Verna, meeting Emmitt's father, mother, four brothers and sister along with their wives, husband and all the children. Apparently, Emmitt, the oldest, was the last holdout to marry, she discovered.

She fell in love with his mother, both of them adopting the love of a 'mother and daughter' relationship right away, as if they were flesh and blood.

Verna discovered how much she needed the love of a mother, something she had missed for over two-thirds of her life.

She also could see a close resemblance between the

father and his oldest son. Emmitt didn't fall far from the tree, she realized. His father was still a powerful man even at his age, lean and tan from years in the Texas sun like Emmitt.

The day before they left for Corpus Christi, Emmitt bade a tearful farewell to his old mount as he turned Blu loose from the corral near the ranch house, into his father's remuda; Blu walking slowly away, turning for one last look at his master and old friend before joining the herd of horses that were grazing on the sweet green grass along the Nueces River.

Verna wept, not at saying goodbye to Ol' Blu, but at the soft spot in her husband's heart for this animal. She understood he was hurting inside.

Verna remembered that at first, she thought this was not a normal relationship between man and animal, but over time and after the events of last summer, she understood the bond between these two.

Ol' Blu and Emmitt had a trust and a love between them she was jealous over. Sometimes she wished Emmitt would love her like he loved that old horse; but she realized also that he loved her differently and with a grand passion not shown for Blu.

Satisfied now with her husband's love, she wept at his goodbye to his old trusted friend.

After eight days with his family, they continued their journey to Corpus Christi. Emmitt surprised her with the passage to Veracruz. Now they were aboard the 'Elissa' returning to Texas by Galveston.

She found she loved sailing, like her grandmother before her. Even after a few days of seasickness both going and returning; the nausea in her stomach passed mostly, and the fresh wind with nothing but sea around them cleansed her spirit and filled her with life.

In fact, during this return trip, she suspected

she was with life in her womb, but hesitated to tell Emmitt until, she was sure. She thought her morning sickness could be nothing more than a part of her adjusting to the sea; so, she wasn't sure, even though she missed her period.

Verna was looking forward to visiting her grandmother and introducing her husband, Emmitt. Life was good, she felt; the future looked promising and full. She thanked God many times in her prayers during this trip for the happiness she was experiencing and for the man who had come into her life.

"Yeah, my Pa took me there once when I was a young boy to hunt. I was ten or eleven, and the sound of those birds was so strong it scared the be-jibbers outta me! I did little hunting." Emmitt laughs. "But I tell you, darlin', the number of birds in that area will astound you!"

"We must go someday, if only for the day, to visit. I want to experience that as well." She replies, thinking of all the things she wanted to do now; she thought that was funny, because before, she was content to listen to travelers who would tell their stories at the dining table at her father's inn, and never imagined too strongly that she would want to travel.

She had done that with the long trip to and back from Pennsylvania. She hadn't developed a great interest beyond that because of the discomfort of the traveling. But now her attitude was changing, and she was content with the desire.

Turning, she leaned against the railing, with her husband beside her. Her hand holding Emmitt's. She would never let it or him go, she promised herself. She had found her life.



Reunion



The Elissa docked at Kuhn's Wharf, the same wharf that was the focal point of the land battle for the recapture of Galveston during the Civil War. Commerce was never better for Galveston.

Emmitt noted three ships plus the one they were on docked at Kuhn's with several others residing at other wharfs both north and south of them in the harbor.

The wharf hummed with the sound of men singing as they labored; cargo was unloaded or loaded both from the wagons pulled up on the docks and onto the ships.

Verna and Emmitt stood watching the stevedores, mostly Negroes, their dark bodies shining from the sweat of labor, working with sunburned Irishmen.

They were waiting for their luggage to be carried off the ship when a tall well-dressed and elegant looking Negro man wearing a black silk top hat over graying hair cut close to the scalp, black, long-tailed frock coat over a white silk shirt, black bow tie, striped wool trousers and highly polished black boots stood at the edge of the dock and called out, "Mrs. Verna?"

Verna immediately turned her head and, upon seeing the man, called out in a loud voice, "Arthur, oh my Arthur!"

"I'm here to collect you and your husband and take you to Mama Rosita," he replied loudly as he pulled on his celluloid collar. It was too small, or he was gaining more weight, he thought to himself.

Verna turned to Emmitt; her eyes lit up, a huge smile spread across her face. "Emmitt, it is Arthur, grandmama's assistant. He is the concierge at her inn. He and his wife have been with her since before I was born!"

Emmitt, smiled at her, raised his gaze to the dark-skinned man on the dock. There was much to learn about his wife's family, he again realized. A truly mixed bag of people of all races.

He wondered what this woman, Mama Rosita, was like. Would she accept him or be one of those rich, stuffy, nose in the air, women he had heard about of others who were wealthy and old?

She was, after all, the widow of a former pirate, a Frenchman, a ship captain and an apparently successful shipping magnate.

"Darlin', he is waiting for us. They sat our luggage down on the docks, time to leave the ship," he replies while amused at his wife's glee and giddiness over seeing this old man from her childhood.

The newlyweds walked down the gangplank, their sea legs giving them difficulty on the stationary dock.

Not caring, Verna quickly scampered to Arthur, jumping up and throwing her arms around his neck, squealing like a little girl.

Surprise took Emmitt at his wife's actions, not sure how to react and very aware of the eyes on the dock watching this display of emotion to this man.

Even though times have changed, some people had not. Understanding fully that his own behavior now was critical in its response. He was not about to put a damper on his wife's exuberance or their marriage, even though he was a trifle embarrassed. He did not know Arthur,

other than what Verna told him, and this public display of childish affection on the wharf in front of all these workers confounded him. It troubled Arthur as well, as the look on his face as Verna jumped on him, wrapping her arms around his neck, was priceless.

"Why, Miss Verna, please you are embarrassing me!" Arthur exclaims as he hugged her quickly then untied her arms from around his neck setting her down on the dock, "There is a decorum Missy, I have a position I must maintain."

Verna stepped back from the man she had known all her life with a knowing smile and began laughing.

"Why Arthur, you have become very pious and stuffy in your old age! Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course I am, Missy, but really, here on the docks for all these people to see?"

"Oh, Arthur! ---I would like to introduce my husband. Emmitt McGowan," she says, turning to take Emmitt by the hand and pulling him forward.

"Pleased to meet you, Sir," Arthur says formally as he bowed slightly.

Emmitt, grinning at the big man's discomfort with his wife's behavior, offered his hand in greeting, which was taken gladly and quickly.

"I have heard much about you, Arthur. I am glad to meet the man who helped to protect and raise my wife as a child during the war and after."

"Ah, I hope, Sir, Missy only told you good things about me. She was a handful as a child. But has grown into a lovely lady, I can see. You are a very lucky man, Sir!"

"Thank you, I can imagine what she was like back in those days, and yes, I know I am a very lucky man."

Verna, watching both men greet each other, smiled and took each by the arm.

"You two are talking as if I am not here. But I am, and I thank you to include me," she laughs, relieved again that her husband had no racial animosities, especially toward Arthur.

"Both men looked at her, then at each other and laughed.

"I guess we've been admonished, Sir!" Arthur replies, laughing, as he turned to help Verna into the back seats of the carriage.

Emmitt chuckled as he affectionately tapped Arthur on his left shoulder as he boarded the carriage himself, sitting down next to his bride.

Arthur, after seeing to the storage of their baggage on the back of the carriage, climbed onto the driving bench, pulled the horse whip from its station next to his leg, tapped the horse on its neck and off they rode. The carriage wheels clicked over the uneven gaps in the wharf planking.

Soon they entered the city next to the red brick bank building, turned right onto the cobblestone - paved Strand Avenue and passed through the merchant business district.

Emmitt, taking in the surroundings while Vera and Arthur chatted about the years since she moved away, noted the darker red brick patches on the back of the bank building where the Union cannon balls had punched holes during the battle for the island on New Year Day in 1863.

He noted a lot of changes and some things that remained the same since his last youthful days as a sailor on a fast sloop blockade runner. One thing he acknowledged, the city had grown. It had grown a lot! He understood Galveston was the largest city in Texas now, certainly with the most commerce.

His wife asked him twice, drawing his attention back to her before he realized she was talking to him.

"Emmitt, are you fine? You're silent," she asks,

taking his left hand into her hands. "Are you happy to be here?"

Emmitt McGowan stared at his bride for a moment. As he gazed into her eyes, feeling the love this woman had for him, he finally smiled.

"Reminiscing, my love. It's been a long time since I've been here. The place has grown! Grown a lot!" He waved a hand outward, smiling.

"Yes, my darling, it has grown. Like Round Rock, when commerce comes to town, the town grows." Verna replied as she held her husband by his upper arm and hand with both of hers. Snuggling close to her man, she loved him more than her own life.

Verna sighed, content with the moment. Happy in her thoughts of her life, and the life she was carrying in her womb.

She wondered when to tell her husband she was pregnant. She concluded she'd speak to Mama Rosita first.

Twenty minutes later, the carriage stopped in front of a large brick house. A large white plaque with gold raised lettering, bolted to the gate entrance, stated. Lafitte House, Boarding and Rental.

The house itself was of the same red brick structure as the bank building noted downtown on the Strand.

Emmitt looked for the damage from the fighting that night as his wife told him the best she could remember as a child. The repairs were so good, he could see nothing that suggested that a minor battle had taken place here.

As Arthur stopped the carriage, Emmitt stepped down, then assisted his bride down. In doing so, he noted across the carriage an older woman standing on the veranda of the house. Her left hand shielded her eyes from the sun's glare as she watched the carriage empty of its cargo and passengers.

Verna took Emmitt by his hand and quickly stepped around the carriage, a huge smile on her face as she saw her grandmother standing on the veranda.

"Mama Rosita!" she cries. "Como esta mama?"

"Bien, hija, bien." (fine daughter, fine) Mama Rosita replies, laughing as she steps off the veranda to meet her granddaughter on the brick walkway.

Each giving an enormous hug, holding for a long moment. Verna in tears of joy. Rosita's eyes moist as she pushed her granddaughter back arm's length to look at her.

Emmitt stood there smiling. Taking pleasure from the sight.

Mama Rosita looked finally at Emmitt and smiled.

"Honey, are you going to introduce me to this fine-looking man?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mama," Verna exclaims and turned toward her husband.

"Emmitt, I'd like you to meet my grandmother, Mama Rosita Lafitte. Mama, this is my husband, Emmitt McGowan."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Lafitte." Emmett says formally, holding out his hand.

"I'm proud to meet you, Sir." brushing his hand away, stepping forward to embrace Emmitt as he bent over to accept her arms round his neck.

"I've heard quite a bit about you. From the letters Verna sent me and her father. You'd make a good pirate! Fearless and strong." She laughed as she stepped back. "I'm familiar with that subject!"

Emmitt laughs along with her. "So, I've heard, Mrs. Lafitte. So I've heard!"

Turning, she took her granddaughter by the hand and held on to Emmitt's, pulling them toward the house.

"Let's go inside. Are you two hungry? I can have something served for you to nibble on. Dinner will be ready around one o'clock.

"Arthur," Rosita says to the big man, "Rosa's room is ready! Put their baggage in there." Rosita looked at Verna. "You don't mind sleeping in your mother's room, do you?"

"No, no, that'd be fine, Mama. I'd like that. Emmitt and I can feel closer to her there."

That evening during supper, there was much lively talk, in Spanish, at the table between Verna and her grandmother. From time to time, Mama Rosita directed questions in English to Emmitt, but the Spanish was too quick for him, making him feel like an outsider, almost a stranger, while the two women remembered her childhood.

For the first time since they had been married, Emmitt watched his wife socialize with her close family. He watched her face light up at some old memory Mama Rosita dug up, the smile on her face when she laughed and the glow that showed. He couldn't remember before that he'd seen that glow. Verna was positively radiant. Her manners, her gestures, the glint in her eyes when she would look at him, melted his heart all over again.

The dinner chatter quietened down for a moment, and Emmitt asked a question he'd been wondering about since his wife had mentioned it at their first picnic before they were married. "Mama Rosita, —Verna mentioned to me you were a young girl in San Antonio during the Alamo battle."

That stopped all talking as everyone was listening to the old lady's reply.

"Yes, Emmitt. I was twelve going on thirteen when Santa Anna rode his white stallion into the square with his army. Mama had pulled me back from

our door before he saw me, or he might have chosen me for his local wife and whore rather than that other young girl he saw later." She recited calmly.

"We had to remain hidden, us children I mean, during their occupation. Until they overran the Alamo mission and killed all those men. It started early before dawn, the ultimate attack, and the shooting continued until almost noon. —They burned the bodies." She paused, her eyes moist as she remembered.

"I'll never forget that horrible smell of human flesh burning —burning for days, it seemed. No one dared to enter that place after the army moved on, in pursuit of the Texican army and General Houston.

Not until Juan Seguin returned a year later. He gathered the ashes and bones for burial to keep his promise, I was told.

It was another year after that I met my future husband, Maurice Lafitte, and ran away with him to become his wife.

My daughter, Verna's mother, was born two years later. She was born on board Maurice's schooner. Off the coast of Bahia."

The room was silent for a few moments, then everyone stood and toasted Mama Rosita as a gallant woman of the sea. Mother, wife of a ship's master and now mistress/owner of Lafitte's Inn. After which someone says, "and pirate." Which was echoed by the entire group and that brought down the house with good warmhearted laughter.

After they ate, he and an elderly boarder, Henry Johnson, sat on the veranda. Johnson carried a bottle of rye, two whiskey shot glasses, that he sat on the small wicker table between the two men's chairs and produced two cigars.

Emmitt, not a partaker of regular smoking, accepted the cigar out of appreciation of the gesture.

"How long have you been staying here?" Emmitt

asks, shaking out the burning match after lighting his cigar. He sat back in his chair, took a deep drag, and started choking.

Johnson started laughing. "You're not a cigar man, are you?"

"No, not really," Emmitt continued choking and laughing with him.

Johnson answered McGowan's question. "Oh, a couple of years, I reckon. Moved here after my wife passed away. I sold off half my herd, gave the other half and the spread in Starr County, to my four sons after she left for the Lord. Was getting too old, too crippled up, to run the place. Moved first to Corpus Christi.

I knew Mama Rosita from the war and inquired if she still ran this establishment. I learned her husband had perished during a hurricane several years ago. So, I inquired whether there was a room available. There was, so I moved here."

Emmitt looked at him in surprise.

Johnson saw the look and laughed again. "Oh, don't worry. I've asked her several times to marry me. She laughs and tells me to ask her again the next year."

"You two met during the war?"

"Yeah, the night we took the island back from the Yankees." Johnson took a drag off his cigar, blew out the smoke, and enjoyed a sip of the rye before he continued.

"We needed an updated map of the city and the enemy's positions. I figured the owners of this hotel might have that information. Later, there was a skirmish here. That woman has the heart of a lioness. I could never forget her. But she was married, and so was I. Now, we both are widowed. I guess she'll say yes to me the last days of my life."

He chuckles as he drew on his cigar again, blowing an enormous cloud of smoke out to the road.

"Well, good luck with that." Emmitt says as he held out his glass, which Johnson met with his, and they both downed their rye.

"Did you meet her daughter, my wife's mother?" Emmitt asks as he shifted his chair so he could see Henry's face better in the dim light that passed through the curtains of the window they sat in front of.

"Yes, and no. She was in terrible shape that night, asleep and all bandaged up from the assault those Yankee boys did to her. I was wounded during that morning's fracas, so I never greeted her in person or got to pay my respects.

They moved me off the island a week later to a hospital near Houston. I learned later that she had passed away in April of that year." Henry said, his voice becoming quiet and sad as he finished.

"I guess no one caught or arrested those bastards. It's a subject that Rosita refuses to discuss. She carries a big hole in her heart for losing her daughter," he added.

Emmitt nodded his understanding as both men turned to look out across the salt grass reflecting the moonlight, toward the bay in the distance. Each lost in their own thoughts, with cigar smoke filling the still air, the smell of rye whiskey was an underlying odor.



Goodnight My Queen



Emmitt finished his cigar, bade good night to Henry Johnson, visited the privy in the backyard and went inside from the back door. He didn't see Verna anywhere, so he made his way upstairs to their room.

Knocking on their bedroom door before entering, he found his bride sitting at the small vanity dresser, combing her hair. She was wearing a sheer white silk laced robe he had bought her in Veracruz. The robe, opened in the front revealing she had removed all her clothing, with the fancy laced silk belt hanging on each side to the floor; however, she still had on her frilled lacy knee length drawers and was barefoot.

The swell of her breasts printed through the light silk material of the robe, triggering Emmett's desire for his woman immediately.

"Did you enjoy your chat with Henry, my love?" She asks, smiles, looking up at him in the mirror.

Emmitt just grinned as he walked up behind her, watching her image in the mirror, pulled her hair back over her right shoulder, exposing her face, ear and neck. He kissed her gently on her neck as she watched him in the mirror.

"Yes, my love. I had a very good conversation with him."

"Oh, you smell of cigar and whiskey," she murmurs as she turns on her bench stool and pulled his head to her, kissing him lightly on his lips, her left breast becoming exposed as the robe pulled away.

"Oh, my love, but you smell good!"

Emmitt murmured softly as he kisses her again on the lips and then her forehead.

"Of course, I took a bath. And it's with hot water. Mama Rosita has installed a small gas-heated water tank next to the iron tubs that keeps the water at the temperature you desire. Really wonderful. You should try it." She giggles.

"Really? Humm, all the modern conveniences here at the hotel. Next thing will be indoor privies and well water direct to the kitchen," he laughs.

"My love, Mama Rosita has an indoor privy. It's called a water closet and is right next to where I bathed." She laughs, "you didn't go to that old outhouse in the back, did you?"

Emmitt looked at her in surprise, then laughed.

"Yeah, I did." Verna covered her mouth and giggled like a schoolgirl.

"My love, go take a bath. You need a bath after that long voyage from Veracruz. Using that old sponge with perfumed water wasn't the best way for us to clean on that old ship." Verna pushed him away and pointed at the door.

"I'll wait," she adds with a knowing smile.

"I'll be right back, sweetheart. Don't go to sleep on me!" he grinned, knowing in his heart what she had in mind for the night.

'Lord, I love this woman', he thought to himself as he grabbed his old sailor trousers, Verna had laid out for him and a bathrobe that Author had provided, he learned later. Collecting his shaving kit, he made his way downstairs, then through the hallway to the back.

The bath was in a room directly across the hallway from the kitchen.

There he found the room divided with two stalls, a tub in each, a gas-fired copper tank of water next to each tub. Henry was in one. The other was vacant, so he hung his clothing on a hook he found on the saloon style door, studied the contraption of piping

and valves, installed the cork stopper in the drain, turned on the valve to the tub and climbed in as the near too hot to bear water filled the tub. A big grin spread across his features as he imagined the rest of the night to come.

A short time later, dressed in his old worn sailcloth trousers, moccasins and bathrobe, feeling quite clean, he made his way back to their room.

He found Verna standing with her back to him, looking through the window.

“Sweetheart, is something out there?” he asks as he throws off his bathrobe.

Verna looked at him over her left shoulder, smiling, then slowly turned to face him, still smiling knowingly and shaking her head no as she opened her robe and let it drop to the floor.

Emmitt sucked in his breath as he marveled again at his wife’s shape, as he had many times since their wedding night. Her full-figured body, signaled the fiery passion within. His eyes followed her narrow waist flowing into her shoulder-wide hips that were made for bearing children.

There was something about that symmetry that pleased him. He couldn’t understand why, didn’t try; he just enjoyed the vision.

Stepping toward Verna, slowly shaking his head from side to side in abject wonder, he mentally thanked God for such a beautiful, loving creature in his life.

Taking her in his arms, they kissed longingly, passionately as she fumbled to release the tied cord that held his canvas britches up.

When they fell to the floor, he picked her up in his arms and laid her gently in their bed. Her hands caressed his hair as she kissed his chin, nose and his eyes while he lay down next to her.

For two hours they made passionate love, resting every so often until, drawn by the passion, desire and love for each other, they’d couple once more, trying with

all their might to absorb the other into their own being. To become one, the passion was so strong they became dizzy as the room spun around them.

Finally exhausted, Verna contented and falling asleep curled against her husband lying on his back. She lay in the crook of his arm, face on the edge of his chest. Her carnal desires sated, her love for this man delivered. Now secure in his arms, she fell asleep.

Emmitt stroked the valley of her waist and up her hip and back down as he adored her sleeping face. Never had he felt so much love welling up in his heart. Every time they made love, it was like this. He looked up toward the ceiling and mouthed a silent ‘thank you, Lord’.

As his eyes became moist with emotion, he whispers gently, “Good night, my Queen,” then closed his own eyes, a smile on his lips.



The Galveston Weekly



Two days later, Emmitt was in the backyard helping Arthur fix the windmill pump that supplied water to the large cistern that gave the hotel its running water to the kitchen, the bath and the tank in the water closet. Verna came to the back door and asked her husband.

"My love, can you come here? There's a man in the foyer asking for you. He said he was from the Galveston Weekly."

Emmitt looked at his wife for a moment and then turned to Arthur and asked. "Can you handle the rest of this? I'm not sure how long this will take."

"I can, Mr. McGowan. I thank you for the help. It would have taken me the better part of the day to do this by myself."

Emmitt smiled as he wiped his hands and gave a friendly clap on Arthur's shoulder. Walking inside, he gave a hug to his wife with one arm and asks,

"Newspaper?"

"Yes, Mama is with him now."

"And he wants to see me?"

"That's what he said, my love." She handed him a damp towel. "Here, darling, wipe your face and neck. You have dirt and what looks like grease on your face," she laughs.

With a grin, Emmitt wiped as instructed by his wife, handed the dirty towel back to her and made his way to the foyer.

Mama Rosita was standing with her back to Emmitt, chatting with a large well-dressed man, blond hair, eyebrows and waxed mustache that curled back up his jawline.

When Rosita heard Emmitt's footsteps behind her, she turned and greeted him.

"Emmitt, this is Mr. Kurkowski of the Galveston Weekly, the island newspaper. Although they are in Houston now."

McGowan smiled down at his wife's grandmother and then shoved out his hand in greeting, which was taken readily. The man's enormous paw reminded him of another huge man he had met in Fort Worth just last early spring.

"Howdy, I'm Emmitt McGowan," he introduced himself before Rosita could react.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. McGowan. I own the Weekly Galveston News. I've heard some interesting things about you, sir."

Taken aback by Kurkowski's comment, McGowan's smile disappeared.

"Oh, nothing bad," Kurkowski assured him, "on the contrary, your name has popped up in many conversations with cattlemen, and lawmen.

I've inquired with the Texas Ranger's office in Houston to see if I could get a story out of your work last year in Austin."

"I see," Emmitt replies. "And what did they say?"

"Talk to you," Kurkowski laughs. "I heard you were coming to Galveston late this year after you and your new bride visited Veracruz, Mexico."

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I have a boarding house to run. Would you two like to sit in the parlor or on the veranda?" Rosita butted in.

"The veranda would be acceptable," Kurkowski replies. "If that's suitable for Mr. McGowan, that is?" raising an eyebrow toward Emmitt.

"That's fine," McGowan agrees.

As the two sat down in the same wicker chairs Emmitt and Johnson had occupied the previous night, Emmitt inquired.

"You and Mama Rosita were talking like you two knew each other fairly well. Is she your source about my wife and our trip?"

Kurkowski laughs as he took a glass of tea from Arthur, who had brought a tray of fresh sugar cookies and the two glasses of tea to the two men.

"Oh! You certainly could say that. Thank you, Arthur.

After the war was over, I did a short piece about the Yankee blockade of the bay and eventual occupation of the island.

I'm afraid my investigative reporters didn't investigate properly. They wrote the story on hearsay. They did not try to interview any of the folks who remained on the island to protect their property," he said. Then took a sip of the tea and bit into one of the sugar cookies.

"I'm afraid my publication didn't print a favorable image of those folks, Mrs. Lafitte included."

McGowan said nothing, just stares at Kurkowski questioningly.

"My paper practically accused them of colluding with the enemy. Which I regret was false."

Kurkowski sighs as he looked out over the salt grass across the road into the bay as a ship, its sails bloated with wind, moved out of the bay and into the channel between Galveston Island and Pelican Island.

"After the articles were published, Rosita came to visit me at my office to lodge a complaint. Our conversation became a heated argument as I wasn't very amiable to her telling me my newspaper was printing lies.

That is until she persuaded me to re-investigate and print the true story of what happened on the island."

Emmitt, curious about how Verna's grandmother

did that with this man. She didn't seem to be the crying, begging type.

"How did she persuade you?"

Kurkowski started chuckling. "She pulled a gold-plated Patterson out from under her shawl and stuck the muzzle under my nose!"

Both men started laughing. The image of Rosita, who stands every bit of four feet, eleven inches in her ladies heeled lace boots, thrusting a Colt Patterson under the nose of this gentleman who stood over six feet, was in Emmitt's mind absurdly funny, as he gained a new respect for his in-law grandmother.

That woman wasn't afraid of anything, he surmised. His memory reflected on Verna shooting one of two Jenkins men, breaking his left arm and disarming the other, who were trying to kidnap his wounded partner, Ben Maxwell, one night in her father's inn late last spring. Now he knew where she got that kind of fearless courage. From her grandmother.

"Okay, I presume you did a retraction?" Emmitt asks.

"Oh yes, yes, I did. I went to the sheriff's office first. After they stopped laughing, they suggested I follow her request. Was embarrassing for the paper, but it didn't hurt sales, which was what I was afraid of, much to my shame.

After that, Mrs. Lafitte and I became good friends. Her friend Henry—Henry Johnson, has been a wonderful source for me concerning things that happened during the war."

Kurkowski shifted himself in his rattan and leaned forward toward Emmitt.

"That's why I am here, sir. Through the Rangers, I learned Mrs. Lafitte was your bride's grandmother and you two would be here soon. I'd like to do a series of stories about your adventures, Mr. McGowan."

Emmitt sat there for a moment, thinking before he spoke. 'Adventures?' Emmitt never considered what he did for a living as an adventure. But he didn't see any harm, provided the stories were factual, not like dime novels.'

"I don't know! How much time do you need from me? My wife and I are leaving in a few days, going back to Round Rock. I've got to get back to work with the cattle association there."

"How much time can you spare before you leave, sir?"

"Well, I guess a few hours a day."

Kurkowski slapped his knee with a big smile on his face.

"Let me take a room here so I can be close at hand. And you tell me the story, perhaps your wife can also contribute, since she was involved."

"Well—okay," Emmitt agrees hesitantly, "I'll ask Verna if she wants to recite. She was pretty scared; I'm not sure she wants to relive those events. But it might be good for her to talk about it. I don't know what her answer will be, but I'll ask her."

"Wonderful! I appreciate this, Mr. McGowan. Let me register for a room. I understand there are a couple available, and I need to telegraph my office to send me a change of clothing. We can start tonight after dinner if that's alright with you."

"Sounds good, Mr. Kurkowski. What is your given name? My friends call me Emmitt."

"Hans, I'm from Germany. My parents immigrated in 1846 to Fredericksburg. I was just five years old then."

"Sounds like a plan, Hans. We'll talk later." Emmitt stood as Hans did, shaking hands before they entered the building.

That night, after dinner, Emmitt and Hans spent two hours on the veranda. There they discussed his "adventure". How he solved the cattle theft problem in

Travis and Williamson counties. Of the murderous Jenkins gang; of Jenkins' attempt to create his own cattle empire with stolen and branded beeves.

Later that night, after the two men had retired to their rooms. Emmitt crawled into bed and pulled his wife into his arms.

"Well, how did your first recital go?" she whispers as she kisses his cheek and then bites gently his ear lobe.

Her husband smiled as he turned to her, caressing and squeezing lightly her left breast. "Offhand I would say it went well. I'm not sure I want to tell him everything."

"Why?" Verna raised up on her right elbow as she played with the hairs on his chest.

"Darlin'," Emmitt began as he took her hand and kissed it. "I don't want to give away how I track, investigate and capture cattle thieves. Some might read that and learn how to avoid being caught. Some of those boys are downright ignorant about covering their trails. These articles could give them pointers."

"Well, I understand that, my love but don't you want the truth out there, maybe it will discourage some young men from that occupation?"

McGowan grinned. "That thought occurred to me. But I don't need the publicity. People might think I'm some kind of hero. Unless that person is my son, you're carrying."

Verna sat abruptly up, twisted and rose to her knees, grabbed her pillow and pounded her husband.

"How-did-you-know?" she asks with every blow of the pillow. "Did Mama Rosita tell you?" She exclaims!

Emmitt laughed and tried to grab the pillow away from her.

"Darlin', I've been around animals all my life. I can tell when a female is carrying. First, their stomachs

get firm and their udders swell.” He pointed at her stomach, then her breasts.

“What? Are you calling me a cow?” She mocked hurtful feelings. “I’m a woman, a human being. Not a cow, horse or pig,” she cries as her mixed up hormones took over her feigned hurt and converted it into real pain; then continued, “or a dog or a---a cat!” Then she blurts out her true feelings of hurt, “I was going to surprise you! Now you took that away from me!” she cries. “How could you?”

Emmitt saw this important moment in their marriage going the wrong way and tried to take her wrists and pull her toward him, but Verna pulled free, and jumped up from the bed. The drama in her heart out of control, she turned to look out through the window curtains, her body shaking as she started sobbing strongly. She was not sure what was happening to her, not understanding her own emotions. She only knew she didn’t need her husband making fun of her as an animal or exposing the secret she was going to announce when she was ready. When she thought the time was right.

She wanted to see the look on his face, the happiness in his eyes. Her dream was for her husband to hold her tightly and whoop and jump for joy. He took that away from her, and it was unusually painful. That left her confused and crying uncontrollably.

Emmitt, realizing the emotional hurt he inflicted on his bride, even though he didn’t understand everything, rose and stood behind her, wanting to but not daring to take her into his arms like she was. His mind chastised itself for being such a dumb donkey.

“My love,” he whispers after a couple of minutes of listening to her sobbing, “I’m sorry for my crude ways. Please forgive me?”

He put one hand on her shaking shoulder as she turned to him, tears streaming down her face, her eyes red and swollen.

“Emmitt, my husband,” she cries softly, “I’m going to have your baby. I wanted to surprise you; you ruined my surprise,” she whimpered. “I don’t know if it’s a girl or a boy. It’s too soon to tell.” She adds. Her breathing shuddered in great gasps.

Emmitt, his own heart breaking for hurting his wife’s feelings, took her into his arms as he said. “Either is good; I don’t mind, darlin’.”

Verna pressed her face into Emmitt’s chest, shaking as her sobbing quieted. “How long have you known? She murmured.

“Oh, toward the end of our voyage back on the Elissa. I suspected when your seasickness didn’t stop after the first few days,” Emmitt says softly. “Your body changes these past days confirmed it to me. I was just waiting for you to say something. My foolish joke tonight ruined that. I’m sorry, darlin’.”

Verna was silent for a moment before she spoke. Taking his face in her hands. “I forgive you, my love,” she whispers as she kissed him.

Emmitt held her for a long moment as they kissed, then, picking her up in his arms, he carried her to bed.

As he walked around the foot of the bed, past the bedposts to his side, he started dancing a jig, laughing as he blurted out.

“Woo—Hoo! We are going to have a baby!” Verna watched her naked man dancing as she giggled like a schoolgirl. Her fanciful dream became a reality after all, better than what she had hoped for.

The next morning at breakfast, Verna made her announcement to the entire crowd. She was so surprised at the squeals of Arthur’s wife and two visiting guests. She was thrilled, her smile so wide it hurt.

Emmitt’s back stung from people clapped him so much. The whole day was like that. No one wanted

her to do any work, much to her protests that she wasn't that far along.

Emmitt was strutting about like a proud rooster. Having to answer the same questions over and over. How long did you know, and why did you keep this a secret for so long?

Such were the last days of their stay as a couple, with one in the oven, as Emmitt liked to joke, prepared for their journey back to Round Rock and the life they had left behind for these two and a half months.

Promises made to bring the baby to Galveston for everyone to see the first child of their new family.

Tearful goodbyes were made by Verna with Mama Rosita, and Arthur and his wife. Verna cried all the way to Houston on the island train.



A Woman's Fury



After arriving back in Round Rock, it was difficult to pick up where they had left off.

Authorities hanged Jenkins, and either hanged or imprisoned the rest of the gang in Huntsville prison. Life had moved on while they were gone.

The small town was growing; businesses were booming with the railroad bringing in passengers and goods as the locals were shipping out their homegrown products.

But to Emmitt, it was quiet compared to how it had been the past year. Or maybe it was because he had much going on himself, he surmised.

A few days after they returned, he and his father-in-law were walking down Georgetown Avenue toward what was his new office as the official Range Detective for the Travis and Williamson County Cattle Association, Fred declared to him.

The vacant lot between the broom manufacturing building and the barbershop, the open space that he and his future bride practiced their dance steps and witnessed the end of the Sam Bass gang in a wild shootout between the gang, the Texas Rangers and local town folks; had now filled with new construction. His new office.

Progress waits for no man, McGowan thought. He remembered what Verna had said about Galveston. This included vacant lots, it appears.

Shaking his head as the two men walked past the barber shop to enter the building; Emmitt stole a quick glance at the sign

overhanging the door and on the window. It read the name of the Association and his name printed under it as "Range Investigator". Not as a cattle detective as Fred had spoken of his title that morning around breakfast.

Inside, behind a desk on the right, sat a young man, who struggled to his feet when the two men walked in. He grabbed a wooden crutch to balance himself as he greeted them.

"Morning, Mr. Gallager, Mr. err, sorry, I am afraid I don't know your name."

Emmitt reached across the desk with his hand, the young man grabbing it awkwardly.

"Emmitt McGowan, and yours?"

"Jake— Coleman. Pleased to meet you, sir. I'm understandin' that you're to be my boss."

"I am?" McGowan replies as he turns to Fred.

"Oh, sorry for not introducing you two. Yes, Jake worked for Worthington; that is, until he took a spill on his mustang. Broke his leg in three places. It'll be a while before he can ride again." Gallager explains.

Turning to Jake, he asks, "Jake, are you able to hobble over to the diner and have them deliver a pot of hot coffee?"

"Oh, no problem, sir. Hobble is correct," he laughs. "That's about all I can do for a while."

"Wonderful, we'll be in the office. Worthington and the other association officers are to be here around noon. See that we are not disturbed."

"Yes sir. Mr. McGowan, you like sugar with your coffee, I can fetch a bowl if you do."

"No, Jake, I like it black, strong and black."

With that, the two passed through the door to the room in the back of the new building, his office, Fred closing the door after he watched Jake Coleman negotiate around his desk and out the front door.

"He's a good kid. Unfortunately, he got hurt. Doc told me he doubts Jake will ever be able to ride again."

Emmitt knitted his eyebrows. "Does Jake know that?"

"No, the doctor said not to tell him until he heals up and tries on his own to fork a horse."

McGowan shook his head in sympathy as he surveyed the room. Sparse would be an appropriate description, he thought to himself. The three outer walls were untrimmed. Just the bare stones of the building construction. A desk, with a banker's chair behind it, and five additional chairs lined against the right wall. And an armoire standing against the front wall next to the door.

Someone had hung a calendar behind the desk, next to the window on the back wall. Its page showing the previous month.

"How do you like your office?" Fred asks as Emmitt walked around the desk, stopped in front of the calendar and tore off the old month, revealing the new month of November.

"It is okay, needs something; I can't say right now. What is in the armoire?"

Fred laughs and moves to open the armoire doors.

"We moved your weapons here, plus provided you with sufficient ammunition to start a minor war." He replies as he opened the doors and stood aside so his son-in-law could see the contents.

"The association paid for your forty-four rounds for your Winchester and sixgun. But did not supply you with cartridges for your Sharps. You'll have to supply those yourself."

"No problem," McGowan replies as he walked Over and drew out his rifle, examining it, working the action then, sliding the dust cover back as he replaced it back into the armoire, he glanced down at the wooden box at the bottom of the closet, reading the inscriptions burned into the pine lid.

*Winchester Repeating Arms
Company.
New Haven, Connecticut
Cartridges:
.44 WCF/500 Count*

Whistling, Emmitt remarked, "You weren't kidding! Five hundred rounds? That should last me the rest of my life!"

Gallager laughs as he closed the double doors. "Let's hope that's a very long time from now."

Putting his right hand on his son-in-law's shoulder, he whispered. "Son, try out your new chair and desk. I've something to discuss with you before the others appear. I don't want you blindsided when they arrive."

That evening, Verna stood in the dining room, facing the two men across the dining table from her. Her arms crossed over each other. Her eyebrows knitted together, almost touching. Her full lower lip seemed to have disappeared into her mouth as she fought to control her emotions.

Emmitt and Verna's father both could see the storm brewing behind her eyes. They didn't move a muscle, waiting for the explosion they knew all day was coming.

Verna uncrossed her arms, placing her hands on the back of the two chairs she stood between. Taking a deep breath, she began.

"So, let me understand. What you just told me." She says, her trembling voice barely above a whisper.

"There is a planned cattle drive. The Association directed you, my husband, to lead the cattle drive. To be the trail boss?"

"Yes, my love." Emmitt answers his wife's question quietly.

"Winter is coming. You're to drive these animals to Dodge City, Kansas, —NOW? It'll be the middle of the winter by the time you reach Dodge, if you reach it at all!"

"My love," Emmitt interrupts her, "a cattle drive from, say, San Antonio, takes about three to four months. These beeves are already half that distance; waiting for me and your Pa. We should be there by Christmas or New Year's."

"You remember last year? You remember how cold it was? Here in Round Rock! You remember how sick you were? Remember my dear husband, you nearly died from influenza!"

"Sweetheart, I caught that in Georgetown. We will be out on the prairie. It'll be okay, I'll be fine."

Verna shook her head no, not accepting her usband's confidence, her eyes settling on her father.

"And you, my dear Papa. You put him up to this? Why did you do that? You know I need him here, to be here when our child is born!" And, why in God's name are you going? You haven't ridden a horse since you built this place!" Fred Gallager's daughter's voice quivering, got louder as the answers she was getting weren't sufficient for her. Not that any answer that these two men gave would be sufficient.

Fred understood his offspring's thinking. She was questioning in the same tone her mother used, every time he rode out on patrol from Fort Davis, before the war and the night before he left Galveston on a ship at the beginning of the war.

"Daughter, try to understand. These beeves belong to the association. Jenkins' men had already over branded them, so it has been difficult to determine who the original owners were. Therefore, the association heads and the members agreed to register the Jenkins brands to me. I must go to handle the sale of the herd.

And with your other concern about my riding. While

you love birds were on y'all's honeymoon, I spent time almost every day riding Emmitt's mustang before I bought a steed of my own. I'll be alright on this drive.

Emmitt will see to my safety if that is also a concern of yours. And we should be back here before your baby is born!"

"Papa!" Verna cries, her voice almost shouted. "Why are you even involved with this? You're not a rancher. An Inn keeper! You two think you have this all figured out! You two are riding off on your adventure before my new husband and I can settle into our life together!"

Emmitt started to say something, but his wife cut him off with an angry look at him that left his words unspoken.

"I'll deal with you later!" she blasted out at her husband.

Turning to her father. "Papa, you're fifty-four years old. Riding on the trail is for younger men. Men who are used to the rough outdoor life. You've been indoors, behind a desk, for the past fourteen years! All you are going to achieve is getting yourself killed!" She spits out at her parent.

Turning on her heels, she stormed out of the dining room; her lace-booted heels thumping hard on the wooden floor, up the stairs to her and Emmitt's bedroom, slamming the bedroom door, falling on their bed, sobbing.

Several guests, opened their bedroom doors, then quickly shut them again, not wanting to be a part of this family feud.

Downstairs, the two men sat silent for a few moments after listening to the stomping of Verna's heeled boots, the slamming of the door. They could hear her sobbing, which made them grimace.

Each man, father and son-in-law, drew a deep breath, turned and looked at each other.

Emmitt broke the silence. "That didn't go well at all! –

- I

thought you said you could handle this news with her?"

"So did I, so did I!" Fred confessed. "Her temper is worse than her mother's. I sort of feel sorry for you, son."

Emmitt couldn't answer; he just sat there staring at his father-in-law with his mouth open in surprise.



Reflection



The next morning, Emmitt rose early. Watching his wife's sleeping form, her face still showed the strain from the previous night. She slept with her hands curled into fists. Her back was to him on the edge of her side of the bed.

Emmitt worried he had harmed their marriage with this venture. Still, the die was cast, and there wasn't much he could do now.

Skipping breakfast, he hurried out as soon as he was dressed. Walking in the early morning air helped clear his thoughts as he meandered down the street to his new office.

As he entered, he realized Jake was already there, using some kind of machine to write figures on paper. He struggled to stand as his boss entered.

"Sit down, Jake. This isn't the Army."

"Morning, Mr. McGowan!" Jake replied, dropping back into his chair.

"Morning, you're here early. What are you working on? And what is that thing?"

"Oh, the tally from Mr. Worthington's remaining herd. Each rancher has agreed to provide us with their winter counts to guard against further rustling.

And this is called a typewriter. Mr. Worthington bought it for us. I'm just learning how to use it."

"Ah, good idea. Saves us some work." Emmitt laughs.

"When you figure out how it works, you can teach me."

"Yes sir. I will. These reports are on account of you're going to be out-of-town most of this winter on this drive." Jake adds.

"I see, okay. Do we have any coffee?"

"Yes, sir, it's in that pot over there on the Franklin."

Emmitt poured himself a cup. Having skipped breakfast, he dropped in two spoonfuls of brown sugar and walked to his office.

Sitting down, he thought about his wife, shaking his head. His heart was heavy with her reaction to the plans about to be implemented. He needed busywork to get her off his mind.

After a few minutes, he rose and opened the armoire and retrieved his Winchester and Colt, laying them on his desk. He lifted the heavy box of forty-four cartridges, sitting the box on his desk as well.

Loading his rifle first, he worked the action to see if the Winchester was operating proper. He marveled at the checkered wood of the forearm and pistol grip stock as he did the first time, he pulled it from Billy Kinkade's rifle scabbard. The receiver, made of steel, the first models so made, not iron, nor the heavy gun metal like his Henry, made it lighter. The half-round barrel added to the lightness. A German silver, Rocky Mountain front sight and a cut-down buckhorn rear sight completed the weapon's custom additions.

Special order, Kinkade said about his late son's rifle, gifted to Emmitt.

Next, he pulled out his Colt, also gifted from Kinkade's late son, and loaded the cylinder. Load one, skip a chamber, then load four. The accepted safe way

to carry a sixgun. Except the second cartridge would not seat completely.

Pulling that round out, he tried another. After six times for cartridges failing to seat, he finally finished the final four.

Sitting down, he stared at the box of cartridges. Finally, standing up, he called for his assistant.

"Jake, I need your help!

Moments later, the young man hobbled into the office, a questioning look on his face.

"Yes, sir?"

"You carry a Colt?"

"Yes sir. My Pa gifted me one like yours last Christmas, a.44."

"Any issues with loading the thing?"

"Sometimes. Cartridges won't seat in the chambers."

"You have it with you?"

"Yes sir. In my desk drawer. Mr. Worthington suggested I keep it handy here after last summer's shootout with the Bass gang."

"Go get it and drag up a chair. We've got to sort through this big box of cartridges." Emmitt says as he emptied his sixgun and placed the shells into a brown glass ashtray on his desk.

Then he disassembled the cylinder from the frame and sat it on his desk to act as a cartridge measuring gauge, to begin the sorting.

"I need one hundred cartridges for this trip, if there's that many good ones in this box."

"Yes, sir, be right back!" Jake replied, happy to do something else besides updating livestock tallies.

Later that morning, they finished sorting out 277 cartridges that would fit both the rifle and pistols.

The men set aside the rest for the local gunsmith to resize.

Emmitt gathered 100, plus the loads in his rifle, pistol and gun belt and placed them in his saddlebags.

128 rounds total. He had bought 30 rounds for his Sharps the day before and added fifteen of those to his saddlebags.

During all this, he got to know Jake better. Noting that the boy was quite intelligent. Too bad about his leg, McGowan mused.

After he completed that chore, he decided to examine his rifles action and clean it if needed.

Disassembled, he noted that the action was no different from his old Henry rifle. Just upgrades, like the type metal, dust cover, side-loading magazine and forearm.

The previous owner, Billy, had added a touch of grease to the lever that lifts the carrier, which moves a cartridge from the magazine to the barrel breach. The grease showed carbon residue, so he cleaned that and re-greased the ball of the lever, then oiled the pins holding the toggles together.

Satisfied, he reassembled the action. Closed up the side plates, and after working the lever several times, felt satisfied of its function. He then reloaded the magazine tube with the 13 rounds from before.

Noon time, Emmitt and Jake had lunch across the street from the bank at the new corner restaurant. Emmitt just didn't want to be confronted by his love that day. His heart was heavy knowing she was so distraught. He worried his presence would upset her again and harm the baby.

He remembered well his mother's miscarriage three months after his Pa left for the war the second time. After his recovery from the wounds he had received a year earlier completed healing. The stress of his going back to the fighting and the Comanche raid a month following unnerved her normally robust character.

He reflected again on that afternoon Indian raid. The first time he had to kill a human.

"Either that or be killed!" His father had told him about killing men. Killing animals for food was one thing. Killing a human being isn't for food. Just for survival.

"Never kill for pleasure or in anger. That's murder." His father had taught him. "Goes against the Lord's commandments!" he emphasized.

McGowan sighed a low breath at how his life had been and how it was now. He had someone who depended on him, to provide for them, to keep them protected. He worried he would fail at that, finally understanding his wife's unspoken fears.

For many years it was just him; now it wasn't anymore. Feeling this weight on his shoulders was a new thing. He had to be more careful now. Take fewer risks.

That evening he returned late to the Inn, having had dinner at the corner restaurant. Verna was with Consuelo cleaning the dining table when he entered. Stopping to watch her through the double doors, she looked up then continued what she was doing. Emmitt shrugged his shoulders and went upstairs to their room. Moments later, Verna entered and stood there looking at him.

"You've been avoiding me all day!" She said softly. The fire gone out of her voice.

