

A desire to live. A reason to die

After the killings, there came almost complete silence, no dogs barked, no birds sang in the few trees scattered around and there came about a sombre, almost surreal atmosphere about the town. Men and women huddled together in small groups on the boardwalks or in doorways and whispered reverently as though to speak normally would bring down the wrath of god about their heads. The subject of their conversation was almost certainly, the events of less than an hour previously and the man who stood alone looking down in almost blank disbelief at the two blanket covered bodies lying on the boardwalk. Bodies that had been very carefully, carried from the rutted mud of the street to lay side by side in their present position. He held his hat in his hands and continuously wrung it between his fingers as he stared in utter bewilderment at the small body of his young wife and even smaller body of his five year old daughter who until less than an hour ago, had been his whole world. He had brought his family to town on their monthly trip to buy supplies for their small farm twenty miles away. Now he had no family, his wife and pretty daughter so cruelly taken from him in just a few moments of madness. The man hadn't left the side of his stricken family since he had been informed of what had happened on the street while he had been purchasing supplies in the store round the corner, perhaps feeling that if he stayed there long enough, he would wake up from the bad dream he was experiencing and his happy little family would be back by his side just as always.

The marshal of the town stood to one side watching the man sympathetically. He was fully able to appreciate the grief he must be feeling having gone through something similar many years previously.

He stood leaning against a post while he idly watched the wretched man. He held a mug of coffee in one hand while the other constantly fingered the butt of the Colt Peacemaker sitting snugly in the holster slung low on his thigh.

Pretty soon, the silence was broken by the sound of a galloping horse entering the precincts of the town and the marshal turned his attention to the long main street and the rider approaching fast. The horseman reigned in close to where the marshal stood and quickly dismounted.

The lawman placed his mug on one of the less distorted planks of the boardwalk and stood up straight to face the man before tipping his hat with his forefinger.

‘How do Mr Kearney.’

‘Sam.’

Kearney was breathing heavily as he regarded the marshal. He had ridden hard as soon as he was informed of recent events and had wasted no time getting to town from his home nearly three miles away.

‘I’m sorry about your wife Mr Kearney sir, there wasn’t much anybody could do about it, they took us by surprise and by the time we realized it, they had made their getaway taking Mrs Kearney with them.’

Sam Draper the Marshall of Providence California, regarded Dace Kearney, owner of one of the richest silver mines in the area with a considerable amount of sympathy and concern.

Though he was breathing hard from the ride to town, Kearney’s business-like and calm exterior when he responded to Draper belied how he really felt, for inside, he was frantic with worry and anxiety for

his wife's safety, a feeling that was alien to him in the normally safe environment in which they lived.

'How many were there and what the hell were they after?'

'From what I can make out, there were five of them and they came to rob the bank, but they didn't put much thought into it cos they chose a silver shipment day and found four heavily armed guards inside. Regrettably your wife was the only customer and they grabbed her to use as a shield. I guess they felt safer taking her along as a hostage. It's damned unfortunate that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but once they get clear and feel safe, there's always a chance that they will let her go.'

'Do you honestly believe that Sam?'

Draper regarded him for a moment, then sighed loudly.

'In truth sir, I don't believe it but I hoped to lift your spirits if I gave you a little hope.'

'I appreciate your concern Sam, but I never believed it either. How soon will you be ready to go?'

Kearney showed a crack in his normally calm demeanour as he became impatient to start the pursuit of the men who had kidnapped his wife.

'Abe Johnson's rounding up a posse as we speak and we should be able to get under way pretty soon.'

Kearney grunted.

'Did they do what they set out to do?'

‘No sir, they left empty handed, they were more concerned about getting away without getting shot. But I have to say, they were a wild bunch shooting at anything that moved.’

He nodded toward the man who stood like a sentinel watching over his wife and child.

They shot dead a young woman and trampled her small child under their horse’s hooves, it was a terrible sight I can tell you Mr Kearney.’

‘My god,’ Kearney was visibly moved by Draper’s revelation. ‘What kind of animals would do a thing like that in this day and age?’

‘I don’t know sir, but you can be assured, we will catch them and when we do, they will hang for their crimes.’

‘Should I go over and offer my condolences?’

‘Maybe it would be better to allow him time alone, I don’t think it has fully hit him yet and until it does, he will be better wallowing in his own thoughts.’

‘Of course, I will offer to help in any way I can once this is all over.’

‘It’s a damned bad business altogether I can tell you Mr Kearney.’

Kearney regarded him before daring to ask the question that had dogged his mind since he heard the news.

‘Was my wife physically harmed?’

‘Not as far as I could make out, nobody would shoot at them desperados for fear of hitting Mrs Kearney.’

Both men were standing outside the stone building that passed as the jail and sheriff’s office when their conversation was interrupted by the sound of horses approaching along the street toward them.

Immediately, Draper unhitched his horse and mounted, ready to greet the approaching posse and pretty soon, Kearney followed suit. There were eleven of them all heavily armed and they had two pack mules in tow.

‘What kept you?’ Draper directed his words at his deputy, Abe Johnson.

‘Took a while to get the supplies together, but we should have enough for a long chase.’

‘Won’t those mules slow us down?’ Interjected Kearney.

‘There aint no point in us going after them varmints hell for leather Mr Kearney, all that will achieve is tired horses and with the lead them fellers have on us, sooner or later we will have to call a halt to the pursuit and turn back. This way, we can wear them down over a period of days as long as they aint got fresh mounts and supplies stashed away somewhere.’

‘What about my wife? I want to get her away from those men as soon as possible.’

‘I figure this way, there’s a good chance we can get her back in one piece, but going after them like there’s no tomorrow could result in you never seeing her again.’

Kearney regarded the Marshal with renewed respect.

‘Then I will bow to your superior knowledge Sam and trust in you to do your job to the best of your abilities. I just hope they don’t harm my wife, she is a gentle, timid woman and I doubt she is capable of standing up to any kind of violence or abuse.’

‘If we can keep pushing them, they won’t have time to do her any harm and I figure they would want to keep her safe so that they can use her as a bargaining chip if things go badly for them.’

TWO

Ciatriona Kearney ached all over but the pain was nothing compared to the fear and the feeling of foreboding that invaded her mind not to mention the undignified way she was being carried face down across the knees of one of the ruffians who had forced her into that shameful position as the horse that carried them sped along at what seemed an incredible pace. The pain of the saddle horn rubbing against her hip and the discomfort in her stomach as she bounced around across the man’s thighs kept her mind alert and aware of the men riding on either side of her shouting and whooping as the adrenaline rush and the excitement of having been in close proximity to death coupled with the relief of getting away unharmed, overwhelmed their minds. There was no doubt in her own mind that she was unlikely to come out of her dire situation unscathed and could even be killed. Nevertheless, she clung to the hope that they might release her once they had made good their escape, even though, after seeing the way one of them had cold bloodedly shot down poor Annie Greaves for no other reason than she was on their escape route as she crossed the street, didn’t fill her with too much optimism that she would come out of this alive.

After what seemed like an age, the horses slowed and eventually reduced their pace to a walk and finally, they stopped altogether giving Cait a little respite from the pain that wracked her body, especially her hip where the saddle horn had chafed it. However, her

respite