"Yes, I know." He murmurs quietly.

"Why?" she asks with a hurt tone.

"Didn't think you wanted me around."

"Yes, you're right I didn't, but —I did —oh, I didn't know what I wanted. —I just know I want you, my love!"

Emmitt held his breath for a moment before replying. "I feel the same way."

With that, she softly cried out and rushed into his arms.



Roses Have Thorns



Red Gallagher stood on the station boarding platform as the incoming train from Austin bellowed, its brakes squealing as it stopped in front of the Round Rock station. His eyes fixed on his daughter's two glaring blue orbs, surrounding whites and swollen sockets, red from tears, as she stood not over four feet away.

He understood why she was upset with him. However, he preferred her in that frame of mind rather than be afraid if she knew what the real purpose of this endeavor was.

She held her husband, Emmitt McGowan, close as his arms encircled her with a long goodbye hug. Her head on his chest, but turned toward her father.

Finally, Emmitt released his bride of just a few months, kissing her hard and whispering his love and affection quietly to her.

"Protect yourself, my love, and come back to me whole and alive." Verna whimpered quietly, "and bring back my Papa from this ridiculous adventure he is taking!"

"Yes, my darlin', I will do my best by your father." Emmitt grinned, his eyes dancing as he tried, in vain he surmised, to ease her fears.

"You take care of yourself and our boy," he says, touching discreetly and gently her abdomen.

Verna acknowledged her husband's request with a smile and a nod before she turned to face her father, pointing her folded parasol at him. With

anger still boiling inside her at this folly he had conjured up.

"Papa," she cries shakily, "you bring my husband back to me alive and in one piece!"

"Daughter, if the likes of Todd Jenkins couldn't kill him, a short cattle drive won't either. I'll bring him back. I—I have full faith in Emmitt's abilities and blessed luck." Fred stammers.

As he finished, the train whistle blew for boarding as they loaded the last of the baggage and stabled the two men's four horses in the livestock car designed for horses.

Fred boarded first, then after another quick kiss goodbye with Verna, Emmitt clambered up the iron steps and into the coach to his right.

With a jerk, the steam engine spun its big iron driver wheels as sand dropped from the sandboxes in front of each. Quickly, as they gathered enough friction to grab the smooth rust-colored tracks, slowly pulling the load of cars trailing behind, it inched forward, as the claw like couplings between the cars, banged one at a time in a jerk, as the slack pulled from each. A few moments later, the train was down the tracks away from Round Rock, headed for the rail junction at Hearne.

When the last car was out of sight, Verna left the station and walked back to the inn. Her heart was heavy with sadness at her husband's absence and quiet anger at her father. She couldn't remember ever being this unhappy and angry at the same time; never in her life.

In the coach, Emmitt stood up and raised the window next to their seats to block off some of the smoke from the engine entering directly into their faces. He sat down and stared at Fred Gallagher, who appeared to be lost in thought.

Finally, Fred turned toward Emmitt, making a noncommittal comment.

"Well, it begins," he says matter-of-factly.

Emmitt nodded in agreement. "I reckon so."

Emmitt stared out the window at the passing trees yards off the track, then turned back to his father-in-law.

"I've never seen Verna so upset with me, yelling almost all that last evening and the day after and that coldness she threw at you." He remarked, stunned by a part of his bride he had never seen before.

"I understand she is upset with my leaving so soon on a job, but it floors me how she is treating her own father!"

Fred nodded, sighs and looked again at the passing scenery. "She's just like her mother. There are no roses without thorns," he says wistfully.

The train reached Hearne that evening. Emmitt over saw the stabling of his horse Strawberry and Fred's mustang gelding, Caesar, sold to Fred by the Worthington Ranch. plus, two gelding pack horses. While Fred secured the two rooms he had wired previously for reservations before leaving Round Rock.

The evening passed with only small talk between the two men over dinner, and then Fred excused himself as he walked down to the telegraph office.

Emmitt watched him walk off, then he turned and headed for the stables to see to the horses one last time for the night. Emmitt didn't see Fred the rest of the evening until just before they both retired for the night. And that was just a polite nod good night.

McGowan sat down on his bed, pulling his boots off, wondering what was on his father-in-law's mind? Something had quietened him down. He didn't seem the same man as a few days ago. He seemed agitated, like he knew something was going to happen in the future that he didn't have control of.

He'd seen that in other men just before a cattle drive, or some other danger facing them, not knowing the outcome, but knowing it would not be pretty. That night in San Angelo came to mind.

Perhaps going from his peaceful life of minding his hotel to the dangers of a cattle drive was it. Emmitt shrugged his shoulders as he prepared himself for sleep.

Laying back, feeling the softness of the pillow, McGowan noted it was the first night he had slept alone since he and Verna had married. Uncomfortable with that thought, he sighed as he closed his eyes

Less than 14 hours and he already missed his wife badly. His mind told him just before sleep overcame him—'Emmitt, you're hopeless.'



Not a Simple Cattle Drive



That morning after a good hearty breakfast in the hotel's small cafe, the two men gathered their things and walked back to the station. The northbound train to Red River City, which had just arrived from Houston, was just taking on water and wood. And luggage and cargo, including their horses and tack, were being staged on the platform for loading.

As they approached the station, the newspaper man, Kurkowski, accompanied by another fellow, hailed them.

"Mr. McGowan, good to see you, sir. And this must be Mr. Gallagher?" He asks, holding out his hand in greeting to both men.

"Mr. Kurkowski, glad to see you made it., Fred, this is the newspaper fellow I told you about," Emmitt says to his father-in-law.

"Ah yes, Mr. Kurkowski, happy to have you and your companion along. You two ready for this grand adventure?"

"We certainly are!" Hans laughs. "The conductor told us we had three hours before the train left the station; is there a suitable place to get some breakfast? And to wash up? Our last meal was late yesterday."

"Why yes, the hotel we stayed at has a good, if small, restaurant, and I'm sure you can wash up there." Gallagher replied.

As the two newsmen walked away, Emmitt chuckled quietly to himself. These two are going to find that their peaceful life is about to experience a drastic change. They'll not be any washing up for the next few months.

"What are you laughing at?" Fred asks.

The Texan revealed his thoughts, and both men started chuckling.

Emmitt went over to the cattle car to inspect their horses' feed and water. It would be a twelve-hour trip, stops for water and fuel included. He knew those animals would be hungry and a little scared, since this was their second train ride. However, Emmitt knew their intended destination was Corsicana, just east of the small city of Waco, where the herd they were to move north was grazing. So, the journey would not be too bad for the animals.

The plan was to de-board with their horses at Corsicana, to meet up with one or two of the wranglers from the Worthington ranch, who would lead them to the herd.

He noticed the two horses belonging to Kurkowski and his assistant also, and made sure they had enough feed and water for the trip.

Connected last to the cattle car, just before the brakeman's caboose, was a flatcar with a buckboard tied down. McGowan assumed the two newsmen would not fork their horses all the way to Dodge.

He shook his head and chuckled again silently. 'City fellas—God help them.'

The train started finally, a half an hour late. Emmitt pulled his gold pocket watch out of his vest pocket, given to him by Hardin, and noted the time. If the train were running on schedule, that would be late in the evening when they arrived in Corsicana.

Emmitt sat back and relaxed, stretching his legs under the opposing seat where Gallagher had perched.

He looked over to the other side of the coach, at the two newsmen who were reading the local paper bought at the last minute.

Hans was taking notes from an article he apparently found interesting.

McGowan, relaxed at finally moving again, toyed with a question in his mind for an hour after the train pulled out of Hearne before he finally gathered the nerve to ask his father-in-law a personal question. Men just didn't dig into another man's life. But he needed to know.

"Fred, I hope you don't mind my asking, but yesterday you stated Verna was like her mother?"

Fred, who was also reading the local paper he bought at the station before they boarded, looked up and smiled.

"No, son, I don't mind. Yes, Verna is very much like her mother. In beauty, attitude and mannerisms."

Emmitt, emboldened, asks, "How did you two meet? Verna said you were in the Army hospital in San Antonio recovering from a wound you received from Comanches."

"Yes, that's correct. Rosa was a nurse there. She was young, sixteen years, I had just turned twenty-one. She gave care to me and a fellow officer, both of us recovering from wounds. I asked her if she would have dinner with me one night, and our romance just blossomed. There was something about her that robbed me of all common sense. I couldn't get her out of my mind.

Emmitt, she was so beautiful. With huge blue eyes; she was soft-spoken, humorous and intelligent. Able to speak three languages, Spanish, French, and English.

Her father, a French sea captain, was the nephew of Jean Lafitte, the former pirate. Her mother

was from one of the colonial Spanish families in San Antonio, the Montoya's.

She had two miscarriages before Joel was born. Rosa was twenty-one by then. I knew those happened because of her worrying about me when away."

Fred was quiet for a moment, thinking. "Rosa was born at sea, did Verna tell you that? I fell head over heels for her. She had me, a second lieutenant in the United States Cavalry, wrapped around her little finger, and she knew it."

"Yeah, Mama Rosita told me." Emmett agreed.

"Verna has me the same way. I'd do anything for her; but this job seems to have put a chill in our romance. I hate that."

"You will, son. Every time you have to go off on a job with the work you do, expect Verna to throw a fit. She, like her mother, knows how dangerous your work is, and their way is to make us men feel bad about leaving them and more eager to return as soon as we can. Not realizing how their words prey on us and our duty. Remember, don't let thoughts of her get to the forefront of your thinking. It could get you killed. An old Bandito gave me that advice."

Emmitt, eyebrows knitted together, tilted his head in question.

Fred smiled. "In 56, my patrol had captured a group of Mexicans stealing horses from the local ranches, or so we thought.

A much larger group of Comanches attacked us, who, according to the leader of the Banditos, the horses actually belonged to. Only God knows where the Comanches stole them from.

Anyway, they surrounded us. I had 25 men at the start; there were 12 banditos with us. Facing about a hundred Waddie's was our estimate. My men had those damn Colt revolving rifles and dragoon pistols. The Mexicans had single-shot rifles of various types, 59 Sharps mostly, and a few carried Colt Pattersons. The

Indians all were using bows and arrows, which deliver a lot more firepower in a minute than we could, accurately if they could get close enough.

We withdrew to a small rocky rise for cover, where we stood them off for four days. The attack wounded half my men in the first moments, including me, again. All the Mexicans suffered wounds. Six died that first night, including two of my men. During the fourth night, that's when I learned that the horses actually belonged to the Indians. I ordered them turned loose; it was daybreak before we learned the Waddie's were gone.

But on the third night, the Bandito leader, Jose, asked what was distracting me. I wasn't focused on what was happening. I was feeling this was my last patrol, and Rosa's sharp words kept repeating in my head.

I confided in him about my wife and what she said the day we left on patrol; that's when he advised me of his philosophy on women."

"What was his philosophy?" Emmitt inquired.

Fred smiled as he answered Emmitt's question. "Don't allow your woman's departing words to sit at the front of your mind. If she's angry or upset with you, just remember, all roses have thorns. It comes with the territory.

Don't dwell on it. She'll be happy when you return. If you don't return, there's nothing you can do about it." Gallagher stopped for a moment, contemplating his next words.

"That still happened to me at Spotsylvania in 64. Although my wife wasn't angry, she was dying when she wrote her last words in a letter.

Devastation overwhelmed me. I could barely function as an officer, let alone just as a human being. The world just seemed to stop and grow very dark. I was lost and couldn't believe what I read. I couldn't believe she was gone. I forgot the old Bandito's words

and allowed her last words to sit at the front of my mind. That's all I could think of.

I tell you, Emmitt, love for a woman, especially true love, can kill a man or get him killed. One does not really understand how much he or she loves someone until that someone is taken from them. No longer among the living.

I learned this: true love can only end in grief for one of the two. Grief takes one's life and freezes it. Nothing matters anymore. You're just lost in a dark place. If it hadn't been for my sister, I'd have died in that damn hospital. Johnny Reb couldn't kill me; Union soldiers almost did!"

Taking a moment to breathe deeply, staring out the window of the moving train, he continued.

"My sister came every day to encourage me to heal. Rosa is who I lived for, without her—I didn't have a reason to live."

He stopped, took another deep breath and let it out slowly, continually staring out the window for a few moments to regain his composure before continuing.

"Even now it's difficult for me to talk about—it was I who should have died, not her; I kept telling myself. I had no strength, no concept of time as I lay in that hospital bed. I could not see a future; it was just a black void not until my sister's constant reminder that I had two children and it was my wife's wish I live for them, did I realize I had to survive. For my wife's request and my children's sake." Fred stared deeply into Emmitt's eyes.

"Son, the dead have it easy. No pain, no worries, no more trying to survive in this hateful world. It's us, the living, who suffer."

Gallager repeated what he had said earlier.

"Loving someone, truly loving someone, will always end in grief, an unbearable grief, for one of them."

Emmitt, interrupts to change the subject with his remembrance of his father's tales of the war. "My Pa was at Spotsylvania."

Fred stared at his son-in-law and then laughs lightly. "He might have been the one who put that ball into me."

Fred gazed out the window again before he continued quietly.

"I still love Rosa. It'll be sixteen years come April. Time changes things; however, two things haven't.

My wife's cry from her grave for justice; that and the love I have for her never goes away. Faded with time, but true love never goes away; it just loses color."

Fred turned his gaze back to Emmitt, who was contemplating what his father-in-law had just confided to him, and interrupted Emmitt's thoughts.

"I've something to tell you, son. And I need to ask for your help in this matter."

Fred Gallager finished explained the real reason he was on this cattle drive and the plan to deal with the last three men of that squad that assaulted and eventually caused the death of his wife, now Emmitt's late mother-in-law.

After he finished and secured Emmitt's agreement to watch his back, Fred sat back and closed his eyes. Comfortable with his son-in-law's answer to his request, he drifted off to his dreams.

Emmitt leaned against the coach window frame, torn with sadness and anger. Uncomfortable with Fred revealing his anguish to him. He understood the need to talk this grief out, but now his wife's father wanted him to take part in killing the three remaining men involved in his mother-in-law's death.

This request surprised Emmitt. He promised his wife to bring his father home in one piece, but that was from the drive, not murder, regardless of the

reasons. Now he understood why his in-law had insisted on carrying out this enterprise this winter instead of next spring. It didn't sit well with him, this knowledge. Still, the association had already arranged everything; all he had to do was act as trail boss and get the herd to Dodge. And make sure Fred survived the trip, he was unsure about what to do in Dodge.

He suspected things would be fluid and that changes would happen when they finally arrived in Dodge, assuming they didn't have a disaster on the drive.

Emmitt's biggest worry was how he would explain to Verna if he failed to bring back her father, especially if her father died at the hands of these men.

Gunning for vengeance wasn't new to him as he thought of that night in San Angelo on the Concho River. That episode in his life still haunted him. He was also worried about how this would work out and both of them not getting arrested, if Fred carried out his plan. Gallagher's Army Colonel friend should have a better plan than Fred's.

Emmitt prayed quietly. He was uneasy about this vendetta, but despite that, he understood what was driving his father-in-law. He'd do the same if he were in that position over Verna.

He remembered the desperate ride he made back to Round Rock from the Colorado River and his entering the Inn unarmed to save the woman he loved and the others from Jenkins' fury.

Yeah, he surmised, he'd do the same as his father-in-law is planning now. He was used to dispensing justice outside the law, a practice from his past work for Mr. Goodnight before he pursued Jenkins this past year.

However, he had the Rangers backing him on that job. And Kansas wasn't Texas. The war concluded, the South, especially Texas, wasn't in a favorable light with Union-appointed judges.

Emmitt then remembered his erstwhile friend, John Wesley Hardin. He didn't want to end up like him. Inside the walls at Huntsville or in a Kansas prison or worse, with a rope around his neck.

Looking out of the window and back at his father-in-law, who had dozed off, he prayed for a better solution. The cattle drive was an excellent diversion, and it kept the cattle buyers in Dodge until they arrived; however, facing them after selling them the herd, that end plan was half-assed. There had to be a better way, he surmised.

Unknown to Emmitt, or Fred or even Verna, another family member was reliving a nightmare he had the previous night. Gunfire, Union soldiers, his grandmother yelling, a man he shot in the back, his mother lying in bed slowly dying, drowning in her own blood. Old memories brought back troubled him. An old hatred of any man who accosted women was like a foul taste in his mouth. Trying to shake off the thoughts, he put his frock coat on, pinned his deputy star on and went to work his shift walking the streets of Dodge.



Corsicana



The sun had already set and the night chill had set in when the train stopped a half hour late in Corsicana for water, change of crew and dinner for the crew and passengers. Also, for the unloading of the horses, wagon and possibles for the men in Gallagher's group.

While McGowan and Kurkowski and his associate unloaded the horses, tack and saw to the wagon being rolled off the flatbed by two burly black station hands, Gallagher walked over to the restaurant to reserve a table and order dinner for the four of them.

By the time he returned to the small station, Kurkowski and his associate Jacobs were hitching their horses to the loaded wagon with their belongings and Jacobs' camera equipment; Emmitt was placing the pannier packs on the two extra horses, Strawberry with Cesar already saddled.

"You gentlemen ready to eat supper?" Fred asks as he picked up the remaining pannier pack and handed it to Emmitt.

"I reckon so," Emmitt replies, looking over at the two newspapermen who were arguing over how to strap the doubletree from the wagon tongue to the horses.

"Hans, are you two hungry?"

"Just give us a minute, please." Kurkowski replies as he turned back to his associate.

Emmitt chuckled, giving a quick glance at the look of wonderment on Fred's face as he shook his head from side to side, walking over to the two.

"Having trouble?"

"Ah, we don't do this every day, and in the dark it's even more difficult—where does this strap go?" Kurkowski's associate, Jacobs, replies.

"Let me see what—oh—you got the double tree backward. Undo these two, move the horses out of the way, unhook the pin from the tongue and turn the tree around—there, now you can attach everything."

"Thanks Mr. McGowan."

"Don't mention it. We are taking our horses over to the cafe down the street. We'll wait for you two inside." Emmitt says, walking away.

"See, I told you so," whispered Jacobs.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," came Hans' reply.

As Gallagher and McGowan walked side by side leading the four horses, Fred chuckled. "You think these two city slickers will make it all the way to Dodge?"

Emmitt laughed. "Lord help me, I do not know."

After the four men finished their meal and were enjoying a second coffee, Jacob asked.

"There isn't a hotel in this town?"

"No, we're lucky this cafe is here. This is just a watering hole for the train." Emmitt replies.

Jacob nodded and again asks, "Are we riding all night?"

"Oh, no! To where? We'll make camp just outside of town, and tomorrow there should be two riders meeting us to guide us back to the herd."

"And if they don't show tomorrow?"

"Then we wait!" Fred replies, looking at Emmitt for support.

"They'll show." McGowan answers with confidence. He was wondering if allowing these two Houstonites to join this drive was a good idea.

Hans Kurkowskis had written a letter requesting to visit Round Rock to write a follow-up story, because his initial article sold twice as many copies and The New York Times and another Chicago paper also published it.

When Emmitt telegraphed back that he was leading a cattle drive in the immediate future, Hans quickly replied, asking if he could join the drive to document what a venture of that sort was like.

"How often do you get out of the city?" He asks.

"I'm from Shreveport, and I've been to Galveston and Dallas. Never camped in my life." Jacobs shrugged.

"Well—that's gonna change." Emmitt snickered lightly.

Later, as a full moon was rising grandly in the east, with the air still, the only sounds were of the men making camp next to a small cedar grove and the occasional coo from an Apache bird. (nighthawks)

Emmitt and Fred searched around the bushy cedars for dead limbs for a campfire with the other two men. After several trips, they had an enormous pile of limbs and cedar bark that Kurkowski attacked with his small hatchet. His associate, Jacobs, found stones to create a circular fire pit per Emmitt's direction.

With a nice blazing fire, if rather smoky, the men picked a spot for their bedrolls. Kurkowski produced a small bottle of rye whiskey, which he passed around and then bade the others good night.

As each man crawled under his blanket, each with thoughts of what the coming days, weeks, were going to be like, they drifted off to sleep.

Emmitt, took one last look at his surroundings, the men, the horses before he laid his head back, looking at the stars that were not blinded by the shining moon

and thought of Verna, wondering what she was thinking or dreaming about right now.

Alone in Round Rock, standing at her bedroom window, Verna McGowan was staring at the stars and moon as well. Feeling very lost. Praying for her husband's safety, wondering what he was doing or dreaming about as she laid her hands over the hard slight swell in her belly.



Sam



The two large brown eyes were intently watching Fred slowly wake from his slumber. Mouth open with tongue hanging out to the left, a look of mirth on the tri-colored head. The creature's black wet nose occasionally sniffed Gallagher's blanket. It was beautifully coated with medium length thick black fur. A rich golden brown long snout, fading into the black head, with a thin white line growing from nothing, between the eyes, running up over its skull, disappearing again at the back of its skull. Black ears with white tips stood vertically, alert, listening to the quiet snoring. The dog sat on its haunches, waiting for the man to wake.

The hound didn't understand why it was attracted to this sleeping man. There were two others in the group sleeping as well. But this one human drew him. Unafraid, the black dog with a white fur ring around its neck and shoulders that ran down its chest and belly, white stockings on its front legs with black dots, waited.

A second, slightly larger dog, a solid black short hair, save for four white paws, unconcerned with its traveling partner, lay next to the smoldering campfire as Emmitt refreshed the smoldering coals with dead cedar logs. Stirring the ashes from last night's blaze, waiting for the wood to catch so the crushed beans he prepared in the large blue coffee pot would boil.

Looking up at one of the trail drivers who had ridden into camp an hour ago, he whispered. "Your dog seems to have an interest in my father-in-law."

"Yeah, never seen Sam take to anyone with such intensity." Riley Joshua whispered. The rising sun, just breaking over the horizon, glistened off his dark, almost coal black, skin.

"You think these fellas should be woken up?"

Emmitt shook his head no. "Nah, let'm sleep. It'll be a long time before they get to sleep late into the morning after today."

Emmitt turned his attention to the second trail driver, Brushy Bill Roberts, as he walked out of the cedars after doing his morning business.

Again, Emmitt motioned for Brushy Bill to be silent, who acknowledged with a nod as he removed his pistol belt off his shoulder and fastened it around his waist, both converted Colt Navy's butt forward.

Emmitt acknowledged to himself, like he did last spring, when he relieved Brushy Bill of his watch over the wounded Ben Maxwell in Salado, how good-looking the kid was. Save for those buck teeth, he reckoned the kid would have gals hanging all over him.

"Good Lord!" Gallagher hollers as Sam began licking the side of Fred's face.

Pushing the dog back, he sat up, staring at the hound, then at his son-in-law, then at the two wranglers standing with big grins about to burst into laughter.

"Seems Ol' Sam has taken a liking to you, Mr. Gallagher!" Riley quips.

"Apparently! Sam? That's his name? How old is he?"

"Yes sir. One of our herdin' dogs. He's about two years old now." Pointing to the black dog, still snoozing next to the fire pit, "This here lazy hound, black as me, is called Indian. He's about four years old, I reckon."

"Indian?" Emmitt laughed.

As they were all laughing, the noise woke the two newsmen, who sat up staring at the two wranglers, then the dogs.

Introductions were made between the trail-hands and the Houstonites as the coffee started boiling.

"What's for breakfast?" Hans asks as he reappeared from the cedar thicket. Riley and Roberts looked at each other and shook their heads, smiling.

"Hardtack and hot coffee!" Emmitt replies.

"Hardtack?" Jacobs replies, rubbing his jaw.

"Never had that. Heard about it, but—"

Gallagher cocked his head and studied Jacob's face.

"How old are you, son?"

"I'll be twenty-four next April 11th."

"So, you didn't serve either side? Not old enough."

Fred answers his own question.

"No, Sir, Pa did. He was killed in a skirmish near Fredericksburg. Almost the same day, near as we could tell, Comanches killed Ma while she was washing clothing on the Sabine."

"Sorry to hear that, son."

"Yeah, it's been a while since I told this story.

My uncle Jeb took me back to Shreveport, where I grew up. Took an interest in photography, learned all I could at their newspaper in Shreveport. Then saw a help wanted, photographer, ad in Mr. Kurkowski's paper, The Galveston Weekly. So here I am now!"

"So, you've never had a chew of hardtack?" Emmitt asks.

"No, is it hard to chew?"

Everybody but Hans laughed.

"It is if you don't soften it in hot coffee. Hard on your teeth if you try to eat it dry," Riley chipped into the conversation. "I've got some jerky if you'd rather chew on that!" he adds.

Four hours later found the group of men, horses, dogs and wagon rolling west off the grassy plains of east central Texas on to the rough narrow escarpment that ran from Austin to Dallas.

Emmitt quickly understood why the many herds of cattle had never taken this route before. The terrain was rough, strewn with rocks, buttes or mesas in the distance, and the only watering holes were the semi-dry creeks they'd have to cross. No rivers.

He knew from experience that this would not be easy to keep the herd safe. The ground wasn't level, like west of them on the Fort Worth Trail. No gently rolling hills. Just craggy drops, fissures every so often. Mostly Buffalo grass and other scraggly-looking weeds he didn't know the name of. Plenty of that, and the only trees seen were the cedars and blackjack oaks that run alongside the creeks.

He understood it was called the Austin Escarpment or, better known as, the White Rock Escarpment. Hard, dense shale rock, chalky limestone stretched from Austin to south of Dallas between the pines of east Texas and the black dirt plains to the west. Like a backbone through the center of Texas. Hard ground.

He noticed that Sam the hound was trailing his father-in-law or leading his horse. Emmitt mused, like a guardian angel on four legs with fur.

Funny, he wondered, how an animal will take to one human over others. That reminded him of Blu. Emmitt wondered how that rangy old mustang was faring. Those children of his brothers and sister were keeping him busy and spoiled, he reckoned.

Stretching his back, he suddenly saw the black dog Indian zoom off to the left, with Sam close behind.

Leading them about twenty yards ran a big-eared jackrabbit. It looked half the size of either dog.

Riley pulled his steed up beside Emmitt. "Well, I reckon those two will have full bellies tonight," he says, and laughs.

"I reckon so." McGowan agrees.

"They share?" Hans called out.

"Oh, yeah. One eats his fill and the other finishes what's left." Riley answers. "Jack that size, they'll be sleeping like babies tonight, full bellies and all. Here they come back. Didn't take long!" Riley continues, pointing to Indian with the rabbit in its mouth, Sam right beside him.

"He's a high stepper!" Hans pointed out. "He is proud of his catch I suppose, stepping like that!" he says of the prancing hound.

Everyone laughs as the horses and wagon continued on, over the rough terrain.

They made camp that evening on the open range, not a tree or bush in sight, save for one dead tree, its limbs bleached white by the sun, that they tossed into the buckboard for the evening's fire.

Riley attempted to cook. Boiling coffee and frying salted pork he carried in their pack horse's panniers. Brushy Bill assisted, mixing up some flour for sourdough biscuits. All the while, Jacob set up his camera equipment and photographed the two men laboring around the smoky campfire.

Emmitt watched Jacobs intently as the young man deftly handled his equipment up to the moment of the powder flash.

However, it was Fred Gallagher who spoke up.

"Have you seen the photographs taken of the battlefields during the war? Gettysburg, for instance?"

"Yes, sir," Jacobs answers. "That's what got me interested in this. I don't have any photos of my Pa and just one tintype of my Ma when she was young. I don't remember now what my Pa looked like. My uncle said I favor him some, but my aunt says I favor my Ma more." He laughs. "I hope in a few years to

open a business photographing families so they can remember the likeness of their kin in years to come."

Riley looked up and grinned, his features blurred through the campfire smoke.

"That there is a good reason, fella. I wish I had something to remember my Ma. But back then, no one was caring what a slave looked like."

"Not just slaves, Riley," Emmitt joined into the conversation. "Many folks have nothing to look at of their kin. Tintypes or these photographs."

"I have an oil portrait of my late wife, but that's all I have," Fred commented.

Emmitt glanced at his father-in-law, emembering the painting of his late mother-in-law hanging in Fred's office.

"Well, that's my goal." Jacob finished as he took the two plates and began the development process under a makeshift hood on the wagon bed



The Smell of Money



The men rose early the next day, had coffee and hardtack or some leftover biscuits from the previous evening, loaded up the wagon and pack horses, then continued the trek westward.

Emmitt noticed Fred seemed to be in pain.

"Sore?"

"Yeah, I guess two or three hours a day riding wasn't enough for riding all day."

"It'll pass." Emmitt replied.

"I know."

The ride was uneventful until that afternoon when coming over a rise in the rough prairie. Hans Kurkowski drew up and halted his wagon.

The wind blew briskly out of the northwest, slightly chilled and carrying an unhealthy taint to his city nostrils.

Emmitt rode up and questioned him.

"Problem?"

Hans looked at Jacob, who, his face screwed up in questioned disgust, was tying a bandanna around his neck and face.

"Yeah," Hans' answered. "What in God's name is that ungodly smell?" he asks, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and holding it over his nose.

"What smell?" Emmitt asks, then laughs. "Oh, you mean THAT smell!"

Hans didn't answer with words, just shook his head, acknowledging McGowan's question.

"Why, Hans, haven't you ever smelled money?"

Hans Kurkowski's eyebrows shot up. "Money? I've never smelled that kind of money! That stinks terribly!" he replied through the handkerchief.

"That's because it's fresh money, Hans!"

McGowan laughs again as Fred Gallagher and the two wranglers pulled their horses up to the stalled wagon.

"I don't understand."

"Cattle, Mr. Kurkowski, cattle!" Riley chipped in.

"Cattle is money, stink included! They are just over there, below that butte," Riley says. He pointed to a mesa, a flat-top landmass approximately four miles away.

"Lord of Mercy, I didn't know they smelled so badly!"

The two wranglers and McGowan laughed again, enjoying this city dweller's discomfort.

"They don't until they are just standing and not moving, their shit just piles up and there's your odor."

Brushy Bill couldn't resist adding his two cents. "The world is their privy. You'll get used to it---someday." Everyone laughed as they continued their ride forward.

Emmitt finally relaxed as they had finally reached their destination, his mind already thinking of the trail drive and the long road to an uncertain future in Dodge City, Kansas.

An hour later, the herd came into view. Spread out over what looked to be a mile square or more were approximately 3000 head of cattle. Beeves that Todd Jenkins had stolen in the past two years. Branded over with one of the five brands issued to Jenkins, so no one could tell whose ranch or farm the animals had belonged to.

After the trial and hanging of the rustling leader, the Texas courts in Austin reissued the Jenkins' brand

and assigned them over to Fred Gallagher at the request of the Travis and Williamson County Cattle Association.

The group passed the herd on to the cow camp upwind and made their arrival known.

As the evening drew to a close, the northwest wind grew colder as it died down to a whisper. The remuda of horses and cattle turned their flanks to the slight but chilly breeze, preparing themselves for sleep. Many slept standing while others laid down for the night. Mother Nature quieted down as the sun settled in the west.

Even the camp drew down to just a few conversations after formal introductions between the men and the four new men, then total quiet.

Emmitt watched as the first shift of night riders left to patrol the herd. Memories of days gone past, when he was just a teenager, before the war, crossed his mind. Driving his father's cattle to Rockport for shipment to New Orleans. Then the big drives started after the war.

First was the Cherokee/Shawnee Trail to St. Louis. That ended when Missouri passed its laws forbidding Texas cattle into their state. The Texas fever, caused by a tick and carried by the wild longhorns, was killing the domestic cattle.

Shifting their destination to Abilene, Kansas, until once again a new trail had to be broken because of the city of Dallas throwing a fit! They hated the stinking cattle passing through their pious berg.

So, the sleepy town of Fort Worth welcomed the cattle, the men driving the cattle, and the money brought into that western town. Fort Worth earning the name 'Cowtown'.

Emmitt shook his head slightly, wondering at all the changes that had happened in the past since he could fork a pony to assist his father and then later strike out on his own.

Now he was a married man, with a child on the way. A responsible position doing what he did best, tracking thieves but currently trail boss of a cattle drive on a secret mission of justice.

Emmitt thought of Verna. Wondering what she would think of him now if she knew what he and her father were up to.

Putting that thought out of his head, McGowan stretched out on his saddle blanket with another over his body, head and shoulders against his saddle. He fell asleep.



Why Papa?



Mrs. Verna Rose McGowan sat at her father's desk in his office reviewing the day's list of supplies for the guests' meals.

The inbound/outbound train from Austin to Hearne was due in later that evening and not scheduled to leave until early the next morning. She held telegraphed reservations in for 12 guests. Four couples and eight individuals. Because only four rooms were available and the other three were occupied, they put up a tent with cots behind the inn for the eight individuals, who were all men.

Verna knew that with the increase of travelers by rail, her father and she were going to need extra lodging for overnight guests. They needed to add on to the inn or build a new building entirely. The present inn, built for stagecoach passengers, who normally were in groups of five or six. Noting a reminder on her private to-do list, she would bring that up with her father when he returned.

Verna sat back in the squeaky wooden banker's chair, the wood creaking as she thought about the two men who had entered the inn yesterday, inquiring about her husband. Where he was and how long ago, he had left.

The maid she hired, Consuelo, had answered the two men's questions before she summoned Verna. The two men said nothing to her when she asked their business with her husband, just tipped their hat brims politely and took their leave.

The two looked rough, like they'd been riding for a long time. She'd seen this type before, drifters, either looking for work or just aimlessly wandering the land.

Consuelo was worried she had said something to the two that wasn't right. Verna soothed her concern, noting that these two were probably just looking for work.

Mrs. McGowan sat for a moment more, staring at nothing, then noticed the bottom right drawer wasn't totally flush with the desk frame. Reaching down, she pulled on the drawer handle, and it opened.

"Papa, why did you not lock this?" she murmurs to herself. "This isn't like you. You told me years ago these were your personal private papers. The letters momma and you shared with each other." She said to no one.

Curious, she pulled the drawer open all the way. Seeing the yellowed envelopes bound with a faded red ribbon, she smiled.

"No, that's their love, not for me to see." She said half out loud.

Then she saw the telegrams. Majority were recent, the months she and Emmitt were on their honeymoon, from a Colonel Handley at Fort Dodge and a old one dated 1869 from Washington DC from a Major Handley, apparently the same man. And the hand written replies from her father.

So, concerning her father's important private papers, and being a dutiful daughter; she read them.

Stunned after reading the last and her father's reply, she now understood what her father was planning. And he was dragging her husband along in this.

"Why, Papa?" she asks, staring at the portrait of her mother. Not knowing whether to be angry, worried or hopeful, they avenged her

mother. She jotted out a letter to her grandmother, Mama Rosita, about what her father was up to. Sliding the three-page letter into an envelope, sealing it, she told Consuelo to watch the front desk as she hurried to the post office. She wanted to make sure that letter was on the 3:30 am train the next morning.

Then, when leaving the post office, she got an idea, turning back up the brick walkway, she made her way to the telegraph office on the corner of Georgetown and Lampasas Street, the access road to the train station, where she sent to her aunt Rosalyn, in Philadelphia, a simple statement

'Papás on the hunt, stop, knows names did mama, stop', need help, stop, come asap, stop, expense paid, stop, Galveston, stop, join Mama Rosita, stop, need at Round Rock, stop, manage inn, stop.

She rewrote the cryptic message four times. Her heart pounding, she didn't know what to do yet, but needed to confide in her granny and aunt before she made any plans. However, in her heart, she knew she must stop this folly before she lost either of the two men she loved.

The question was, how?



Jenkins



Mrs. Verna Rose Gallagher de McGowan, her name, she signed the Spanish way taught by her grandmother. For the delivery receipt from the market on the north side of town for the vegetables and freshly butchered beef on dry ice.

The beefsteaks were placed in the new D. Eddy & Son icebox her father bought while she was on her honeymoon. The ice and dry ice shipped in insulated train cars from the Houston manufacturer to the ice warehouse recently erected.

The day's supplies to feed the guests staying at the inn and passengers who were waiting for the next train to take them either to Austin or to Hearne, then points north to Red River City or Shreveport or east to Houston/Galveston.

As she finished the morning instructions with the cook Juan. She oversaw Consuelo's cleaning of the dining room after the guests ate. Verna heard booted heels thumping across the veranda, the double doors opening, and the little bell, installed just recently over the doors, ringing its tiny notes of someone entering.

Returning to the front desk, she watched the individual enter, his cane in his right hand supporting a stiff leg as he walked up to her. It was then she saw the star with its five points attached to a surrounding circle, with the inscription, Texas Ranger, stamped in the circle. She knew they stamped the badge from a Mexican silver 50 Peso coin.

"Good morning, are you Mrs. McGowan?" the Ranger asks politely, exchanging the cane to his left hand as he offered his right over the top of the desk.

"Yes, sir, I'm Verna McGowan."

"I'm Ranger John Armstrong, from the Texas Ranger Austin Investigation Division."

"How do you do, Ranger Armstrong? Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise...Mrs. McGowan, is there a place we can talk privately?" he asks, cutting through the pleasantries quickly.

"Why, of course? What's this about? Is my husband in trouble?"

"Your husband? Oh no, I'm not here concerning him. He's away on a cattle drive, correct?"

"Yes, he and my father left a week ago. Let's go to my office. Through that door."

As they entered, she gestured toward one of the banker chairs facing her father's desk, which now she was using.

"Please have a seat!"

"Thank you. I took a bullet a year ago, so my old leg isn't the same anymore."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sir!"

"No need to be. Part of the risk of this profession. --- Mrs. McGowan, has anyone been here inquiring about your husband? Asking his whereabouts?"

Verna's eyes widened. "Why yes? Shortly after Emmitt and my Papa left, two men entered asking for him. They spoke to my maid before I came into the foyer; she let them know they had already left. I asked them why they wanted to see him, but they didn't reply, just acknowledged me and left."

"Can you describe them?"

"Roughly dressed. Looked tired and dirty, smelled bad, like they had been on the trail for days.

Much like any trail hand. One was taller than the

other, about 5'8" or so. Dark hair and a mustache. Needed shaves. I figured they were looking for work through my husband."

"Why do you think that?"

"Others have sought him out. I guess they think he would know which ranch needed help."

"I see." Armstrong lowered his eyes in thought before continuing.

"The cattle, they are moving; they're east of Waco?"

"I believe so; that's what my Papa said. About twenty-five miles east, thirty or so west of Corsicana."

"So, a week ago." Armstrong glanced at the ceiling, doing mental calculations as he spoke out loud.

“Assuming the herd moved two, three days ago—maybe thirty or forty miles from Waco now.”

“Ranger Armstrong, is there something you are not telling me? Is my husband in danger?”

“I don’t know for sure, Mrs. McGowan.”

“Call me Verna, please. Mrs. McGowan is so formal and stuffy. And makes me feel old.” she smiles with a worried look.

“Your description of the two men matches the young fella at the Range Inspector’s office.”

“Jake?” Verna offered.

“Yeah, Jake, nice enough fella but thought his name was Jacobs. But those two described don’t match our reports.”

“He prefers Jake. Reports? I don’t follow?”

Ranger Armstrong hesitated for a moment before he answered, looking at the concern in this woman’s eyes for her husband.

“Todd Jenkins had a brother. His brother is reported to have an outlaw gang in the Nevada/Utah area. New reports now show that the gang has been seen in northwest Texas.”



Mission of Vengeance



Verna McGowan inhaled nervously as her hands covered her mouth and nose.

“Oh, my God! He’s after my husband?”

“Now, now, we don’t know that for a fact. We don’t know yet the whereabouts of Mark Jenkins and his gang, or even if the reports are accurate.”

“You said my husband was not in trouble, this is trouble!” Verna cries, her voice trembling.

“As far as we know, he isn’t Mrs.—Verna.”

“My husband needs to be made aware this before something terrible happens!”

“Yes ma’am. I’ll telegraph the Waco home office, and they can send a ranger out to the herd to let them know. That’ll take a couple of days, but we don’t know if there is any immediate danger or any danger at all.”

“Please, sir! Do that as soon as you can?”

“Yes, ma-am. I’ll do that as soon as.”

“Ranger Armstrong, my Papa and husband are on a mission of vengeance. Can you stop them before they get into trouble?”

Armstrong, who was just rising from his chair, stopped and sat back.

“Vengeance?”

“Yes sir. During the war, Yankee soldiers assaulted and murdered my momma on Galveston Island during their occupation. Three of them are still alive. Posing as cattle buyers and they are in Dodge City waiting for my Papa’s very herd.”

“I see,” he drawls. “Do you have proof of this?”

Verna reached down, opened her father's personal drawer, pulling out the telegrams and the envelope that contained the notarized deathbed confession.

After Armstrong read the telegrams and the confession, he looked up at Verna and smiled.

"I think we can solve this before your father and husband arrive with the herd.

Your mother was a citizen of Texas, regardless of the war, and a non-combatant. I believe the State of Texas can issue a request to the State of Kansas to detain for extradition. Arrangements need to be made with the local law so these three don't skip out. I'll have a wire sent confirming these men are still in Dodge City. Let me keep these as they now are — evidence, and see if we can get the Texas courts to issue an arrest warrant for each man and start the extradition process."

"Oh, thank you, sir. This is a great load and worry off my mind and my heart."

"I understand. Your father should have contacted the Rangers about this instead of trying to handle this himself. And dragging your husband into this as well."

"I know."

"But I can understand his feelings and motivation. If I were in his place, I might have tried the same thing. But I have this." He tapped his Rangers badge.

Armstrong stood and offered his hand across the desk. "Mrs. McGowan. Verna, I'll be in touch concerning this, and I'll get that telegram off to the Waco office after I leave here."

"Thank you, Officer Armstrong, I—"

"Call me John, Verna."

"Thank you, John. Thank you," she says weakly as color returns to her face.

"I'll see myself out, just rest here. We will handle

everything."

Armstrong exited the office, his booted heels thumping as his cane tapped across the foyer floor, the little bell ringing and the door closing.

Verna practically collapsed on her father's desk. This year had been horrible save for the few months of bliss with her betrothed.

Memories came flooding back, remembrances of that horrible day Todd Jenkins burst into the Inn, holding everyone at gunpoint, the blinds pulled, windows shut, the stifling heat growing inside on that July day as Jenkins waited for the man who would become her husband.

Her father went down from a blow to his head, from Jenkins' pistol barrel. The fistfight, Emmitt getting shot, his rage as he almost killed Jenkins with a fireplace poker and the relief in the end when the bullet from Jenkins' derringer found lodged on the prong of Emmitt's belt buckle, never penetrating, just bruising his flesh.

Now Todd Jenkins' brother, plus her father's folly, dragging her man into that mess. It was almost too much for her. She prayed the Ranger would manage everything as he said, protecting her family from harm or death. Then she broke down and started sobbing.



Trail Drivers



Emmitt McGowan woke early as the faint light from the still-hidden sun lightened the morning sky. He noted that the cook, Lester Cornyn, and his assistant, Charlie Worth, had already risen, stoked the large cooking fire, preparing the morning coffee.

The cook and his assistant are almost done cooking the biscuits, gravy, and fried beef for breakfast.

He noted the night riders, Raul Montoya and his brothers Rene and Juan, and their cousin Carlos Navaro, were just entering the camp after being relieved by the morning crew.

The crew comprised Jim Stead, Frank Holcomb, two seasoned trail drivers from the Kinkade ranch. A young boy, barely sixteen years old, Tommy Stewart, on his first drive. Jeremiah Dossey, a young Negro barely older than Stewart, on his second drive this year, and Jamie Christian, a mixed-blood Negro/Mexican, all from the Henderson spread, and the two Irishmen. Lucas McCory and Isaac McDonald also from the Kinkade ranch. And of course, Riley Joshua and Brushy Bill Roberts he knew, from the Worthington ranch.

Having just met the drovers the day before, remembering who was who was a chore this early in the morning.

Riley had introduced the crew to him and Fred and the two newspapermen. But Emmitt hadn't conversed with each man to get to know them.

Cow camps were busy places as the herd had to be moved every few days to fresh grazing. A small spring-fed creek that the camp was situated on drained into a small lake, approximately three acres of water, with grazing all around it becoming sparser and sparser. The herd had moved several times in the past few weeks, waiting for the two to arrive from Round Rock. The white chalky rock didn't grow grass like further west on the north trail to Fort Worth. Just buffalo grass and nondescript weeds and not much of either.

Emmitt was having doubts this idea of Fred's was a sound one. Better to take the chance; the grass was high enough on the north trail. Certainly, there was more water. Crossing the winding Brazos River alone multiple times gave plenty of watering. But the die was cast, and they'd have to make the best of it. He just wondered how many head of cattle they'd lose.

He acknowledged they needed an additional wagon and team of horses to haul newborns, rather than leave them on the trail to die.

As the four vaqueros sat down, Emmitt asked. "Who was singing last night?" Rene replied with a big, toothy grin.

"Ah, Señor McGowan, that would be my brother Raul. Bonito voice, Si?"

"Yes, quite beautiful." Emmitt agrees. "What was he singing? I've heard that before, but don't remember where."

"Pescadores de Hombres. Fisher of men."

"Oh, Okay, I think it was in Mass with my wife."

"Si, Señor McGowan, people sing it in Mass. You're Catholic?"

"Yes, converted at my wife's request to marry her."

"Ah, Bueno'. You know Spanish?"

"Un poco," McGowan answered.

Lester, the cook, overheard their conversation and shook his head. Mumbling out loud so anyone could hear.

“Damn bunch of Bible thumpers!”

McGowan heard the cooks mumbling and commented.

“You got a problem with religion?”

“No, boss, just don’t believe in all that hogwash!” Cornyn replied.

“You don’t believe in God, señor?” Rene asks as he looked at his brother in surprise.

“There ain’t no damn God!”

The three men just stared at each other, heads shaking slightly in wonder.

Gallager walked up about that time and motioned his son-in-law to follow him out of earshot of the men coming in from the night and those going out.

Walking down to the small spring-fed creek, Fred started the conversation.

“Son, I know I am not anywhere near learned on how a cattle operation is supposed to be run, but this outfit is way too loose.”

“How so?” McGowan asks his father-in-law. He realized himself he hadn’t been paying attention to the routines of the men.

“I know this isn’t a military operation and these certainly aren’t soldiers. But no one seems to go out of their way to get things done. Nothing seems organized, no leadership from that scout/ramrod Jim Stead.

Emmitt smiled at his wife’s father and realized the old Army officer was showing his wings. Perhaps this was the time to let him fly again.

“Fred, you want the job?”

“What? I know nothing about driving a herd of cattle,” Fred replies. “I’m just making an observation.”

“You don’t have to know. You can learn. Most of these boys have experience. The ones who do, know their jobs. They just need a leader to keep them on their toes.”

Emmitt looked back at the camp and past that to the herd in the distant being watched by the day riders.

“You’re now the ramrod of this outfit. I’ll speak to Jim and let him be what he is good at. It’s your herd anyway, so now you take ownership of its operation.”

Gallager started to object, but Emmitt cut him off.

“What you don’t know, you can learn. Our seasoned riders will teach you what you need to know. Consider them as Sargent’s of high rank. Lean on them for suggestions, but you are their ramrod now.”

“I didn’t mean to usurp Jim’s job. I wasn’t thinking of becoming someone in charge.”

Emmitt laughs. “Well, sir welcome to the cattle business,” slapping his wife’s father on the shoulder.

“Lean on Riley, Bushy Bill, Frank Holcomb and the two Irishmen, McCory and McDonald, for advice. If Jim offers anything, listen to him as well. Also, the Tejanos. I don’t know them, but I suspect they know their business. You can take over that job without offending Stead, I am sure.

“Ok son. You just made my day heavier. Thanks a lot!” Emmitt grinned at his in-law.

“Anytime, Fred, anytime!”



Gettin' Ready!



For the rest of that day, Emmitt McGowan inspected the cattle, checked the equipment in the two wagons and the foodstuffs for the trail. Looked over the remuda, the herd of support horses for each rider.

He was told that Jim Stead had handled the preparations, but McGowan noted the cook wagon and supply wagon were short of certain items for the drive. Flour, dried beans, beef tallow, and salted pork barrels were almost empty.

Lester acknowledged that. Their supplies were running low after they had camped there for two months. Along with resupply that third wagon needed to be bought in Waco within a day or so.

Dissatisfied with the preparations, Emmitt, allowed his father-in-law as the new ramrod with his military and hotel experience to shape up the men.

Stead would continue as a scout as he was overloaded carrying double duty as the former ramrod and as scout.

Some of the more seasoned drivers: the Irishmen, Riley and Roberts kept things from falling apart waiting on Emmitt and Gallagher.

McGowan called Stead to converse with him about the changes as they walked down toward the spring-fed creek. Their heeled boots crunching pecans, old and new scattered like sand on the ground.

The scout bent to loosen a strap around his left thigh that held his chaps in place.

Emmitt noticed Jim's chaps were well worn, with many shallow cuts across the leather from mesquite thorns, heavy sweat stains colored the light tan leather dark on the front of each thigh. The lowers tore in places.

Similar to all the drovers' outfits, the scout eluded experience in his dressage. Wearing what worked, what was necessary in their line of work. Charcoal woolen britches, shiny on the butt from hours in the saddle, stuffed into stovepipe high-heeled boots and held up by bright red suspenders over a faded red and black checkered blouse. His torso shrouded with the standard thin deerskin vest every drover wore to fend off the cold.

A dirty gray pinched Stetson or short flat brimmed sombrero mounted on his crown, silk scarf around his neck, and loose around the waist, a gun belt with a Colt, Remington, Starr or other pistol of some vintage, nestled in its lair, completed the picture.

The pistol was for defense, not from badmen but errant mad bulls or mommas bent on goring him or his horse and the occasional rattlesnake. However, some snakes walked on two legs.

Emmett remembered from the night past that Jim was wearing a gray wool coat with a fur collar, that appeared new.

Everything he and the others wore, were tools of their trade, nothing more, nothing less.

"Too tight?"

"Yeah, punched a new hole for the buckle, but guess it was too close to the others; have to fix that later."

"Jim, I'm putting Fred Gallagher as the ramrod."

Jim Stead stared at the creek for a moment, not knowing how to accept that news. He felt a sudden relief at the responsibility being lifted but was worried he had done something wrong.

"I understand, boss. Things are pretty loose around here. I'm more at home as your scout."

"Well, you can't be out scouting and also keeping the crew inline. It's Fred's herd, anyway. He needs to learn the cattle business at this end. Give him as much attention as you can. I'd appreciate that."

Emmitt noticed his boot heels crunching black husks as he stepped. There were many pecan trees growing along the banks of the creek. Many husks on the ground, opened, revealing the brown pecan shells lying inside. Stooping over, he collected a few and began shelling them between his hands by cracking two against each other, as he spoke.

"This ground away from the creek and that little pond isn't very good for grazing or traveling." McGowan said, popping the tiny brown pecan meat into his mouth.

"I know. I wanted to discuss that with you. This is the only large watering hole between Waco and Corsicana. So, we kept them here, but Riley insisted that our orders from Mr. Gallagher were to drive the herd up north on this white escarpment."

Stead stopped, picked up and tossed a rock into the creek, and exclaimed.

"Boss, there's a reason no one has driven a herd in this direction. Up ahead about ten miles is a drop-off. A small one, but still, we'd have to go around to the east several miles, through thick brush, cedar and juniper."

Emmitt stared off into the distance. "Have you scouted out past that?"

"Some, it's not fit for moving a herd this size. Maybe driving a few beeves, but not this many. We'd lose more than a few."

"Alrighty, what's your suggestion then?"

"We could go west, cross the Brazos just west of Waco and drive them up the Fort Worth Trail, then follow through to Red River Station and then on to the Abilene trail, splitting off to Dodge like all the other drives have done." Stead answered, then

continued. "But that way is pretty barren of grass for the critters, from what I've heard from returning boys. They said some of the last herds had a hard time finding forage."

"Go on," Emmitt encouraged his scout.

"We go east; you saw how the country was for a few miles west of Corsicana, before it turned into this useless escarpment. I've been that way before, always wondered why none of the herds in didn't travel that way."

In the past, I believe it was called the Cherokee Trail before the war. It's a narrow strip of ground between the pines to the east and this escarpment. Black soil, I reckon, lush grass and relatively flat. The main reason the railroads laid their tracks there, I reckon."

"That'll lead us past Dallas, and you know how those city slickers have outlawed herds passing through or east of their burg?"

"I know. We don't go that far north; we cut to the northeast, past a small town called Waxahachie, then north on the low side of the escarpment. West of Richardson, then down that slope to Mountain Creek for watering. From there straight north, across the Trinity, then to Rock Bluff on the Red River, picking up the Old Chisholm trace to Dodge."

"You've been that way before, past Waxahachie, I mean?"

Jim smiled. "I was in Richardson seeing a gal a few years ago, returning from a drive to Abilene. Her Pa ran me off with a shotgun. I went south to Waxahachie then Corsican to catch the train. It's rolling hill country a few miles north of there with a lot of cedar brush but doable. That slope, hidden by the cedar bushes, is the only place we'd have to be careful with the herd and the wagons. That's about an eight-hundred-foot drop. In less than two miles."

"Yeah, I'm aware of it. Climbed that slope last winter with my old Mustang going to Richardson to catch the train to Hearne."

Emmitt rubbed his chin in thought. "Okay Jim, we'll start that way. Once we get past that escarpment and down on that black soil prairie grass, it should be a straight shot across the Trinity to the Red. We'll have to see the conditions beyond that. How long do you think it'll take to reach the Red?"

"About a month or a few days less than that. We have a shorter distance here to cover in Texas. Moving the cattle here was a good idea for that reason. Cuts months off the trail. However, the distance in the territory, then to Dodge will be harder." Jim removed his pinched Stetson, ran his left hand through his brown hair before replacing on his head.

"Crossing the Red and then hitting the old John Chisholm trace, then the Abilene trail, before cutting off to the railhead in Dodge, like you said, sounds good. I like it...just so long as there's water along the way. How long do you think this will take?" Emmitt inquired, squatting down to gather another handful of pecans.

"There should be. With winter just around the corner, and with this wet autumn, even the dry creeks will be half full." Stead replied and then continued. "I figure two to three months if we don't run into trouble."

"That'll put us into February at the worst. Mr. Gallagher promised the buyers we'd be there in January. We'll have to push the herd hard to beat that." McGowan stated.

He was feeling like this drive was becoming a fool's errand; to drive a herd this time of year, with limited time to reach their destination. All for vengeance. It just didn't sit well with him.

Emmitt glanced at the ground again as he finished his comments. He realized that pecans, which

had fallen from the trees on both sides of the creek, covered the ground. He didn't notice that when in conversation with his father-in-law.

"We need to collect a couple of pounds of these for the boys to chew on while on night watch."

Jim Stead chuckles. "Some of the fellas have been filling their vest pockets for that very thing. We'll need some empty barrels. Fill them up and put them on the supply wagon."

"You have the boys do that, Jim. I'm sending Fred to Waco to buy us another wagon and team. Lester should have some near or totally empty barrels from his stores"

"You think we need another wagon?"

"I've seen several newborn caves. And a few mom-ma's ready or close to being ready to drop. We'll follow my old boss, Mr. Goodnight's, lead and carry the newborns in the extra wagon, letting their mothers nurse them when bedded down, till we move again."

"That's better than leaving them to the wolves and coyotes."

"See to it, Jim," McGowan replies as they walked back to the camp.

"I'll tell my father-in-law there's been a change in direction. He put me in charge, so he'll have to agree. He's not a cattleman, not yet anyway."



Not Good News



Fred Gallagher and Charlie Worth were halfway to Waco when they spotted the solitary rider coming toward them.

"Wonder who that fellow is?" Charlie comments.

"I reckon we'll find out soon enough. Is your sixgun strapped down?"

"Not anymore. You think he's a highwayman?" Charlie asks nervously.

"Don't know, son, there's nothing out this way anyone could ride too. So, it's careful we'll be."

A few minutes later, the solitary rider rode up next to the two men. An older man, with wrinkles around his eyes, a big thick mustache turning white, drooped down each side of his mouth to his jawline.

He had pushed his brown dusty sombrero back on his forehead. The short rim flared on each side with the crown creased. Riding a sorrel, Fred noticed he was carefully laying his hands on his saddle horn. Away from his right side, where his revolver rests in its holster.

"Afternoon, gents!" The stranger nodded at Fred, then Charlie. He moved his left arm away from the saddle horn, his vest pulling away, revealing a silver five-point star surrounded by a circle of silver.

Fred knew immediately who this stranger might be. A Texas Ranger.

"Howdy." Fred says, relaxing a bit. "You two fellas from the Gallagher herd?"

"Yes."

"I'm Ezra West, Texas Ranger. I have a message for Mr. Gallagher and his son-in-law, Emmitt McGowan."

Fred's eyebrows rose as he replies. "I'm Fred Gallagher. This is Charlie Worth. My son-in-law is back at the cow camp. Charlie and I are heading to Waco to pick up supplies before we move the herd north."

Ranger West, not having said a word, pulled a yellow envelope from his inside vest pocket, a telegram enclosed in a yellow envelope, and handed it to Gallagher.

"You two planning on buying a wagon in Waco or just getting' a few things to carry on horseback?"

"We're going to buy a wagon. Why you ask?" Fred asks, accepting the envelope.

"Oh, just a hunch. If y'all were buying supplies for the drive, you'd need a wagon. Y'all can't carry much on just two horses. There's a Conestoga for sale at the livery stable down by the saloons on the river." The ranger replied and then explained the envelope by pointing at it.

"The Austin investigation office wanted you to be aware of the potential danger that might follow you boys."

Fred read the note twice, then placed it back into the envelope and handed it to Ranger West.

"We won't be back until tomorrow or the next day. I'd appreciate it if you rode on to our camp and spoke to Emmitt about this!"

"Not a problem. Was planning to spend the night with your bunch, anyway. Just be careful going to and from Waco."

"Thank you, Ranger. It's much appreciated." Fred hesitated and then asks.

"Does my daughter in Round Rock know about this?"

"I reckon so, a Ranger from Austin, confirmed two fellas had visited Mrs. McGowan, asking about her husband. But they disappeared after that. We have eyes on the house."

"Well, I guess that'll have to do." Fred reached out to shake the ranger's hand.

"Much obliged, to y'all fellas, for warning us. I reckon we need to move on to reach Waco by dark." Fred, troubled with this news, needed to get to Waco and back to camp.

Another problem was now added to the weight that was mounting on his shoulders.

Ranger West touched his Stetson's brim in salute as he goaded his pony to move on.

The Inn keeper now cattle owner, laid the reins on his saddle pommel as he sat back to contemplate this additional problem.

"Trouble, Mr. Gallagher?"

"Most likely. You just keep that sidearm oiled and close at hand all the time. Is that a Colt?"

"Yes, sir," Charlie replies. "51 Navy conversion. All I can afford," he adds. Inside his soul was tumbling, he was worried and excited. This cattle drive he signed up for the extra money was proving to be an adventure he never contemplated.

Fred and Charlie didn't run into anyone after the Ranger on their ride into Waco. Arriving there as the sun was setting.

Charlie took the horses to the local stables as Fred rented a room for the night, which passed uneventfully for them. Save for the gunshots down on the Brazos River in one saloon.

Fred just shook his head, thinking Waco's nickname is well chosen as 'Pistol City' for a reason.

The next day, with the purchase of the Conestoga, four mules and now filled with supplies and four empty wooden kegs, they started out on their trip back to the cow camp. Their saddle horses following behind.

They didn't see them at first, off to the right, roughly a mile or so behind. Seven riders were

following their wagon. Charley actually was the first to get a glimpse, commenting to his boss.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, as the riders following seemed to have vanished.

That meant nothing to the former US Cavalry officer. He knew what was possibly coming in the next few days. The quiet days as a inn keeper seemed so far away at this moment.

They met Ranger West on his way back to Waco, who turned his mount around when notified by Fred of the riders following.

Fred felt a little easier now. An extra gun and the law to boot. No matter what happened next, they would have the law on their side.



Blood in Their Eyes



The entire bunch of trail hands greeted them upon arrival at the cow camp, except for two who were watching the herd. Hans and his photographer stood off to one side.

Emmitt, surprised the Ranger had returned to the camp with his father-in-law, stood in front of all the men, a mixture of anger, frustration and worry shown on his face.

The worry was for his wife's safety; anger at this brother of Jenkins and frustration that every day lost moving the herd out was a day less they had to arrive in Dodge before the buyers left.

The Association arranged ahead of time for the buyers to remain in Dodge, waiting for this herd, if it arrived soon. The buyers would rather winter in their homes up north with family than spend Christmas and New Year in the dusty town of Dodge.

Four teams of buyers from Chicago, New York, Des Moines and St. Paul. All agreed to wait for the cattle.

According to Fred's Cavalry friend, the three still-living murderers were posing as buyers from New York.

"We need to talk, Fred."

"I know. It's not your fault. These men need to know that, and they need to know what's up ahead."

"Gentlemen!" Gallagher stood next to Emmitt, facing the trail drivers, addressing them.

"There may be some trouble coming our way, maybe even before we can move the herd."

Fred turned and asked his daughter's husband. "What have you told them?"

"Nothing other than what you just said, there might be trouble coming."

Again, addressing the men, Fred began his speech as the Ranger, having not dismounted but still sitting on his sorrel, eyed the behavior of the cattlemen.

Charlie, however, dismounted from the newly purchased wagon and joined the group of men, murmuring to the ones next to him,

"We counted seven."

"As most of you are aware, Emmitt here was the key figure in the breaking up and ending of the Todd Jenkins rustlin' gang last summer. That ended with Jenkins being hanged last August with some of his men and the rest now living inside the Wall in Huntsville."

Many of the men murmured acknowledgment as Fred continued.

"We, Emmitt and I, learned that it appears Jenkins has a brother, who has his own wild bunch up Utah way. Train robbers, I am told.

Regardless, not wanted in Texas for anything, yet. It would seem this brother is seeking retribution from Emmitt here." Gallagher motioned to McGowan.

"In all likely hood they might take the herd or try to, after killing us first."

"All of us?" Young Tommy Stewart asks.

"Probably, you wanna hide in the wagon when the shootin' starts?" One of the men whispered loudly amid quiet snickering.

"Mr. Gallagher," Frank Holcomb, a blonde-headed ranch hand from Kinkade's spread, whose deeply tanned face emphasized his blonde locks, spoke up.

"We've, most of us, been here collecting these beeves into one herd for nearly four months. Put in a lot of work here, rounding them up from various locations and drivin' em here; signed on for this drive north as well. Ah don't see giving them up for anyone. Don't care

if this Jenkins character has a beef with our trail boss, he is one of us and, by Gawd, we'll see those outlaws in hell first!"

Loud grunts of agreement rose from the group of men. Hatted heads bobbing the affirmative. About that time, Ranger West stepped off his pony and walked up to the group, his long, lanky body standing next to McGowan.

"I can see you boys are ready for a fight. Out here, away from the cities and towns, Texas law is still law. Just to keep what's about to happen legal, I can deputize all of you as temporary deputy Rangers.

"Gentlemen," he says, looking at Gallagher and McGowan, then the cowmen.

"I can't stop these riders until they have broken the laws of Texas. Don't know that they will!

However, when, if that happens, I'll need you men to back me up!"

Turning to Fred and Emmitt, "if you're agreeable to handling this under state law? I'm sorry, but your herd and you, McGowan, must act as bait; that is, assuming these seven are intent on what we think they are!"

"Your men are ready, are you two agreeable to that?"

McGowan smiled, and Fred Gallagher, heaved a big sigh and nodded affirmatively. He wasn't too sure if he wasn't too old for this.

Just at that moment, Emmitt realized who Ezra West, Texas Ranger, reminded him of. Ben Maxwell, his partner from last year's downing of the Todd Jenkins gang. He assumed Maxwell and West knew each other, having ridden together with McNelly.

He wondered if Ben and family were safe?

Satisfied with their answers, Ranger West turned again to the men, motioning Emmitt and Fred to join the group.

"Men, raise your right hands. Do you men swear to uphold the laws of the State of Texas, to support and follow orders from a duly appointed lawman, by the State of Texas, in the carrying out of his duties, so help you God?"

In a loud voice, the group of trail drivers answered. "I do!"

At that moment, there was a sudden, brilliant momentary light. Jacobs' camera flashed from atop the newsmen's buckboard. Ranger West and the trail drivers of the Gallagher herd are now immortalized for posterity.

The night passed uneventfully; however, most of the men couldn't sleep if not on watch. But when the sixteen-year-old Tommy Stewart didn't ride in from his two AM to dawn watch over the cattle, the men, without orders, saddled up and began their search. With worried expressions showing on their faces, as the 'Kid' was much beloved by the men as a younger brother.

They found Tommy's body late that morning, badly beaten. A note was pinned on his back.

'YU KILLED MI BROTHR, NOW I KILL YU AN YUR MEN AS THEY SLEEP LIKE THS ONE AN TAKE YUR HARD'

"Not well educated, is he?" Jim Stead quips after handing the note to Emmitt, who passed it on to Fred and Ranger Ezra West.

"According to that note, Tommy was asleep in his saddle. That's how they got him without a fight, with no one hearing."

Stead looked up and says, "Oh Jesus, they folded him up like a jackknife," as he dragged the young man's body out of the briar patch. The boy's legs were dislocated at the hips, folded over his chest, booted toes pointing over his shoulders.

"What animals would do this to another human being?"

"I've seen this before, but by red savages, not white men!" Ranger West commented.

"I have too," Gallagher agrees, remembering his Cavalry days before the war. Old memories, commands from the past, flooded back into his mind. Overshadowing the shock of one of his men, the youngest one's death.

"This ground is too much like rock a few inches below the soil. Bury him near the creek, under the pecan trees; make a tomb with rocks, and mark it well. So at least his folks will know where he is if they want to fetch him for burial close to home." Fred continues, sighing, looking down and shaking his head from side to side, knowing more time would be lost for the drive as he tried not to focus on the present moment but think ahead.

Turning to the eighteen-year-old Jeremiah, a ranch hand from Sevens spread, he instructed,

"Jeremiah, I need you to go hitch up the extra wagon."

"Use ours!" Kurkowski spoke up. "We already have the buckboard hitched. We'll take him over to the creek and see he gets a decent burial. We'll catch up if you decide to move the herd today."

"Okay, thank you, Hans. I'm still going to Waco, need to send a telegraph to his boss, who'll have to tell his folks. I don't envy that job, not at all," he says, looking down at the body. He coughed back sorrow welling up. "So damn young, too young."

"Just you?" Emmitt, surprised, asks Gallagher, knowing they would lose more time.

"He'll be safe." The Texas Ranger voiced as he pointed toward the growing crowd of cow punchers riding up.

"I need five or six of your best horsemen who are good with a rifle."

The Texas Ranger surprised Emmitt. Ezra was smiling.

"I reckoned Mr. Jenkins doesn't understand." West chuckles.

Emmitt and Fred glanced at each other questioningly. The coldness in this Ranger's heart troubled them. They lost a man, a young boy actually, and he was smiling? Why?

"The law has been broken." Ranger West read the expressions on their faces as he savored the moment and explains.

"Threats to kill, to steal cattle and now a murder! Looks to me, it's time to pay Mr. Jenkins and his boys a visit. They played their card, now I'll play mine. Fortunately, they don't know I'm here."

"I'm not inclined to be part of any arrest of these killers," Stead spoke up.

"Neither am I!" West replies.

Stead stared into the Ranger's eyes, trying to read what was in the man's mind. All he saw was death. Death waiting to ride. A sword of the Archangel, unsheathed, waiting to strike.

"Then I'm going with you." He replies, standing up from his grisly chore of putting the dead boy's legs back in a normal position.

McGowan and Gallagher stared at each other. Acknowledging what needed to be done. Based on their own individual experiences. The former Cavalry officer and the Range Investigator understood that they must deal with this using violence. There was no other choice.

"Okay, change of plans. I'll go tomorrow; if you're planning on what I'm thinking you are, I'm going as well. This young boy needs justice."

"Move the cattle tomorrow." Stead offered.

"Today we send Tommy on his way; tonight, justice."

"No need for you to ride back, Mr. Gallagher, just give me the information and I'll make the wires after I return to Waco." The Texas Ranger offered.

"Thank you! That's most generous of you." Fred replied.

Emmitt acknowledged with a nod of his head. With the death of one of their own, combined confusion with what to do first ironed out, both men felt the coldness creeping into their own hearts, replacing the shock and emotions of the moment. Just like the ranger, there was blood in their eyes.



Smoke of a Rifle



It was time to end this Jenkins business once and for all. Both knew there'd be no peace for Emmitt and, because of family ties, for Gallager as well. Not to mention their men.

Even if it meant killing off the whole Jenkins gang. They had already decided on the coming night's business in their hearts, no matter the outcome. Justice demanded they act on the Texas prairie.

That afternoon, Emmitt and Fred arranged a small, quick memorial for young Tommy. They lowered him into the shallow grave, in a coffin of sorts nailed from boxes used for supplies and wrapped in canvas. After that, stones covered the grave to prevent predators from digging.

The Montoya's, led by Raul, sang what was becoming Raul's signature song, which he sang every night to the cattle. Pescador de Hombres, Fisher of Men.

Quite a few of the hard Texans sniffled or wiped their eyes, some doing both. The soft melody struck a chord in their hearts. Tommy was popular, taking in a lot of the kidding and harassment due to his young age, with a grin. Most of the drovers called him the Kid, who was the youngest of the four boys under twenty-one. Jeremiah, Jamie and Brushy Bill were the other three.

Toward sundown, Riley Joshua and Carlos Navarro rode in. Their faces somber. They had located the campsite of the killers of Tommy. They reported

that there were actually nine men, not seven as they had counted earlier.

"Damn fools had only one guard out. Guess they figured they were safe enough." Riley reported.

"It be much easier ambush El banditos than the Kawaa-de's!" Carlos remarked with his broken English. An Indian fighter since his teens on his uncle's rancho across the Rio Grande; Navarro was a well-respected vaquero.

"Okay, you still want in?" West asks McGowan and Gallagher.

"Yeah, we do!" Fred answers for both of them.

"I can't guarantee your safety."

"I know," Emmitt replies, "I need to see the end of this!"

West nodded. "Understood. Okay, let's go. Mr. Joshua, you lead the way."

Riley grinned, "Ain't nobody has ever called me Mister."

"There's always a first time." Stead chuckled.

The group assembled, all four Tejanos, Raul, Rene, Juan and Carlos, trail scout Stead, drover Holcomb, Gallagher and McGowan followed trail behind the Ranger, Navarro and Riley.

Gallagher left instructions for the rest of the men to watch the herd with McCory in charge. He also left written instructions in case of his and Emmitt's failure to return. Both left letters to daughter and wife. Gallagher left one for young Stewart's parents. Something he realized he had never gotten used to during his cavalry days.

As the sun set over the horizon, leaving just a faint glow in the western sky, the temperature dropped dramatically. Wind out of the north diminished but was still loud enough to mask the sounds of ten horses' hooves and the occasional neigh.

Emmitt McGowan trailed behind the Texas Ranger; Riley and Navarro followed by his father-in-law,

then the rest of the men with Stead bringing up the rear. All on a single line.

Emmitt, conscious of any extra noise, felt the thumping of his half full canteen against Strawberry's shoulder was too loud, he pulled it up and looped the strap twice over his saddle horn. So it rested on the side of the pommel.

Looking back over his shoulder, he caught the ghostly stare of Fred's eyes and the faint outline of the men and horses behind, fading into the gloom.

The icy stare from his father-in-law startled McGowan. He realized Fred was reliving the past. Remembering perhaps patrols much like this one.

Feeling the chill of the wind, he pulled his coat collar up around his ears, thankful for the body warmth rising from Strawberry. Emmitt felt different.

Something had changed in him, he surmised. Verna's safety and their unborn child's safety would always be his purpose for the rest of his life. But he had to survive to do that. This night was one of those reckonings. As long as a Jenkins was alive, his and his family's lives were at risk.

He remembered the Bible verse his mother had taught him and his brothers; Isaiah chapter sixteen, verses 2 through 5. To protect the women was the gist of it.

"Thank you, Ma, I now understand fully," he whispers.

Riley led them west for about an hour, then south for the same time, before heading roughly east for another twenty minutes.

Emmitt, lost to where they were in relation to the herd, looked back at his wife's father again, holding his hands palm up, showing his confusion.

This land was so barren, save for the occasional scrub bush, and with no moon, cloudy sky so no stars either, all he could do was trust in the old buffalo soldier's sense of direction.

Fred didn't respond. He was looking past his son-in-law into the gloom ahead. In the distance, a barely perceptible, flickering, yellow glow just above the horizon appeared against the black of night.

The riders pulled up next to Ranger West, Riley and Carlos Navarro, who had stopped.

The three lead men swung off their mounts, West motioning for the others to do the same.

They were now facing the icy wind out of the north, so any sounds would be carried away from the glow in the distance, north of them now.

"Up ahead, about two hundred yards, the ground drops off into a dry wash. Those killers picked a good spot to be out of the wind and keep anyone from seeing their campfire until they were almost on top of it." Riley explains as he adjusted his coat collar. "Except for the light from their fire, on a night like this. It's like a beacon!"

"What's the width of the wash? How's the slope into the wash? Steep or gentle, with or without impediments?" West asks the ranch foreman.

"About sixty yards wide where they are camped. It's a gentle and fairly smooth slope. We could line up and just walk upon them within pistol range before they even knew what was happening. Their lookout is posted on the other side of the wash. I guess not expecting anyone to come in this way."

"They had never dealt with Texas Rangers, apparently." West commented. Doing the unexpected was typical of old Indian fighters.

"Sounds good, down-wind, guard facing away from us. I suggest we get online and just walk in." Fred offered his advice to the old Ranger.

"You have military experience?"

"US Cavalry, until the war ended. My hat didn't give you a hint?"

"Thought you were just wearing it. I rode with Captain McNelly during and with him on the Nueces Strip after," West replies.

"Well—the war is over."

"Yeah, I reckon so." The old ranger rubbed his chin with the back of his hand, remembering.

"Okay, we do this online as suggested, just ride in easy-like, don't fire until I do unless spotted. We want to catch them by surprise, without none of us seeing the good Lord tonight. Just sending these monsters to hell. Questions? Okay, mount up!"

Gallager made the last comment before they remounted their steeds.

"Any hesitation, men, just remember what they did to Tommy."

Roughly twenty minutes later, after negotiating the small slope into the dry wash, the cattlemen found themselves roughly twenty yards from the campfire.

The outlaws, seen moving around the camp, were oblivious to the line of death approaching from the south. The cold north wind blew any sounds made by the horses away from the camp.

West fired his rifle first, dropping the man only ten yards from him, quickly re-chambering a cartridge and setting it off at a target running toward the bandits' hobbled horses.

Emmitt took aim and missed his moving target, levered another round and fired again, as apparently two or three other bullets hit the man at the same time. He flew backwards, his feet flying out of his boots.

A barrage of lead assailed the Jenkins gang. Some men caught multiple hits, dropping them before they could pull their sixguns from their holsters. Pandemonium reigned as many of the drovers chose the same target, giving the others not targeted time to reach their weapons.

Carlos Navarro fired one shot directly over his horse's head. The animal reared up, tossing him to the ground.

Others in the gang dove for their rifles laying on their saddles. Reaching and even getting off a shot or two, wildly into the approaching line of red flames and smoke of .44 caliber rifles.

Near misses were experienced as Holcomb's sombrero flew off his head; a round from the bandits pierced the crown. His lanyard caught on his throat, stopping the hat as it settled on his back. Stead felt his new coat jerk as a bullet passed through, just missing his left side. Scattering a bag of cigarette tobacco in the coat pocket.

Gunsmoke cleared quickly as the drovers nervously looked for movement. Their ponies danced around as the riders tried to control them. The mustangs, not accustomed to this sudden noise and violence, were fidgeting and passing fecal matter, some pissing as well.

Then it was quiet. Save for the sound of the wind, and the occasional nervous neigh of the horses.



They will not be Mourned



It was over in less than fifteen seconds. The group decimated the second Jenkins gang that cold late November night in less time than it took a man to roll a cigarette.

McGowan looked around, counting heads, nine one short.

"Who's down?" he called out.

"Soy bueno, Señor boss. El Caballo threw me, that's all." Navarro answers from the ground. He was hidden behind Holcomb and his cousin Rene Montoya's ponies.

"Ya mean ya shot yer horse's head, that's why he threw ya!" Holcomb's voice cries out, laughing off the tension from the moments before as he examines his sombrero.

"She's bleedin' all over Texas! Looks like you got a piece of her ear!" says another relieved voice in the dark, relief obvious from the stress of the intense but quick killings.

"Wonder which one is Jenkins?" Stead asks no one in particular as he dismounted, gripping the saddle horn of his pony. He said nothing else, hoping no one saw his legs shaking, having difficulty standing as he held onto his pony.

"Don't know. Emmitt, you knew his brother. Look at these faces and see if you can find a resemblance. We want to make sure Jenkins is finished." Ranger West directed with a calm voice.

McGowan walked around, turning some bodies over that were lying face down. Examining each man's features in the flickering campfire light.

"Here, he's damn near a dead ringer for Todd Jenkins."

Gallager walked over and dropped to one knee, examining the corpse.

"Yeah, I think you're right, son. Sure looks like him."

Rene Montoya bent over the corpse to inspect the dead man's face.

"Señor! He looks like you too!"

"I know, I was almost killed last year because of that!"

"Hey, I thought you said there were nine? I count only eight." Holcomb called out.

Moments later, in the distance, what sounded like horse hooves in full gallop rolled over in the wind. Then a cry of fright and pain from the pony in the dark. Then silence.

"Bet that's their guard. He'll be in Cal-lee-ferny by dawn." Holcomb draws, his voice as calm as the rangers'.

"If he doesn't break his neck and his mount in the dark." Came the reply with nervous laughter.

"Sounds like he did." Another spoke.

West reached down and searched Jenkins' body. Finding only a few silver dollars and a tobacco pouch with paper and matches in a brass tube in the vest pockets. Then he moved to the saddlebags nearby.

"I'm surprised all were here and not creeping up on our boys at the herd!" Gallager comments, looking around.

"I suspect in the early morning, like they did your young fella. I surmise that was how they were planning to tackle you boys," West called out.

"Early morning, take one or two out per night until the odds were in their favor. We caught them just in time."

"So much for planning, what now, Ranger?" Gallager quips.

"Collect their rifles and pistols, gun belts and ammunition. You boys can keep those and their horses, tack as well. I don't have the means to transport all that back to Waco. I might need a pack animal though."

"What about the bodies? This ground is hard as rock; we need to get the cattle on the move."

Emmitt questions, knowing it'd take another day or two to bury the outlaws.

"Do as you wish. My job here is finished."

Emmitt thought for a moment as he looked around at the bodies and his men's faces in the flickering light from the bandits' campfire, then decided.

"Okay, we leave them as they lie."

"Wild animals and buzzards will have a feast!"

Rene Montoya exclaimed.

"Critters need to eat." Holcomb adds his thoughts to the conversation.

Raul, who had said nothing up to that point, stunned at the surrounding carnage, heard Emmitt voice his decision.

"Biblical!" he exclaims. "Just Biblical."

Emmitt stood up from Jenkins' body and looked around at his men standing, who were waiting for orders.

"Alrighty, collect their horses and saddle them up. Bedrolls, anything that looks like we can use, hang on the saddlebags or the saddles.

Those two pack mules with their panniers, bring them here to pack their camp gear. Load all the extras onto the panniers as well. We'll sort them out in the morning before we move the herd, I want to be north of Corsicana in two days."

No one moved.

Emmitt hesitated for a moment, again trying to read the reactions of his men. Men who just killed in cold blood other men and not liking it. Justice served cold wasn't nearly as palatable as they figured.

He'd seen that before in San Angelo. Turning to Raul, he asked.

"Can you say a few words over the dead? I reckon we all know where their souls are, but it won't hurt to pray over them."

"Si, Señor." Raul quickly agrees and removes his sombrero. The others followed his lead.

"Señor," Raul looked up at the black sky. "It is written: They will not be mourned or buried but will be like dung lying on the ground. They will perish by sword and famine—in this case by rifles—and their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals! Señor, we give thanks for our survival and commend these souls to your merciful judgment. Amen."

Moments later, after a chorus of amens, they got busy carrying out their trail boss's orders. Relieved leaving the bodies exposed was biblical.

Gallager took his son-in-law by the elbow and led him away, downwind from Ranger West, who was still searching the other saddlebags of the dead outlaws.

"The only difference between these dead men and West is his badge." Gallager comments, looking back at the carnage they had wrought just a half hour earlier.

"I know. It takes his kind to do the work he does. Don't hold it against him," his son-in-law answered, knowing he fit in the same box.

"This whole thing leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth," Fred continues quietly, ignoring his daughter's husband's response.

"Me too!" Emmitt replies, then nods at the men. "I suspect for them as well. They're not killers by nature.

We didn't give these bastards one second of a chance to surrender. I —myself —this is the second time in my life for this. San Angelo was the first."

"I know, but that's how battles are won. Surprise and victory. San Angelo? You don't count the Colorado last summer?"

"No, I was there but didn't take part. And they surrendered after a few fell. Here—." Emmitt turned and again stared at the bodies.

"I meant the promontory fight, anyway, West mentioned he rode with McNelly's Rangers. They cleaned the Nueces strip of those bandits and rustlers. They didn't take prisoners either. He's of the old stock, a Indian fighter, no mercy. No, I'm speaking of your decision of leaving these men here to just rot, to be carrion for the animals."

Emmitt studied his wife's father's face for a moment before answering.

"You think I'm wrong? Have you forgotten how they folded young Tommy up like a pocketknife, slicing his butt muscles to the bone so his legs could be bent over his chest, his boots pointing over his shoulders? Then tossing his body into that briar patch? Not to mention we are getting behind our schedule to meet those buyers of yours in Dodge. The worst part of winter is coming, and I reckon those people don't want to ride it out in Dodge. Those old wooden buildings are cold, few with fireplaces or enough Franklins and just wood to heat with. Up north, they have coal and gas heating in brick buildings. No, they won't wait."

"I'm fully aware of that. It's just —it's just we buried the southern boys after our fights during the war, did the same for the Comanches before that and the Mexicans in that war."

"Fred, we have no tools, no pickaxes or shovels here with us. It took us hours to dig Tommy's

grave, and that was softer ground because of the spring water. This soil is only a few inches deep, then rock. Another day, maybe two, will be wasted doing what you want. No, we leave them here for the buzzards. They deserve no more than Raul's prayer. They're dead; they don't care. In Hell, I reckon, with bigger worries."

Fred stared at his son-in-law for a moment before replying.

"You're a hard man, Emmitt. Almost as hard as that Ranger!" Gallagher gave up reasoning with his daughter's husband and walked away. Realizing he had been like that once. Age had softened up the soldier he once was, but knowing he made the right choice asking this man to back him in Dodge. Emmitt could be cold as ice when necessary. A man needed to be in the line of work he was in.

Gallagher, conflicted with his own lust for vengeance, this evening's killings, with Emmitt and what humanity he still carried toward these dead, needed a man like his son-in-law, watching his back, even if he didn't agree with the man's methods, he realized.

Fred knew he was still too soft, too slow emotionally, to have a chance of surviving what was to come in Dodge. Emmitt would be cold enough to finish the task if needed.



Move' em Out!



Morning came, bright clear sky with a new bitter chilly wind. A reminder of what the trail drivers would face in the coming weeks. Breakfast was served. Lester and Charlie had prepared a good serving of biscuits and gravy mixed with chopped jerked steak for the men the night before, simmering in two Dutch ovens.

The atmosphere at the camp was somber. Not too much chatter, no questions about the night before, several glances at the creek where young Tommy Stewart's body lay beneath the stones. Not even the newspaper owner and his photographer had any discussion with the men who took part in the previous night's action.

Emmitt called the two waggoners and Charley to the pack horses and had them unload the animals onto the supply wagon.

Lester didn't need any of the camping gear, save for the coffeepot and one large iron pan. He dumped the rest in a pile.

Of the nine rifles, three were 1866 Yellow Boy Winchester carbines, in .44 Henry chambering. The other six, the newer 1873's. Chambered for the new .44 Winchester Center Fire cartridge, but the older iron frames.

He asked if the three if they had lever rifles, all said no, just single shots. He gave each a 66, and pistols and cartridges in the same caliber. The four vaqueros and Riley Joshua were each gifted a 73. All but Riley having 66s. He carried a Henry on his saddle.

Holcomb declined, having his own 73 as did Stead. But accepted the extra cartridges and pistols in .44 Winchester Center Fire.

Jenkins was carrying a fancy engraved Merwin & Hulbert Frontier in 44 WCF, and Gallagher grabbed that, putting his Army .44 conversion with his Colt double action in his saddlebags.

Emmitt gifted his father-in-law the extra rifle but kept an 1872 Colt Open Top that had been re-hambered in .44 Winchester.

To the victor go the spoils, they reasoned.

Ranger West sat alone, writing in a small notebook. The events of the previous day and night everyone presumed. Four of the outlaws' saddlebags lay beside him, filled with gold and silver coins and other items collected from the dead.

Some drovers didn't take that too well, feeling like the Texas Ranger was profiting like a grave robber off the dead.

Around 8:00 AM, Ranger West left the camp, leading one of the outlaws' pack mules with the gold and silver to Waco.

Before he left, he had given Gallagher some coins for their trouble and loss of a man.

"I'm keeping a few for my expenses and putting the rest into an account that will be available to the young man's folks to collect. Least I can do." West says to Gallagher.

Gallagher understood, shaking hands with the Texas Ranger before he mounted his pony and rode out of the cow camp. None of the men said goodbye, still disturbed by the Rangers' actions with the outlaws' loot.

Sam was the only soul who bade farewell to the Ranger. Barking several times before returning to Gallagher's side.

Emmitt watched the ranger ride off for a few minutes, then turned to Fred.

"So, what is that all about?" motioning to the saddlebag in Fred's hands.

"He left \$500 worth of \$5 silver eagles with us. Keeping a hundred for himself and said he'd deposit the rest in an account, \$1000 for Tommy's parents to collect in Waco," Fred replies as he watched the shrinking image as Ranger West disappeared in the distance.

"It's probably stolen money, but we don't know who it belongs to. The man has a soul after all." He said, watching the receding figure on horseback.

"Damn! Not much of a trade. Your boy for a thousand in silver and gold," was all Emmitt could say in reply.

"Okay, let's get this party rollin'!" He ordered, then turned to Lester and Charlie.

"As soon as you two break camp, move ahead of the herd about six or eight miles and set up again.

There's a wet creek up ahead. We crossed it coming here. Camp on that. It may be dark before we get there, but have everything ready for the men. Also, rig up a canvas windbreak between two wagons for them. We don't need anyone getting sick with this chilly wind."

"Yes, sir boss," Lester replied, grabbing Charlie by his left arm and turning him to the cooking pots.

"Clean up while I set the wagon."

He motioned Jamie and Jeremiah to follow him as he walked toward the chuck wagon.

"Y'all heard the trail boss. Hitch up y'all's teams and move your wagons up ahead of the herd about a mile and wait for Charlie and me. Jim will show you the way we are a goin'.

Jeremiah, make sure you have all the newborns collected before you drive off."

"Yesha, Mr. Lester." The two answered in unison.

Two hours later, with the herd of wild longhorns grouped in a ragged semblance of order,

McGowan waited at the front for Stead to ride up to confirm all were ready.

Looking back at the herd, noting the chuck wagon just passing by them, Lester waving, McGowan held his Stetson in his right hand, stood up in his stirrups and waved in a circle then forward so the riders on each side could see his command.

"Move'em out!" was lost in the wind to all but himself and Stead.

The men knew from the wave of his Stetson the message, passing the signal on, the same way, to the drovers behind. The journey they'd been waiting for since August was finally beginning.

Encouraged by the crack of the outriders' bullwhips, the lead steers, following the lead "Judas" bull with a heavy bell jingling around its neck, began their slow trot forward. Just a walk, not a trot or run. Just a simple walk as the herd, like an accordion opening up, made their music bawling and complaining.

The drovers managed the spacing between the animals. With three thousand head, the line of bawling steers, cows and yearlings, stretched almost a mile and a hundred yards wide.

Emmitt steered Strawberry off the left side to watch the progress of the herd, leaning on his saddle horn, feeling good, like in days gone past. He watched as Gallagher, riding Cesar, trotted up.

"By God, Emmitt! This is damn impressive. This is something magical!" Fred exclaims. "All these animals marching in column.

Like a four-legged army —whoeeee, it's impressive!"

McGowan laughs at his wife's father's excitement, sat up and pointed at the cattle waltzing by. "Do you understand why they are spaced so far apart?"

"So, they don't gore each other?"

Smiling at his father-in-law's answer, McGowan replied. "Well, yeah, but after about an hour, these

beeves will produce a lot of body heat. Even in this cool weather, they won't enjoy being around each other; feeling too much heat would make them scatter.

We keep this spacing for that reason."

"I see, good point. I didn't know that. Guess I've a lot to learn."

"Yep, Fred, there's a ton of knowledge about cattle drives that the average person doesn't know. But you'll be a top hand before this trip is done. Guaranteed."

Fred Gallagher sat in his saddle, watching the animals walk by, contemplating what his daughter's husband had just said. New excitement was being born in his soul. Maybe this is what he needed to tame the grief he had carried so long.

"I guess I need to check on the boys on the other side."

"That's part of your job. Go around the back; it's easier. And tell Hans and Jacobs to lay back behind the remuda a few hundred yards, unless they like eating dust all day"

"Will do, see ya later. Son!" Gallagher called out as he spurred Cesar to a fast trot toward the rear.

An hour later, Emmitt observed the newsmen's buckboard nearing the front of the herd on the far side, instead of following as he had sent word to them. They continued for it seemed a mile, then they stopped.

"What are they doing?" Emmitt asks himself.

Then, as the herd drew closer, he could see Jacobs standing in the back of the wagon with his camera tripod. They did that twice more during the day.

It was near eight in the evening. A full moon lit the landscape when Emmitt and the drovers spotted the red glow of a campfire in the distance.

Stead and Gallagher rode up to the trail boss asking where he wanted the herd bedded down for the night.

"Left or right of the camp? Lester found that small creek okay," he added.

"Which side has the most grass and the most water in the creek?" Emmitt asks.

"Left."

"Then there's your answer. Why'd you ask me that?"

"Cause you're the boss."

"Jim, I trust your judgement on matters like this. Don't make me wonder, ya hear me?"

"Yes, sir, I apologize."

"Don't. We are still getting used to each other. I'm not like some trail bosses; I trust you to do your job without me okay'n everything."

"Thank you, boss!" Stead spun his mustang around and rode off to the lead outriders.

Fred Gallagher, gave Emmitt a thumbs up as he rode to the mid and flank outriders with the same instructions.

The cattle bedded down after they drank the creek dry, the first watch already patrolling around with Indian and Sam alongside as lookout. The rest of the drovers took their rest under their bedrolls, with saddles as pillows.

Lester and Charlie cleaned up and prepared the morning breakfast fixings', before they took their rest.

The cold north wind blew all night, but with the canvas shield the cooks and wagoners rigged up, blocked the hard breeze from the sleeping men, who lay behind the shield of snapping canvas.

It was a peaceful end to the first day of the drive. Everyone did their jobs with next to no direction from Fred Gallagher, McGowan or even Stead.

Emmitt lay on his back, watching the clouds skitter across the face of the new moon. Content that the day had gone well, despite the horrible start yesterday.

He glanced over toward his wife's father, who was engaged in a quiet conversation with Jim Stead. The trail boss smiled slightly; his father-in-law was picking up the reins as Ramrod pretty fast. Emmitt had no qualms about appointing his in-law to that position. It was a good choice; he surmised.

He also realized this day ended well, but the days coming weren't all going to be good. He looked at the sleeping cattlemen and wondered if he'd lose another of them. Not just to bandits, but to the dangers associated with driving a herd of half-tame cattle to market. In the dead of winter, no less.

Turning on his side, McGowan thought again of his bride of just a few months. Pregnant with their child, wondering how she was doing, how she was handling the Inn and if she was even thinking of him as he was of her.

The love for her swelled up in his chest as he smiled and closed his eyes. His last words before sleep overcame him. "Lord keep her safe."



Cold Mornings, Hot Afternoons!



Flames, burning flames. Consuming cattle, men. Wagons burning. The scream of a locomotive. Verna's face, crying, calling his name.

Emmett woke with a start, sitting up, flinging off his blanket and poncho. Startled, sleep finally falling from his eyes, he could see. There was nothing but the campfire, two Dutch ovens sitting on the coals, a large five-gallon coffee pot next to them, the aroma of freshly brewed Arbuckle coffee filling the cold air.

Bad dream, he told himself, terrible dream. Reaching into his vest pocket, he slid out his watch, opening and tilting it to the light of the campfire.

Five fifteen.

He fingered the engraved words inside the lid, thinking of that first cattle drive so many years ago. Of his friend turned bad, now living inside the Wall.

So much had changed, so little hadn't. Cold chills ran down his back as the morning air assaulted him. Grabbing his coat, which he had been lying on for comfort from the ground and to keep it warm for the morning, he stood up as he donned the wrap.

His father-in-law saw him standing and walked over to him with a tin cup, steam rising from inside its rim. Hot coffee!

"You didn't wake me!" Emmitt says, accepting the tin cup.

"No need too. I was up at three, saw the night shift replaced by the early morning one. Cookie and his helper up, started warming breakfast about an hour ago.

Everything is humming along, Boss."

Emmitt was looking at some men still sleeping who had the first shift, glanced at Fred when he called him boss.

"And don't you forget it either!" he replied, laughing.

Fred held his own tin cup up in salute to his daughter's husband before taking another sip.

"I need to do my business. I guess someone thought to dig a latrine last night?"

"Over past the calf wagon about fifty yards out. A straddle trench." Fred pointed with his tin cup.

McGowan found the privy just as was said. A foot wide trench about four feet long and down through the soil to rock about six to eight inches. Two buckets were next to the site, along with a shovel. One bucket contained lime and a tin cup; the other, sheets of soft paper.

"All the comforts of home." McGowan mumbles to himself. Squatting, as the chilly morning wind, played with his exposed privates and buttocks, causing him to blurt out. "Ooh, it's cold!"

Two hours later, the men and the herd were moving again. The cold air had grown colder as the sun broke the horizon. The cattle complaining and the drovers, coats buttoned up to their necks, kept the herd intact with the help of Sam and Indian, who never seemed to run out of energy. Chasing down a stray occasionally, mostly yearlings, who decided they didn't want to march along with the others. Dogs and outriders, maintained order and semblance.

Morning grew into noon and then afternoon. The herd moved along slowly, not losing any time, but not moving as quickly as Emmitt and Fred wanted.

The trail boss was looking for ten miles a day, but they weren't doing over six, eight at best.

That afternoon, the wind had stopped blowing hard, with just a slight breeze occasionally, and the temperature started rising.

Before long, coats were shucked, vests unbuttoned as the air around the herd heated.

Fred rode up to Emmitt, wiping the sweat off his face. "I see what you mean by these animals creating heat!"

"Yeah, think what it's like in the summer months!"

"Lord have mercy! I bet it's like hell—but now—cold in the mornings, hot in the afternoons."

Emmitt laughed. "It's Texas, what'd ya expect?"

"Yeah, I reckon you're right. Just expect whatever the Lord sees fit to provide each day."

Emmitt glanced sideways at his father-in-law and chuckled.

"Never looked at it like that. That's pretty astute for a cattle owner."

"You think?" Fred laughs and spun his pony around to the rear of the herd. He learned his job included constant riding back and forth to keep the men focused and not falling asleep in their saddles. Much like it was in his cavalry days, he realized.

That evening was a dry bedding. No water anywhere nearby. Another chilly night but without the hard wind.

Sunrise saw the herd moving again, sooner this time than the day before.

Emmitt was pushing them a little harder each day. Just enough for the drovers to take it in stride and not complain. At least only what a cowpuncher would about his butt wearing out his saddle, the weather not deciding to be hot or cold, his horse acting like it knew nothing, the cattle not wanting to trail in line and especially the food.

Chow could be five stars and they'd find something about it to complain. This was normal;

Emmitt didn't want them to have added fodder to complain about. So, each morning started a few minutes earlier than the day before. By the fourth day, the herd was on the grassy strip of black prairie Jim had spoken of and north of Corsicana. Best of all, they were approaching ten miles a day.

Emmitt McGowan figured they'd reach Waxahachie within four days or less. The good Lord willing.

They passed over several creeks that held enough water for the cattle and horses. He didn't like that they had to spread out along these creeks, being they were narrow streams, only eight to ten yards wide; however, some were wider with more water.

"These damn creeks are wearing my ass out!" Holcomb complains to Issac McDonald. "Sometimes we're crossing two or three a day. Small creeks, dry until heavy rains fill them. Forcing us to stop to water these doggies or having to drive them out, bawling and bitchin' in protest!"

"Especially after they'd just watered in the creek behind us!" McDonald replies, laughing.

Holcomb just shook his head. Part of the job he knew. Didn't mean he had to like it, however. He watched as the newsmen drove their buckboard toward the front of the herd for more photos; he reckoned.

"There's the good life! Writing and taking photos. Can't beat that!" he exclaims to himself wistfully.

On day seven since the start, Jim Stead came galloping in, pulling up his mount next to McGowan.

"Up ahead, about two miles, there's a good rise in the land. We angle to the left at the top of it, on a compass of northwest. The white rock escarpment."

"Okay, did you let Lester know this?"

"Yeah, I told him to take his wagons to the next small creek. It's about six miles after we turn." He replied. "The creek is wide and full. Apparently, there had been rain further up last few days. Run off working its way down the creek." Then he added. "We'll be just north of Waxahachie about three miles. Another three, maybe four days to Mountain Creek."

"Good work, Jim," Emmitt replies. "We might try a resupply if Lester says we need to. I don't know, have to talk to him tonight. Give the cattle and the boys a day's rest."

"Sounds good," Stead answers as he took a drink from his canteen.

"I'll go see that Lester makes the correct campsite. It'll be close to sundown or right after, I reckon?" He says, not waiting for Emmitt to acknowledge him as he turned his mustang and spurred off into a gallop.

Emmitt pulled his watch from his vest pocket, 1 pm. Four hours until sunset. They'll be driving in the dark again and no moon. It can't be helped! He mused to himself.

Surprised things have gone so well so far, since the first day's drive. Still, another thirty days until they cross the Red River, then up through Indian territory, with the worst of the winter facing them during that time.

Emmitt was becoming more and more frustrated with his father-in-law's gamble just to satisfy his vengeance.

He stopped himself from thinking that —if it were Verna instead of her mother, he'd be doing similar if not the same, he told himself. Or would he?

McGowan stopped trying to reason out this situation with something that hadn't happened. Pray to God it never does, were the thoughts that surrounded him. He realized he didn't know what he'd do if something happened to his love or his child or children.

Violence most likely, he sighed. Probably the same as he did in that San Angelo tavern. Just walk in and start shooting. He had backup then, other men, Goodnight's ranch hands. All Fred has would be him as backup. There's just three, he surmised; catching them by surprise will be the trick.

The trail boss put all this confused thinking aside and got back to focusing on his present job, bossing this herd to the Dodge City cattle pens.

As Emmitt was doing his job, he did not know what his loving wife was up to. That her determination to thwart her father's attempt to get himself and her husband killed, as she saw it, was just bearing signs of fruit.



What's Next?



The telegram that Verna was expecting finally came from Pennsylvania as she was checking out two overnight guests who were in a hurry to catch the outgoing train.

After that, she assisted Juan and his helper clean up the dining room breakfast dishes and straightening the furniture, adding a log to the fireplace to keep the room warm.

Then oversaw Consuelo's changing the bed sheets and cleaning up the rooms used by the guests who just checked out. Finally, a couple of hours later, she had time to open the envelope from the telegraph office and read the message.

'Darling niece-stop-coming-stop-next boat-stop- arrive Galveston - stop - Est. Dec twentieth -stop- Aunt. Rosalyn. -stop'

A big smile grew on Verna McGowan's face as she reread the message several times.

Entering her father's office, she sat down and wrote a brief message that she would later take to the post office for the train leaving that afternoon for Houston, then stopped, rose from the desk and gathered her coat, bonnet and purse.

"Consuelo, I'm going to the telegraph office. Be back shortly."

"Si, Señora McGowan."

With that, she left. Verna had to let Mama Rosita know her aunt was leaving by ship, arriving on the twentieth at Galveston port.

From there, they'd both travel to Round Rock and then complete their plan before leaving her aunt to run the inn, as the two of them, grandmother and granddaughter, would leave for Dodge via train. She knew that Mama Rosita would entrust her Inn operation to Henry Johnson and Arthur.

Verna knew her widowed aunt helped her father after he was wounded in battle. That she had come to the hospital every day, to nurse him, sit with him, talk with him, to encourage him to let go of his grief. Of the feeling of betrayal by his own soldiers, even if they didn't know each other. They were part of the Army.

Her father always gave his sister, Rosalyn, credit for saving his life. Verna knew part of the story about his receiving the last letter penned by her mother. But when she returned from the women's college in Pennsylvania, Verna asked him about his desire to die, and her aunt refusing to let him. Something he had never told her before. All of this just gave Verna more understanding of her father's love for her mother. And deepened her own love for him.

What her father didn't know was that helping him get a handle on his grief, helped his sister with hers as well. Her husband died at Gettysburg in July 2nd, 1863, on Little Round Top, under the command of Chamberlain.

So, she knew the entire tale and the part her aunt played in it. Now, it appeared her father was bent on righting a wrong committed against his family and dragging her husband into it as well.

She could not let this pass. Just a week earlier, she had received a telegram with one terse statement. 'Threat no longer a threat'. From a Texas Ranger by the name of Ezra West.

Then two letters, one from her father and one from her husband. They were fine, with no mention of the outlaw gang.

Now, to the other business at hand. Her grandmother and she were planning to arrive in Dodge before the herd did, find the three men and beg them to leave before her father arrived.

That was her and Mama Rosita's plan, which was altered a week later, when Ranger Armstrong came to visit again.

"Mrs. McGowan?" Armstrong asked at the desk stationed by Consuelo.

"Si Señor, I'll fetch her." The little Tejano woman smiled and disappeared through the door to the kitchen and out the back door. Moments later, Verna appeared, pulling off her coat and bonnet.

"Ranger Armstrong, I'm sorry, —John! How nice to see you again!"

"Howdy, Mrs. McGowan. It's my pleasure. Can we talk in your office?"

"Of course, this way, please." Verna replies as she hangs her coat on the hooks behind the front desk.

After they seated themselves, Armstrong handed her a large envelope.

"I was successful. This is a copy of the warrants issued for the three men who murdered your mother in 1863. I know the assault took place in 62, but she passed away from that assault in 63. So, that's the date the murder charges will begin. Also warrants for the attempted murders of you, your brother, your grandmother and servants during their assault on your granny's establishment.

The grand jury issued an indictment against these three. This was not a military operation, but outright criminal assaults against civilians, a Texas family of a Union officer.

The state prosecutor didn't know if that'd sell, but it did. And therefore, the grand jury indictments.

Texans want their pound of flesh any way they can obtain it!

The second page is a copy of the request to the State of Kansas to detain by arrest and hold for extradition to Texas for the assault and attempted murder of several citizens of Texas. All non-combatants during the war."

"Oh, this is wonderful news, John. Thank you so much."

"No problem. I'll be leaving for Kansas within a week after we get a response from their attorney general. First to Dodge to notify the sheriff and then Hays City to sign the papers and pick up their Kansas warrants and then back to Dodge to present to the sheriff and collect my prisoners."

"Sounds like you've done this before."

"Yes, twice. Most recent was Mr. Hardin in Florida."

"The shootist? That was you? Verna asked in surprise.

Ranger John Armstrong nodded in the affirmative.

"When —when do you expect an answer from Kansas?"

"Any day now, if you notice the date on the request, was Nov 27th. When the judge read the documents presented to him, he was quick to respond. I fear he lost a family member to the Union army during the occupation after the war. He doesn't favor the boys in blue."

"Even though my mother was married to a Union officer." She comments flatly.

"He's aware of that. He knows also that your father is a transplanted Texan, contributed to the community and suffered the loss of his wife to his own army.

Additionally, the judge is aware of your grandmother. He knows about her defense of her

domicile during the brief occupation on Galveston Island. Also, her help to the Texas Volunteers that night and during the following days. Offering her hotel as a hospital."

Verna smiled. "Yes, I was a little girl there that night. All I remember is the noise of the guns, the soldiers who came later with injuries. And Mama Rosita running, yelling orders and shooting like a pirate."

Armstrong sat back and laughed.

"And my brother Joel, shooting that man in the back, before he hurt Mama Rosita."

"Your brother? How is he today?"

"I don't know. Haven't heard from him since he and Papa had an argument, a nasty argument. That was eight years ago."

"Oh, that's too bad. He'll turn up someday."

"I hope so; I miss my brother."

"You are aware of the issue with the Jenkins gang?"

"Just the telegram from a Ranger West, saying the threat was gone."

"Yes," Armstrong shifted in his chair. "But not before one drover, actually a young sixteen year old kid by the name of Tommy Stewart, was murdered while on his early morning watch."

"Oh!" Verna gasps. "I didn't know. My Papa and my husband wrote me, but didn't say a word about that."

"Well, —Ranger West deputized the drovers, and nine of them rode with the Ranger confronting the bandits that next night. None of the gang survived. One tried to escape but was found with his neck broken next to his horse, who apparently wrecked attempting to get away in the dark."

"Were my husband and father involved in this?"

"Yes, ma-am. Both were."

Verna sat back and sighed, shaking her head.

"What's next on this adventure?" She mumbles. Relief and fear rumbled up deep from her throat like a man.

Armstrong sat back with a question on his face, then sighed and finally laughed at the circumstances. "It's not a good start."

With a worried expression on her face, she sat up and spoke. "Ranger John, I've something to tell you. Mama Rosita and I are planning to go to Dodge ourselves as soon as my aunt arrives from Pennsylvania. She's coming by boat, should be here before the end of December."

Armstrong leaned forward in his chair and sighs as he looked down at his boots, thinking, his right thumb rubbing the brass knob on top of his cane, before he comments.

"I rather you ladies didn't. But since you have already started with your aunt coming here, I suggest y'all wait until the response from Kansas has arrived, and we can all travel together."

"Oh, that's wonderful, John. Thank you, thank you very much."

"Just don't confront these men. We don't know how they'd react to you and your granny. Especially since they may recognize her."

"Yes, sir, I understand. We won't. Our plan is to confront my Papa and my husband before they have time to do anything." She lied, thinking they'll have to change their own plans.

"I see. Good, just let the law handle the rest."



It's Raining in Waxahachie



Shortly after the herd made its turn to the left and moving up on the white rock escarpment again, clouds blew in from the north, rapidly turning dark. No thunder, just winter clouds, and then the rain. Cold, misty rain, that whipped occasionally with the gusts of wind that accompanied it.

Each drover broke out their oilcloth or 'gutta porcha' ponchos or some with oilcloth raincoats. Draping them over their heavy winter coats. Their chaps protected their legs. Warmed against their ponies. This inhibited their movements somewhat, but they made do.

Soon, the misty rain turned into staggered downpours, creating a miserable environment for the cowpunchers, their ponies and the cattle. The grainy dirt quickly turned to greasy mud just a few inches thick over rock, creating dangerous footing for the horses and the cattle.

Darkness came quicker with the clouds, low to the ground as the evening wore on. Around 9pm, the cook and supply wagons were seen in the distance.

Cold, wet and muddy. Perfect conditions for accidents. But the men carefully did their jobs. Keeping the complaining to a minimum. Soon the cattle, watered, were eating the muddy grass around them and lying down for the night.

The rain let up around midnight, but the temperature just kept dropping, although not to freezing. Just a wet, miserable cold night.

Lester and his crew had erected a makeshift tent of sorts between the supply wagon and the newborn' wagon. Giving some shelter as they ate. Later, drawing lots for who slept in the newborns wagon, the rest got the muddy ground under the shelter.

Lester and the waggoneers stayed up all night keeping the campfire roaring, throwing its heat into the makeshift shelter for the men.

Such was the life of a trail driver.

Morning came, cold, muddy frost on the ground with the wind out of the south, a promise to dry things up and add some warmth to the air.

But the mud, gray, nasty, grainy and slick as grease, made walking interesting, even for the beeves, who attempted to rise, then plopped down on their bellies. There was much bellowing and complaining.

The remuda had no better luck. The mustangs, after one attempt to stand, refused to rise. Content to just lay in the mud. Their butts to the wind.

The night watch and the day watch jobs remained necessary, learned quickly to walk their ponies rather than ride, risking a wreck.

With the greasy ground, nothing living was going anywhere, anyway.

The saving grace was that the mud dried up pretty quickly. By noon, walking and standing were nearly back to normal. The air temperature had risen significantly, making heavy coats unnecessary.

Clothing soon dried out, if not the leather.

McGowan conversed with the cook about any resupplies needed, which Lester affirmed for a few things.

As they were discussing, Lucas McCorry pointed out they were about to have company. "Wagon and riders coming, boss!"

The visitors were coming from the direction of the small town of Waxahachie. The drovers watched

with interest as the group rolled/rode up and Emmitt, Fred and John Stead walked out to meet them.

"Howdy!" greeted the older man seated in the wagon. "Mind if I step down?"

"Sure, no mind." Fred answers.

The old man hopped off the wagon and held out his hand as he walked up to Gallagher.

"I'm Ben Johnson; that's my son Abe," he pointed at the young man handling the reins of the wagon team.

"And these young fellas are from the local farms around here." He concluded, motioning toward the riders on horseback.

"Is this your herd?"

"Yes, it is. I'm Fred Gallagher. This is my trail boss, Emmitt McGowan, and our scout Jim Stead."

Johnson shook hands with everyone before he continued.

"Pleased to meet y'all. We saw your herd yesterday, approaching before the rain. Never seen a cattle herd driven through here, they always go north to the west of here. This is a damn lot of cows!

Amazing sight!" He exclaimed, looking back at his riders.

"We are interested in buying some of your cattle, if you would sell to us. We had a spate of cougar kills that wiped out many of our animals this past summer. Kinda short on beef now."

Fred looked at Emmitt, who nodded his head affirmative. He was agreeable in selling a few. Having noticed these men came in peace. None carried any weapons, no rifles or pistols.

"We have some we can sell you. We also have some new born' that we'd like to get off our hands along with their mamas. Say fifteen dollars for the mamas, five for the babies and if you want any steers, twenty dollars."

"How many mamas and babies?"

"Twenty. Is that accurate Emmitt?"

"Actually, eighteen, two newborns died a couple of days ago."

"That's kind of steep. Can you accept ten dollars for the mamas and three for the newborns? Fifteen each for ten steers?"

Fred looked at Emmitt, questionably, not sure his son-in-law would object.

"They're your beeves, Fred." Emmitt answers the unasked question.

"I reckon we can do a deal. We need some supplies, mostly can goods. How is your general store stocked for that?"

"Depends on what y'all want. But y'all are welcome to visit. We don't have a saloon and don't cotton to wild behavior from strangers."

"That's not a problem. We'll be moving on tomorrow morning anyway."

Johnson smiled hugely and shook Fred's hand again.

"If you don't mind, we can take your choice of critters back with us, and you can come into town to collect your money at our bank and visit our general store as well."

"Sounds like a plan. Jim here will work with your boys, culling out the ones we talked about. My cook and I will bring our wagon into town within the next couple of hours."

"Thank you, Mr. Gallagher. Nice doing business with you."

"And you, Mr. Johnson." Fred replied to the old man as he was climbing back into his wagon.

Jim Stead oversaw the delivery of the newborn calves, their mamas, and steers purchased by the town folks. After shaking hands with the men, he turned the cattle over to, he rode back to meet up with Emmitt McGowan, who was inside the bank, his red roan stallion, Strawberry, tied up outside.

Having dismounted and entered, he didn't see his boss in front of the bank, asked for him, and they guided him to the bank director's office door.

As he started for the office, a soft, familiar female voice stopped him cold.

"Hello James," says an unusually pretty young woman, dressed in a fine light blue dress, the hems at the bottom, soiled from the mud brought into the bank. Her blonde hair tucked up under a small pale cream bonnet, striking blue eyes that matched her dress, a thin straight nose over full pale lips. Petite in build but standing at 5'5", tall for women of that time, a vision to admire. She walked up to him, smiling.

Taken aback, he stopped and stared, not believing his eyes.

"Mary?" he finally croaked out.

"Yes, it's me. James, you look like you've seen a ghost!" She laughed.

"Well, —it's been a while, I reckon. You're looking pretty as ever; what are you doing here in Waxahachie?"

"Oh, my husband owns a ranch near here; we raise horses."

"Husband? You're married?"

"Yes, his name is Peterson, Scott Peterson. We married two years ago."

"Oh, your Pa should be proud; you married a man of means and property," he replied sarcastically.

"Yes, I guess he was. You didn't have to say it like that! You left me, never returned, not even with a letter. Just gone out of my life."

"How should I say this? I left because I was looking down the barrels of a side-by-side shotgun pointed at my head, your Pa calling me a no-good saddle tramp! You were there! You forget that part?"

"But you didn't write to me."

"What good would that have done? I wasn't welcome ever."

"I know, James—Papa—I'm sorry." Mary looked down as she apologizes.

"No need to say that. Life is what we make of it. Sounds like you did alright. I'm happy for you."

"Oh, James—James, you don't know, —don't know—I—never mind. I thought you'd be glad to see me?" She says, unable to tell him her heart. Her vows as a wife held her back.

Finally, she blurted out. "Papa's dead." Mary stammers. Realizing in her heart she'd made a mistake years ago, letting him go. In these brief moments, meeting by chance again unlocked the vault in her heart where she still held a deep love for him. Hidden for so many years. Knowing she was afraid to go against her father, now the wife of another. Suddenly, her true love standing before her as if some kind of miracle, was gripping her heart in growing grief. Shaken, recognizing that her love for her husband wasn't as deep as her forgotten love for James Stead.

Just as Stead was about to say something that was to be even more cruel about her father, his anger at the memory revisited. His boss walked out of the bank director's office, carrying a canvas money sack that looked heavy.

"Oh, Jim, sorry to interrupt, the cattle delivered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, we need to get back."

"That's alright, boss. May I introduce you to Mary— Mrs. Mary Peterson—an old friend."

McGowan raised his hand to the brim of his Stetson in the western tradition of acknowledging a woman's presence. Especially one so beautiful.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Peterson. Please excuse us now; we have to be on our way. Jim, I'll meet you outside. Don't tarry long with goodbyes." McGowan grinned. He could sense the tension between the two and hurried out of their way.

Jim took Mary by her left elbow and led her away from the other patrons in the bank to a secluded corner.

Mary spoke first.

"You're with that herd north of here?"

"Yeah, I'm riding scout for Mr. Gallagher and Mr. McGowan, whom you just met. Mr. Gallagher owns the herd." He answered and then continued.

"I won't say I am sorry he's passed. He scared the hell out of me with that damn shotgun and his accursed words!" He whispers about the news she gave about her father.

"But I want you to know that I never stopped loving you. There's no gal in Texas that could take your place—But now—now that I know you are someone's wife, I can let you go—I can say goodbye.

Never got to say that the last time. Goodbye Mary, have a good life."

With that said, he turned before he made a fool of himself or she could respond and walked out of the bank, without looking back. His face set hard, fighting the tumultuous emotions of love, anger, regret and sadness, dueling deep in his soul.

The feeling that he was about to break into two or more pieces scared him. This was unexpected; seeing her here blindsided him.

The news that she was now married was like a knife in his heart.

He wanted to run, but could only walk; his legs felt like he was wading through knee-deep mud.

Some of the female patrons, who knew Mary, watched him leave, whispering among themselves. Mary Peterson, aware of the spectacle that they had just made, stood there, frozen in shock at this entire unexpected meeting of the man she still loved deep within her heart.

With tears welling up in her eyes, watching what should've been her future walk out of her life, forever this time, she thought. With pain written all over her

face, old wounds that never healed opened again, her heart, once broken over this man because of her father, broken once more.

Outside, as Jim exited the building, he stopped on the edge of the brown sandstone steps to the bank, looking at the sky, feeling suddenly weak, like his life was being drained from his body. His legs felt impossibly heavy, as if of stone, like the steps beneath his boots, difficult to move. He took a deep breath and exhaled, wondering why, of all places, this had to happen again? And with her. It was bad enough the last time; he remembered.

Jim knew he had lied to her. He knew he could never let her go in his heart. Stead knew he would carry that love to his grave. Now again he'll have to spend months burying that same emotion so he could breathe, function normally. 'Oh Lord, why did he have to see her again?' his mind screamed at him.

Emmitt, sitting on Strawberry, watched his scout for a moment before he spoke to him. Knowing the signs of a woman troubled man.

"You okay, partner?"

"No—but I will be in time," he replies quietly, his legs not readily cooperating but finally managing to mount his pony.

"She's stunning! Richardson?" was all Emmitt dared to say or ask.

"Yeah." Was Stead's quiet, labored, almost whispered answer. Not able to speak more, barely able to breathe. His chest felt like it had caved in. Never in his life had he felt this angry, and depressed all at the same time.

Earlier, Fred Gallagher, Emmitt McGowan, the cook, Lester Cornyn and Charlie Worth rode onto Waxahachie's muddy streets. The three found their way to the general store. Emmitt rode over to the bank to meet Ben Johnson.

Inside, Lester and Charlie began running through their list of items needed or wanted. Not everything was available, but enough to warrant the effort.

Then Lester noticed several wooden barrels, marked LIME FRUIT on the outside, standing near the back door.

"Those for sale?" Lester asks as he lifted the lid on one barrel full of the green fruit.

"We're waiting for the freight wagons from Richardson. These are to be shipped north. From our very own orchards south of town." The store owner replied proudly.

"What are you asking?"

We expect twelve dollars a barrel.

Lester turned to Gallagher, taking him aside.

"When I was in the Navy during the war, we had these in our ship's store. They help prevent scurvy, but we also noticed the crew didn't get as sick with colds, and other problems. Might be good for the men in this weather."

Fred nodded. "Yeah, I'm aware of that. Something in the juice that helps keep one fit. Okay, offer him fifteen per keg. How many do you think we'll need?"

"I'd say four, maybe five. This cold weather will keep them from rotting so fast—four should do it." He replied after thinking a moment. "Okay, make the offer for fifteen each, but no more than twenty."

Several minutes later, a deal was made, and four wooden twenty-gallon barrels of limes moved to the front with the other supplies.

As the wooden barrels were moved to the front, Fred noticed off in one corner what looked like folded canvas tents. Upon closer examination, he realized they were military garrison tents. Holding anywhere from six to ten men each. Next to them, the tent poles and ropes and the prize—field cots!

Fred turned to the store owner and asked.

"Where did you get these?" pointing at the folded canvas and poles.

"Oh, I bought those in Richardson. There was a surplus sale of Texas military goods, and I thought these would be a good idea to buy for some future folks settling around here who might need shelter."

"How long ago? Looks like they've been here a while."

The storekeeper laughed. "About five years now. If you need them, I'll make you a good price."

"Beats the boys sleeping on the ground, boss."

Lester commented. "Charley and the waggoneers can set these up every evening. Get the men out of the weather for a spell."

"How many tents are there here?"

"Two large ten men and one officer three-man."

"Cots?"

"Twenty-four if I remember correctly. I have wool blankets as well. They have CSA embroidered on one corner."

"Don't care, the war is over. I'll give you twenty for the entire lot."

"Can you make it twenty-five?"

"Okay, deal!"

After Gallagher paid for the goods, and the supplies were being carried outside to their wagon, he noticed the young man who worked in the store, helping load the barrels, tents and other goods.

"Who is that young fella? He doesn't look very happy?" The storekeeper smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yeah, he just recovered from the influenza. Lost his family last spring to it. Parents, two younger brothers. They had just arrived from down south somewhere. Kept to themselves outside of town until he walked in, sick as a dog, begging for help. Family

too far gone to save them, although we tried. He barely made it."

"Oh, that's sad," Fred says. "What's his name?"

"Ricky Morolze. Strange Latin name. We just call him Ricky or More or Less." The storekeeper laughed.

"Gave him a job here, sweeping and helping. He sleeps in the back room."

"Do you pay him?"

"Yeah, two dollars a month plus found."

"I see. Does he know how to drive a wagon?"

"Oh, yeah! Family drove a few oxen loose plus the two pulling their wagon. He was on horseback tending the oxen before the family became stricken."

"I see," Fred replies as he walked over to the young man. "How old are you, son?"

"Señor', I'm seventeen. Gracias."

"Seventeen and polite as well. I understand you can handle animals and wagons?"

"Sí, Señor," Ricky replies calmly. "I helped me familia since I was old enough for walk."

"Would you consider handling one of my wagons on this cattle drive to Dodge City? We're short a man. Driving a wagon, maybe standing watch on the herd at night. Helping the cook. Pay is twenty a month plus grub and a two percent bonus off the total sale at the end of the drive, if you complete the entire drive?"

Ricky Morolze's eyebrows shot up at this man's question. A hesitant smile crossed his face, as he was having a hard time believing this unexpected offer.

"Si Señor', I like that very much! I make you bueno vaquero." Ricky exclaims excitedly in his broken English.

"Good, you have a horse, saddle, firearms?"

"No Señor'. I sold everything. Also, mi Papa's pistole's and rifle. To pay for mi familia's funerals and burials." Ricky answers sadly, expecting to be turned down.

"Okay, we just happen to have extras. Get your possibles together and climb in our wagon. I'll handle your former boss!" Fred laughs slightly.

Morolez disappeared into the back of the store and carried all he had left in the world out to Lester's wagon and returned to say goodbye to the store owner and his wife. The two bade him a hearty handshake, a hard hug from the wife and a kiss farewell on his cheek.

Emmitt and Jim, riding up as Fred was mounting Cesar, noticed Ricky in the back of the supply wagon and the stack of folded tents and cots he was sitting on.

"Looks like you got more than foodstuffs!" Emmitt chuckles.

"Yeah, his name is Ricky More or less or something like that, and we can use the tents—What's wrong with him?" Motioning towards Jim, who sat motionless on his pony in the middle of the muddy street, staring off into the distance. A lost look in his eyes.

Emmitt held his hand, palm out as if to say, stop, shaking his head, showing not to ask.

Fred acknowledged with a nod and then asked.

"You get our money?"

"Sure did, in silver eagles." Emmitt replies as he noticed the boy didn't have a coat on.

"Ricky, I'm the trail boss, Emmitt McGowan. Fred here is the herd owner and Ramrod—do you own a coat? Rain slicker or poncho?"

"No, Señor boss."

"Alrighty, back in the store; you can't survive where we're going without those two things."

"He can use Tommy's things." Fred interrupts.

"He's skinny but bigger than Tommy, don't you think? He can use Tommy's chaps, poncho and bedding, but I don't reckon his clothing will fit."

Finally, later, with everything taken care of, the group left the town of Waxahachie behind.

Ricky, wrapped in a warm new heavy wool lined moleskin coat, smelling of mothballs, holding a brown paper package containing a new woolen shirt and trousers, two pair of woolen socks and red flannel Long Johns, was wondering how his life will be now, as he had no future just hours ago.

Emmitt, happy to unload those newborn calves, he figured they'd never survive the trip in the coming bad weather. And thankful his father-in-law was along with his cavalry experience. He was outfitting this drive like an army, an army of cowpunchers; he laughed to himself.

And Jim Stead, wondering why of all places, in a lonesome little town in the middle of nowhere, did he have to meet and have his heart broken again by the only woman he ever loved so deeply?

Remembering the quote from Tennyson's poem he learned in school, he was grateful for those brief hours years ago, but today only ripped the scar off an old wound.

Lester and Charlie, already planning a lime dessert for the crew.

Fred, feeling good about himself. He knew in his heart his late wife; Rosa, would have approved of him giving this young man an opportunity. It was funny; he thought as the wagon and men cleared the last buildings onto the open range, glancing at Stead, how life can be full of turns and twists. People dying, others losing a dream and this young man in the back of their wagon, given a chance at life. Rather than being stranded with nowhere to go.

This wasn't just a simple cattle drive, a cover for vengeance. It was becoming more than that; it was becoming a small slice of life. He wondered what else was on the menu for their futures.



Cedar Hill



The herd was two days' traveling from their rest north of Waxahachie when another cold front blew in, dropping temperatures dramatically, resulting in a light freeze by morning.

Fortunately, the front brought no rain. Just cold, windy weather. With camp set up on the curve of a large unnamed creek, sheltering the cattle, remuda and men by the thick growth of black oak trees growing along the bank; the use of the old military tents proved effective and welcomed. The men grateful for the cots rather than sleeping on the ground like before, the wool blankets a coveted item for warmth during the nights.

That evening, limes were passed around for the men to gnaw on after their suppers. Raul and his two brothers were discussing something with Ricky in Spanish, when the cook, Lester, overheard some words in English that didn't sit well with him.

"Y'all Mex's talkin' religion with that poor boy, warping his mind?"

"Just about his parents and brother's souls." Raul replies, smiles.

Lester stopped what he was doing and walked up to the sitting vaqueros. In a threatening posture.

"His parents and brothers are dead, done, they haven't got any souls," he complains.

"Why don't y'all understand that? They're done, just like Tommy, just like those bandits we killed off."

"You truly believe that cookie?" Rene Montoya asks, rising to his feet.

"I ain't seen nothin' in this world to make me believe in anything else."

"Señor' Lester, Señor' Jesus' spoke of men like you. Eyes closed, ears closed. Unable to see or hear."

"Ya sayin' I can't see or hear?" Lester started laughing. "I can see and hear perfectly. I see you and hear your lies to this boy!" he pointed toward Ricky.

"Señor' Jesus meant they, and you, do not understand or want to understand."

"Horseshit, I understand what I can see and what I hear. There's nothing else after we die. Nothing!" Cornyn exclaims and walked off.

The Montoya brothers and many of the other drovers within earshot just shook their heads. Some whispered to each other; some said nothing.

Fred, Jim Stead and Emmitt were in their own private conversation when the argument started. Listening, they quietly started toward the group of men and Lester when Lester stomped off, banging a Dutch oven lid closed, then removing the pot from the coals it was sitting on.

Fred, standing between the two, grabbed their arms to stop them from going further.

"Let it be. I've dealt with this before during my Cav. days. Let them work it out; otherwise, it'll fester and grow if we interfere."

Han's Kurkowski and Jacobs sat down with a few of the drovers and began asking questions about their experiences with weather on drives. Especially with winter weather.

After a few comments about experiences during early spring or winters on ranches, Frank Holcomb, one of the older, seasoned drovers, spoke up.

"Winters up north are worse than here. Montana has snow up to the belly of a horse. Cattle don't know how to forge through the snow. We had to dig down for

them that first winter and lay up hay for the winters after."

McGowan heard his comments and asked.

"You've worked in Montana?"

"Yes, sir, trailed a herd up there in 66 on the Bozeman (trail)."

"So, you worked for Nelson Story?"

"Yes, sir, we started with 3000 head, just like this bunch. Arrived with a little over 1500."

"You run into Indians?" Kurkowski asks, eagerly writing what was said.

"Yeah, Blackfeet, Sioux, and others. They'd sneak in at night and steal a few. Mr. Story would not pursue them as he knew they needed the beef, or they'd be eating buffalo instead."

"Ya got any advice on how to fight Sioux Injuns?" Navarro asks.

"Same as Apache's or Comanches here in Texas—they mostly are a right-handed bunch, meaning they shoot off their ponies to the left or straight ahead—harder for them to shoot arrows to the right. So that's the side to be on if possible. The right side. A warrior can get off five or six arrows in less than a minute. So, your aim at them needs to be quick and precise or you might be sporting a bunch of arrows outta your chest."

Holcomb took a suck of his lime. Then continued.

"One other thing. They are dead accurate with those arrows. They wait until their ponies have all four hooves off the ground before launching an arrow at full gallop. I've tried this with my rifle; it takes practice and knowing your cayuse's movements." He said, using the old fashion term for a pony.

"Which tribes are the best at fighting on horseback?" Kurkowski asks.

"The Comanches, I reckon, followed by the Sioux, their related I understand."

He looked over at the cook, who was directing Charlie and the two wagon drivers.

"You pray to the Lord you never run into the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers; they're the devil his-self!" He whispers loudly.

"Teufulshunde's" Kurkowski replies in German. "What?"

"My parents' language. German, Teufulshunde. Means hounds from Hell!"

"You got that right—as I was saying—all the different tribes have just one God. Called the Great Spirit—and believe in the afterlife. They're not animals, just as human as we are. Just different."

"Seems you have a lot of respect for those savages?" McCory asks.

Looking over at the Irishman, Holcomb smiled as he replied. "I do—funny you should call them that—they consider the white man as the savages."

Emmitt, who had been listening to Holcomb and the newsman's questions, responded to Holcomb's last statement to McCory.

"Some of us are. Nine of them are rotting in the sun back east of Waco."

The drovers, growing silent at their trail boss's reminder, sat there, staring into the campfire, reflecting on that night a month ago now.

"You ever fought Indians, Mr. McGowan?" Rene Montoya asks, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, twice—down on the Nueces River during the war. And once on a drive to Colorado with Mr. Goodnight."

"Thought you were on a blockade runner during the war?" Fred Gallager, who had joined the group of men toward the end of Holcomb's story.

"The year before I signed on as a deckhand. I was fifteen then. Comanches raided our ranch shortly

after Pa had returned to fight with Hood in Tennessee."

Minutes later, the first night watch, saddled their horses and relieved the evening watch, and the rest of the men retired to their respective tents.

Two days later, the herd reached the southern edge of the Cedar Hill area of the white rock escarpment, where the black prairie grass meets the limestone cliffs of the escarpment.

Jim Stead and Emmitt McGowan rode ahead of the herd, scouting the best route through the rolling terrain, studded with cedar bushes, until they reached the sharp downhill drop-off to the open north central plains.

"Whee-Hoo! I forgot how steep this was!" Emmitt exclaims as the two riders ride up to the edge of the two-mile-long slope to the grassy prairie below.

"Yeah, and you can see forever from here. Isn't that Fort Worth over in the distance?" Stead remarked, pointing toward the northwest.

"Damn, Jim, you've got better eyes than mine. Panther City is over there, but damn if I can see it! I'd need a spyglass for that." Emmitt exclaims, expressing his appreciation of his scout's vision.

"Yeah, there are advantages to being just a saddle tramp! Sights like this!" Stead says wistfully.

"You're no saddle tramp, Jim. Whoever said that to you was spitting a load of cow shit!"

"Actually, I don't think he ever knew what cow shit smelled like. Just a damn old dry goods proprietor."

Emmitt hesitated before he asks. "That was where you met her?"

"Yeah, I bought a sack of oats for my pony. She worked there. We got to talking, and I asked her if she'd have dinner with me at the local cafe. I was just passing through on my way back south from a completed drive. Decided to spend time there. Two weeks later, we were both madly in love with each

other. I even asked her if she thought I would make a good husband. She said yes. I never knew if she just meant I'd make a good husband to someone or yes for me being her husband. Was going to ask her the next day, but her Pa ran me off. I didn't even get to say goodbye. Just tried to forget her. Until that day at the bank."

"Jim, I don't care what that old man said to you. You're no saddle tramp. You're one of the best scouts I know of, can handle yourself around cattle and I hear tell Kinkade, your boss, thinks the world of you."

"Who told you that?"

"Holcomb."

"Yeah, he's not gonna like it when I give my notice. Been saving for years, finally after this drive, I'll have enough to buy my own spread and a few cows and a bull to raise up a herd of my own."

"That's a wonderful goal to make happen. Where bouts?"

"I'm a-thinkin' around Pleasanton. Land is still cheap there. The weather is fair—going for a nickel an acre last year when I checked. The state school board owns that area and has it up for sale. I'll have enough for the animals, about 2000 acres and equipment plus supplies and building materials for a shack to live in after this drive."

"Glad for ya, pardner. I wish the best of luck in making your dream come true."

"Thanks, boss!" Stead replied, still feeling the effects from that meeting with Mary Peterson, haunting him.

"You're welcome—we best be getting on back; it'll be dark before reaching the herd." McGowan says, seeing his scouts' demeanor changing again. Emmitt knew how a woman can drive a man crazy-sad by their fickleness or actions.

He was thankful Jim Stead had a good head on him and was smart enough to recognize his own

emotions and how they affected his behavior. Being busy helped a lot. However, the ride back was quieter than the ride out.

Emmitt reflected as they rode how lucky he was with Verna. His bride was mostly level-headed, fearless when required, a little hot-tempered and smart. Better educated than he, but not lording it over him. And he was in good graces with her father, he hoped. Yeah, he surmised, he was very lucky to have found her.



Mountain Creek



Mountain Creek rises from the earth near the tiny settlement of Alvarado. The settlement and the headwaters were about twenty miles south of the courthouse in Fort Worth. Snaking its way north/northwest along the edge of the white rock escarpment. Then, when past that limestone backbone, ventures out into the black land prairie toward the growing city of Dallas. Finally emptying its watery self into the west fork of the Trinity River near the little settlement of Grand Prairie.

Stead and McGowan had agreed there was too much timber and bushy growth along that creek basin to follow the creek itself. They chose to trail the cattle over the lower edge of the escarpment to Cedar Hill, then down to the creek for watering. With all the rain recently, there were large stands of water along the track they intended to use to move the herd.

From there, the creek cut north-eastward, however, McGowan and Gallagher intended to cross the Red River at Rock Bluff, further west than the creek's direction.

They planned to trail across the grassy prairie until they reached the west fork of the Trinity east of Fort Worth. Trailing the herd east of Denton, and watering on the different branches of the Trinity and various creeks that fed that river's branches, then heading the herd north to the Red River.

However, McGowan and his father-in-law were concerned about the steep descent off the escarpment to the prairie below.

"That's a pretty steep grade." Gallagher said. "Do you think we'll have trouble with the herd?"

Emmitt shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. If we keep the line thin, few at a time, we should be okay. If not—" He let the thought die out.

"I should have come alone. If I'd known!"

"Can't change the past, Fred. We were committed the day we left Round Rock. Stop thinking like that, just do the best we can to see this enterprise through!" Emmitt interrupted quickly.

His own frustration for this winter drive, over an uncharted route, didn't sit well with him and then add to that the real reason the winter drive was implemented instead of waiting till spring just compounded his internal turmoil with his father-in-law. 'And now Fred was having second thoughts? Not acceptable!' Emmitt muses.

"Losses—half-wild critters—one should always expect trouble on a drive. Try to keep things to a minimum and get the job done. He added.

Fred stared at his son-in-law for a moment, shocked at the emotion shown in his reply, realizing the strength this man had, that his daughter married.

Understanding that he himself needed to toughen up. Too many years behind a desk in a warm home made him soft.

"Thanks, son!"

Emmitt smiles, noting his in-law got the message.

"Welcome, cattle owner."

Both men snickered and then began grinning.

Two days of trailing through the lower escarpment, keeping the herd intact as they pushed through the cedars that seem to grow in clumps, like around the Colorado river high ground, Emmitt

thought, remembering his night ride from the Colorado river back to Round Rock, to stop Jenkins.

The weather had finally let up its attempt to make the trail drivers, horses and cattle miserable. Warming to the extent, the men were down to shirtsleeves, wiping grimy sweat off their foreheads.

The area they were passing through was barren of civilization. Just one abandoned cabin was seen, tucked back up in the timbers to the east. Nothing else.

As ordered, Lester Cornyn and Charley Worth and the other wagon drivers set up camp just a mile short of the slope down to the creek and the black dirt prairie.

It was another dry camp. The only sign that there had been water occasionally was a dry creek. And sure enough, it was dry. Fortunately, several pools of standing water were encountered earlier in the day, so the animals were watered enough they didn't complain too much.

That evening, Emmitt and Stead instructed the men on how they should move the herd down the slope without causing too many wrecks. Two drovers were to be stationed equally down each side of the slope, to keep the herd intact. No more than twenty steers were to be moved down the slope at a time. Spaced in groups to reduce crowding and bunching up.

An all-day affair, Lester and crew were to go first, along with the remuda, setting up camp on the creek next to the last growth of timbers and brush. The cattle are to be spread out along the creek for watering and feeding after they reach the bottom of the slope.

They expected their ponies would tire quickly running up and down that steep grade, so they needed fresh mounts at the bottom instead of waiting at the top for the herd to travel down.

They planned everything out as best as they could, as this was the first time any man in the group had experienced this.

The next day would be a day of rest for the cattle, horses and men. They estimated twelve to fifteen miles to the West Fork of the Trinity. So, there would be a dry camp before they reached the river.

Nobody was comfortable with this plan, but no one had a better idea. There was no other way down from this escarpment where they were located.

Texas men being what they were, pushed ahead, despite the dangers, pitfalls and just plain bad luck that might foresee their efforts.



The Slope



The next day at sunrise, the herd was rounded up and divided into small groups while the cook crew and waggoneers packed up and eased their wagons down the slope.

They lashed the simple wooden brake on the right side of each wagon down tight, causing the right front wheel to barely turn against the brake. Two of them actually caught fire from the friction against the iron rim of the wheel, caused by the additional pressure applied by the driver's right leg as needed. The drivers needed to use it all the way down.

Then the remuda of extra horses was driven down, in small groups, giving the animals room to maneuver as they made their way down the two-mile slope.

Then the cattle, harder to maintain than the herd of horses, took time to keep them going in the right direction, as many didn't like the downhill angle. They'd attempt to double back, working the riders and ponies harder. Three became lame from overstretched tendons from chasing the errant steers back into line on the slope.

And one which stumbled and fell forward, throwing its rider, Rene Montoya, onto the ground, injuring his shoulder. The horse's neck broken but alive until dispatched by McGowan with one pistol shot to the brain.

"Rene, tell More-or-less to saddle up and take your place," Emmitt hollers.

"Si, Señor boss." Rene answers as he starts down the slope on foot. Ricky Morolez quickly saddled up and replaced Montoya, who retired to Lester's care.

After Rene's spill around noon, there were no further incidents as everyone was extra careful on the slope.

The last of the herd was successfully driven down the slope around six o'clock, led to the creek and allowed to forage on the tall Johnson grass growing wild as far as one could see on horseback.

Emmitt and Raul inspected the three lame horses, noting the swelling and limping each animal showed. Emmitt sighs and looked at Raul. "Leaving them here would be best; they don't have to move much to drink or eat. But they'd be an easy meal for any hungry wolf, coyote or cat."

"Si Señor, lo se'."

"Well, you know what to do."

"Si, I'll wait till the herd leaves."

"Okay, let them stand in that creek water. It's pretty cold, should reduce the swelling. But they're done for cattle work."

That evening was a quiet one, the weather calm, the cattle tired and quiet from the downhill adventure, and also the horses. The drovers were exhausted as well. The four-hour night shifts broke down again into two-hour shifts. Rene volunteered to do all night shifts as he was lamed up for trail work the next few days. Said he could sleep in one wagon while the herd was moving.

Morolez, Juan and Christian, one of the waggoneers, volunteered to stand the last four hours from 2:00 to 6:00 am.

McCory sought McGowan, looking exhausted and troubled as he confronted McGowan, who took him by his elbow and walked over to the remuda away from all the others.

"Boss, I'm worried!"

"What about? Something with the herd or the crew? Lester giving you a hard time also?"

Lucas looked down at his boots, ashamed to state what was forming in his heart.

"Boss, it ain't none of that—I —I don't think I'm gonna make it to Dodge!"

"You quit'n me? You're one of my top hands!"

"No, boss, it ain't that. I'd never quit you. I'd stay all the way to Dodge if I could." McCory looked away to the herd and the cow camp.

"I don't think I'm gonna make it much longer in this world."

Emmitt's eyebrows rose in surprise at this statement. He remembered his pa telling stories about troopers before a battle, writing home their goodbyes or their wills. But never had anyone to tell him that.

"How do you know that, Lucas? Has someone been talking to you? Raul or his brothers?"

"No, but I've been listening to Raul and Juan explaining the Bible to young More-or-less. I've never heard it explained that way. Then this feeling has come over me. I don't wanna go to Hell—you think Raul can baptize me?"

"I don't see why not. He's a deacon in the Catholic Church. Are you Catholic?"

"No, but does that matter for being baptized?"

"No, — out here? — I rather think the type of religion is unimportant for baptism. But—I don't think you have anything to worry about, any more than the others. We all are in danger every day, moving this herd. But if you're serious about this baptism, I don't reckon Raul will have an issue."

"Okay, will you talk to Raul first? I don't know what to say or ask?"

"I'll talk to him." Emmitt replies, putting his right hand on McCory's shoulder as a gesture of confidence.

"You're gonna be alright, Lucas. The Lord has you in his hands." That night, the temperature dropped into the forties, but without rain or stiff winds.

Around the campfire, many of the drovers gathered as they put on their heavy coats, listening to Raul explain the reasons for baptism to McCory and to some other men who showed interest.

Later, several of the drovers expressed their desire to be baptized along with Lucas McCory.

Lester Cornyn, the cook, couldn't keep quiet during this explanation and said his piece.

"Why would any man offer himself as a sacrifice to save anyone? That's just plain nonsense! And rising from the dead? Fables, stories for children at bedtime!"

"You don't understand Christ's love for humanity? He is the Son of God. Born of a woman, he died as a sacrifice to God for our sins and rose from the dead, so all that believe will be saved and have eternal life!" Raul exclaims.

"The baptism represents one's faith in Christ's passion. It's a symbolic act as we are dipped in water to wash away our sins and rise as brothers in Christ."

"Ah, don't give me that. Why would anyone do that?"

"It is written, no greater love has a man, than to lay down his life for another." Raul replied.

Lester stopped arguing. His face showed the look of a man who had just seen something that went against everything he believed in.

"Bullshit!" was all he could say as he turned and walked away. His face was white as a ghost.

"It's just a matter of time! He's conflicted." Rene whispers to Raul and Ricky.

"I know. Would like to see that." Raul murmurs to no one in Spanish.

McCory shook his head. He knew he needed to be saved before his time was up. Which he felt more and more, was just a few days away; couldn't understand men like Lester. He wasn't alone. After tomorrow, the entire crew would be safe in their faith, all but Lester.

The next day, before noon, the drovers, not including the ones watching the herd, gathered at the creek, just yards away from the brush and timber.

They all knelt or sat to listen to Raul Montoya read from the New Testament he carried. Both in Spanish and in English. Explaining the Passion of the Christ and what it meant to be born again.

After he finished twenty minutes later, Lucas McCory, Issac McDonald, Jamie Christian, Frank Holcomb, Ricky Morolez, Jeremiah Dossy, Jim Stead, Brushy Bill and Riley Joshua pulled their boots, trousers and shirts off and stood in a loose like line in their faded red Long Johns, at the creek's edge as Raul waded out into the water.

"All right, amigos, let's make this quick. The water, she is very COLD!" he shouts.

McCory was first to wade to Raul, while the others laughed at his hooting and hollering at the cold, his noise struck a funny nerve in the group.

Gallager and McGowan, laughing, helped McCory back to the bank of the creek, shivering from his dip. His eyes bright with a new life in front of him. No longer afraid of the future.

All hollered at the cold as they walked into the water until the last man was finished being baptized.

Stead, Joshua and Roberts stunned the trail boss and ramrod. Amazed and surprised, they just now accepted eternity. Astounded that was even on their minds.

All but Lester, who watched from the chuck wagon, with a look of disdain on his face.

"What good is that gonna do?" He mutters to himself as he turned to the noon chow preparations. Two of the newly minted Christians, McCory and Riley, helped Raul out as his legs were too numb to move through the water.

The drovers felt closer to each other now than before. As brothers in Christ, they were joking, helping each other warm up, dancing and just feeling free and good. Some pulled their wet long johns off and laid them over the nearest bush to dry in the warm sun: running back into the ice-cold creek and did a quick wash of their bodies, laughing and giggling like schoolgirls at the way the cold was causing their privates to shrivel up.

The rest of the day was lazy save for the preparations for continuing their journey to the Dodge City stockyards.

Brushy Bill Roberts and Ricky Morolez walked off about a quarter mile away from the herd. Suddenly, the drovers in the camp could hear distant pops of pistol shots as the two young men were taking turns shooting at an empty tin can.

They'd put a rock in the can so they could throw it higher as they tossed it into the air, and the other would shoot at it. Morolez hit the can more times than Roberts.

"Kids!" Gallager laughs shaking his head.

"Looks like Roberts has met his match! More-or-less hits that can almost every time." Holcomb quipped.

The rest of the trail drivers laughed in agreement.

The rest of the day was quiet and relaxing. Lester fed them well. He knew that despite how they felt about his comments, their stomachs ruled the day. He was the 'go-to' for medical, eats and coffee. Putting up with his hard-nosed banter was acceptable as long as he took care of their physical needs.

Lester Cornyn was sort of the patriarch of the camp. That was part of the issue between him and Raul Montoya.

Lester viewed Raul as a threat to his rule over the camp with his religious comments and services to what he considered his boys. It seemed to Lester that the crew were leaning more and more to Raul for advice on everyday issues rather than to him. His dislike of Raul was slowly turning into hate.

McGowan and Gallagher both saw that, but didn't move on it, because of the need for both men.

McGowan and Gallagher were conversing when Lester walked up.

"Bosses, we're gonna need resupply soon. Is it possible to send the wagon to Richardson? It's closer than Fort Worth or Dallas!"

"Yeah, you don't think you can make it to Denton for resupply?" Gallagher asks.

"Well, we could, I reckon. But the boys have been eating pretty heavily lately."

"No, we'll stock up in Denton. Just do what you can with what we have now."

"Okay boss," Lester says walking away a little dejected.

After he walked off, Emmitt asked Fred.

"Wonder what that was about?"

"Don't know. It hasn't been that long since we resupplied in Waxahachie."



Into the Flames



It was the second week of December, after choosing to rest for an extra day at Mountain Creek. Gallagher rode into Richardson to telegraph the buyers at Dodge.

When he returned, Emmitt gathered his men around him. Gave the news that some buyers in Dodge might not be waiting after the first of January. Also, there were two herds out of San Antonio that arrived late in Kansas and camped for the winter, letting their cattle fatten on the remaining grass in the surrounding area.

He offered the men extra wages to winter outside of Abilene or drive them to Dodge for immediate sale. It was their choice.

Having already discussed with Fred the change in plans concerning the reason his father-in-law's desire to be in Dodge, they agreed to leave it up to the men over the cattle.

Emmitt knew some of the men had families and wanted to return to them as soon as possible; others didn't have families but had work waiting for them at the various ranches, which they could lose if away too long.

No one wanted to winter there, so that issue was settled.

Now it was just time running out. They agreed to push to twelve-mile days.

Or at least try.

They had a month to reach Dodge by January first. Emmitt knew that was not possible. Somehow,

they would need to convince the buyers to wait until the end of January.

Fred had already agreed to sell at rock-bottom prices. So, he had sent a plea for the buyers to remain until the first of February.

The third day, the herd was moved out.

The tall Johnson grass, densely grown, kept the cattle well fed, actually putting on weight. Apparently, none of the herds that year had traveled that far east when passing by or through Fort Worth.

This gave the cattle plenty to munch on as they plodded forward.

Making dry camp that evening, Lester and Charlie spent several hours, with the help of two of the Montoya's, Rene and Raul, clearing a large area of the prairie grass away so as the sparks from the cooking fire did not start a blaze.

Lester avoided speaking with Raul after their argument several days before, despite Raul's friendly comments and help.

The camp atmosphere was tense and quiet because of these two, and no one spoke much, not wanting to stir up another round of bitching from Lester. Who was becoming a 'most disagreeable fellow' according to Holcomb!

Poor Charlie had to deal with Cornyn's mood. Absorbing the rude, barking instructions without rebuttal.

Emmitt himself was tiring of the cook's attitude but kept his thoughts to himself. Letting the two men come to terms themselves.

Around sundown, Jim Stead rode in from his scouting and reported to McGowan and Gallagher.

"The Trinity River is about ten or twelve miles north of us. Should be there soon," he says as he warmed his hands over the cook fire, accepting a plate of beans and beef from Charley. "There's a railroad track

up ahead, about four miles. Looks new. Guess that's the new Texas and Pacific outta Dallas."

Emmitt nodded.

"Yeah, I was in Fort Worth early last spring. The whole town was out helping lay the tracks, or the contract would have fallen through with whoever was bankrolling the company."

"Well, we'll have to dry camp again tomorrow night if we don't make the river."

McGowan looked over his shoulder, looking for Cornyn.

"Lester, where is he? Oh, okay, there you are. We'll be dry camping again tomorrow night. After the herd moves out, move your wagons about two, three miles past the railroad tracks and set up camp. We won't try to push the herd far without watering them two days in a row."

Lester, not saying a word, raised his right arm in acknowledgment.

Stead, watching the cook's reaction, shook his head.

"He's still pissed at Raul?"

"Yeah, still." Gallagher joined in.

"Over religion?"

"Yep! Lester's an atheist. Discussing the Bible around him really gets his dander up!" McGowan chuckles as he tossed his remaining cold coffee from his tin cup into the campfire.

Stead sat down cross-legged to continue eating as McGowan and Gallagher sat with him.

"How's the grass around the railroad tracks? Grown back up or just dirt?"

"Dirt is most places. But I did see some fresh growth up and down the line. Why?"

"Sparks. With this north wind blowing like it is, we need to be on the north side of the tracks as soon as possible tomorrow."

"I see your point."

All three men stared at the campfire, praying in their minds that the burning blaze is the only one they see until tomorrow night.

The next morning, the trail drivers had the herd moving just as the sun was peeking over the horizon. Thirsty but with full bellies, the cattle bellowed and complained as they started moving in unison again.

Emmitt had instructed his men to narrow the herd to approximately fifty yards. That made the total length of the cattle block over a mile long. With ten feet spacing around of each steer that wasn't many animals across but gave each steer plenty of room to run and easier for the drovers to turn if needed.

Brushy Bill, Riley Joshua and Juan Montoya and Carlos Navarro worked as the swing and flank riders on the left side of the herd.

Riley and Brushy Bill leading on the left. Spaced about two hundred yards apart. The other two were spaced approximately a quarter mile apart.

The same spacing on the right swing and flank riders, with Frank Holcomb and Issac McDonald leading and steering from the right, followed by Lucas McCorry, Ricky Morolez. Jamie Christian rode trail with Charlie Worth, with Raul managing the remuda.

Jeremiah Dossey, with Rene Montoya driving the two extra wagons with Lester handling the chuck wagon.

Hans and Jacob followed the remuda, as they always did; but were told to keep centered in case of a fire. McGowan rode point. Jim Stead rode ahead to monitor any approaching trains. Fred accompanied his son-in-law.

Emmitt ordered the men this way, not worried about having a man on either side to work strays. He wanted to get the herd past the tracks as quickly as possible. But with the beeves block narrow enough to turn quickly if required.

Lester and the other wagon drivers had struck camp shortly after the herd moved out and were moving

as quickly as they could to get in front and over the train rails as instructed.

The cattle had gone maybe three miles when in the distance Emmitt heard the whistle and saw the funnel smoke from a westbound train, barreling down the tracks, but was blocked from actually seeing the locomotive by a rise in the land as it passed by two miles away.

Shortly thereafter, Jim Stead came at full gallop, waving his Stetson and shouting; but too far away to be heard. Behind him, toward the east, white smoke just began filling the air.

"It happened, Mr. McGowan! That damn locomotive engineer was highballing and blowing sparks all over the place! Grass is burning to the east and just now brewing up in front of us! This damn wind is whipping it up fast!" He yells out as he rode up.

Emmitt cursed and looked at Gallagher before turning back to the scout.

"How quick do you think it'll take to reach us?"

"Don't know, it's burning like nobody's business. Less than half an hour, I reckon!"

McGowan twisted in his saddle and looked back at the long line of steers.

"Alrighty, spread the word to the other side. Break out their whips, we'll have to stampede them through the fire!"

"Stampede?" Fred cries out, unsure what this meant. Running the herd into the flames seemed ludicrous to him.

"Yes, stampede. We're too stretched out; that blaze will wipe out the entire herd before we can turn them back to the creek!"

"I understand. Have you done this before?"

"No, not deliberately. Never had a prairie fire coming at me either. We will lose some, but it can't be

helped. Rather lose a few than the entire herd,” Emmitt explains as Stead wheeled his mare around and galloped around the front of the herd, then to the right side. Alerting the men to the danger and the orders.

“Fred,” Emmitt turned and focused on his father-in-law, “this is outside your experience. Go to the back of the herd and follow behind through the fire. These critters will have the pathway stomped down good by the time the last ones pass through. Just stay in the center. Let Lester and Hans know as well.

Lester and his wagons need to fall back and follow. And put the dogs in the wagons!” he orders as he observed Sam and Indian standing beside Fred and Cesar.

Fred Gallagher saluted by tipping his cavalry hat as he wheeled Caesar around to race to the back of the herd. Calling Sam, Indian and stopping only to load the dogs while instructing Lester, Jessie and Jamie to follow him.

Moments later, McGowan heard the crack of the bullwhips as the men started encouraging the cattle to run.

The lead steers, smelling the smoke first, balked and tried to turn but the outriders at the front wouldn’t allow them, snapping the whips directly next to their heads, the sound like lightning strikes or gun shots, startled and scared the cattle, spooking them into running. Some behind, just following, not knowing why.

Still trying to resist going forward, the cattle behind pushed the ones in front until they were all running full gallop, some stumbling and being overrun by the ones behind them, jumping and piling until there were gaps in the rush around the downed animals; up over the rise, into the now visible wall of flames bearing down on them a mile distant.

The air filled with smoke and dust as the rumbling thunder from the hooves of three thousand longhorn steers shook the ground.

Men on horseback, some who put bandannas over the eyes of their ponies so all they could see was the ground in front of them, others didn’t, rode, bent over the heads of their mounts, snapping their bull whips, yelling curses as they tried not to focus on the wind curled wall of red and yellow flames, light gray smoke, pushed by the wind, flowing like a blanket over the ground they were rushing toward.

The rolling rumble of twelve thousand hooves striking the black soil was constant and frightening. The screaming yells of the riders mixed with the sharp cracks of their whips echoed along the three miles of thundering flesh and horns as the very earth shook!

In all their lives, none of the men would ever experience again such a cacophony of sounds, sights and odors of deliberately stampeded cattle running toward a flaming wall of hell! It was a tale that would be told over and over to grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Whipped by the cold north wind, flames towering eight, ten feet in the air, curled toward the cattle like sea waves breaking on shore; six to ten feet deep of flames, leaving hot cinders behind. Closer and closer, the two calamities rushed toward each other. One a firestorm, the other the living horde of wild flesh and bone. When the first line of beasts met the flames, animal screams of fear and grunts filled the air, mixed into the unearthly crack of the burning grass being stomped out.

For each rider, as the flames reached them, some moved their ponies between two outside steers; others just rode close alongside one as they crashed through the flaming wall of burning prairie grass.

A few un-masked mustangs attempted to jump over the flames only to land in the midst of the fires,

then vaulting again, screaming in fear and pain. Their riders holding on for dear life, with their legs pressed tightly, their feet pointed into the underside of their pony's ribs, hugging to the belly of their cayuses with their booted toes. Screaming and cursing as they crashed through the burning Johnson grass on their frantic steed.

The cattle, a hundred feet behind the lead animals, only experienced the hot cinders as the ones ahead stomped the burning grass out as they passed over. However, the flames to the sides, heat, stench of burned grass and hot ground terrified them into an even crazier run.

Up and over the railroad tracks. The other side in flames, but being defeated by the ever-constant wind. With no fuel to burn, the north side of the rail tracks soon ended in just smoking cinders. Quickly the herd was running into fresh, cool, tall Johnson grass and earth. The stampeding herd continued for three more miles until Emmitt raced Strawberry to the front and signaled with his Stetson to circle the herd back into itself, to slow and then stop the stampede.

It took two hours to quiet the animals. Let them rest and calm down after their ordeal. Some ate; others bawled for water. Many were bleeding from the horns of others.

Lester and the others pulled up in their wagons, faces black from the dust and ash kicked up by the hooves in front of them.

"You want us to set up camp here, boss?" Lester asks.

"No, rest your animals for an hour, then move to the river. It's about six miles or less to the Trinity. Set up camp there. We'll be there this evening, probably late."

"They need water!" Raul Montoya says as he reined his limping pony up.

"I know. What's with your mount?" Emmitt asks.

"I think he split his hoof on the tracks back there." Raul answered as he swung out of his saddle to examine the animal's left front leg and hoof.

"Si, that's exactly what he did. But a shoe would hold it until it grows out and heals."

"Okay, it's your mount. If you think a shoe will help, then do it now. Otherwise, put him down."

"No Señor, I correct him."

"Okay, it's your choice; you're gonna wear out those other two."

"Si Señor. My choice."

As Raul walked away, leading his injured pony toward the other wagon, which carried the tools for shoeing and an assortment of horseshoes, Lester watched. Disgust was clearly shown on his face.

"Guess he has a soft spot for horses. Figures for a Bible-thumping greaser," Lester quips after Raul walked out of earshot.

"Lester!" McGowan barked. The look in Emmitt's eyes signaled he had had enough of the cook's comments.

Charlie climbed up after dismounting his pony and took the reins to the wagon horses, pulling away, before Lester could say anything else.

Gallager rode up right after that.

"My Lord, Emmitt. That was some stampede."

McGowan started laughing at the sight of his father-in-law's white teeth and bloodshot eyes, face covered with dust and ash.

"You rode too close to the back of the herd. You should see your face!"

"My face? You should see yours!" Fred laughs.

About that time, the scout, Jim Stead, rode up.

"I guess we got them settled down, boss. We lost a few heads. But that was to be expected."

Emmitt eyed the way Jim was looking down. Not wanting to face him. "You think we should have turned the herd and tried to return to the creek?"

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that. We would probably have lost the entire herd, like you said. —We lost two men."

Stunned, Emmitt glanced at Gallagher before asking, "Who?"

"Both Irishmen, Issac McDonald was gored in his left calf. He's gonna lose that leg if he doesn't get medical attention soon."

"You said two, who's the other?" He asks, having not heard the mumbled word *Irishman* from Stead.

Stead looked at Emmitt with sad eyes as he coughed up dirt and ash spunk-cum, leaned over and spit it out on the ground. And quietly, almost in a whisper from the back of his throat, a voice hoarse with pain cried out!

"McCory! Lucas is missing."

"Oh, no!" Gallagher exclaims. Bending over his saddle horn, "Why God?" he whispers, sick to his stomach at losing another one.

"You sure about that?" Emmitt asks. The conversation about Lucas's sense of doom reared its ugly head in Emmitt's mind.

"Yeah, young Ricky was behind him and said before they crossed through the flames, Lucas moved in between two steers to avoid the burning grass. Said it looked like his pony stumbled, but the smoke and dust obscured his vision. But after breaching the fire, he didn't see Lucas, just his pony. He was just gone."

"Where's Ricky now?"

"Back across the tracks, looking for him."

"Get some of the boys and help him look. If he went down in the herd, there won't be much to find," McGowan says dejectedly. His soul ached remembering how he had assured McCory he would be alright. A faint hope of finding him on the scorched prairie unharmed held in Emmitt's heart, but he knew instinctively that hope was useless.

"Get some shovels outta the supply wagon as well." He hollers as Stead was trotting away.

Gallagher stared off toward the burning grass in the distance. He felt guilty again. This man might not have died this way if this drive hadn't started.

McGowan read the guilt and sadness on his father-in-law's face. Understanding the man's guilty feelings, he said, "It was his time, Fred. He felt that, told me so three days ago."

"He knew?"

"Said he did. Wanted the baptism because of it. Wanted to square himself with the Almighty, to assure of his soul's future."

"Guess the Lord had a reason. But this way?"

"It was his time. If not here, some other place and way. Let's go find him. We have a long day ahead of us."

Before McGowan and Gallagher had reached the tracks to cross over, they saw, in the distance, the search party gathered in one location. They found McCory in the churned-up burned prairie dirt.

Emmitt knew there wasn't much left of the man before they reached the group. Girding their stomachs for the sight, the two men rode up and dismounted.

"It's him, boss. Not much left but wet dirt, bits of bone and torn clothing. His knife, the only thing in one piece!" Holcomb reported.

"Okay, get the shovels and dig a hole alongside. As deep as you can make it."

"How are we gonna put him into that hole?"

"Just scrape everything you see, wet dirt, pieces, everything. Someone fetch Raul. He's shoeing his pony over at the supply wagon."

"God, what a horrible way to die!" Brushy Bill exclaimed. He and Riley had just ridden up as well.

"He knew the risks," Holcomb replied. "We all know this. It can happen to any of us."

"At least his soul is saved and at peace!" Riley said what the others were thinking. Not a dry eye in the group, McCory was one of them, a brother, a hardworking cowhand, easy to get along with.

An hour later, the shallow grave was dug in the black clay-like dirt. McCory's remains slipped into the ground as Raul read over the grave.

"How do we mark it? He needs a marker to show he existed, doesn't he?" Rene Montoya asks.

"Here, bury this shovel up to the blade top where the handle begins. His knife, strap it to the top; that'll make a fine cross. Who has a length of leather?" Gallagher instructed, his heart heavy. Giving orders and instructions helped him stay focused and in control.

"Here!" Bushy Bill says as he pulled a ball of leather lace from his saddlebag.

They lashed the blade to the shovel below the handle, allowing the knife hilt to rise above the tee shaped handle, making a cross.

Some made last farewells; others just saddled up silently, and rode back to the herd, completely aware that could have been them in that hole.

Back to business, back to the toil of driving half-wild, dangerous, unpredictable, four-legged beasties to market. They had a job to do, a deadline to meet. There was not much time to grieve. That came later in Dodge.

McCory was gone. In a few months, years, he'll be forgotten just like they will be. His grave washed out, built over, lost to time.



Greek What?



The herd reached the Trinity River around ten that evening. A three-quarter moon gave enough light on the dark landscape for the drovers to water the thirsty steers and then bed them down.

Exhausted, sad and dejected, many skipped chow and just crawled into their respective tents. All but the few who had first night watch, and those who were up with McDonald as he was undergoing Lester's doctoring.

Gallagher was in the Conestoga wagon with Lester holding a lantern over McDonald's leg.

McGowan, having finished overseeing the evening duties carried out, stood at the back of the wagon and asked how bad the injury was.

"I'm alright, boss, just a little poke in my leg!" McDonald drawls, his Irish accent thick with Lester's liquor.

"You're lucky it's just a poke. Ya could have lost your damn leg muscle!" Lester replies. "He needs to see a doctor, boss. I can't guarantee this mix of hot water and bicarbonate of soda will keep it clean. I can pour some of my 190-proof into this hole to stop immediate infection, but it needs proper care."

"Hot water and bicarbonate? What kind of mix is that?" McDonald asks, getting close to passing out.

"An old Greek concoction to clean wounds." Lester answers.

"Greek what?" McDonald blurted out! With that exclamation, McDonald passed out.

"He's gonna hurt like hell tomorrow."

McGowan looked questioningly at his father-in-law, who nodded his approval.

Emmitt shrugged his shoulders. Not liking how events were controlling this drive.

"Okay, we take him into Fort Worth. I know they have a doctor there. Not sure how good he is. We'll find out tomorrow."

"The boys need to let off some steam after these past few days." Fred commented to his son-in-law.

"Agreed, ask for volunteers to stay with the herd; the rest can ride in with us."

"Hell of a way to run a railroad!"

"Railroad my ass, that's who got us into this damn mess! If I find that train driver, his ass is mine!" Holcomb replied.

"You'll have to wait your turn." McGowan answered quietly.

Everyone agreed, snickering in a dark way.



Fort Worth



The temperature dropped again overnight. However, the sky was clear, with no clouds, just icy wind.

The big wheels of the Conestoga wagon bounced occasionally, waking McDonald lying in the back, or making him holler if he was awake in between doses.

Frank Holcomb kept him liquored up when he was awake; however, he was rapidly starting to refuse anymore.

Young Ricky Morolez, Charlie Worth, Jamie Christian, Jim Stead, Raul and Rene Montoya volunteered to stay with the herd, with Jim left in charge.

The rest rode their ponies alongside the Conestoga, which took the better part of the day, arriving in Fort Worth in the early evening as the chill in the air was getting worse.

Fort Worth was quiet. The cattle season was past, and many folks retired early out of the weather into their warm homes. However, the drovers brought a lot of attention. Winter drives were not a regular

The group rode up Commerce Street off of Fourth Street to the local city marshal's office to inquire about the location of the doctor's office.

"You boys need to put your guns away!" was the first thing says before Marshal Jim Courtwright gave directions to the doctors.

All complied except Brushy Bill, who slipped one into his coat pocket before stashing the other and belt holster in his saddlebag.

Roberts noticed the Marshal wore a two-gun buscadero belt outfit similar to his, but had beautiful tooled borders with small silver conchos attached down the side of the gun pouch itself.

As they rode away from the Marshall office, Brushy commented quietly to Riley.

"You see his getup? Nice-looking buscadero he's rigged with!"

"Yeah, I heard tell he is the fastest draw west of the Sabine." Joshua replied.

"Yeah, I heard that too."

"Don't go challenging him, Brushy; I don't need to lose another drover today." McGowan orders Billy, after overhearing the two's conversation.

"I appreciate your confidence in me, boss," Roberts says laughing. "I'm not that fast. Not like it's said about the Marshall."

"Not that accurate either, if judging by the exhibition you and More-or-less put on the other day." Holcomb commented from the back of the Conestoga.

Roberts' ears, which stuck out a little farther than most, turned red, and he kept quiet after that. But the comment was not lost on him.

Having found the doctor's office, they carried McDonald inside, one on each side, while the others waited outside as the building was small.

Gallager and Holcomb remained while Lester drove the Conestoga over to the next street, named Houston, to a general store, which the owner opened again for evening business for Lester.

McGowan and the others rode their horses over to the White Elephant saloon on the third block of Main Street.

Inside was a different bartender than there was back early last spring, who apparently did not appreciate who they were.

"We don't serve this kind!" he barks, pointing at Riley, Jeremiah, Juan and Carlos.

"What kind is that?" McGowan asks.

"You with that herd east of here?"

"Yeah, what about it?" McGowan asks. "Since when were drovers not welcome here?"

"You and that kid is, they aren't! They can mosey on down to Hell's half acre. That's where all the riffraff drink!"

"They're part of my crew. They've earned the right to a drink!"

"Not these boys —these cow's boys!" The bartender emphasized the two words separately as a racial insult.

"Who you callin' cow boys?" Brushy Bill spoke up.

Riley put a hand on Brushy's shoulder. "Easy pardner. Let it go. We can drink at this Hell's half acre he's yapping about."

"No, it's not gonna be easy. We've lost three men so far on this drive. This fat son of a bitch has no right to call y'all any names. If 'n your cowboys, we all are!"

"No, not serving any cows boys. And if you want to be included—get out!" The barman raised his voice, reaching under the backside of the bar, retrieving a short-barreled shotgun. Cocking one hammer back.

"Now hold on, fella, we didn't come looking for trouble!" Emmitt raised his voice as well.

While Emmitt distracted the bartender, Brushy Bill pulled his pistol from his coat pocket, firing one shot, hitting the barman in the left shoulder.

Dropping his shotgun, it discharged, shattering glass stored along the bottom shelf of the bar.

Grabbing his shoulder, the bartender ran out of the bar.

"Now you've done it, Brushy. Best head back to the herd now!" Riley counseled his longtime friend.

"No, they'll look for him there. Head up to Denton and wait for us there," McGowan orders.

Just then, Fred Gallagher, with Sam next to him, entered. Standing just inside the door, he surveyed his men, noting Brushy standing holding his pistol, smoke still drifting from the barrel.

"You shot that bartender?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Why?"

McGowan answers for him. "The bar-keep refused service, pulled a shotgun on us, ordering us out, Brushy shot the thing outta his hands. I told him to get out-of-town now. Meet us in Denton. They'll look for him at the herd."

Before Gallagher could reply, Brushy spoke up.

"I'm sorry, boss, and to you fellas. But that was uncalled for him calling us cow's boys and pulling that gut buster on us!"

"Billy," Gallagher replied, "you need to ride now. Meet us in Denton, like Emmitt said. You need some silver?"

"I've a hankering to go to New Mexico. Been thinking about that for some time. Even talked with Riley about that!"

"Well, you'll need more than a few dollars. I've some leftover from the payment to the doctor. Consider this your past month's pay. You boys want to chip in?" Gallagher asks, turning to the others.

"Si, he stood up for us. We could do no less." Juan commented as Jeremiah, Carlos and the others nodded, reaching into their vest pockets for the few silver dollars they had.

All total, Gallagher collected fifteen silver dollars with change, added a month's salary from what he had

left in a twenty-dollar gold piece and gave that to Roberts.

"Now get outta here, son. We'll cover for you." Brushy Bill Roberts shook hands with everyone, his friends, some long time, some he met for this cattle drive.

"Good luck, Brushy!" McGowan says, the last one to shake his hand.

Roberts walked out quickly, followed by his best pal, the tall, old Buffalo soldier now ranch foreman, who had talked Worthington into giving a young fifteen-year-old a job five years earlier.

"There's a small town west of here called Weatherford. About two days' ride, I reckon. How you fixed for grub till then?"

"I've got some jerky in my saddlebags. I'll be okay. I've heard of Weatherford. I'll get outfitted there. I have most of my last pay plus tonight's, so I'm set."

Outside, his near-charcoal skin glistened in the light of the rising moon. Buttoning his coat up against the evening chill, Riley said. "Hell of a night to be on the run, pard. Take care of yourself."

Roberts took the hand of his best friend ever with both of his. Both men staring deep into each other's eyes, words not spoken but shown in the appreciation and care for each other.

"Thanks for everything, Riley. I mean that. You have been like the Pa I never had! Say thanks and goodbye to Mr. Worthington for me, please?"

Riley, choking up, just nodded his head as Brushy mounted his pony, waved goodbye with his sombrero as he spurred his cayuse and galloped south in the Main Street dust, then cut west, before he reached the train station, into history.

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Cowboys



Moments later, the drovers all walked out of the White Elephant and stood watching the lone figure on horseback disappear into the growing evening darkness.

"Gentlemen, if you'd mind coming back inside, I think I can serve all of you gents."

McGowan turned and recognized the man in the dark suit standing in the doorway.

Luke Short, the owner of the gambling hall on the second floor. McGowan had met him in early spring when he was looking for the detective recommended by the Texas Rangers.

"All of us?"

"All of you cowboys. You don't mind this handle, do you? I think it's a wonderful description of what you gents do for a living."

"Well—we cowboys would be much obliged for a drink."

Emmitt replies with a grin, motioning the others back in the saloon.

Holcomb and Lester rode up in the Conestoga a moment later and joined the group inside.

"Where's Brushy?" Holcomb asks.

"There's been a little—misunderstanding and—"

The city Marshall, Jim (long hair) Courtwright, entered the saloon just as the story was to be told, and immediately everyone went silent.

Courtwright stared at the drovers at the bar, then focused on the dog sitting on its haunches in the middle of the saloon, staring at the Marshall, growling quietly.

"Sam! No, come here!" Gallager commands.

The dog obeyed, moved and sat next to his chosen master but watched every move the Marshall made.

"Which of y'all characters shot the bartender?"

"He's already left town." McGowan replies after a long moment of silence.

"Left town? How convenient! Where did he go, back to y'all's herd?"

"No, Marshall, he left for—"

"Missouri!" Riley interrupts in McGowan.

"Going home! "

"I doubt that! Anyway, he's in trouble. Carrying a firearm within the city limits. Shooting a defenseless bartender for no reason. He—."

Again, Riley interrupted. "He wasn't defenseless, and there was a reason!"

Courtwright walked over to Riley and looked up at the tall black ranch foreman.

"You're claiming he did that in defense of what?"

"Us!" Juan spoke up.

Courtwright stepped back to see Juan on his right, in the line of men at the bar.

"Cursed at us, then pulled a shotgun out to run us out!"

"Our pard took it upon himself to protect us, shooting the fat pig."

"Is that so? Well, he says differently. The doc says—."

"It's true, Jim. I saw the whole thing.

Currington went off almost immediately on these fellas. They just wanted a drink. That young man protected himself and them. Currington dropped his weapon when hit. The gun discharged on the floor, breaking a bunch of glasses and bottles back here on

the bottom shelf,” Luke Short adds to the conversation, in his defense of Brushy pointing down behind the bar.

Courtwright walked around the end of the bar, his heeled boots clunking on the wooden floor, and looked at the mess on the raised wooden planked surface and bottom shelf of the bar.

“So, he lied to me. Still, y’all’s pal is in trouble for packing and discharging a firearm within the city limits!”

“Yes, Sir, that’s why he left town.” McGowan adds nonchalantly.

“Well, I’ll need a description of this character, his name and where he’s headed. A warrant will be telegraphed out tonight or maybe tomorrow.”

The Marshall pulled out a small book and a pencil. “Description, please.”

“About five foot ten, maybe eleven.” McGowan comments after motioning to the others not to speak.

“Now, that’s interesting. Currington said he was around five feet six!”

“He’s worked for me on and off for over a year. I ought to know his height.” Emmitt replies.

“Who are you?”

“McGowan, Emmitt McGowan!”

“Ah, I’ve heard of you. You busted that gang of cattle thieves last summer!”

“Not alone. I had help, my sidekick and the Rangers.”

“Yeah—hair color? Eyes?”

“Blonde, blue eyes.” McGowan replies, giving a description of the late Tommy Stewart.

“Name?”

“Br—.”

“William Bonney.” Riley interrupts.

“We called him Billy or sometimes just the Kid. Mostly Billy!”

“William Bonney—Billy or—.” Courtwright’s pencil lead broke off as he started to write ‘OR’. Cursing,

he pulled his Barlow pocketknife from his vest to sharpen it, then continued his notes. “The Kid.” Leaving off ‘sometimes called.’

“Where’s he going?”

“Missouri, is what he said.” Gallagher answers.

“Where in Missouri?”

“Didn’t say—” McGowan answers.

“Yeah, so y’all say. We’ll catch him. Luke, did these cow chasers give me the correct lowdown?”

“They did Marshall.” Short ran his hand up to his mouth to stymie a fake cough, hiding his smile.

Closing his notebook on a fake description of Brushy Bill Roberts, Marshall Courtwright nodded at Luke Short and walked out of the saloon.

Juan followed a few steps behind, stopped and looked out through the window, watching as the Marshall examined the horses tied to the hitching rail, then inside the Conestoga before walking across and down the street then around the corner onto Fourth Street.

“He’s gone, Señors!”

McGowan started laughing, and the other trail drivers joined in.

“You didn’t have to put yourself into this,”

Gallagher says to Short.

“I know. Currington is a bigot, a liar, hot head and a generally disagreeable character. Getting shot is a fitting punishment. Courtwright will be all over him for lying to him. The Marshall isn’t much better of a character, but he enforces the law rather well.” He adds. “Your young friend is rather quick with a pistol.”

“Yeah, he is, but we have one back at the herd who is faster and always accurate. That boy has good eyes!” Holcomb replies, showing his admiration for Morolez.

“Boy?”

“Yeah, just a young kid.”

"Another cowboy!" Riley quips. Which brought another round of laughter.

Luke Short poured each man another round of rye and asked.

"I guess y'all are staying the night?"

"Yeah, I've booked rooms at the Royal for my men. And we need to leave now before they stop serving supper!" Gallagher exclaims.

"What's the word on McDonald?" McGowan asks as they leave the saloon.

"I'll tell you over dinner. We need to get the horses and Conestoga taken care of for tonight, then we all meet over on the next street west of here, Throckmorton, for supper and then bed. Need an early start tomorrow back to the herd."

"I need to go to the rail office and find that engineer."

"Already did. They fired him. That blaze went into the winter crops of a bunch of farmers southeast of here. Burned some barns and livestock too. "The son of a bitch nearly burned half of North Texas, I was told."

"Where's he now?"

"Don't know."

"Well, let's get the horses stabled and get something to eat," Emmitt remarked.

An hour later, around eight o'clock, the drovers found themselves sitting at the dining room tables where Emmitt had spent hours last spring, with the detective Jack Duncan out of Dallas.

Everyone ordered fried chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, fresh-baked bread, green beans and a mug of locally brewed beer, having had a belly full of beef stew and sourdough biscuits for the past several months.

Nobody said a word about the fellows guarding the herd or Brushy Bill. What happened, happened! The others made their choices, now missing this fine meal.

McGowan paused between biting down on an untouched chicken leg and asked.

"McDonald, how is he?"

"Doc's sending him to Dallas and then maybe on to Saint Louis. There's a special doctor, a surgeon, either still in Dallas or already back in St. Louis, who can save his leg."

"That bad?"

"Yeah, could have been worse if not for Lester's Greek concoction; cleaning out the wound delayed infection. Still, there was some dirt and burnt grass filings deep inside. But the doc cleaned it out again. Put Issac out with laudanum. Still out when we left."

"That's gonna cost us some money."

"Can't be helped. I paid the doc for his services, overnight care and for the train trip to Dallas tomorrow morning. Telegraphed the Association about funding any expenses in Dallas or Missouri."

"They said they'd do that?"

"I imagine they won't be happy, but that was my agreement with them before starting this enterprise." The association pays all major medical expenses. I learned that during the war. Lots of men lost limbs because the doctors were few and there wasn't time to nurse them back to health. I can attest to that!"

"Doubt they counted on a stampede through a prairie fire."

"Did you?"

McGowan laughs slightly, shaking his head no, as he bites into his chicken leg. A mental picture of Lucas McCory grinning, standing in front of him, clear as day.



The Lord Provides



The next morning, as the men were leaving the hotel, two men walked up to Holcomb, who recognized one of them immediately.

"Frank, been some time. Who's your boss?" The taller and older man spoke.

Holcomb shook his hand, smiling. "Yes, John, it's been a while. Long while. You get tired of the snow too?"

"Yeah, you could say that. This is Robert Murdock. He and I have been cow punching for the past two years together wherever we could find work. We understand you're short of help!"

"Yeah, hang on." Holcomb turned to Gallagher and McGowan, who were watching the meeting.

"Boss, these here fellas are from Montana. I rode with John Cammer here up the Bozeman Trail with Nelson Story. His partner Robert—" he turned to Murdock to confirm he had the right name, "Murdock? Robert Murdock. They have been punching cattle where ever they could find work."

Gallagher turned to McGowan with questioning eyes. "We need three men."

McGowan looked both men over, skinny, clothing worn. Hands rough, faces tan and wrinkled around the eyes, from too much sun. Cattlemen!

"You vouching for them?"

"Yes sir. Good men—" He mumbles to his old friend and his partner. "Don't embarrass me."

"We are still short one man. You know anybody in town?" McGowan asks the two.

"Yes, sir!" Murdock answers. "He's over at the stables, working for his keep. He is a good cowhand. The only thing is—he's a darkie." McGowan looked at Riley and Jamie. "Does it look like we care?" He asks, turning back to Murdock.

Murdock grinned. "No sir. It do not!"

"Okay, twenty a month and found. 2% bonus of the sale when we deliver the herd, if you're still with us."

"Fair enough, when do we start?"

"You just did. Get your gear and crawl into the Conestoga at the stables. Unless you have your own beasts."

"No horses, no saddles. No guns. Sold them to eat."

"Fine, we have spare saddles. Where did you sell your firearms?"

"General store two blocks over. We have our ridin' and campin' outfits."

"Fine, I'll buy the guns back and take that out of your bonus. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough!" Murdock quips.

"When was your last meal?"

"Two nights ago."

"Oh! Go to the Royal Hotel restaurant and see if they have any of that fried chicken left over from last night if not get whatever they have you can carry.

Here's five dollars. Sack it, eat on the way to the herd." Emmitt replies, handing Cammer five silver eagle coins.

At the stables, Gallagher and McGowan sized up Jose Chapman instantly. Another big, muscled Negro sporting a big pleasant smile with the whitest teeth Emmitt ever saw on any man. Emmitt liked him immediately, hiring him on the spot.

He had his own horse and saddle. But had sold his firearms, and Gallagher gave him the same deal as the

other two. Clothing and other gear necessary for a drover he still had.

His answer when offered a job—"Beats shoveling horse dung!"

Emmitt turned to Fred with a big smile on his face. "Can you believe this? Lost three, found three! Dropped right into our lap!"

Gallager shook his head in wonder. "The Lord provides! I just pray we don't have more trouble. I've spent almost all that five hundred the Ranger gave us."

As they were leading their horses out of the corral, Emmitt spotted a man dressed in a railroad worker's outfit. Blue shirt and overalls, high-top lace work boots and with a railroader's cap planted slightly tilted backward on his head. Instinctively, he walked up to the individual, stopping him in the middle of the street, followed by Holcomb.

"You work for the railroad?"

"Did until this morning."

"You were the engineer on the train that started the prairie fire?"

"Yeah, got fired for it. What of it?" He sneers back. Still not accepting fault for the damage he caused.

"You know a good man died because of you. Another may lose the use of his left leg!"

"So, that's too bad, I lost my job!" he fired back in defiance.

"Wrong answer." Emmitt exclaims harshly just before smashing his right fist into the fella's right cheekbone, sending him to the ground. Blood oozed from broken skin over the cheekbone.

Emmitt walked off, not looking back, leading Strawberry as Holcomb walked over and added his fist to the man's face as he was attempting to rise from the ground. Knocking him unconscious, with a broken nose.

The others, leading their horses one at a time, walked past and spat on his prone, unconscious body, laying in the middle of dusty Commerce Street.

And to add insult to injury, Sam trotted up to the ex-engineer, sniffed the prone body and hiked his left leg up and pee'd a good twenty seconds, before running to catch up with his adopted human.

Finally, with fresh blood added to the team, the cowboys of the Gallagher herd bade farewell to Issac McDonald, wishing him well, as Gallagher paid him his back wages, then forked Cesar for the ride back to their herd.

Exiting fourth street on to the open prairie, they passed on the right a small dark red brick church. Some men pulled out of the group and rode to the building. The door was locked as they tried to enter.

"Must be Baptist or Presbyterian!" Juan remarked. "Priests never lock their doors."

Disgruntled, the men knelt down at the locked door and said a brief prayer of thanksgiving and a request for protection. The events of the past month, losing fellow drovers, had driven a fear of the Lord deep within their hearts. Even the hardest of them, Holcomb, prayed.

It was mid-December, and at least a month or a month and a half left to drive the complaining steers to the stock pens at Dodge City, Kansas, and eventually to the dinner plates of the beef-starved families up north. The cowboys of the Gallagher herd knew they needed all the help and protection they could get.



A Grandmothers Pride



In early December, Mama Rosita and Verna's aunt Rosalyn arrived on the noon train from Hearne after making connections from Houston.

Verna was very happy to see her aunt again. It had been many years since she had stayed with her while attending the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia in the late 1860s.

With her normal glee and squeals of delight seeing both women, she helped them gather their light baggage, directing the local porters to wheel the heavier clothing chest to her father's Inn down the street.

They devoted the rest of the day to settling into their rooms, eating dinner, and gossiping about the trip to Dodge City, Verna's pregnancy, and Rosalyn's voyage to Galveston from Pennsylvania.

Later, they centered their discussion on Rosalyn's brother. On his plan in seeking vengeance for Verna's mother; Rosita's daughter's. Creating their own plans to stop their menfolk from getting themselves killed.

The next several days were busy as Rosalyn was shown and trained to manage the inn while Verna was gone.

Rosita listened and added a few tips her granddaughter hadn't considered.

Toward the end of December, Texas Ranger Armstrong came knocking at the inn with news of the final approval scheduled for a court hearing the week after Christmas.

The women invited him for a cup of warm chocolate, the cacao beans fresh by boat from Veracruz, gifted by Mrs. Rosita Lafitte.

"My word, ladies. This is the first chocolate drink I've ever had. Very different from coffee!"

"Thank you, John. Mama Rosita brought the beans from her supply. They are from Mexico. The beans called Cacao—roasted like coffee beans then ground to a fine powder. Add a little brown sugar or molasses and wa-la! Here you have it!" Verna replies.

Armstrong grinned and took another sip.

"You ladies are gonna spoil this old Ranger." John chuckles.

"You're not old, Señor!" Rosita replies.

"Well, kinda shot up anyway." He says, patting his game leg.

"As soon as the courts approve the final paperwork for requesting extradition from Kansas to Texas, y'all need to get your train tickets through Shreveport to Saint Louis to Dodge City. I'll telegraph the hotel in Dodge to reserve rooms for you two when I arrange for mine. You'll have to make the payment arrangements. The state won't cover the two of you. Sorry!"

"No need to apologize, John. We were planning on paying our way anyhow. Even if you weren't along."

Armstrong sat silent for a moment, rubbing his thumb over the handle of the coffee cup now a quarter full of chocolate.

"Need I remind you, Verna, this is a state matter now. You and your granny are not to be involved or interfere with this business. You're just witnesses!"

"Understood John. Mama Rosita and I won't be in your way."

"Good, hate to see you two hurt." Armstrong replies nonchalantly as he finished his chocolate.

"That was amazingly good. Thank you again. I need to be getting on. I'll telegraph you as soon as the

court makes a final review and approves the extradition papers; with train dates as well.”

John Armstrong stood up, taking Verna’s offered hand, and shaking it. Then Mama Rosita’s as well, saying.

“You have a beautiful and smart granddaughter, Mrs. Lafitte.”

“Thank you, Ranger Armstrong. She’s a grandmother’s pride.”



Indian Territory



It took four days to pass the northern branches of the Trinity that flowed around or through Denton. Fording all the twisted river bends, sometimes crossing the same river three or four times. This slowed the forward movement of the herd.

Finally on dry ground, as Gallager called it, the herd moved quickly north to Rock Bluff on the Red River.

That stretch took the herd five and a half days, crossing creeks, and going around young wooded areas not yet burned off by wildfires. Negotiating with farmers to cross their fields; struggling to keep the occasional stray from meandering off the approved path. All that burnt daylight better spent moving north, was the routine each day.

The only godsend was that the weather held. Cold yes, with wind, but dry. The drive was manageable, no calamities, no issues of any sort other than dealing with the cattle.

Reaching Rock Bluff, a series of cliffs on the south side of the Red River, there was an opening down to the river, sort of like a chute that bunched the steers up as they passed down that slope, across the Red River and onto the flat red sandy ground of Indian Territory. (the future state of Oklahoma)

This was the old Shawnee Trail to Abilene and Saint Louis. However, the men guiding the herd only drove them up to and then crossed the South Canadian River, turning left toward the west, across the deltas until they reached the North Canadian River

convergence with Clear Creek. There they crossed the sandbar to the north side of the river. Crossing that, Raul exclaimed how cold the water was with Lester lampooning him about doing baptisms in the water. Their feud never ceasing, Raul took Lester's atheist banter on the chin and just smiled.

McGowan, tiring of this constant hatred coming from Lester, instructed him to drive the wagons about two miles up the delta along the river bank. And set up camp for the evening.

As the herd was moving slowly, trying to get as much water as the cowboys would allow, Gallagher rode up to Emmitt and pointed north.

"Look at that!" he exclaims. "Never saw a storm that dark!"

The storm cloud was as dark as Hades. A deep black/blue. Thousands of electrical flashes filled the cloud, some piercing into another part of the cloud, some reaching to the ground. Like a nightmare slowly unfolding, it was moving directly south.

From their vantage point, it appeared the storm would pass in front of them, as it wasn't large.

But the wagons weren't safe. Seemingly, the cloud from Hell was barreling down on Lester and the other waggoners.

McGowan looked around and saw that Raul was closest to him. "Raul, ride up there to Lester and the others, ride like the wind and tell those boys to come back this way till that storm passes!"

Raul saw the cloud and knew what could happen: obeying his Trail Boss without hesitation.

"Si Señor!" Spurring his pony twice, he started his race to the wagons. Muttering a prayer in Spanish. "Ride with me, Lord God!"

Emmitt turned to Stead and Gallagher, telling them to circle the herd to prevent a stampede in case of a lightning strike.

As Raul neared the wagons, a lightning bolt struck near the wagon team Lester was handling. Spooking them into a wild gallop.

Not only were the horses spooked, but the boom from the bolt startled Lester so badly he jumped, cursing and dropped the driving reins.

Hanging on for dear life, he lost his grip when the wagon struck a rock, bouncing high as it threw Lester into the air, and sent him over the left side of the wagon, with his right booted foot catching under the edge of the seat. Lester's left leg and butt slammed against the left front wheel as he caught the side of the wagon, the wooden sideboard biting into his armpit. He found himself hanging on with his backside just inches from the front wheel and about two feet of space from the back wheel and his head. His free leg dangled over the front wheel, occasionally rubbing the wheel rim.

Raul saw all this and immediately spurred his pony even faster to catch up with the runaway wagon.

Lester held on, panic gripping his heart, fighting to free his trapped foot. Deathly afraid he was going to be crushed by the rear wagon wheel.

In his struggle, he didn't see Raul coming alongside until the Vaquero yelled. "Grab my arm!"

It was his one command as he moved closer to the wagon and reached out for Lester with his right arm.

Lester took the offered arm, and as he felt Raul taking his weight, he let go of the wagon side with his right hand.

"Can you get your foot free?"

"No! My ankle caught on something!" he yells in panic!

"Hang on!" Raul yells out, "Let me get you further up! Can you grab hold of my Cantel?"

Lester held the offered arm with both hands above Raul's elbow until Raul moved his pony as close

as he could so Lester could wrap his left arm around the saddle cantle.

The left front wagon wheel spun dangerously close to the galloping pony's shoulder and Raul's right leg.

Raul urged his pony forward, oblivious to the danger of the spinning wheel. Lester felt the pressure ease off on his ankle and slipped his foot out of his boot.

Pulling his pony away, the man despised by the cook let his antagonist down to solid ground, who fell on his face in a tumble.

Raul raced ahead, reaching the left horse of the team, grabbing its halter and turning them in a full circle until the wagon and horses came to a standstill.

The Tejano trotted his steed back to the wagon and retrieved Lester's boot, holding it in the air as a victory salute to Lester.

Cornyn jumped up and down, waving his arms and whooping with joy. Thankful for the rescue and Raul's heroic actions, plus saving the chuck wagon.

While holding Lester's boot high, waving it, a lightning bolt crashed down between Raul's pony and the wagon. The electrical charge blasted the wagon into two pieces, throwing foodstuffs, medical supplies, and cooking utensils into an arc to the right.

The team of horses tied to the wagon were electrocuted immediately, as well as Raul's pony and Raul.

Lester froze, shocked at what just happened, with his arms still raised up in celebration, couldn't believe his eyes. Stunned at first at what he witnessed, he started running with one boot on across the brambles and rocks along the Canadian delta.

Crying out, "No—No—Nooo!"

When he reached the wagon, the fire had almost burned away the canvas top. The smell of scorched flesh hung in the air.

Stopping at Raul's corpse, still holding the boot in his hand, the cook just stared, frozen. Then, dropping to his knees, he looked up into the sky and screamed.

"Why? Why? I'm the evil one. Why did you take him? I should have died! Why?" he cries out, his arms raised in protest, his face the face of grotesque agony.

"He should not have died saving me, God!" he yells—"Oh God, forgive me, forgive me!"

Bawling like a baby, he collapsed into a heap. And that is how McGowan and the other drovers, not managing the herd, found him. One of the toughest trail cooks and 'go-to for anything' in Texas, now lying in a folded heap. Sobbing in great anguish. Lester's arrogant soul crushed.

Gallager rode up with the drovers and Emmitt, dismounted, took one look at the carnage, listened to the bawling and crying of the cook and then stumbled over to the river, away from the others. Still, they could hear him scream out as he fell to his knees as well.

"How many more, Lord? How many more? Forgive me for my folly. Forgive me! Vengeance is only yours, Lord! Only yours!" He cries out. His arms in the air in submission.

The shaken drovers present at the wagon with the dead on the ground looked at each other.

"What's he talking about, Boss?"

Emmitt shrugged his shoulders and answers, shaking his head.

"He has a meeting with the devil in Dodge. That's all I can tell you until we get there —if we get there."



No Greater Love



They took the rest of the day to bury Raul. Looking for rocks to cover his grave and make a kind of headstone. A grave is dug on a small hill on the edge of a clump of trees away from the flood level of the river, as they saw it. They used parts of the chuck wagon to create a coffin, and they lined it with the remaining burnt wagon canvas.

His two brothers and cousin cried over his grave as they recited scripture in Spanish. Some understood, some didn't but all the drovers wept, some openly, some, looking around, would stifle a shudder, wipe their eyes or nose quickly before anyone noticed. No one did.

As the cowboys laid the last stone on Raul's grave, McGowan spoke up while looking at each man. He realized they were looking to him for answers, consolation, leadership. He was the trail boss.

He'd been silent while the drovers worked to prepare the coffin and dig the grave. No leadership was needed there; they knew what to do. But now it was time.

"I only knew Raul a short time," he began. "I'd never ridden with him before as some of you have. I understood he was a good cowpuncher and wrangler of horses. A good Vaquero! He certainly proved that with me.

A church deacon in the Catholic church, he baptized many of you fellas standing here today. He had a beautiful singing voice, and I suspect is serenading the Almighty right now, just like he did the cattle at night.

I know we all will miss that. Especially with that one song he favored, *'Fisher of Men'*—Raul was certainly one of those.

But the thing I think the Good Lord will remember most," Emmitt stopped to clear his throat—"I know I will, —was his sacrifice of his life to save a fellow brother.

It's written in the good book, —I may misquote the exact words Christ says, but, "There is no greater love shown than a man laying down his life," he had to stop again to take a shaky breath, "laying down his life for a brother. Raul showed us that love!"

At that moment, Lester collapsed again. The hard-nosed atheist cook surprised everyone, as he took Raul's death the hardest.

Seconds later one of the cowboys, no one knew who, started singing an old British church hymn from the 1840's. *'Nearer My God to Thee'*.

Some who remembered the song from early childhood joined; others not knowing the words followed as best they could. It was so moving even McGowan and Gallagher were singing, all their male voices reaching up to the highest, tears flowing down their faces.

Cronyn cried all day, sometimes just weeping, other times bursting with uncontrollable agony.

He was beside himself with grief. The uncontrolled weeping, Juan and Rene said, was like all the hardness and evil spirits in him were being ripped from his soul. Even Sam came to him. The black and white hound nuzzled his face, licking it to say it's okay.

Eventually, the drovers left him alone. This was between him and the Almighty, Gallagher told them. None of them had ever witnessed this before. As Raul was fond of saying. 'It was biblical!'

The men collected what was still usable from the chuck wagon off the ground, and Charley and Jamie started the meal preparations.

The electrical burst welded together the two large cast iron Dutch ovens. When they broke them apart, one had a sizeable chunk missing from its side. Permanently welded to the other. They tossed it aside.

The disaster burst open all the canned goods, and the scattering was so thorough that the drovers only recovered one and a half sacks of the three sacks of potatoes bought in Fort Worth. Fortunately, the other supply wagon held the remaining flour bags, barrels of jerky, the last barrel of limes and two twenty-gallon tins of tallow. Plus, equipment belonging to the cowboys.

The last chore was to drag the dead horses off the trail into the timbers to avoid scaring the cattle as they passed.

That evening, when the meal was ready, Charley started dishing it out, but he had only served a few when Lester walked up, quiet and solemn.

"Let me do this."

"You sure, pard?" Charley asks softly.

"Yeah, I'm sure." Lester replied, almost in a whisper. As he dished out each meal, he whispered to each drover, which stunned everyone.

"God bless you, cowboy."

Many just shook their heads, smiled and laughed in a quiet, good-warmhearted way at the change. Would this change last? Some wondered. Time will tell.

Juan, sitting on the ground with his brother and cousin, plate of stew in his lap, said to them. "I wish Raul could see this.

"Somehow maybe!" Rene replied.

"I think he can. I think he's around here somewhere, watching and smiling!" Carlos finished for his cousins. A big smile on his face.



Up the Trail to Dodge



Reaching an open path through the trees north of the North Canadian, the herd was turned and driven north along the western trail laid out by previous drives, until reaching what was popularity called 'Hell Raisin' Creek'. On their first night camping on that stream, the drovers were murmuring to each other, glancing over their shoulders at Gallagher and McGowan.

Fred and Emmitt noticed this, glancing at each other, expressing without words the question on their minds 'What was up?'.

As Fred was standing next to the supply wagon, now the chuck wagon, and Emmitt was leaning against it holding his tin plate and stuffing down his supper, Holcomb and Stead walked up to them.

"Bosses, can we talk a minute?"

McGowan sat his plate down on top of a water barrel hanging on the side of the wagon.

"Sure, what's on y'all's mind?"

"The boys and us aren't a superstitious lot, but we have seen more disaster on this drive than any other, save for Story's in 68," Holcomb replied.

"Yeah—that's true. But it's a winter drive, Frank."

"We know that, but with this mystery of why Mr. Gallagher needs to be in Dodge to meet the Devil, as you put it, has made us a little skittish."

"We haven't lost that many steers considering, but we have lost men. Some are scared they may be next." Stead replied.

"You want to quit?" Fred broke in.

"Oh, no sir, we'll take the herd to Dodge as we signed on to. But we'd like to change our contract."

"How's that? Changing the contract?"

"Yes, sir," Stead replied, steeling himself for an argument.

"To what? We aren't gonna get much for this herd anyway, since it's winter."

"Four percent of the total sale, and if one of us gets killed before we make it to Dodge, he still gets his bonus percentage anyway and it's sent to his family."

Gallager shook his head no and spoke.

"Tell you what—make it three percent and I'll throw in my cut divided equally. And it's a deal on the next of kin on wages and bonuses. Everyone gets their bonuses, alive or dead. And sent to next of kin both bonus and wage if dead. The deal is off if anyone alive quits before reaching Dodge! That means no one quits! Or y'all lose!"

Both men looked at each other, surprised as they were expecting a heated disagreement, nodded to each other, the new terms were acceptable and agreed to the new deal with Gallager.

"We'll make sure no one quits!"

Gallager held out his hand to both men, who took it.

"I'll have Charley make an amendment to the original contract, and y'all can sign that in the morning."

The two cowboys shook hands with Gallager again to seal the agreement and then with McGowan.

As the two walked back to the group of drovers, Emmitt looked at his father-in-law with a quizzical smile on his face.

"You had that all planned out before they even brought it up?"

"Yeah, I heard them talking and giving me looks. Hell, I'm worried about losing more men, either by death or just quitting. I don't need the money; they do. And if money will keep them working for me despite what's happened. It's no problem."

"Stroke of genius making it a requirement everyone stays or deal is off!"

"Yeah, old military doctrine. Where we go one, we go all!"

"The association?"

"The association be damned. On paper, all legal with court stamps, these cattle are mine. I'll handle what comes later, if I'm still breathing."

"What about Dodge?"

"I don't know yet. The Lord will show me, I hope. If I'm still breathing!" he repeated the last sentence.

Gallager began to walk away, then turned and pointed his finger at McGowan.

"You just make damn sure I am." He orders as if he was still in the Cavalry, reminding Emmitt of his promise to his wife, Fred's daughter.

McGowan nodded. Taking his plate of now-cold beans and beef, he watched Fred walk down to the river and realized how much his father-in-law had changed on this drive. How much they all had changed, including himself.

He never really gave much thought to the afterlife. There was living and there was dying. What happened after wasn't of much use to think about since he thought he couldn't do much about it anyway.

He figured he needed only the baptism from his childhood. Not until he met the woman now his wife and not until he got to know Raul had he realized there was more to it than that.

Then he thought of Verna, wondering how she'd feel about the changes in her father, in him? Life was gonna be different, he surmised.

Later that evening as the sun was setting behind distant clouds and another icy wind kicked up, Juan, Rene, Carlos and Lester were seen walking to the creek.

“Where are you gents going?”

“To the water, Señor. Cookie wants to be baptized.” Carlos replied.

“That water is too cold; he’ll get sick and we won’t have our favorite cookie!” Holcomb hollers back.

“Si, we know. We will do it in the Catholic way. Just a little water on his head.”

“Oh, well, this I gotta see!” Holcomb stood up and followed them to the river, along with every drover not on watch.



Another Delay



After two more days of trailing along the east side of the Arbuckle Mountains, the drovers and cattle enjoyed unusually warm weather. Temperatures ranging in the mornings in the low forties and the highs during the day averaging in the upper sixties.

The drive was proceeding well. The men were tired, but healthy. No sicknesses, as feared might happen; that have happened on other drives in the early springtime.

Gallager and McGowan, watching the herd move along the plains, noticed how sparse the growth was. Apparently, the heavy drives earlier in the year had beaten the grass down so badly it hadn’t recovered before winter set in. Just as Emmitt predicted.

As they were riding point for a change, Emmitt saw Stead in the distance coming at full gallop. Not feeling comfortable with the way, the scout was riding, which showed something ahead would not be good news. Emmitt braced for bad news.

Finally, Jim reached the two men and pulled his sweaty, laboring steed to a halt!

“Bad news?” McGowan asks, not even giving the man time to catch his breath.

“Yeah, boss,” he replied, wiping the sweat from the headband of his pinched Stetson before placing it back on his head. “Looks like there was a fire up ahead. Almost all the grazing grass is burnt. Been a while apparently, there’re some sprouts popping up, but not enough for this crowd!”

"How long a stretch is it?" Gallagher asks, finally becoming accustomed to knowing what questions to ask of his scout.

"I rode for eight miles; as far as I could see ahead it was the same. Must've been a big one, just like the one we passed through. Even some of the scrub and younger trees bordering the flatlands were burnt or scorched."

"Suggestions?"

"Yeah, one. I saw off to the left across a stream that ran parallel to the edge of the Arbuckle rocks about four miles up, what appeared to be a pass through the rocks. Looks like an old dried-up creek from years ago. It might lead to an untouched grassland. It's uphill also. Looked like it from this end. I have to scout that to be sure.

I rode up to it after crossing the stream. Good crossing there while the stream is down. Didn't enter without a fresh pony. There are crawlers visible there."

"Crawlers? You mean snakes?"

"Yeah. A big nest of-em."

"Those mountains are Chickasaw Indian territory!"

"Yeah, I know, but there's no other way, boss."

"Okay, take a rest this evening. We'll camp up ahead, get yourself a fresh mount and an extra sixgun for the crawlers tomorrow." Emmitt orders. Turning to Fred, he said. "Have the men drive for another two miles and then water and bed them. Have Lester and his boys set camp."

Turning back to Stead, he asks, "How long do you need?"

"Give me a day in and a day back. That is if I don't get bitten."

"See that you don't."

Turning again to Fred, his frustration showing, he complained. "I wonder if Moses felt this frustrated, wandering around in the desert?"

Fred looked surprised at hearing his son-in-law's comment. It wasn't in Emmitt's nature to compare life today to biblical history.

"I reckon we'll know one day, son."

"Yeah, I reckon so.? But not today, I hope!"



Christmas Day



The next morning, the weather was signaling a change. It hadn't happened just yet, but the cowboys, cattle, horses and dogs could tell the difference in air pressure on the ears. Something was coming.

McGowan stood with a cup of coffee in his hand watching Stead ride off as the sun was just breaking over the horizon. Fred walked up and joined him with his own steaming cup of coffee.

"You know what day is today?" Fred asks.

"No, but I bet you're gonna tell me."

Emmitt answered with a smile.

"Christmas Day!"

"You're kidding?"

"Nope! Merry Christmas, son!"

"Same to you, Fred. Do the others know this?"

"Yeah, Lester wishing them a Merry Christmas in the grub line. Seems he keeps a calendar."

"Well, imagine that? Ol' Lester, our born-again cookie! Did anyone tell Jim before he rode off?" Emmitt asks, sipping his coffee.

"No, I don't think so. Charley gave him a couple of biscuits, but Lester wasn't dishing out the grub when he left. Probably didn't say anything at that time."

"That's too bad. Poor man rides with a heavy heart. Knowing it was Christmas day might have lightened his load a tad."

"That business in Waxahachie?"

"Yeah."

"Care to enlighten me?"

Emmitt took a sip of his coffee as he watched the distant figure ride off.

"He told me in a roundabout way back when we were at the lakeside camp before the drive. And added to it when we scouted ahead, back at the slope.

A few years ago, returning from a drive he'd completed to Abilene, he'd gotten run out of Richardson by the Pa of a girl he'd met and was sweet on. Apparently, she married later a Scott Peterson who had a ranch outside Waxahachie. There he bumped into her at the bank the day we sold those steers to the city."

"I see—so he'd been carrying a torch for her for years. Then, finding out she's married—loving a woman can sometimes kill a man or get him killed, and sometimes just kills his soul." Fred commented, shaking his head sadly. Feeling his own pain.

Emmitt nodded, understanding. Something he would not have done a year ago.

"Poor fella!" Gallagher says before walking back to the chuck wagon for another cup of Lester's strong coffee. Then stopped and looked back at Emmitt.

"Come to think of it, I served with a Major Scott Peterson before the war, fighting the Apache's and Comanches, we were stationed together at Fort Davis. He was in command of a different unit from mine. Wonder if it's the same Peterson? If so, she married a fella older than me."

"He doesn't need to know that."

"No, —no, he doesn't. Might not be the same Peterson anyhow." Fred reasoned as he walked off.

Shortly before noon, some of the men heard faint thunder in the distance. But the skies were clear as far as they could see. Other than that, it was a quiet day of rest for the crew and animals.

Juan and Rene held a makeshift service to celebrate Christmas Day.

The downtime also gave Lester and Charley an opportunity to bake a cake and make several pies using the limes and some cans of peaches found in the supply wagon that escaped the chuck wagon disaster.

In the evening, McGowan allowed Lester to open a bottle of his 190-proof corn liquor for the men to relax with.

Murdock brought out his guitar, and they sang several songs to live music. It was a good Christmas day for the cowboys of the Gallagher herd.

Off in the Arbuckle plateau, Jim Stead sat alone facing the warmth of his small campfire. Staring mindlessly into the flames. With an emptiness in his heart he couldn't fathom, no matter what he did. When he had downtime, like right now, the pain was like a big hole, with teeth, gnawing always at his soul. Crushing his heart.

He pulled his blanket up around his shoulders, unable to sleep, he just sat there, staring into the flames, unaware of the day's significance or of the eyes watching him from a distance.



The Rich Widow



Mary Peterson sat staring at the flames dancing around on the blackjack oak logs in the family fireplace. Sitting on the family couch, feeling the heat from the fire on her face, even six feet away, didn't do anything to warm her. She just felt cold and lost.

Alone for the moment, she reflected on her future. Still recovering from the shock of her husband Scott's lingering death from a stroke less than two weeks ago.

This Christmas was a lonely time for her. Even with her brother-in-law and his family and Scott's two older sons present in the massive home.

She was feeling more alone, not just because of the death of her husband but because her true love was gone out of her life as well.

Mary also was feeling insecure, even with the good graces of her in-laws. However, her step-sons were ten and fifteen years older than her, which made things difficult as she knew they were enthralled with her.

However, Janice, her sister-in-law, knew she wasn't happy. Hadn't been for almost a month. Not since the last time the family was in Waxahachie.

Janice knew of the encounter Mary had at the bank through the local gossipers. Knew that was the beginning of the sadness in her brother-in-law's wife.

So, she spoke to her husband, Tom, about buying out Mary's share of the ranch, as it had been willed to her by Scott. To set her free and prevent strife between family members, especially the two sons of Scott Peterson.

Janice entered the family room and stood before the roaring fire to warm herself.

"It's Christmas Day, but just doesn't feel the same without Scott." She commented.

Mary just sat in silence. Her situation just seemed to bury her in deep despair; oblivious to any conversation directed at her.

Janice turned and stared at Mary for a few moments, wondering how to breach the subject her husband agreed to.

She understood the lost look on Mary's face and had an idea of the pain in her heart, not from Scott's death but from the loss of her true love.

"Sweetheart, you need a change. It will not be good for you here now. Scott is gone, and his two boys are like horny stallions, just waiting for their chance at you. For your sake, you need to find that young man and go to him."

That caught Mary's attention, and she glanced up, a quizzical expression taking the place of the lost look on her face.

"Oh yes," Janice continues. "I know about the encounter at the bank. You haven't been the same since."

"I've been true to my husband!" Mary snaps back.

Janice smiled the smile of an older woman who had seen a little of life. "I know, dear. And everyone knows you've been the perfect wife to Scott. But your heart really belongs to someone else, doesn't it?"

"I've been true to my husband." Mary repeated, but softly, all the time nodding her head yes.

"Your husband is dead. Gone to glory. You are free of that obligation, Mary."

Mary looked at Janice and then back at the flames in the fireplace. Nodding her head in agreement again as tears filled her eyes once more.

Janice sat down next to Mary and took her right hand, cradling it.

"Sometimes I've felt more of a mother to you than a sister-in-law. I love you as if you were my child. I hope you understand that and understand why I want you to find that young man!"

"I do, Janice, yes, you've been more of a mother to me than my own, may she rest in peace. But how do I live?"

"You'll live. And live nicely. I've asked Tom to buy out your share of the ranch. He agreed. We made a fortune on the last sale of horses to the army last month. He is offering ten thousand dollars in government-backed gold certificates for your share."

"Ten thousand—that much? That's a fortune! But what of the boys? I still don't understand why Scott left me half of the ranch?"

"You don't know this but your Papa saved Scott's life years ago when they were both in the Cavalry, back before the war. Your Papa was worried about your future after he passed away and asked Scott to honor his debt by taking you as his wife. Scott was afraid of the trouble it might cause if you were forced to marry one of the boys after he was gone, or be cast out of the family penniless if you refused. So, he made sure you were secure by leaving his share of this place to you. Giving you some control over your future!

Tom and I know now that your future isn't here but out there somewhere on a cattle drive.

As for the boys, Tom said he would include them in his will. That would keep them here and not pursuing you. That would be better than one killing the other and then marrying you so they can inherit their father's half of the ranch through you, possibly selling to a stranger."

Mary snorted a laugh. "That'll never happen. I'm not a whore to be passed from one brother to another."

Janice sat back against the couch, shaking her head in frustration. "Oh, the intrigue in this family is so biblical it isn't even funny. No, you're not. I'm not implying that."

Janice sat up, turned so her knee touched Mary's through their heavy skirts, holding Mary's face with both hands. Tears rolled down the cheeks of both women.

"Get out while you can, Mary. Get out and find that young man. Take Tom's offer, go to Dodge City and wait for that young man to arrive with his damn old smelly cows. Marry him, raise a passel of youngens and be happy, my dear."



Rattlesnake Pass



On his ride back off the plateau, Jim Stead had a sense of someone watching him until he reached the pass through the rocks that was home to a big family of rattlesnakes.

Pulling his pistols and spurring his pony into a gallop, he rode the two hundred odd yards, yelling and shooting to scare the snakes back into the rocks on each side of the pass. Only once did he have to shoot a rattler. A huge one, coiled to strike, not giving ground or retreating. Its head exploded into a bloody mess as the bullet passed through its open mouth, through the back of its head as it was striking.

That afternoon, Jim rode back into the cow camp.

"Welcome back, Jim!" Lester hollers before anyone else noticed it was he who rode back in.

"Howdy, cookie, you got anything to eat? I'm starved!"

"Yeah, brother, let me fix you right up!"

Jim smiled as he pulled his saddle, blanket and harness off his pony and handed it over to Ricky, who was in charge of the remuda that afternoon.

He realized he liked this new Lester. Much more affable than the former cantankerous cookie he knew before.

While he was sitting cross-legged with his plate in his lap, Gallagher and McGowan rode into the camp from inspecting the herd.

"When did you get in?" Emmitt hollers from the back of Strawberry.

Looking up, waving a gravy-soaked biscuit, Stead acknowledged his boss's question.

"About an hour ago or so. Cookie has been trying for the past few minutes to get me fat. This is my second helping."

"Didn't you take any grub with you yesterday?"

"Some jerky, that's all. Spent most hours on horseback, no time to eat except at night before sacking out."

"Well, I see you didn't get bit!" McGowan exclaims as he poured himself a cup of Arbuckle.

"No—no, I managed not to!" the scout replied with a laugh. "Although there was plenty of opportunity to have done so. That pass is crawling with rattlers!"

Gallager sat down next to Jim and asks.

"Can we get the herd through there? And what kind of grazing is on the other side?"

Stead sat his empty plate on the ground in front of him, wiping his mouth and mustache with the back of his hand and fingers.

"The land looks as if cattle have never touched it. I did see some buffalo, but few. It's a good thirty miles of plateau, with rocks every so often and low mountains just west.

This is Indian country—Chickasaw land. I didn't see any, but it sure felt like I was being watched." He said, stretching his legs out and leaning back on his elbows. "I'm not sure, as I didn't ride that far, but I think the river cuts through or at least there's a converse where another stream feeds the Cimarron. That's our way out of there and back onto the river plains to Dodge. This pass with the crawlers appears to be an old channel that fed a dried-up river centuries ago."

"You sure?"

"No, not one hundred percent. But I remember several streams feeding the Cimarron further north on

previous drives. At least we can bypass the burned-out piece of this prairie. Few would know about it. As I said, it's Chickasaw territory." He adds.

"Alrighty, Fred, are you okay with this?"

McGowan drawled a question to his wife's father.

"What choice do we have? Hopefully, the Redskins are amiable, willing to let us pass with, say, a few head of cattle as payment."

McGowan grinned. His wife's father was becoming a seasoned cattleman.

"Okay, we go first thing in the morning. Jim, we need your suggestions on how we scatter those rattlers before we run the herd through."

The next morning as the sun rose, the cowboys of the Gallager herd waited for the signal to cross the river toward the opening in the jagged rocky cliffs that everyone started calling Rattlesnake Pass. McGowan, Stead, Morolez and Holcomb, each with four six shooters, two in holsters hanging off each side of their saddle horns and two holsters draped across their waists, buscadero style, plus their rifles, crossed the shallow stream and sat on their ponies outside the mouth of the pass.

Their intent was to make as much noise as possible to scare the rattlesnakes out of the flat grassy bottom and into the rocks and crevices in the cliffs. The rattlers were just coming out of their dens as the sun rose, to warm themselves on the gray/white rocks when the four men started their ride forward and stopped as they observed the creatures coming out of their lairs like some horrible nightmare. The four men looked at each other in wonder before Emmitt gave the word.

"Gentlemen, let's make some noise!" McGowan exclaimed.

They opened up with a barrage of rifle fire into the floor of the pass and its grass. Four rifles, thirteen

shots each, created such a rumble of fire and smoke in such a narrow canyon, the sound reverberating off the jagged pass walls; it had exactly the effect they wanted.

The rattlers squirmed for their dens and nests. A few coiled themselves at first, only to be shot; the rest snaked their way back to safety in their holes.

Another big one, like Jim shot the day before, coiled its body up in front of Ricky Morolez a few yards away from the front of his pony.

Like a big stick waving in the wind, its rattles singing the critter's warning song, the rattler was just waiting for Ricky's pony to come into striking distance.

Morolez dispatched it with one quick shot from his set of sixguns.

"Damn, that was a monster! It was big around as my arm!" Holcomb exclaims.

"Yeah, there are some old grandpas in this place!" Stead remarked back.

As the four men moved into the pass, Fred Gallagher signaled with his cavalry hat for the herd to move across the river.

The herd, passing the halfway mark in the pass, were moving along fine when the four riders reached the end, stopped reloaded their weapons and split into two groups riding against the flow of the herd on the outside, occasionally shooting into the rocks at any movement.

The idea was just to keep the snakes from appearing which would startle the cattle. The pass was no place for a stampede.

Approximately two hours later, the herd had passed through the pass, followed by the wagons and the newsmen's wagon.

Lester stopped twice to pick up several dead rattlesnakes, cutting off their heads and tossing the carcasses into the supply/chuck wagon.

"Dinner!" he tells Charley and Jessie. "Fried rattlers almost as good as chicken."



Feed the Hungry and Save Your Hide!



With the pass completed successfully, the cowboys, with a lot of stress off their souls, drove the herd northwest the rest of the day. Across what appeared to be virgin grasslands. Untouched by previous cattle drives.

Reaching a small stream of water cutting through the landscape in the late afternoon, they pulled up, watered and bedded the herd and made camp.

Everyone was in a good mood. Passing through that snake-infested cut in the rocks into this seemingly untouched grassland appeared as a good omen to them.

"Did we just ride into the promised land?" Chapman asks as he rode up to Lester's wagon before they reached the stream.

"Not promised to us—Injun territory!"

"Oh! —well didn't the Israelites take the promised land from the Canaanites?"

"Yep, but they weren't Chickasaw's!"

"Meaning the Chickasaws are meaner than the Canaanites?"

"I would not want to find out, Jose," Lester replied, laughing.

"The Indians the only reason you think no one has come this way?"

"Probably and them damn critters of Satan!"

"Do you think we'll run into them soon?"

"The Indians? They are probably watching us now." Lester replied, looking off to the horizon.

"Guess I should clean my weapons." Chapman says as he pulled back up to the left drag position assigned to him.

That night, the temperature dropped into the thirties with a strong north wind. It seemed to the drovers that the fair weather was over and winter had finally shown its teeth. The drovers thankful for the tents bought back in Waxahachie.

The supper that night was an interesting fare for the men. Lester and Charley had gutted, skinned and tossed into the big Dutch oven, filled with boiling beef tallow, at least two hundred or more rattler backbones/rib combinations. Where they were fried like chicken. With each piece a golden crispy delicacy.

Most of the men, including the two newspaper fellows, were hesitant to try it until they saw the vaqueros' making pigs of themselves eating the snake meat.

Before long, the two hundred-plus pieces were gone. Cowboys with full bellies praising the cook and his help. Rattlesnake bones lay all over the ground.

Kurkowski filling four pages in his notes concerning this unusual meal.

The next morning the herd was just moving out when in the distance about thirty riders appeared over the horizon to the west.

"Okay, here we go, gents." Holcomb quipped. All the drovers unstrapped their sixgun tie-downs, some riding up to the Conestoga wagon to retrieve their rifles.

Emmitt signaled with his Stetson to halt the herd as he, Gallagher and Stead rode out some quarter mile and stopped, waiting on the riders, who by that time had been identified as Chickasaw Indians.

The group of Indians stopped as three of their party rode forward to the three men.

When they stopped, both parties held the universal hand sign of peace and greeting up.

The leader of the group spoke rapid Spanish.

Emmitt held his hand up, then asked if they spoke English. "Habla de Inglis? (you speak English)

"No, Señor." was the leaders replies.

"Un momento Por-favor?" (one moment please)

The shake of the head no, allowed Emmitt to make the sign of wait and he sent Stead back to the herd for Carlos Navarro. The only drover he knew that had experience negotiating in Spanish with Indians.

Moments passed into minutes before Carlos was seen riding quickly up to the small group of redskins and drovers.

"Si, Señor boss?" Carlos asks as he drew up his pony.

"Ask what he wants in Spanish?" Emmitt instructed. Moments of rapid Spanish that Emmitt could not follow, then Carlos turned to his trail boss.

"He says we are trespassing on their land. But because they are short of meat, not wanting to kill the buffalo, as there are few, he wants one hundred head of steers.!"

"One hundred?" Gallagher almost shouted. Which startled the Indian chief.

"No way in hell. Too many. You tell him that!"

More rapid Spanish

The chief turned and signaled to his braves waiting, who immediately charged forward and surrounded the three men.

"Now what?" Fred asks, realizing his quick response wasn't the thing to do.

"We talk." Emmitt replied.

"Carlos, tell him we will give them thirty head."

"Si, Señor boss!" Carlos replied, fighting the sudden rise of fear from the pit of his stomach.

Following a few more moments of rapid Spanish, Carlos again informed his boss what they wanted. Sixty steers.

As he spoke that, the drovers, led by Stead, who had remained back, rode up and surrounded the Indians.

Rene pulled up and shouted out in Spanish.

"You kill our leader, Mr. McGowan and Mr. Gallagher; we kill you—pronto!"

The Indian chief spoke again after seeing that there was going to be a confrontation and that they weren't in a good position.

Carlos turned to Emmitt. "They have babies to feed, hungry women. Asking for fifty steers now."

"Okay. Offer thirty steers, ten cows who are carrying and two bulls. Tell him they should start their own herd and feed the babies and women." Gallagher responded.

The Chief, now understanding the heart of these white men for their families, babies and women, agreed and raised his voice to his braves, who backed off, passing through the drovers' line quietly and forming a group some distance away.

Gallagher rode up beside the chief, pulled the glove off his right hand and held it out. The chief stared at the offered hand for a moment, not understanding what he wanted.

Then when Carlos says in Spanish, "It's a sign of agreement among honorable men," —he took it, smiling while shaking vigorously. Both laughing. The laughter spreading amongst all the men and braves.

An hour later, the Chickasaws with much whooping and hollering, drove off their newly gained cattle, happy with their bounty collected.

Gallagher looked at his son-in-law and remarked as they pointed their ponies back to the herd. "Always feed the hungry and save your hide."

"You know what the Chief said of us, Señor?" Carlos asked as they were riding back.

"No, what did he say?"

"That they did not want to fight crazy white men who pass through the devil's passage unharmed. Or eat the devil's pets. Seems it was bad medicine to fight us."

"Is that what they call it?" Gallagher laughed, referring to the rattlesnake pass.

"Bad medicine? Ha, little did they know—thank God!" Emmitt responded, chuckling. "Let's get this bunch of critters moving. Dodge is waiting!"

"Yeah, it is!" Gallagher says quietly.



Two Ladies and a Ranger



The locomotive sighed its last gasp of steam, as it came to a halt at the Dodge station platform. Of the passengers disembarking the cars were two ladies and a Texas Ranger escort. Even though they were excited during the trip, they were glad to have completed the long journey.

Mama Rosita had never been into the interior of the country any great distance. Only visiting the seaports. During the time she sailed with her late husband Maurice. This trip was of extreme excitement for her.

Verna McGowan and Ranger Armstrong had done some traveling. Verna to Philadelphia and Armstrong to Pensacola, Florida and Louisiana. So, they appreciated Lafitte's exuberance.

But Kansas was an unknown country to all of them. Open, windswept plains, gently rolling hills, the Arkansas River running through the middle of town, down for the winter but still flowing albeit just a stream now.

The country was so different to central and lower Texas, except for Armstrong, who likened it to the western Llano Estacado part of Texas. The staked plains.

They checked into the Dodge House hotel on the north side of town, which was considered the safe side. The train tracks considered the red line between polite society and the wild side to the south.

Their intent later was to visit the City Marshall's

office to give notice of their presence before Ranger Armstrong took the train to the capital city, to pick up the extradition warrants.

During their meal, three well-dressed men walked in and sat at a table across the room from the two women and the Ranger. All three glanced over at the new comers noticing the Rangers badge on Armstrong and the two ladies. One young, apparently just showing she was with child and an older Spanish-appearing woman. Still in her prime.

Mama Rosita's expression on her face immediately darkened when she noticed the men as they entered the dining room. One man had most of his left ear gone. She knew instinctively who he was and therefore who the others were.

Ranger Armstrong picked up on her change in demeanor instantly. "Say nothing; --- don't look at them, Mrs. Lafitte. We'll talk later in the Marshall's office."

Verna, unaware of the three men until the Ranger spoke, understood the change in her grandmother's mood.

They finished their meals quietly, stood and exited the dining room as if there was nothing wrong.

"That was him, and I assume the other two! I can't believe I'm this close to those murderers." Rosita says as they were walking down the boardwalk toward the Marshall's office.

"You sure?" Armstrong asks.

"Yes, I gave him that shredded ear the night they tried to take us by force!"

"Then it's too dangerous for you two ladies to stay at the hotel. Maybe the Marshall will know of a boarding house with a vacancy." The ranger replied as they stepped onto the boardwalk that led to the Marshall's office.

Standing outside of the office door stood a tall, young man, wearing a charcoal-colored frock coat,

striped wool trousers of the same color; his coat pulled back over his sixgun on his hip, smoking a thin cigar.

He was staring down the street the opposite way from the three who were approaching, he quickly turned to the clumping sound of heeled boots on the boardwalk, his Deputy Marshall's badge glinting in the fading light of the setting sun on his vest.

Verna stopped immediately. The young man's face, older, weathered, but still showing his youth, struck her dumbfounded for a few moments.

Mama Rosita and Ranger Armstrong stopped a few steps ahead and looked back at Verna questioningly. Then seeing her stare, looked at the Deputy.

Verna just stared at the young deputy, not believing her eyes. The deputy Marshall saw she was staring at him; then recognition hit him as well, his mouth dropping open in total surprise.

Verna was the first to speak.

"Joel?" she asks quietly.

"Sis?" he responded with his own question.

"Is it you, my brother?"

"I reckon so, Verna. What the hell are you doing here in Dodge?" he asks as he walked toward her and gave her a hug and kissed her on her right cheek.

That's when Ranger Armstrong interrupted the conversation. "Excuse me. I'm Captain John Armstrong of the Texas Rangers, here to see your Marshall on Texas and Kansas legal business. These ladies are accompanying me concerning this. Mrs. McGowan appears to be your sister; therefore, you are involved in this business I spoke of.

Can we go inside where it is more private?"

"Yes sir. Step right in, please. —McGowan?" Joel said questioning, looking for confirmation from his sister, as he opened the office door, then looked down at Rosita and a big smile leaped across his face.

"Mama Rosita?"

"Si, Joel, my son. Si, it's me. My goodness, you have grown so much!" She exclaims as she reached up to hug him around his neck before passing through the open door.

Inside, Joel quickly collected the chairs from the desks and standing against the walls for them to sit.

Still not believing her eyes, Verna watched the movements of her older brother. Amazed at the coincidence of this encounter. He was so smooth and confident in his movements. Not like the nervous, jerky little boy she remembered.

They made formal introductions this time as they waited for the Marshall.

"What is this all about, Ranger?" Joel asks, holding his sisters' hand.

"Let's wait until your boss comes in. I rather not have to repeat this several times."

"I understand—Mama, Sis, where's Pa and how is he doing?"

Verna didn't know how to tell him what their father was doing, so she just blurted it out.

"He and my husband are driving a herd of cattle to Dodge. They should be here in a week, at least by mid-February."

Joel laughed as hard as he could. His head thrown back, slapping his right leg.

"Pa's driving a herd of cattle? And you are married? I can't believe any of this! You married and Pa a cowpuncher? Oh, my God—!" Joel Gallagher laughed again.

"Hard to believe, yes, but true. And your sister is with child. You will be an uncle soon, my son." Rosita joined in the laughter.

City Marshall Bat Masterson walked into the office during the middle of the laughter, stopped, looked at Joel questioningly and then at Ranger Armstrong.

“Am I interrupting anything?”

Joel stood up, as did John Armstrong.

“No, boss, we were waiting for you. May I introduce Texas Ranger Captain John Armstrong, my sister Verna and my granny Mama Rosita Lafitte?”

Armstrong and Masterson shook hands before he gently took the hands of the two women in greeting.

With no more chairs to sit in, Masterson sat on the corner of his desk, his cane laid up against the desk, and asked.

“Okay, there’s a reason the state of Texas is here. I presume it’s regarding the letter I received a month ago concerning three cattle buyers here in town, and I presume you ladies are part of that reason— Ranger Armstrong?” Masterson asks with sudden recognition. “You’re the one who captured that Texas gunman Hardin? I guess you have the floor?”

The next two hours were an eye-opener for Joel Gallagher and Bat Masterson. They knew the three men in question and were surprised at their past histories. Masterson didn’t like Fred Gallagher’s intent and told the ladies and Armstrong they needed to head off trouble before it started with their father and the three wanted cattle buyers.

They also agreed that the two women were in danger if any one of the three finally recognized the grandmother, which meant they needed to move out of the Dodge House into lodging on the outskirts of town. A boarding house run by two elderly spinster sisters.

Ranger Armstrong was to take the next train to Hays City to the State Attorney General to collect the issued arrest and extradition warrants to be handed to Marshall Masterson before Ranger Armstrong could take custody and remove the accused felons from Kansas back to Texas

Deputy Gallagher was to accompany the Ranger and his prisoners since he was a material witness as were the two ladies.

Until the Texas Ranger returned from the capital with the warrants, everyone was to act normal, not to give any indication of what was to happen.

Verna and Mama Rosita were to stay out of the main part of town to avoid contact at any cost with the three men. Joel was also ordered to avoid the men.

When the herd arrived, Joel was to ride out and confer with his father and his brother-in-law.

Ordering them to stay out of Dodge until summoned to the Marshall’s office. And not to do anything else upon reaching Dodge.



Three Ladies from Texas



Under the cover of darkness, Verna McGowan and Rosita Lafitte returned to the Dodge House, hurriedly packed what few things they had unpacked from their luggage and met Joel with a buggy at the front steps.

Quietly, they left the hotel to the west end of town where a boarding house, run by the two spinster sisters, the Van Horns, sat among several tall oaks, bare of leaves, roughly a hundred yards from the Arkansas River. A house much like the building that was Gallagher's Inn in Round Rock.

There, Joel confirmed there was a room, just one unoccupied, that was satisfactory. Making all the banging noises of moving luggage, the two women signed the registry, explaining they might be there a month or longer, paid in advance and got settled.

After Joel kissed both women, he took his leave and returned the buggy to the stables.

The next morning at breakfast, the two met another woman from Texas, and three other boarders.

One identified himself as Jason Albright, a cattle buyer for Armour & Company, Chicago.

"Hello, good morning. I'm Mary Peterson, from Texas." The other woman introduced herself as she sat down at the table.

"Good morning, I'm Verna McGowan and this is my granny Mama Rosita Lafitte. We are from Texas as well. What brings you to Dodge?"

"I'm waiting for my future." Mary says with confidence.

"I'm sorry, your future?"

"Yes, my future is scouting for a herd of cattle due in here soon."

Verna looked at her grandmother and giggled.

"Oh, your man!" Mama Rosita stated slightly amused at the way Mary described him.

"He isn't yet, but I hope he will be." Mary replied.

"Would that be the Gallagher herd?" Verna asks.

"Why yes? You know of this?"

"Oh yes, we know it quite well. My father is Fred Gallagher and owns the herd. My husband is trail boss of the same."

"What a coincidence!" Mama Rosita exclaimed!

"First your brother and now this young woman in waiting!"

"Who is your future? You said the scout?"

"Yes, James Stead. That is, if he'll accept me. I was a married woman when we last met. I've since been widowed, sold my share of the ranch my husband owned to my brother-in-law. Came here to see if James will take me back."

"Do you love him? Does he love you?"

"He did until he learned I was married. Now I don't know. I'm here to find out. And yes, my love for him is still strong."

"How is it you married another man, dear?"

Mama Rosita asks.

"My Papa ran James off six years ago. Said he was just a saddle tramp. Worthless, no future. He arranged my marriage to an older man. Scott Peterson.

My Papa had cancer, and Mama was already deceased. He wanted me to be taken care of."

"I see, an arranged marriage. How old are you—where are you from, Mary?" Mama Rosita was

getting really nosy by this time, as Verna shook her head no at her grandmother's questioning.

Mary took her first bite of eggs before she replied. "I grew up in Richardson, Texas. My late husband's ranch is southwest of Waxahachie, and I am twenty-six."

"An older gentleman?"

"Yes, he was sixty-four when we married two years ago. He died from a stroke. That is what the doctors said."

"So sorry for your loss, dear. How did you know the Gallagher herd was coming here?"

"They passed by Waxahachie and sold a few head of cattle to the city fathers. There had been a cougar problem and almost all the cattle for food was killed off. I accidentally bumped into James at the bank as he was collecting their payment for the cows."

"Fate, my dear. It sounds like fate is steering your life. You made a wrong turn because of your Papa. But fate has corrected your journey."

"This young man, James, he'll be happy when he sees you." Mama Rosita said, knowingly looking at Verna. The old female pirate knew a thing or two about life and fate.

"Oh, I very much hope you are right. I've been so worried he will reject me, like he did at the bank."

"He was right to do that back then. You were married. Now it's different."

All three women nodded their heads in agreement.

Albright, listening, didn't say a word, but smiled around a bite of toast.



Trails End



The next ten days were just routine. Nothing major happened. Much to the relief of the cowboys of Gallagher's herd.

On the eleventh day, Stead came riding back to inform the Trail Boss and Ramrod/owner that the next large stream up ahead lead down through the bluffs to the Cimarron River. It was a good fording spot as well, with the river down.

At the same time as they were discussing the stream as it cut down to the river, Gallagher pointed at the sky to the north. "Looks like a blue norther coming!"

"Yeah, that's all we need. Bad weather, so close to completing this drive." Stead replied.

"We are lucky it's been this calm and warm most of the drive." Emmitt reminds them.

"Yeah, remember that greasy mud? Even the horses couldn't stand up!" Fred said, reminding them not all the weather was good.

All three laughed, even Stead, choosing not to think about that next day.

"How many more days till we reach Dodge?" Gallagher asked Stead.

"I'd say about eight to ten days. We cut away after crossing the river to the northwest up ahead.

That's about two miles, then it's a straight drive to Dodge."

"That'll put us into the end of the month, first of February." Gallagher calculated.

Moments later, the wind out of the north blew up, dropping temperatures dramatically within the hour. As the cattle were moving, riders quickly rode up to the Conestoga, where their equipment was now stored, to fetch their heavy coats and their slickers or ponchos to block off the icy wind.

Before nightfall, with the herd watered and bedded down, it started to snow. Not heavy at first, but light, small flakes.

The Vaqueros, not accustomed to such a change in weather, suffered the most. Complaining in Spanish all evening, stopping in their tents to put on an extra layer of shirts and long Johns. They were cursing Mother Nature in rapid Spanish. So much, the other drovers started to laugh at their discomfort.

By morning, the ground had six inches of wet snow; the tents sagged from the weight on their tops, with dripping water in little streams cutting through the snow-laden roofs, because of the body heat within.

Lester and his cook crew stayed by the campfires as much as possible, with both five-gallon coffee pots bubbling away. Cooking breakfast for the cowboys.

The cattle and the remuda of horses were standing with their butts toward the wind or lying down the same way, close in as much as possible to each other for body warmth.

The seventeenth of January was one miserable morning for both animals and men.

"These tents need Franklins!" One man exclaimed.

"With what will you burn in them? There's nothing here but prairie grass!" Another shot back.

"Burn the damn Conestoga!"

Another offered. "Why, it's just weather. Are you cold?"

"Si, mucho frio!" Rene complained.

"Suck it up, cowboy. It ain't nearly as bad as it's gonna get!" Holcomb laughed. Speaking from experience, he knew what was in store for them.

"Ah, caramba, you need not tell me that!" Rene spits back as he tried to pull his boots over two pairs of socks. All the socks he had.

Murdock, laughing, pulled out his guitar and started singing a silly song about his butt freezing to his saddle, but it's gonna be alright, because they will soon finish driving the doggies. Both tents of men were laughing in spite of their misery. They knew it would get worse, but they knew the drive was near completion, and they had that to look forward to.

Eight days of freezing temperatures, miserable mornings, unhappy animals, and then Stead rode in with the best news. Dodge's holding pens were just a few miles away.

Emmitt ordered camp to be setup two more miles ahead. Shortly later that afternoon, two riders appeared looking for the trail boss.

They were from a herd, bossed by Slim Jamison, foraging on the southeast side of the town, close to Fort Dodge, and didn't want Gallagher's herd mixing in with theirs.

Their plan was to wait until early spring and sell then, letting their cattle fatten to get a better price.

Gallagher and McGowan understood that and agreed to keep their herd to the southwest of the town until moving them to the rail stockyards to make their sale. They would not use the holding pens either, just let the cattle free graze.

When the two riders left, another lone rider appeared in the distance. Emmitt rode out to him, expecting another representative from the other herd, trail bossed by a man named Ferguson, that was sitting out the winter.

As Emmitt closed up, he could see this fella wasn't a cowpuncher. He was dressed nicely, with a big

buffalo overcoat keeping the chill off. An expensive flat-brimmed, low-crown black plainsman hat kept his head warm.

He sat tall in the saddle and resembled a younger Fred in the face.

"Howdy!" He greeted Emmitt as they pulled up next to each other.

"Howdy." Emmitt replied.

"I'm City Deputy Marshall Gallagher of Dodge!" Emmitt was silent. Dumbfounded for the moment. A sinking feeling in his stomach yet was curious about this deputy.

"I'm Emmitt McGowan, the trail boss of this here herd."

"Who's the owner? Is he with the herd?"

"Yeah!" Emmitt took a chance and spoke. "Your Pa, Fred Gallagher. You must be Joel?"

The deputy was silent for a moment as the wind tugged at the fur on his buffalo-skin coat. Then he smiled.

"My Pa, with a bunch of cows? What happened to his inn in Round Rock?"

"He still has it."

"He needs to go back there. What he has planned will only get him thrown into prison or hanged."

"Y'all know?"

"Yeah, Mama Rosita and my sister have come here to stop him. And you. I take it you're my brother-in-law?"

Emmitt, shocked speechless again for a moment, wondered why Verna was in Dodge?

Reaching his gloved right hand out over his saddle horn to greet with a shake his brother-in-law, he replied.

"We need to talk. Ride back with me and let's grab some hot coffee and talk this out. Your Pa is gonna be surprised!"

"Not half as much as I was when I saw my sister and granny!" Joel replied in a more relaxed voice, as they turned their rides to the cow camp.



Lost Son Found



Fred Gallagher saw the two riders approaching but didn't recognize his son until they were within talking distance over the insistent wind.

Like Emmitt before him, Fred was flabbergasted when he realized this was his son Joel. Tears welled up in his eyes as he realized this. Wiping them away, he walked up to Joel and gave him a hug after he had dismounted his pony.

"Pa!" Joel greeted his father with recognition.

"Joel! —my lost son, found—. My God, you've gotten tall. Let's get outta this wind. Come into the tent." Gallagher says to his son.

Inside, Lester brought them hot steaming cups of coffee and then left.

"It's good to see you, Joel. Looks like you've found your way in life. A deputy Marshall?"

"City Deputy Pa. There's a difference between a city and U.S. Deputy Marshall."

"I understand, son. So, what brings you out to the camp?"

"Pa, if you enter Dodge before it's okay by the City Marshall. He'll arrest you."

The only sounds heard for a good two minutes, as the three sipped their coffee, was the wind beating on the tent canvas and the occasional voices of the drovers outside.

"Reason?" Fred finally broke the silence between them.

"We know why you are here; Pa. Sis and Mama Rosita and a Texas Ranger informed us."

"Verna and Rosita are here in Dodge?"

"Yeah."

The bottom dropped out of Fred's stomach. He didn't expect this. His own daughter interfering with his business.

"Why's the Ranger here?"

"He's not right now. Took the train a few days ago to Hays City. Picking up extradition warrants for the three men accused of assaulting and murdering Ma!"

"Lord have mercy, God answered my prayers! Son, I gave up on doing anything. Was counting on the Lord to show me the way."

"Well, I'll tell my boss, but you need to remain out of town until the Ranger returns."

"Joel, I had a deal struck with these fellas to sell my cattle. After that, I did not know what to do—challenge them, I guess—just didn't think that far ahead. To bullheaded to reason this out, I guess! Just wanted to settle the score for your Ma's death! For what they did to her!"

"Sis took care of it for you; Pa. Sis isn't a stupid woman. She's smart, smarter than the two of us combined. Maybe combining her husband with us." Joel smiled as he looked at Emmitt.

"I'll accept that evaluation." Emmitt laughed.

"You cornered that cattle rustling gang in Texas." Joel comments in admiration.

"Well, yeah, but I had help."

"I know, Sis filled me in on the details she knew. And it was in the papers here. I didn't know you were my brother-in-law then." Turning back to his father, Joel continued.

"So far, no one has recognized you as Ma's husband. They may have forgotten the name Gallagher. They never asked me anything about Texas, or if I was from Texas, or if I was your son. So, chances are they have forgotten the name Gallagher."

"But not the crime!" Emmitt commented.

"No, they are guilty, Mama Rosita pointed out the injury to the left side of Comal's head. Most of the top of his ear shot away. She said she did that aiming at his nose but missed when he moved his head.

He said it was a war injury. But never said where he got it. Wears his hair long to cover it up. Comal also said he was with the 42nd Massachusetts Regiment and a POW, the latter half of the war. But never spoke of Galveston."

"You remember that night?" Emmitt asks.

"Some of it. Shooting that soldier in the back of his shoulder before he could take out Granny and her sticking that sword of hers into his kidney when he turned to face me. The rest is a blur."

"That's enough. You have bad dreams because of that?" Emmitt asks again. He remembered he did after killing that Indian who was trying to do him in when he was fifteen.

"Use to when younger, now not so much." He says, glancing at his father. "I've grown up. Been in a couple of shootings. Stuff like that hardens you."

Both Fred Gallagher and Emmitt agreed, nodding their heads.

"Okay, but again, we had a deal with these fellas to sell our cattle to their company, Red Rooster."

"We know. They will want to come out here to inspect the cows, but."

"Steers, son or cattle—not cows." Fred corrected his son.

"Cattle—when they do, someone from the office will ride with them to keep things quiet—just in case."

"What about me? I want to see my wife."

"Marshall Masterson said you both can visit the boarding house where the two women are staying. But to stay out of town."

"Where is it located?"

"West side, north of the river, on the outskirts of town. There are a few big trees around it. Hard to miss."

"Okay, it's getting late. You are welcome to stay the night, son."

"No thanks, I need to get back and update the Marshall."

"By the way, what did you say the Marshall's name was? Masterson?"

"Yeah. Bat Masterson. His brother Ted was gunned down months ago on Front Street, south of the tracks, when he was City Marshall. Bat's touchy about people carrying handguns. Concealed or open carry. Both sides of the tracks now.

When your men come into town later, they'll need to check their firearms in at the Marshall's office. Let them know that under no circumstances are firearms allowed north of the railway tracks. It's the nice and polite part of town.

The tracks represents the deadline, the boundary between. And after 9pm, walking around there on South Front Street is at their own risk. Not everyone obeys the law about carrying a gun in the Red-light district."

"I can understand that. Waco is like that, nickname is Pistol City, and Fort Worth has a red-light district called 'Hell's Half Acre'. Carrying concealed under their coats or in their coat pockets is common, I'm afraid." Joel's father commented.

"By the way, do you have a James Stead working for you?"

"Jim? Yeah, he's, our scout. Why, is he wanted for something?"

"No!" Joel laughs. "Not unless he has done something to a certain lady. Just tell him, Widow Peterson is waiting to see him—at the same boarding house—she's a looker!" He adds.

"Peterson? Scott Peterson?"

"I'm not familiar with her late husband's first name. Just that he died back in mid-December. She's looking for this Stead."

"That'll blow him off his cayuse." Emmitt laughs.

"Why?"

"They're old romantic friends. Their history is fit for a dime novel."

"I see. Well, Pa, I need to head back. It's getting downright chilly outside."

"Chilly? You have a knack for understating things son. That has apparently never changed about you. Be careful going back. We'll see you in a few days. And I'll stay out of Dodge until told otherwise."

"Ok Pa. Emmitt, nice to meet my brother-in-law. Heard some wild things about you with the capture of the Jenkins gang."

"You too, Joel. Ride safely Deputy. By the way, we have two newsmen who rode with us on this drive. Mind if they ride with you back to Dodge? I suspect they'd appreciate a warm bed about now."

"Sure, are they ready to go?"

"Give them a few minutes to load up their buckboard and hook up their team."

"Okay, tell them to hurry. Looks like it's fixin' to snow again."

"Right!" Emmitt walked over to the tent the newsmen were sitting in, informs the two that the City Deputy would escort them to Dodge if they could be ready quickly.

"We wanted to record the penning and shipment of the cattle. I guess we can do that while lodging in the city." Hans quipped.

"Yeah, in a nice warm bed for a change!" Jacob commented also.

"Thanks Mr. McGowan. It's been a very interesting three months." Hans says shaking Emmitt's hand.

"You're welcome gentlemen." He says to both newsmen.

Half an hour later, the three rode off as Fred watched his son disappear into the gloom of night.

"Good to see him again. The Lord sure works in mysterious ways, Emmitt. You noticed that?"

"Yeah, I have," he replied as he thought of seeing Verna again. Happy and a little miffed, she thought of this solution instead of her father. She was one hell of a woman, he realized.



Family Reunion



Around noon the next day, Fred Gallagher, Emmitt McGowan and Jim Stead rode out of the cow camp toward the boarding house on the outskirts of Dodge. Around three o'clock they reached the river, crossed over and followed it up to where the boarding house stood about one hundred yards away.

As they rode up three abreast, three women, wrapped in heavy cloaks, exited the building and stood on the veranda waiting.

When the three ponies came up and stopped at the hitching rail in front of the veranda, to the right side of the walkway, everyone just stared at each other.

Emmitt focused on his wife Verna, and so did Fred and Mama Rosita.

James Stead sat still, not taking his eyes off Mary as the other two men climbed off their ponies and tied their reins to the rail.

Suddenly Stead, choking down sudden emotions and afraid of showing them in front of everyone, whipped his mount around and rode back the way they came in a gallop.

Emmitt and Fred watched in surprise as he rode off, then looked at Mary Peterson, who put her hands to her face and ran back inside to her room crying.

Emmitt walked up the steps to his wife and embraced her tightly, kissing her passionately.

"Hey you two. Come up for air." Fred laughed while hugging his mother-in-law.

Finally, the two parted long enough for Verna to embrace her father.

"Let's go inside out of this weather." Rosita says, taking one last glance at the receding figure of Jim Stead in the distance. saying to herself mentally, 'he'll be back.'

Inside, after removing their coats and wraps, Emmitt and Verna once again embraced, unashamed of their show of love for each other in front of their family members and two of the guest boarders, who quickly excused themselves back to their own rooms.

Fred started the conversation after everyone settled down and took seats.

"Daughter, what have you done?"

"Saving my husband's life and yours, Papa.!" She said with emotional force saved for this moment."

"And endangering yours, daughter."

"How Papa? How have I done that?"

"These men are killers. It doesn't matter whether you are a man or a woman. They proved that with your Ma and attacked your Granny's Inn later."

"Yes, and when they find out you are here for that reason, they'll try to finish the job!" Emmitt offered his two cents worth.

"Papa—Papa—what you were planning, including dragging my husband into it, is worth the risk to stop you. Besides Joel is here along with the Ranger and the Marshall's other deputies."

Emmitt, having sat quietly during this heated conversation, interrupted the two of them.

"Verna, your Pa is right. But you are too, by arranging for the Texas Rangers to become involved. But you needn't be here."

"My love, you're not glad to see me?"

"Yes, that's true, but—!"

"Mama and I came here to stop you two from getting yourselves killed or arrested, maybe hanged. It's against the law in today's modern world for vengeance like you were planning."

"Vengeance is the Lord's only—I've re-learned that on this drive, daughter. But Emmitt is correct; it is dangerous for you and Mama Rosita to be here."

"What happened on the cattle drive that made you see what you were planning was wrong?" Mama Rosita asks.

"Many delays, the death of three good men and the injury of one other."

"What about the second Jenkins gang?"

"You know about that?"

"Yes, Ranger Armstrong told me what happened."

"One of our younger cowboys, Tommy Stewart, was murdered. Giving Ranger West a reason to take down the gang. Deputizing us to assist."

"Cowboys? You call yourselves cowboys?"

"Yes, we do."

"That was the beginning," Emmitt adds.

In the next two hours the two men recounted the trail drive, the dangers, losing two more men, McCory and Montoya, and the injury to McDonald, as well as the addition of Morolez, Chapman, Murdock and Cammer. And the incident with Brushy Bill Roberts.

When the recital reached the death of Raul Montoya and the conversion of Lester Cornyn, the women finally understood Fred Gallagher's change of heart and his submitting to the will of the Lord.

Just as they were about to indulge in that conversation, a knock on the front door interrupted them.

One of the spinsters came from the kitchen and answered. It was Jim Stead. Ms. Vên Horn invited him in, but he asked for Mary Peterson to see him on the veranda.

Mama Rosita rose and knocked gently on Mary's bedroom door. "Mary, there's a gentleman out on the veranda who is asking you to speak with him outside."

Opening her door, with a surprised expression on her face, Mary brushed the tears still wet on her cheeks as she nodded okay and closed the door to freshen up.

The room fell silent as she passed through the sitting area and went outside, pulling her heavy cloak tightly around her shoulders.

Jim was standing at the edge of the veranda, looking out past his pony when she appeared.

"James?"

Stead turned and just stared at her for a moment, not knowing what to say. "Why are you here?" he finally croaked.

"I came for you. If you'll have me. Why did you ride away earlier?"

"I couldn't believe you were here. I was also afraid of your reasons, which confused me." He confessed, staring at the decking of the veranda.

"Your husband?" He adds, worried as he raised his head, his eyes meeting hers.

"He died two weeks almost to the day after we met in the bank." She said, not moving from in front of the door.

"Why were you afraid?"

Stead just shook his head. "I didn't need more grief. You don't know what seeing you in that bank did to me, Mary."

"No worse than it did me!" She complains.

"Why did you marry a man of his age?"

"Mama was gone to glory; Papa was dying of cancer. He arranged the marriage for me so I would have some security. Scott was a good man, a loyal husband, but never touched me. He wasn't in good shape, I guess. We even slept in separate rooms. If I had heard from you in any of those years, I'd have refused Papa's demands. But you didn't. I thought you were gone forever from my life!"

"So, you're here now?"

"I have no place left to go. His two sons, a little older than my age, would have fought over me. My sister-in-law arranged for her husband, Scott's brother, to buy my share of the ranch, which was half, left in Scott's will to me. I'm free James, what should have been six years ago, it can be now. If you want me?"

"So now you are a widow?"

Mary grinned. "A rich widow!"

"I don't want your money. This drive will give me enough to buy my place. And start a herd. I just want you." He adds.

"I want you too, forever and ever. I have the money to help with your dream, even if you don't want it. It's mine, and I'll spend it or not spend it as I please!"

Jim laughs lightly at her stubbornness, then took two steps toward her as she flew into his grasp. Arms wrapped around each other, their lips met, years of pent-up passion for each other released in a long kiss. Their bodies ignored the wind, the cold of February. Hugging each other tightly as if afraid of some fate would separate them again.

"Love me forever, Mary," Jim whispers in her ear. Holding her in his arms, he'd forgotten how small she was in size, but not in height. He knew in his heart he'd protect her with his life if necessary. There could be no one else for him.

"Forever, my love. I'll never be a burden, always yours."

"I love you. Never could stop. Will you marry me?"

"Oh yes, yes, yes, James, I'll marry you. I'll be your wife, give you sons or daughters, many children, make a home for you. Help you with your dream! Love you like there's no tomorrow!"

"Then let's do this here in Dodge after my bosses sell the cattle?"

"Do we have to wait that long?" she whispers.

Jim laughed and kissed her again. "Let's go inside; it's gettin' cold!" he continued laughing, pure happiness in his heart. For the first time in his life, he felt complete.

Inside Emmitt and Fred stood as the couple entered the room.

Shutting the door behind him, Stead stood beside Mary, his right arm wrapped around her tiny waist, holding her tight against him. Both of them smiling. Silence filled the room for some moments, as the suspense built.

"Folks, I want to introduce my fiancée, Mary Peterson." Stead said proudly, a smile so big it nearly split his cheeks.

The room erupted in cheers and laughter as the couple were congratulated, hugged and hands shaken.

Mama Rosita hugged Mary, whispering in her ear.

"What did I tell you?"

Mary looked at her, tears of happiness in her eyes. "You were right, thank you." She whispers back.

Emmitt looked out the window and noted out loud the time.

"It's getting' late; we need to head back, gents."

The women protested but accepted the reasoning. There wasn't a place for the men to stay, and they had responsibilities.

Heavy and tight hugs and kisses preceded the three going outside as the women followed, standing on the veranda as their men rode off into the setting winter sun.



Encounter on the Prairie



S nowing again for two days delayed the three buyers of the 'Red Rooster' cattle purchasing company from visiting the cow camp and viewing the herd.

When they finally arrived, they were accompanied by two of Marshall Masterson's deputies. Deputy's Earp and Tilghman.

As they arrived at the cow camp, McGowan was the first to greet them.

"Gentlemen, welcome to the Gallagher herd. Please step down and let me offer you a cup of coffee."

McGowan watched, as each man dismounted. He studied each. Deputy Earp and Tilghman were rather tall, like Fred's son Joel. Sporting the drooping handlebar mustache's popular at the time.

Of the other three, the cattle buyers were of average height. Two clean-shaven, the third, the top of his left ear missing, wore a goatee and mustache like the deputy's. McGowan assumed this was Comal.

"Howdy, I'm Deputy Marshall Wyatt Earp; this is Deputy Marshall John Tilghman." Earp announced and then pointed to the three buyers. Announcing their names as McGowan shook each man's hand. "Preston Comal, Victor Lambert and Sherley Langdon. Owners of the Red Rooster cattle company."

"You gents independent buyers?"

"Yes, we purchase your cattle, ship them and resell to the meat packing companies up north."

"Thank you, gents, for waiting for our herd to arrive." McGowan replied. Then added.

"The owner. Mr. Gallagher is out seeing to the herd. You'll meet him during your inspection."

"Fair enough. We needn't see the cattle, not with this snow just falling again. I believe our offer was fifteen dollars per head? Sight unseen!"

"That's correct." McGowan agreed.

"How many heads did you finally arrive with?"

"Around two thousand seven hundred and thirty-two."

"Well, we'll confirm that count at the stock pens. We'll make payment after the last count."

"Sounds good. Would you gents like a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks, not interested in pulling the old willy out to pee in this cold."

Everyone started laughing at that crude joke, even if it had much truth to it.

"You sure you don't want to meet the owner, Mr. Gallagher?"

"No, we can at the sell. It's getting nasty outside, and we don't want to be caught out in it too long—.by the way, is Mr. Gallagher related to Deputy Marshall Gallagher?"

"Yes, father and son."

"I see. I seem to recall a Gallagher during the war. Was he in the Army?"

"Cavalry. Was severely wounded at Spotsylvania."

"Oh, guess it's a different Gallagher. The one I remember was under Grant during the Vicksburg campaign. I believe he died there."

"Yeah, Gallagher is a common name."

"Well, if you gents want to beat this snowfall before it gets worse, we need to git!" Earp interrupts.

"Okay Deputy. How soon can your men move

the steers to the pens?

"We can start tomorrow."

"Well, make it the next day. The railcars for cattle won't arrive until Friday. That will allow us to count before loading them. With

"Good, we'll start our final drive day after tomorrow." Emmitt agreed, holding his hand out to shake. He felt a chill run down his back when he shook hands with Comal but didn't reveal his discomfort on his face.

After the five rode off into the falling snow, Fred Gallagher rode up a few minutes later. Grabbing a cup of coffee, he joined McGowan in their tent.

"How'd it go?"

"Good. We move the herd to the pens the day after tomorrow."

"Did he seem suspicious?"

"No, in fact I think he has you confused with another Gallagher who was with Grant at Vicksburg."

"That'd be my cousin James. He was killed there."

"Yeah, he said that. Well, hopefully he won't dig too deep."

"Yeah, seeing the dollars out there on four legs, he isn't too worried about the past."

"He didn't even want to see them. Said it was too cold." Emmitt shook his head.

"Really? Well, I'm not that familiar with buying cattle, but when I buy something, I want to see what the hell I'm buying."

"Yeah, me too."

"We have an extra day now, think I'll ride over to the fort and look up my old buddy, Handley."

"With it snowing?"

"Yeah, things are moving too fast. I need to see him before we move the cattle." Fred replies as a powerful gust blew falling snow in past the tent entrance flap.

The following day, after a hearty breakfast, Lester asked if he could run a resupply into Dodge. Gallagher and McGowan agreed, but told him to wait two more days and buy just the bare minimum and only what was needed for a few days. The herd would be moved tomorrow.

A few minutes later, Fred was on his way to Fort Dodge.

Three hours later he passed the Jamison herd, and the drovers' camp some two or three miles southeast of the city and west of Fort Dodge. He noticed only two riders circling the cattle and wondered if that was enough. Emmitt always kept four men on watch.

Another hour later and he reached the fort.

Established on the north bank of the Arkansas River, the crossing there was shallow if not ice cold. He noticed that some of the dug-out quarters along the north bank of the river, for the troops, were still being occupied. Probably warmer than those wooden barracks up on the meadow, he surmised. Even with Ben Franklin heaters, they'd still be drafty cold.

Riding up to the main building, he recognized it as an impressive structure. Sporting a wide veranda with railing, like his inn in Round Rock, with two floors and chimneys at each end of the structure. Judging by the number of windows, front and back, there was room on the second floor for twenty single bunks, forty if stacked bunks. Officer quarters most likely, he thought.

Tying Cesar to the hitching rail in front, he walked up and asked the sentry to see Colonel Handley. He was informed that the Colonel and two companies of troopers had been ordered to Fort Davis in south Texas two weeks prior. Commanchie problems with a certain chief named Black Horse.

Disappointed, Gallagher remounted Cesar to start his return to camp, crossing over the river just west of the fort.

As he passed the Jamison cow camp, two riders appeared from behind some scrub trees and galloped away to the north.

Gallager watched them crossing the Arkansas River, continuing at a gallop on the other side until they passed over a rise in the distance and were out of sight.

Curious who they were, he turned Cesar toward the Jamison herd and rode up to the closest rider watching the beeves.

"Howdy!"

"Howdy yourself! We're not hiring!"

Fred, surprised at this greeting, just smiled and answered back.

"Not looking for work. I'm Fred Gallager. My herd is southwest of here."

"Oh, yeah, I guess you aren't; we've had fellas ride up asking if we're hiring."

"I see, then you saw those two trying to hide in those scrubs over yonder way?"

"No, I didn't. They still there?"

"No, I apparently spooked them as I rode up, and they hightailed it across the river, disappearing over that rise." Gallager pointed northward.

"Ah! I don't know who they were. We get a lot of fellas asking for work. Times are hard."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I am on my way back to my herd. Nice talking with you."

"You too, stay warm, Mr. Gallager."

Three hours later he was back at the cow camp, unhappy that he had missed his longtime Cavalry associate and friend Colonel Handley and still curious about the two riders.

Emmitt saw him riding up and handed him a cup of coffee after he dismounted.

"That was a brief visit."

"He wasn't there. Had been transferred down to Fort Davis. Along with two companies of troopers.

Seems there's an Comanche chief causing trouble, goes by the name of Black Horse." He said, stepping down from Cesar and accepting the cup.

"Black Horse? That's a new one!"

"Yeah, renegade Commanchie's are the worst to face in a fight."

"Worse than the Apache?"

"Yeah, different fighting tactics from the Waddie's. Apache's like to ambush from cover, rocks, trees, that sort of thing. Waddie's prefer to just ride on horseback and attack. Very good cavalry."

"Hope your friend survives this new assignment." Emmitt says, holding back the tent flap as his father-in-law ducked down and entered.

Sitting down on his cot, he sipped his coffee.

"Ah, that's good after that long cold ride."

Emmitt just laughs as Lester brought in a plate of hot stew for his boss. "You want some trail boss?"

"No thank you, Lester, still full from your lunch."

After Cornyn departed, Emmitt said quietly.

"He has certainly changed."

"Yeah—yeah, he has. The Lord works miracles."

"Yeah, too bad Raul had to pay the price for that." Emmitt muttered.

"I hear ya. But it was Raul's time, and everything has its purpose. Something I had forgotten and am now relearning.

I saw something interesting on the way back." Fred looked at Emmitt's eyebrows raised as he continued.

"Saw two fellas hiding in some scrub trees a few hundred yards from Jamison's herd, then they hightailed it out of there as I was riding up on them."

"You recognize them?"

"No, they were gone too fast for me to get a good look. I rode down to Jamison's herd and spoke to one of

the drovers riding watch. They only have two, by the way, guarding the herd.

Anyway, that fella wasn't too interested in what I had to say. At least his reasoning wasn't."

"What was that?" Emmitt asks, leaning back on his elbows.

"That they were probably fellas looking for a job. Times were hard he said."

McGowan thought for a moment before replying.

"Could be that or nothing, but it is interesting."

"I don't know. After that mess with the Jenkins gang, I'm suspicious of any fellas just sitting out there, all lonesome, in the damn cold and snow, watching." Fred said, sitting his empty cup down on the edge of his cot.

"Stealing cattle this close to the stock pens and town and even closer to the fort makes little sense.

Where would they sell stolen cattle?" Gallagher asked as he stretched his arms and back.

"You said yourself the fort was down to one half-company in the fort with the other half out on patrol. Would the remaining troopers leave the fort unprotected if there were trouble?

"No, I don't think things have changed that much. Maybe a squad or two of, say, twenty men might go out, but I doubt it." Fred answers.

"To answer your other question. If unopposed, by that I mean the city Marshall won't do anything, it's out of his jurisdiction. They might just drive them to Denver. Those miners would give a good price, not caring where the beef comes from. Or even driving the herd north to Montana." Emmitt offered.

"Yeah, but that's a lot of dangerous effort with the Army and other herds close by. I guess I'm just too suspicious since Waco and young Tommy."

"I'll tell the men to arm themselves with their rifles while on watch and during the drive tomorrow, just in case."

"Good idea." Fred nodded as he spoke.



The Final Drive



When the sun rose the next morning, the temperature change was welcomed; it warmed enough that the snow, now roughly a foot deep, started melting. However, the earth underneath was still frozen.

The drive to the stock holding pens began after the sun rose, the herd of steers leaving a wide swath of beaten down snow and half frozen mud which would turn to ice that evening and night.

The drovers rested, fed well by their Bible-quoting cook, were a happy lot. Whooping and hollering at the steers to get along.

A few hours later, they reached the holding pens that stretched for two miles on the south side of the town. There, hay stored in barns for the springtime arriving herds was found in the troughs along with troughs of water. Arranged ahead of time by the three with the Red Rooster cattle company.

The longhorns made themselves at home, eating the easily reached hay after scrounging through the snow for frozen prairie grass.

Jose Chapman, Robert Murdock, and John Cammer were left to watch over the herd, with Carlos Navarro in charge.

To be replaced that evening with four other drovers. All armed with their rifles and pistols.

As the rest of the cowboys were returning to their camp, they overtook Lester in the supply wagon. No one was to go into town to relax until after the cattle were sold and they were paid. Then

their contracts would be completed and free to do as they pleased.

Lester let on he had bought, along with the few supplies they needed, three bottles of rye whiskey. A pleasant gesture by their ramrod and herd owner Fred Gallagher.

Three bottles weren't much for everyone, but they'd certainly take the chill off the cold weather. Gallagher, a former Cavalry officer, knew how to take care of his men and keep them content, if not happy.

On the way back, Emmitt and Stead took leave of the group riding back and rode over to the Van Horn boarding house.

After the pleasantries of greetings, Stead walked outside and sat on the bench on the veranda with his fiancée, while Emmitt and Verna took a stroll around the back of the premises.

"You still mad at me, my love?"

Emmitt stopped and hugged her tightly.

"No sweetheart. What's done is done. Getting the Rangers and the state involved in this was a lot better idea than what your Pa had. I guess he's of the old ways of doing things. Eye for an eye sort of thing."

"When did he tell you about his plan? Before you two left Round Rock?"

"No, on the train after we left Hearne the next day."

"Oh! I thought was your agreement to this silly idea before you two left." She whispers as she put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"You need not be too hard on your Pa. He loved your Mama deeply. Told me the story on the train. I'd probably do the same thing if the places were switched."

"Would you?"

"You're my life darlin'. If I lost you, I'd go crazy!"

Verna smiled as she kissed her husband again.

"You're sweet, my love. I made the right decision, marrying you." She said as they turned to see Stead and Mary walking around the corner of the building.

"Damn hard place to find privacy, isn't it?" Emmitt hollers out, sending the two lovebirds back the way they came.

Verna giggled. "Don't do that. They are as much in love as we are."

"I know. Had to put up with him for a thousand miles." McGowan chuckles. "He's a good man, though. I'd put my life in his hands any day."

As they walked back to the front, Emmitt felt it necessary to say his piece. He stopped and held her at arm's length.

"I've learned a lot on this drive, darlin'. Much happened." He said looking into his wife's wide-open eyes.

"I've seen men die before. Even killed a few. But this time darlin', this time I saw the Lord working. It was amazing. This drive was like—I don't know—like a story out of the Bible, but it wasn't. All our boys were baptized. When we lost Tommy, Ricky was there shortly after—then we lost three more and three were there to hire the next day, we didn't have to look for them—Lester, our cook, went through such a painful change. Like something out of the Bible, when people have demons driven out by Christ. I've never seen that before. An atheist most of his life, Lester asked the Vaquero's to teach him the Bible after their brother and cousin lost his life saving his! Things happened that shouldn't have, but we survived them. Most of us anyway.

I can't explain it more. Never gave it much thought before. All my life has been without thinking of the Almighty. Just assumed this world was created by him but nothing else." He said, hanging his head, then looking his wife in her blue eyes. "I know for a fact that the Lord was with us the entire trip. Providing when we

needed it, protecting us when we failed to do it ourselves."

Verna smiled gently at her husband. With pride rising in Her heart, hearing her husband's confession.

"My love, the Lord has been with you all your life. Just now you realize his presence. Everything in your life has been with purpose, the Lord's plans.

Our meeting when you rode back into Round Rock with the body of Kev Perry. He had tried to kill you; I understood Mr. Perry never missed. It wasn't an accident he missed. But that brought you back to me.

No, my husband, everything has a purpose, everything has meaning. Every move we make, every decision we make, good or bad, is already foretold. It's all in God's plans. It's like he wrote a book about us and everyone else. Only he knows how it ends. We can't skip to the back to see the ending!"

Emmitt stood there holding his wife, studying her eyes, her face, seeing in them the love and wisdom of this woman he loved so much.

"It's still a hard world." he finally says.

"I know, with the work you do, when not driving cattle, as a range investigator, you may have to kill again. But only if you have no choice, you're not a murderer. I understand that.

My mother never understood that about Papa, according to Mama Rosita. But please don't volunteer every time a cry for vengeance is raised. As Papa has been saying, vengeance is the Lords, not ours."

Emmitt smiled and kissed her. "I'll try not to, my love."



Cattle Count



It was freezing the morning the three men, representing the Red Rooster Cattle Consortium, agreed to count the cattle.

Dressed in their heavy coats, wool stocking caps pulled over their heads covering their ears, topped with their Derby's, they complained about the weather and having to count the steers in it, but wanted to finish this buy and catch the train leaving in two days.

When they met Fred Gallagher that morning, there was no sign of recognition from any of the three. Having never met Gallagher, he was of no interest to them other than as the owner of the cattle they were getting very cheap.

Hours passed as the count proceeded. The staff usually counts the animals when they load them onto the railroad cattle cars for shipment. However, they made an exception because of time, weather, and the three buyer's need to be on the same train with the first load. Thus, the count and payment were arranged that day.

After Comal, his two associates, Gallagher and McGowan, agreed with the count, Comal handed Gallagher a bank voucher for forty-one thousand and fifty-five dollars, payable at the Dodge City Bank and Trust.

"I'll need your boys to move the cattle to the rail head stock loading pens, down on the east part of the stockyard, when the trains come in. The loading crew is gone until next season. Is that acceptable?" He asks handing the voucher to Gallagher.

"Sure, not a problem. We can notarize the ownership of the cattle at the bank tomorrow. I have to retrieve my ledger for my men for the bank payoffs. I'm sorry, I left it at our camp."

"Great Mr. Gallagher, nice doing business with you."

Gallagher shook hands with Comal, and the same icy chill ran down his spine as did Emmitt's when he shook hands with Comal at the cow camp. 'Shaking hands with the murderer of his wife was like shaking hands with the devil', he'd recall later.

Outside, on the edge of the pens, the Gallagher drovers were waiting for their boss to come out and ride back with them to the camp.

With the drovers surrounding him, Emmitt and he felt pretty safe until the city Marshall and his deputies rode up to the group.

"Mr. Gallagher, if you would please come with me and my deputies. We need to talk."

The drovers gathered around the lawmen, not sure what was happening but prepared to defend their boss. Just like they did with the Chickasaws.

"Sure Marshall. Boys, it's all right. Go on back to camp. I'll be along directly."

The ride back seemed like forever as the men were already planning on having a good time at the Alamo, Lone Star and Long Branch saloons.

Holcomb spoke out the loudest. "Let's sample the whiskeys at each and then deciding which had the best, then return to that one for the night."

Once they reached camp, the men gathered around Emmitt, demanding to know what was happening with their ramrod, Mr. Gallagher. All the mystery concerning a date with the devil running through their minds.

"What's going on with our Mr. Gallagher, boss?"

"Just some legal issues. Nothing to worry about. Your Mr. Gallagher is fine. The meeting with the devil I

spoke of weeks ago has been canceled. Now if you boys will wait, let me get Fred's ledger and we can start writing your vouchers, so you boys can collect your earnings tomorrow."

"How much did we make total, boss?" Holcomb asks as his turn in line came up.

"A little over forty-one thousand." Emmitt replies as Lester wrote out the voucher for Holcomb.

"Frank, your total, counting back pay for five and half months, comes to \$1421.56! You want all that at once or have it deposited in an account at the bank until you decide what you're gonna do next?"

"Mercy! I'll take a hundred now. I'll leave the rest in my account at the bank until time to go back to Texas."

"What are you going to do next?" Lester asks.

"Rest a bit for a month or two, then find another herd that needs trailing back here. In the summer!" he added, a look of mirth on his face.

"Okay, here," Lester handed the paper chit to Holcomb, laughing as he understood totally.

"When you boys ride in tomorrow, check your weapons in at the Marshall's office before you go to the bank. Collect them when you leave town. Lester here will keep the camp open a while, if you boys want to spend your nights here to sleep off your partying or you and bunk up at the Drovers House, if you don't mind the stink!" Emmitt joked, then adds, "We need a few of you to volunteer to help load the beeves onto the cattle cars when they come in. The loading crew normally here, they're off until April. So, it's up to us to finish this job."

"I'll help." Murdock called out.

"Count me in too." Chapman hollers from the back of the line.

Soon everyone but Lester agreed to finish the drive by helping with the loading.

"Okay, try not to get too smashed tomorrow, as the first train pulling the cattle cars will be here late tomorrow, or the next day."

Emmitt motioned for Lester to follow him behind the chuck/ supply wagon.

"What's up, boss?"

"Fred asks me to have you gather up everything not needed and see if you can sell off to the hardware store. He wants you to arrange shipment of the Conestoga and this supply wagon, tents and cooking ware back to Round Rock."

"Is he planning on another drive?"

"Don't know, but the way he's been talking, I think so. Don't know if he's gonna be on it, but I get the impression he's gonna give it another go."

"Well, I'll sign on if he does. He's a good man, learned a lot with him and he with the boys."

"Yeah—, yeah, he did."

"Are you going to do this again?"

"I don't think so. I'll have enough work with the Association in Travis and Williamson counties. And I don't think my wife would appreciate that with the baby coming due this spring."

"Do you know when that'll happen?"

"No, just in the late springtime."

"Well, if I don't see ya again before that happens, congratulations, boss. I'm happy for you and the misses. God bless your family."

Emmitt smiled hugely at Lester, amazed at the changes in him. "Thank you, Lester. The Lord has certainly blessed you." Lester smiles a huge smile as he walked away.

In town, in the Marshall's office, Fred Gallagher sat with Marshall Masterson, Fred's son Joel, Wyatt Earp and the Texas Ranger John Armstrong.

Ranger Armstrong had arrived on the morning train with the warrants. They were discussing the timing of the arrests and of Gallagher's sale.

"When will you collect your payout from Comal?" Masterson asked.

"Tomorrow if I'm allowed in town. If not, then Emmitt will have to do the exchange and the payment to my boys."

"Well, we can do the arrests after you conclude your business with these three. You're allowed in town. Just keep it under your hat till it happens."

"Absolutely Marshall. Ranger Armstrong, will you need help on the trip back to Austin?"

"I could use a couple of men. Are you making recommendations?"

"Yeah, two of my boys are really handy with a sixgun and rifle. And they are young and strong."

"Who's that?"

"One goes by the name of Ricky More-or-less, spelled M o r o l e z. And the other is Frank Holcomb. He's in his early thirties but seasoned and knows his right from his left."

"Okay, I'll keep them in mind."

"You need to keep your men out of town in case there's a hiccup to this. Don't need unnecessary gun play or people getting shot who were in the way."



Payday



The next day, Gallagher rode into town with all the drovers to the Marshall's office to check in their firearms.

Inside, Earp and Tilghman were writing the names of each man and tagging their weapons when a tired and excited Jamison burst into the office, cutting past the line of Gallagher drovers.

"Where's the Marshall?" He almost shouted!

"I'm right here!" Masterson replies as he walked through the back door from the privy behind the jail.

"Marshall," he turned, almost falling over when the drovers in the office saw he was bleeding from his leg.

"My herd was stolen. Rustled late this morning.

He almost fell again, then Tilghman assisted him into a chair.

"They hit us about eight this morning. Four or five of my men are down, maybe dead. The others were badly injured. I had to walk into town; they took all our horses and the chuck wagon!"

"The Army didn't send anyone?"

"No, nobody! Don't even think they know!"

Emmitt, who was standing with Gallagher among his drovers, asked.

"Which way did they go?"

"North, across the river—from there I don't know. With all this snow, they'd leave a trail, a big trail." he responded as Tilghman walked up and gave him a cup of water and looked at his wound.

"How many men do you think there were?" Earp asks.

"Don't know, maybe twenty or thirty. They just seemed to swarm over us like bees!"

"We need a posse!" someone called out.

"It's out of my jurisdiction, and the US Marshall is days away. They'll be outta the state before then." Masterson answered.

"You have a judge here in town or a County Sheriff?" Armstrong asked.

"Yes and no, why?"

"He represents Kansas?"

"I see your drift. He represents the county."

Masterson replied and turned to Emmitt and Gallagher.

"Do you think your men would volunteer?"

"Yeah, they've got a knack for this kind of thing! But you'll have to ask them. They were fixin' to get paid."

Masterson nodded and asks the drovers inside the office to step outside.

Outside, they all gathered around as Masterson sent for the judge down the street at the courthouse.

"Gentlemen, y'all are aware of the ongoing theft of the Jamison herd southeast of here. The herd has been rustled and is by now several miles north of the Arkansas.

There are said to be roughly twenty to thirty rustlers in this group. They have no compunction about killing. Several of your fellow Texans are now lying in the snow, dead or dying.

This is out of my jurisdiction, but our judge can deputize you men for a posse to recover the herd.

But you have to move fast, or they'll be outta the county before long. I'm asking for volunteers for this posse."

As he was finishing his speech, six riders entered the west end of town, riding fast, too fast for the icy

streets. They rode up to the crowd standing outside the Marshall's office. Their mounts skidding on the icy ground.

"Marshall Masterson, we are from the Ferguson herd and were riding in when we saw some fellas who apparently stole a herd of cattle, heading northwest, pushing them hard!?"

"Did you see how many there were?"

"Didn't count them, but they were a big bunch!"

"About thirty, I'd guess!" One of the other riders gave his opinion.

"They're headed for Denver, I reckon."

Tilghman offered his opinion.

"We need to get ahead of them, charge in, turn the herd around and stampede them back the way they came." Holcomb yells out.

"It'll be a running gun battle!" Navarro yells excitedly.

"Alrighty, who's for it, boys?" McGowan hollers out! Sensing the fever rising among his men. Ignoring the promise to his wife. This wasn't vengeance he felt.

With a roar, everyone yelled approval of some kind. The Gallagher drovers needed some payback for all their suffering on the trail, loss of their partners.

These unknown rustlers, not in any way innocent, were just the ticket for such payback.

Cattle rustling was a hanging offense in both states; gunning them down would be the alternative. And the Texas cowboys were just in the mood to do that.

The county judge had been standing next to Masterson for the past five minutes and understood the problem.

"You men understand you are about to undertake a dangerous task?" The County Judge spoke loudly so everyone understood.

"Some of you might not make it back, some crippled. Do you understand that?"

A roar of I do's and yeah's rose from the crowd.

"Very well. Raise your right hands. I, state your name, do solemnly swear to uphold the laws of Ford County and the state of Kansas today and tomorrow as a lawfully appointed temporary County Deputy Sheriffs. So, help me God! Now, bring in these cattle thieves. Dead or alive!"

As they were finishing their pledge, Marshall Bat Masterson motioned Earp and Tilghman back inside. Then, turning to the drovers, now county deputy sheriffs, he said.

"You boys who checked your weapons, come inside to check them out."

Ricky Morolez turned to McGowan just before he walked in to collect his pistol and rifle. "I've never ridden with a posse. What do I do?"

"Don't get killed. Not by the rustlers or accidentally by one of us," Emmitt replies.

"Keep your head on a swivel, Ricky. Be aware of all that's going on. It's gonna get wild and crazy, pardner." Holcomb adds his advice. "You've been in a stampede, now add a running shootout. Just be aware." He adds.

Thirty minutes later, at roughly noon, the nineteen drovers and two city deputy Marshall's, Masterson instructed to swear in as temporary deputy sheriffs; rode out of the west side of Dodge, past the Van Horn boarding house, out onto the snow covered prairie.

As the riders rode past, the rumble of their hooves resounding against the boarding house walls brought Verna, Rosita and Mary out onto the veranda. Mary and Verna both saw their men leading the posse.

The ladies stood and watched until the riders were just a dark line on the horizon, then the line turned northwest.

The women looked at each other with questions on their faces, when Verna's father rode up.

"Papa, what's going on? Where are Emmitt, James and the others going?"

"After cattle rustler's daughter. Emmitt's chosen profession."

"He promised me!" she cries out loud in anger "No more acts of vengeance."

"This isn't vengeance, Verna. It's law enforcement. They've all been deputized as temporary county deputy sheriffs by the county judge. It's all legal, girl."

"My husband enjoys tempting fate!" She cries as she ran back inside. Followed by Mary. Rosita remained on the veranda.

"My granddaughter's husband would make a good pirate!" She exclaims, smiling at Fred.

"How's that?"

"The man has a taste for danger."

Fred just shook his head, laughing, turned Cesar around and rode back to town. He had an appointment at the bank with his wife's murderers.



Cattle & Bullets



The posse reached a point northwest of Dodge, approximately eight miles away, near a homesteader's sod home on the Kansas Plains.

Carlos, Jim and Riley came back from their scouting expeditions with news of where the herd was going to be in a couple of hours.

"They're pushing them hard, almost in a stampede," was the report.

"They should come between those two hills. We can hit them then, is my suggestion." Stead said. Riley and Carlos agreed with Jim's estimation and location for the ambush.

"We need to split up, put some sharpshooters with their rifles on the two hills and the rest hidden behind until the shooting starts, then mount an attack on the lead riders." Earp suggests.

"What about the cattle? They may actually start stampeding?" One of the Ferguson men asked.

"We'll gather them up later; first we deal with the rustlers." Emmitt voiced his opinion.

"Sounds good to me," Earp agreed. "I'm wanting the rustlers; y'all can handle the herd, gathering them up and such." Earp answers.

The drovers of Gallagher's and Ferguson's herds split up, sending their best riflemen to the back side top of each small hill, dismounted with their rifles and waited. Growing cold with inactivity, they did their best to keep their muscles warm.

The rest gathered at the bottom of the southernmost hill and dismounted, walking their ponies to keep them limber and warm from the cold. Sloshing through the half-melted snow and what was becoming icy mud. Many boots getting soaked, feet cold to the point of pain. Their ponies' hooves feeling the same pains. The half-melted snow and cold mud was worse than just cold snow.

A little over an hour later, as predicted, the men could hear the bawling of protesting cattle in the distance.

Emmitt, along with Wyatt Earp and Bill Tilghman eased up to the top of the southernmost hill and peeked over the low snow-covered brush. In the distance, they could see the dark mass of cattle running toward them. The rustlers, whipping and driving the animals harshly in an attempt to get them as far away from Dodge City as possible, quickly as possible.

"Wait until the herd is halfway past this hill, then open up on the ones riding rear flanks and trail." Emmitt told the riflemen stationed there, including Ricky Morolez.

"We need to let the other shooters over there know when to start shooting." Tilghman says. "I'll ride over there." Emmitt volunteered, turning and sliding down the snow-covered slope to Strawberry, who was walked by Cammer with his own pony. "They'll be here shortly. I'm going to the other side to give last minute instructions. You have these boys saddled up in the next fifteen to twenty minutes. When the riflemen shoot, we ride head-on into the leads, turning the cattle around."

"Right, boss!" John replies as McGowan rode off to the other group of riflemen.

Roughly an hour later, the stolen cattle were passing between the two low hills; one could hear the rustlers' cries and bullwhips snapping, mixed with the

steers' constant bellowing and complaining as they were forced forward.

It started snowing again, big fluffy flakes, as big as man's hand, drifting down, slowly, like fall leaves, on the cattle, rustlers and the posse, hampering vision for the riflemen on the hilltops. The temperature dropped dramatically but not a hint of a breeze.

Suddenly, rifle shots were echoing off the hillsides, and the rustlers on the rear flanks and trailing fell off their horses or bent over wounded.

Several, more than half, turned and fled back the way they came!

Emmitt, Earp and Tilghman led the charge into the front of the herd, shooting the lead riders off their horses and causing the front flank outriders to turn and flee, racing through the hail of rifle bullets zipping past them.

Of the actual twenty-five rustlers, twelve got away, fleeing back the seventeen miles toward the river. Wounds or death affected the rest. The dead were quickly buried under the snow that was falling. Not to be found until spring thaw.

Earp and Tilghman took six men and went after the rustlers that fled. Including Emmitt McGowan, Jim Stead, Ricky Morolez and Frank Holcomb.

The rest rounded up the steers that had scattered, away from the sound of the guns and fleeing the men who stole them; now being walked back the way they came.

No Gallagher drover or those from the Ferguson herd suffered any injuries or fatalities.

A mile from the river, the remaining posse caught up with the last of the rustlers who had escaped the ambush. Driving them down toward and into the river. Some sought shelter down behind the riverbank, and a few tried to cross in the icy waters.

Those in the river were gunned down by Morolez and Holcomb's rifles at one hundred yards.

Their bodies floating downstream, never to be seen again.

The others, after a quick fight against mounted, charging horsemen, half frozen from lying in the snow, surrendered.

The fight was over.



Drinking with the Devil



F red Gallagher met up with Preston Comal at the bank to sign and notarize the cattle over to the Red Rooster Cattle Company, owned by the three ex-soldiers. The bank approved the voucher made out to Gallagher and transferred the forty-one thousand and fifty-five dollars into Fred's account, with nineteen blank bank accounts held in reserve for the drovers. After completing all the paperwork, Comal shook hands with Gallagher and invited him for a drink at the Long Branch saloon.

Gallagher hesitated at first but agreed after Comal insisted.

"Okay, just one. I need to check with the Marshall about my boys after those rustlers."

Comal looked at Gallagher sideways with a sneer.

"You care about those men?"

"I spent several months living with them. Yes, I have an interest in their well-being."

"You're a strange one, Gallagher. Most officers I knew didn't give a rat's ass about their men."

Fred just stared at Preston, slowly understanding who this man was. A creature who did as he pleased. No regard for authority or anyone but his own self. Perhaps not even that.

"I'll take one drink with you, but at the hotel if that's agreeable."

"Sure," Comal replied as he opened the bank door and walked out in front of Gallagher.

In the hotel the four men secured their glasses of whiskey and sat down at one of the dining tables. Sherley and Lambert eyed Comal as if waiting for him to speak. A few sips of the yellow liquid then:

"How long have you lived in Texas?" Comal finally asked, breaking the ice.

"Since the war. Opened a boarding house, stage stop. Got interested in cattle and bought this herd." Gallagher half lied, not wanting to say much that would give Comal any suspicion.

"Ah, you married?"

"Was, but she died a few years ago."

"Mexican gal or white?"

"French actually. Her father was a merchant captain. Had his own ship."

"I see. Too bad about your wife's death. sickness?"

"Yeah, influenza." Fred kept lying.

"Damn; that takes a lot of folks." Comal glanced at his partners before asking the next question.

"Where did you meet her? Where did you live?"

"We met in San Antonio. But I lived—built my business in Round Rock. A little town just north of Austin."

"So, you ever been to Galveston?"

"No, why do you ask?" Fred replied, thinking to himself, 'Here it comes!'

"No reason. We have, but that was during the war." Comal threw out the bait to see if he'd get a reaction from Gallagher. Fred kept a straight face despite a small laugh.

"Yeah, I heard about y'all's short stay there, and the Navy running off. Abandoning all you troopers there. Guess you were a prisoner for the rest of the war?" Gallagher asks, diverting the direction of this conversation.

“Yeah, we were. Those damn sailors just sailed off without us! Those Johnny Reb prisons were hell. Even the one in Texas.

What was worst was the Army didn’t compensate our time there. Just discharged us after freeing us six months after the end of the war. No thank-you for surviving that hell hole, back pay or promotions.

I was planning to make the Army my career, but the way we were treated. Piss on them. Now I’d rather rob a bank, take what I want, than wear that blue uniform!” Comal stated angrily. Tossing the remaining of his whiskey to the back of his throat.

“I see, so how did you come up with the funds to buy my herd?” Gallagher’s interest peaked now.

“I just told ya, Mr. Gallagher! Anyway, this is our third time to buy cattle for resale.” Comal said, realizing he had said too much. Glancing at his two partners he nodded.

“Well, again, it was great doing business with you, sir. Have a safe journey back to Texas!” Comal stood up, as did the other two with him. None of three shook his hand before they left.

Fred Gallagher, stood at a side window of the hotel, watching the three, cross Front Street, the railway tracks, then the Iron Bridge before disappearing into the Long Branch Saloon.

Breathing heavily, he looked at his hands as they started shaking; the adrenaline expended itself as he tried to relax. ‘They knew more than they let on.’ He realized that now. ‘Thank God, he could pull off his pretense and not give himself away.’ he thought to himself.

What troubled him now was the funds they paid him. Someone’s life savings from some bank? Even if this was the third time for them to buy it was based on illicit gains. He can’t pay it back, even if it was blood money.

Taking another deep breath and exhaling, he opened the door of the hotel and made his way toward the Marshall’s office.



You Remember Me?



Two hours after sunset, the sky cleared off. The stars shining bright in the cold winter sky, as the temperature dropped even more, freezing the melted snow.

Verna and Mama Rosita entered the city marshal's office, joining the four men, Texas Ranger Armstrong, Marshall 'Bat' Masterson, Deputy Marshall Gallagher and his father Fred Gallagher.

The three lawmen acknowledged the two women as they entered.

"When are you going to make the arrests, Marshall?" Verna asks, looking at her father after addressing the Marshall.

"Tonight, Mrs. McGowan. Your husband hasn't returned yet either!"

"No, sir, he hasn't. I'm worried about his safety. Letting him go after those rustlers for another man's herd is insane!"

"He's got the drovers watching his back, daughter." Fred tried to ease his offspring's fears. "Besides, he volunteered to do this."

"I know he volunteered; you men just seem to want to get your fool selves killed!"

"Someone had to do it, ma'am." Marshall Masterson joined the conversation.

"And you let him, Papa." Verna directed her anguish at her father, her eyes blazing.

Frustrated with the discussion, and these women, Masterson commanded; "We need to get

moving now. You ladies, please wait at the Dodge House until we have these killers ensconced behind these bars!"

Verna and Rosita stepped out of the way, while the Marshall opened the door for them, and they exited, turning to the left to the hotel. They met Mary Peterson a block away, who inquired if the men had returned yet.

While Verna and Mary conversed, Mama Rosita stopped and looked back at the four men as they crossed over the railroad tracks and then the iron bridge to the rowdy side of town.

After the lawmen crossed over the bridge, Mama Rosita took Verna by the arm.

"Come on."

"Mama, we were told to wait at the hotel." Verna objected, not letting her grandmother pull her.

"I want to see these bastards arrested."

"Mama, your language!" Verna complained, still resisting being pulled.

"Very well, you wait at the hotel. I am going oss these tracks." Mama Rosita chastised her granddaughter as she walked away toward the train tracks, hiking her skirt up out of the frozen mud and unmelted snow now turning to ice. Her destination, the part of town no lady would dare find herself in.

Mary turned to Verna and exclaimed! "Your grandmother is crazy!"

"I know, she has the heart of a pirate!"

Verna, knowing her grandmother, how stubborn she could be, and the hole in her heart that needed to be healed after so many years, followed, along with a reluctant Mary Peterson.

"Wait, I'm coming." Verna called out.

"I am too; maybe we can stop her."

Marshall Masterson and the two other lawmen with Fred, Gallagher, found the three men still in the Long Branch saloon. The three they were to arrest were

standing at the long bar, dressed in their eastern city suits, heavy winter coats, derbies cocked off center on their heads. Obviously half drunk.

One of them, Comal, turned his head as the lawmen entered, followed by Gallagher.

"Marshall Masterson, how nice to see you. Let us buy you a drink, sir? We are celebrating our newfound fortune and departure tomorrow." Comal called out, greeting the lawman, then noticing Fred Gallagher following the lawmen.

"Mr. Gallagher, so you decided to join us after all?" Preston said through slurred speech.

Masterson walked up and shook hands with Preston Comal, then taking him by his upper arm, moving him away from the bar, saying, "Would you three gents please stand over here against this wall"? Pointing to the back wall of the saloon.

"Sure, Marshall, what is this all about?" Comal asked.

"I have warrants to detain you three, Mr. Comal. You're under arrest!" Masterson answered.

"Ranger, it's your game." Masterson turned and motioned Ranger Armstrong forward.

"Gentlemen, my name is Captain John Armstrong of the Texas Rangers. I have authorization from the state of Kansas to extradite the three of you to Texas, where warrants for murder and assault have been issued against you. You will stand trial for the assault and subsequent death of one Rosa Marie Gallagher." Armstrong held up the warrants and extradition papers as he spoke, emphasizing his authority.

"Murder, assault? Why we've never been to Texas!" Victor Lambert protested. "You made a mistake; we are innocent of these charges!"

"You were with the 42nd Massachusetts Infantry, part of the landing and occupation party on Galveston Island on December 25, 1862. You

assaulted Mrs. Gallagher on the 27th of that month. She passed away from her injuries in April 1863. Now, if you would cooperate and face the wall?"

Gallagher, who stood behind the three lawmen, had remained silent, stepped up between the shoulder of Joel and the Marshall. He cried out angrily, "She was my wife. The wife of a Union officer."

With that comment from Gallagher, the faces of the three murderers went ashen. This was indeed the husband of the woman they assaulted, they realized.

Gallagher had lied to them in the hotel, and to whom they admitted they were on the island.

"Let the Army judge us. It was war!" The third man, Sherley Langdon, blurted out.

"She was a non-combatant and a citizen of Texas. And my mother." Joel blurts out in his own anger. Memories of that night suddenly rising, recollections of his mother lying in pain on her deathbed for what seemed like years to a twelve-year-old boy. Haunting memories that brought the old pains back, the old hatred of Union soldiers.

Bat Masterson grabbed Joel by his elbow and saying, "Easy Joel. Let the Ranger handle this!"

Mama Rosita, Mary and Verna were standing next door in front of the General Outfitting store when they heard the arguing. Rosita quickly moved toward the double swinging doors of the Long Branch and pushed them open to peer inside.

"Mama, don't go in." Verna whispers frantically. Mary right behind her, shaking her head in disbelief.

Not listening, Rosita pushed the doors full open and entered. Verna, bobbing her head in protest, followed, trying to stop her little grandmother.

Mary hesitated, knowing better than to enter a place not fit for ladies, entered then stood just inside the doors to one side. Not daring to go further, aware of the eyes of the men still in the saloon watching her and Verna and the little old lady.

"I tell you Marshall, and you, Ranger, we had nothing to do with this!" Comal replies harshly. His whiskey laden anger and panic building. Flashbacks of those five days and the two and half years in a Confederate prison blinding him.

"We have a deathbed confession from one of your squad members. Naming names, dates and the attempted assassination of the entire family. Now face the wall, hands behind your backs!" Armstrong orders harshly. Aware things were heading in the wrong direction with these drunks; His hand found its way to his Colt .45 Peacemaker, ready for trouble. The two city lawmen did the same with their .44's.

"I tell you; we had nothing to do with this woman. I don't remember any attempted assassination of any family," Comal repeated drunkenly, almost screaming.

"You don't remember? —you don't remember? —Do you remember me?" Rosita Lafitte yells as she stepped forward from behind the lawmen, unnoticed until that moment.

Preston Comal looked down at the small, dark and gray streaked haired woman, wrapped in a woolen shawl, that covered her to her waist over her floor-length light green winter dress.

"I don't know who you are, Lady!" Comal spat back, disdain, exuding in his words. "Never seen you before!"

"Oh, yes you have! Perhaps this will help!" Rosita cries as she pulled her jeweled short scimitar from under her shawl and leaped at Comal, the razor-sharp blade cutting the top half of his right ear off as it shaved a sizeable chunk of his hair as well. Blood spurted all over his shoulder and hand as he pushed her away, reaching up to feel the side of his head.

"Do you remember me now?" she screamed, sixteen years of anguish exploding from her heart, not willing to listen to reason, abandoning her carefully

cultivated peaceful image. The savage pirate bride rising up from her lair, placed there after her daughter's death. An angry mamma beast waiting for this moment to fill the gigantic hole in her heart with his dead soul.

Recognition suddenly dawned in Comal's widening eyes.

"YOU!" he shouts as he pulled a short-barreled Colt Lightning from his coat pocket, pointing and shooting Rosita twice with the double action. The .38 Colt bullets hit her on her left side just below her ribs, knocking her backwards and to the floor.

Verna screamed! "MAMA!"

Then all hell broke loose. Preston Comal dove for the bar, grabbing the towel off the bartender's shoulder who was frozen in place, slapping it to his head as he bolted out the back door while his two compadres pulled their own pistols, a half second slower than the lawmen's draw.

The close quarter gunfight lasted not quite three seconds, leaving the room full of thick burnt sulfuric smoke.

Masterson was unharmed, Joel grazed on his left arm, that bullet slamming into the wall across the room, next to Mary's head, with a loud crack. Ranger Armstrong hit directly in his badge, knocking him backward but unharmed.

The two gunmen were down. Lambert, wounded badly, with a .45 hit to the shoulder from the Ranger's Colt. The other, Sherley Langdon, dead on the floor. Two .44's in his chest.

Fred Gallagher, glancing down at his mother-in-law, stepped over her and ran out the backdoor in pursuit of Preston Comal. Pulling out his Merwin and Hubert sixgun hidden under his heavy winter coat, ready to do battle. His vision coldly focused on taking Comal down.

Joel picked his grandmother up and laid her gently on the pool table in the center of the saloon. A growing rage building in his soul. He saw she was still breathing short, shallow bits of air, but out cold.

The image of his mother, lying in her deathbed, also breathing short shallow gasping breaths her last hours, flashed before his eyes. Bitter anger rose from his heart. How much more will his family endure he wondered?

"Joel! Papa!" Verna yells and points at the back door. Joel looked quickly at his boss, who nodded approval. Moments later he was in the alley, undecided which way they went when he heard a commotion on Front Street.

Dashing to his left, around the back of the General Outfitting store toward the opening between buildings to Front Street. He ran to the middle of the street, stopping and skidding on the icy mud, dropping on one knee as he saw his father on horseback galloping dangerously hard on the frozen surface, west, out of the city. Disappearing into the distant gloom of the evening.

Looking around desperately for a ride, he chose a spotted gray mare, loosened its reins from the hitching rail, left hand on the saddle horn, he leaped into the saddle with a single swinging bound; something he could never repeat the rest of his life; spun her around, the horse nearly falling, he dug his boot heels into her ribs, crying out "hah, hah" and gave chase.

Just by chance, Emmitt McGowan, Jim Stead, Earp and Tilghman along with Ricky Morolez, and the rest of the drovers with the surviving prisoners, rode back into town along with five bodies of would-be rustlers. The group of men stopped at the jail.

Earp, McGowan and Stead noticed Joel across the river on South Front Street, riding hard out of

town and the commotion inside and outside the Long Branch saloon.

Earp commented, "The arrests must have gone south!"

Leaving Tilghman with the prisoners, Emmitt and Wyatt rode across the iron bridge to the Long Branch, stepping off their mounts and entering the saloon. Jim Stead followed behind.

"Emmitt, help me!" Verna, seeing her husband enter the swinging doors, cried out.

Just as he reached the pool table, Rosita sat up, inhaling a deep breath, scaring Verna and Mary, who screamed in fright at Rosita's sudden return to the living.

Her revival also startled both Marshall Masterson and Ranger Armstrong, who cursed out of surprise. Earp glanced at his boss questionably.

"What happened here?" Emmitt demands of Verna.

"I'm afraid the arrests went badly," Masterson quipped, staring at Rosita.

"Why are you in here, the three of you?" Emmitt demands again of Verna.

"Husband, I'll explain later. Papa and Joel have gone after Comal. Please help them!" She pleads.

"I'll bring them back, both of them." Emmitt promised, still confused why his wife was in a saloon in the red-light district of Dodge. Why Mama Rosita was sitting in the middle of a pool table and why there were two men on the floor at the back, with gun smoke still lingering in the air. He had an idea, but wanted her to explain why.

Confused but bowing to his wife's pleading, he ran out, through the gathered crowd outside and mounted Strawberry and started west out of town.

"James, go with him, help them!" Mary pleads with her fiancé who was just as confused as Emmitt was why his bride to be was in that saloon.

"On it!" He says, following Emmitt out to their horses.

As Emmitt was exiting the Long Branch, Verna turned her attention to her grandmother, who was trying to unbutton her dress over her middle.

"Mama, what are you doing?" she asks in disgust!

"I've been shot, daughter. But I don't feel any pain."

Undoing her buttons, she looked at herself, screamed in delight, then started laughing.

"Oh my God, the Lord is still with me." she cries out. Pulling the two bullets free of the whalebone corset she was wearing under her clothing. The hardened bones of a long-dead sea creature stopped the two pieces of lead. The whole saloon erupted in laughter at this little old lady's luck.



Vengeance Wears a Star



West of Dodge, Fred Gallagher could barely see Preston Comal riding at a hard gallop ahead. He was following the half-frozen trace the homesteaders used to travel to and from Dodge. Two miles—three miles then Comal disappeared from view.

Up ahead was a small wooded bridge that spanned a dry creek that fed the Arkansas River in the spring and early summer. Moments later, Gallagher's pony's hooves clumped noisily over the ice-covered wood planks to the other side.

A shot rang out, and his horse reared up, screaming, and bucking, tossing its rider onto the ground, landing on his right shoulder. Sudden shock hit him. He knew his shoulder was hurt, but he couldn't feel anything broken.

As he was struggling to rise to his feet, Comal appeared out of the dry creek on his pony with his Colt Lightning in his hand.

"Well, Gallagher, it looks like you—."

Fred pulled and fired his Merwin and Hubert .44 and letting off a round that struck Comal in the leg, causing him to fall off his pony as well.

Quickly, Preston scrambled for the safety of the dry creek, dropping out of sight from Gallagher, as he fired a second round, missing as the bullet passed over Comal's head as he dropped down.

In his mind, Fred was focused on finding and ending the sixteen-year nightmare. Of sending Comal to his reward in Hell. Nothing else mattered at that

moment. The coldness of his thoughts focused on just one thing. Killing Comal.

Carefully, he eased up to the edge of the drop-off into the creek bottom. His shoulder throbbing with a dull pain, he looked into the darkness of the creek.

"Comal, you will not get out of here alive. You know that, it's time you met your reward for what you did to my wife!" Gallagher called out, hoping to hear a response that'd give the killers' location away.

"Yeah, I remember that little gal. She was a looker. Nice, soft but screamed a lot. A few kicks with our boots put a stop to that!" was the drunken slur of a reply.

It was enough for Gallagher who fired into the darkness of the creek toward the voice taunting him.

A shot rang out from the darkness of the creek. The bullet buzzed past, missing Fred, but causing him to lose his footing. He fell down the side of the creek bank, losing his pistol.

Moments later, Comal was on top of him, beating Fred's face as hard as he could.

With his shoulder hurting, it was difficult to protect himself from the blows, but he managed to push the intoxicated Comal off and strike a few blows on his own.

The two old men grappled and rolled around the dry creek bottom for a few minutes until both were exhausted.

Finally, Comal stood up, fumbled around his coat and then the ground, looking for his Colt, but finding instead Gallagher's forty-four.

"Hey there, Gallagher, nice shooter!" He says, examining the nickel-plated revolver. Then pointing it at the innkeeper/cattleman, saying.

"Now you can join your wife in Hell!" He spits, aimed the revolver at Gallagher's head, cocking the hammer back.

That's when another .44 Colt roared in the darkness. The bullet striking Preston Comal in the right shoulder, shattering his shoulder blade, spinning him around and knocking him to the ground on his back. With the Merwin going off, the bullet missing the former cavalry officer's head by inches.

On the edge of the creek bank was Joel. Standing tall, an imposing long legged figure, thin, dressed in his Buffalo coat and black trousers, the unbuttoned coat moving with the light wind gusts as if wings; his black flat-brimmed, low crown plainsmen hat seemed to be a medieval helmet for a moment, topped off the image, silhouetted against the stars above him. His .44 Colt conversion smoking in his hand.

To Fred he looked like St. Michael the Archangel, with a gun, not a sword.

"Pa, are you alive?"

"Yeah, thanks for asking," Fred answers, trying to sit up.

Joel slid down the side of the creek bank, walking over to where Comal lay on his back. Unable to move his right arm to reach for the pistol next to him, he watched the young deputy approach.

"You think you're taking me back?" The rapist hissed.

"No, at least not breathing." Joel replied, torn inside to just arrest this woman killer/rapist as the law would demand, or end this monster's life for the death of his mother. The images again of his mother gasping her last breaths as she suffocated, flooded his mind.

"Go to hell!" Comal cursed as he tried to reach with his good arm the .44.

"Perhaps one day, but not tonight. You are though." Joel answered, kicking the pistol out of Comal's reach. He made his decision. Indifference to

Comal's pain or words blocked his humanity as his heart grew cold.

"As ah told your Pa, your momma was one fine piece of—."

Joel fired a round into Comal's uninjured leg. Shattering his thigh bone.

"Ahhh! You sonofabitch!"

"That first one in your shoulder was for my Pa. That one I just put in your leg is for my sister. This one is for me!" Joel recited as he fired a third round into the man's good shoulder. Completely immobilizing him.

"Ahhh! kill me! I'll see you in Hell, you bastard!" he cursed and screamed.

Joel ignored Comal's words as he cocked his Colt once more and aimed it at the killer's forehead.

"This one is for my Ma!" he said slowly.

The Colt roared one final time.

Fred looked at his son, at Comal's bloody remains, then laid his head back against the dirt embankment. Exhaling a long, shaky sigh.

It was over.

Ended not by him. The Lord's vengeance ended it, and vengeance wore a star. He suddenly felt lighter. The pressure was off him. His wife has been avenged.

Almost giddy, he smiled at the stars above him.

"I love you, Rosa, my darlin'." He whispers.

Moments later, Emmitt and Jim Stead rode up. They'd seen the red flashes low on the ground in the distance and heard the thunder of a .44 Colt in the dark of a winter night.

Swinging off their mustangs and standing on the edge of the creek embankment, they asked as they holstered their own sixguns.

"Everything good down there?"

Emmitt, seeing Fred and what he assumed was Comal, lying on their backs and Joel kneeling over his father presumed the fight was over.

"Yeah, just fine." Fred called out as he studied his son's face. Pride, of a father for his own child, now a man, whom saved his father, filled his heart.

"I see two horses over yonder; guess they'll need them!" Jim stated as he climbed on his pony and rode across the wooden bridge.

"Hey, who shot this cayuse in the butt?" Stead hollered in the dark, moments later.

"That's my pony. Comal did, I guess. That explains why it threw me." Fred hollered back. Then to Emmitt, "I think I busted my shoulder."

"We'll have the Doc look at you when we get back. Looks like you took a pounding." Emmitt says as he helped Joel stand his father up and climb out of the creek.

"How do we get this carcass out of this creek?" Joel asks.

"Just put a lariat around him and drag him out." .

Riding back into Dodge, they stopped at the Marshall's office, then Emmitt and Jim took Fred to wake up the Doc to see to his shoulder.

After quickly examining Comal's body before summoning the undertaker, Masterson turned to his deputy and asked.

"Five bullet holes? Resisting arrest, I suppose, is the reason for his condition?"

"Yeah boss. Exactly that, but only four are mine."

Earp also gave a quick once-over to the body. "Must have done a lot of resistin'!"

Joel just shook his head in the affirmative as he replied. "A lot."

"Well, it's better he's put into the ground before the US Marshall rides in. He's due in a few days. You don't want to have to answer to him." Masterson says as

he turned to Ranger Armstrong, who was just watching and remaining silent.

"I'll make out a sworn death certificate for the two. You can take Lambert back as soon as he is able to travel."

Armstrong nodded his head. Looking at Joel, he said. "Need you down in Austin soon for that trial, son."

Joel again nodded his head. It was after midnight now, and with all this commotion he was tired and had forgotten his grandmother.

"My granny, Mama Rosita?"

"She's fine. Her whalebone corset stopped those bullets. She's inside, sitting in a cell. I don't know whether to charge her with interfering with the law or just let her go! She's becoming the talk of the town, even at this late hour." Masterson quipped, stifling a laugh.

"I warned her about that before we traveled up here." Armstrong comments as he chuckles. "But you know, you can't trust a pirate to obey you."

"Pirate? Mrs. Lafitte?"

"Yeah, thought the name would give her away?"

"She's related to the pirate Lafitte?"

"Yeah, her husband was a nephew of Jean Lafitte. They did some pirating down Central and South America way, I understand."

"Oh, my God!" Masterson exclaims slowly and then laughs. "That explains everything. That fancy sword of hers. And the way she handled it. Whacking Comal's ear off!"

"It's called a Short Scimitar. And she's good with it. I remember as a kid, she'd practice with it on anything she saw fit." Joel said, relived she was not hurt.

"You know, it might have had a different result without her there. Maybe a different outcome for us. Those fellas weren't about to be arrested without a fight." Armstrong noted.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. We'll never know. Guess I'll let her go. When the news gets out about her pirating days, no jury will convict that scrappy little woman of anything. I might just fine her twenty dollars instead." Marshall Masterson laughed.



Cattle Resale



Two days later, the railroad left its cattle cars for loading when details of ownership were settled. The county judge quickly held a hearing and ordered a review of events that led to the Red Rooster Cattle Company's demise. The authorities are expecting an answer within the next 24 hours. Which was today, March 12th, 1879.

"Glad I got the cattle sold before this happened." Gallagher said to the Marshall, shifting uncomfortably in his chair across from the Marshall sitting at his desk. His shoulder ached, a fractured right collarbone, the doc said.

With his arm in a sling to lessen the movements, he was given a powder called aspirin for the dull ache. The doctor recommended an upper-body plaster cast to lesson movement, but Gallagher declined. Opting for just a sling and heavy wrappings around his shoulder.

"I guess with the Red Rooster outfit no longer in existence, will the trains still come to pick up the cattle if no ownership is established?"

"Don't know. But it's been established, Fred. Those critters revert to you by the judge's order. You'll be responsible for the expenses for shipping now."

"Oh, that's not welcome news. And what about the money?"

"Yeah, there's a buyer from Amour Meat Packing staying at the same place your daughter and mother-in-law are at. You might see if he is ready to buy. He'll handle the shipping costs if he buys."

"Well, I can't pay for shipping; the money, most of it has been paid out to my boys. Anyway, who would take it?" The innkeeper turned cattleman asked.

"It's yours. Comal signed it off, didn't he? Ask the Armour buyer. His name is Albright."

"You mean I can resell these steers?" Fred asks incredulously.

"Well, yeah. The company you sold them to lost them by forfeit. The judge has approved the return of the steers to their original owner. And since there's no one to have the money returned, it's yours to keep."

"And I'm stuck with the shipping bill if this Armour fella doesn't buy them." Fred complains.

"Well, that's true. Hopefully, Albright can handle that." Masterson replies, growing exasperated.

"I need to see him then." Gallagher remarked.

"He's over at the hotel restaurant right now. Saw him earlier," the Marshall said, eager to get Gallagher out of his office.

"Much obliged, Marshall." Fred grins as he shook left-handed with Masterson.

At the hotel, Emmitt was with his wife, Verna, having lunch. The first meal he'd eaten cooked by women since Fort Worth.

Not that Lester was a terrible cook; it just tasted different.

"You know I'm still mad at you?" Verna whispered.

Emmitt looked at his wife, surprised at this confession.

"What'd I do now?" he asks as he took a bite of mashed potatoes.

"You put yourself in danger riding off with those drovers to rescue that stolen herd."

"That's my job, my love."

"In Texas, not Kansas."

"Those were Texans who lost their herd and, many of them, their lives."

"Still, you promised."

"I promised not to volunteer for vengeance missions. Not upholding the law."

They were interrupted by the housemaid, who handed him a letter.

"Who's that from?" Verna asks.

"Don't know. Return says Henry McCarty. Don't know a Henry McCarty and it says from New Mexico." Emmitt replied as he opened the letter.

"I'll be, it's from Brushy Bill, says he's fine, working for a John Henry Tunstall's ranch, raising cattle. Good to know Billy got decent work! I'll have to let Riley know this."

"Emmitt, we are about to have a child. Are you trying not to be alive at his birth? Not to be there to see him or her?" She asked icily, not wanting to change the subject.

"No, I am not!" Emmitt replied in the same hard tone. It was then he remembered what his wife's father had told him. "There are no roses without thorns."

"I understand your fears. I'll take more care from now on." He whispers softly.

Verna started crying as she looked at him. "I don't want to lose you. Like Papa lost Mama. To some evil men!"

"You won't." Emmitt whispers to his love as he put his arm around her and kissed her on her cheek, then the side of her head before kissing her on her trembling lips.

"You two having an argument?" Fred Gallagher asks as he stood in the open double doors of the hotel cafe.

"No, Papa." His daughter answered.

"Just shucking some thorns." Emmitt also answered.

Verna looked at her husband and then her father, both of whom seemed to know the meaning of what Emmitt said.

Emmitt handed the letter to Fred, who read it and snickered.

"Good to know. Glad he made it," he said, then asked. "Have you two seen Mr. Albright?" Fred asks as he adjusted his arm sling, wincing at the pain from his collarbone.

"Yeah, I think he's in the parlor." Verna replies.

"Wonder what that's all about?" Verna asks as her father walked away.

"Your Pa needs to unload those steers. The judge reverted ownership back to him since the Red Rooster Company had been shut down."

"When did you hear this?"

"About an hour ago, from your brother."

"Oh—oh dear. I hope Mr. Albright will buy them."

"So do I, —so do I." McGowan agreed with his wife.

In the parlor, Mr. Albright was reading the local paper. A novel by Hans Christian Andersen lay on the lampstand next to his chair.

"Mr. Albright?"

Albright dropped his paper and, seeing the voice belonged to Fred Gallagher, smiled, stood and stuck his hand out for a greeting.

"Yes, Mr. Gallagher. I've been expecting to hear from you, eventually. Have a seat!" Gesturing to a vacant stuffed chair.

Gallager, surprised, gave a short laugh.

"Oh, I guess word travels fast around this town."

"Yes, yes, it does. I know you need to unload those steers you sold to the Red Rooster outfit, as they are now back in your ownership."

"Yeah, word does travel fast. I just learned of this only an hour or so ago myself."

Albright shifted in his chair before he spoke again.

"I'm sorry about your misfortune with the perpetrators of your wife's death. It does seem that your son did an excellent job of dealing with these roughnecks. However, it was also your misfortune to sell to them in the first place."

"I needed a way for them to remain in Dodge."

"Ah, now I understand your strategy. Nicely done, Mr. Gallager."

"Well, the Marshall didn't think too highly of it. But that part of my intentions worked. It kept them here."

"So now you come to me to see if Armour and Company will buy your animals?"

"That's it in a nutshell, Mr Albright. You can offer whatever price you deem fair."

"I see. Well, the spring market hasn't opened yet, but beef is always in demand up north, so say I offer you three dollars—." Gallager sucked in his breath at that number.

"Three dollars less than the going price. Twenty-seven dollars per animal. Does that seem fair to you, sir?"

Gallager was beside himself.

"It's a deal, sir!" he says quickly, afraid that Albright would change his mind.

"Fine, I'll have the papers drawn up for ownership transfer, and we can complete this

transaction tomorrow afternoon. Is that agreeable, Mr. Gallager?"

"Oh, very agreeable!" Fred says with a cheerful voice.

Both men stood up, shook hands, Fred walked out of the parlor as if walking on a cloud.

Emmitt and Verna met him as he reentered the dining room.

"Well, did he agree to buy them?"

"Oh yeah, he did."

"At what price?" Verna asked.

"Twenty-seven a head. Can you believe it? Twenty-seven dollars a steer!" He repeated, unable to fathom his and the cowboys of the Gallager herd's luck.

"I'm doing this again!" Fred stated, looking into the eyes of his daughter. "You run the inn."

He looked at Emmitt, who shook his head before Fred said anything.

"I've got a job!"

"Yeah, I know. I need a drink!" Fred exclaims as he headed for the small bar in the hotel.

As he walked away, a hotel servant walked up to Verna.

"Mrs. McGowan, this came in the day's mail on the train." She says as she handed the envelope to her. Offering thanks, Verna looked at the return address. It was from the Inn in Round Rock. Inside was another letter and addressed to Emmitt in care of Verna McGowan.

"It's from your mama. She sent it to the inn."

"Open it, and tell me what she says." He said, standing and watching his father-in-law, thinking of going to join him.

Verna softly cries, "Oh no!"

"What? Is everyone okay there?"

"No, not everyone." She whispers, feeling the pain for her husband that was coming in the next few minutes, as she handed him the letter.

Emmitt stared at his wife for a long moment before looking down to read the letter:

My dear daughter, my son's wife. I addressed this letter to you because I need you to be with Emmitt when he learns this news.

Ol' Blu, the horse he loved so much as a young man, who shared many adventures together for sixteen years, has passed away. He died a hero.

My grandchildren were down on the riverbank, fishing and doing silly things that children do. Ol' Blu was nearby, just like he always was when the children were outside. Ol' Blu loved those children and watched over them like big Red, our dog, would.

On December 30th, while the children were on the river bank, a cougar crept up on them, stalking them, I suppose. Our dog, Big Red, fought to defend the young-uns until he was defeated. Then, according to the older boys, Ol' Blu attacked the cougar and stomped it to death. But the cougar had cut the right jugular near the base of his neck.

By the time the men reached the screaming little ones, Ol' Blu was on his knees. The little ones tried to stop the bleeding with their hands, begging him not to die.

He died quietly with the children he loved and protected, all those he loved around him, bugging him

I hope I get that kind of attention when I pass on.

We buried him and Big Red together.

The children insisted that a stone marker be placed on their grave, with their names chiseled into the stone.

It's a big rock, took two horses to drag it to that location. Son, I am so sorry that Ol' Blu is gone. I know how you loved that horse. Know he sired six foals after your and Verna's visit here.

My prayers are with you both.

Momma.

Emmitt handed the letter back to his wife, tears welling up in his eyes.

Verna was near crying because of her husband's sudden grief. She knew he loved that horse as much as he loved her. Only differently.

"My love, I'm so sorry, I——."

Emmitt shook his head and held up his hand for her to stop.

"Don't—let me be alone for a while. I need to walk this off!" He pleads, then walked out of the hotel and down the iced and snow-covered street.

He didn't want his wife or anyone else to see him mourning for his horse. He didn't need to hear the guffaws or snickers he knew would come if he were seen. Men don't weep for horses. They after all, are just horses. Tools, transportation. Nothing to get upset about.

Later that night he would weep on his wife's shoulder, but not now.

Mama Rosita, who had moved into the hotel so Emmitt could be with his wife at the boarding house, walked up and asked.

"Where is that daring grandson-in-law of mine?"

"Oh, he just left. Needed to clear his head."

Mama Rosita looked at her granddaughter quizzically, at the letter she held in her hand and then walked over to some men who asks her about her life as a pirate.

It'd been many years since she had been the center of attention for so many men. The last time as a pirate's wife.

Lester Cornyn, Jose Chapman, Robert Murdock, Jesse Dossey, Jamie Christian and John Cammer hired on to the Jamison herd after the last of the steers were shipped, to spend the balance of the winter watching over those cattle. They replaced the

men who had been killed by the rustlers. Lester, of course, as cook.

Lester and the others made four more cattle drives with Fred Gallagher until the Dodge City trail was closed in 1886.

Lester then attended the Methodist Seminary, run by the Revern Hardin, the gunman's father, in Austin; becoming a Methodist Preacher, with his own church in Athens, Texas. He met up with Raul and the Lord in 1915.

Jim Stead and Mary Peterson were married in the Dodge Chapel a week after the cattle were resold to the Armour & Company Meat Packers.

They left on the next train back to Texas to start their life together in Pleasanton, Texas. Buying twice the amount of land and cattle Jim had originally figured on buying.

His wife, Mary, funded the building of a 3,500 - square-foot, two-floor, stone home, of her design, to raise their seven children in. They lived until the ripe old ages of 102 and 98, passing just days apart in 1951.

Captain John Armstrong made Ricky Morolez a temporary deputy ranger to help him escort Lambert back to Austin, Texas, for trial. In February 1880, they hanged Lambert for his part in the 1862 crimes.

Morolez joined the Texas Rangers Company C after that. He remained with the Rangers, rising to captain before he retired. He passed away in 1955.

Frank Holcomb trailed cattle until his death from the Spanish flu in 1919. Driving small herds of cattle, horses and mules, to the stockyards in Fort Worth, Texas, after the Dodge Trail was closed.

All the other drovers and vaqueros meandered back to Texas for the next cattle drives that spring and summer of 1879 until the trails were closed in the late 1890s. Their passing in the early 20th century went unheard.



Galveston: Late April, 1879



T across the island, cooling the temperature just enough that it was delightful.

Birds flying back north to their summer homes filled the sky. Spring was raising its head, flowers bloomed, and life was returning to the land.

Standing among many marble and granite markers, statues, and occasional tombs were three generations of two families united, the Gallagher's and McGowan's.

There to pay their respects on the anniversary of the death of Rosa Maria Montoya de Gallagher, her husband Fred, daughter Verna with her husband Emmitt McGowan, son Joel Gallagher, mother Mama Rosita Lafitte and sister-in-law Rosalyn Verna Mayfield. As well as Arthur and his wife and Nadie.

Mostly silent, each in their own thoughts, Fred knelt down to lay a bouquet of red roses on his wife's grave. Quietly, he uttered these words.

"My darling, my love, now lying here cold in this cold earth. You were the light of my life. You gave me two wonderful children. Loved me like no man deserved.

Taken too soon, my love. Much too soon. But your beauty and character remain in my mind until I join you in glory.

My dearest Rosa, all the evil men who took you from me are now being judged by our creator. You probably know this.

You have been avenged, my love.

*I wish I could tell you about all the amazing things I've learned, but I know you were watching me from up high, and you know what I've experienced and learned.
I so miss you Rosa, till death overcomes me, I will always remember your sweetness, your love for life, for the children and for me.*

You can now rest in peace, my faded love.

Of the family members, no one had dry eyes. Each hugged Fred and each other. Including the men.

"Well, we have here all the Roses of San Antone." Fred exclaimed.

"I've never been to San Antonio!" Rosalyn pointed out.

"You're now an honorary member. We'll have to take you there someday." Rosita responded.

"Oh, I'd like that," Rosalyn responded happily.

Rosita knelt down and hugged Sam, who was just sitting there, quiet, wondering why all these humans were standing among all these funny-shaped rocks. And why his master was talking to the ground for so long.

"And you, Sam, you're such an obedient dog. Loyal to Fred. You take care of him." She whispers.

Rosita stood up and announced. "I think it is time I got married again."

"Henry?" Emmitt asks.

"Yes, he asked me again last night."

"You said yes?" Verna asks.

"Not yet, told him I'd think about it and answer today."

Everyone just smiled and gave her a hug. As they were walking back to their two carriages, Joel commented on his sister's condition.

"Sis, you look like you are bout ready to pop! When is the baby due?"

"Next few weeks I reckon, brother."

"Y'all chosen names yet?"

"We have several, but haven't decided yet."

Emmitt answered Joel's question.

As they were about to climb into the carriage and buggy, Fred asked. "Drop me off down by the beach on the gulf side, I'll walk back."

"Papa, that's a long walk."

"I know, daughter, I need this."

"Okay Papa. Take Sam with you."

Fred laughed. "There are few places he'll let me go alone. We'll be fine."

A few minutes later, Emmitt and Verna watched, as Fred walked down the sandy beach towards the city of Galveston, tossing a small piece of driftwood for Sam to chase after.

"Papa's free now. I know that he misses her, but his soul is at rest over Mama." Verna says softly, a smile on her face.

"Yeah, he's free. He knows she's waitin' for him. That will never fade. Your Pa' is a good, honest man. He deserves his peace." Emmitt agreed with his bride, as he tapped the buggy horse on its back with the reins.

The End



Acknowledgements



Galveston Weekly News
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September 17, 1862

Holy Bible: King James Version
The Three Masted Baroque, the Elissa, built in 1877 and
restored; is docked at the Historical Wharfs in
Galveston, Texas

Songs That Inspired this Novel

‘Faded Love’

Song by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys.

‘There Are No Roses Without Thorns’

Song by Michael Martin Murphy

Texas Ranger Captain John Armstrong, Marshall
Jim (longhair) Courtwright, Deputy’s Wyatt Earp, Bill
Tilghman, Marshall Bat Masterson, and Brushy Bill
Roberts were real people who lived in this time period.

Proof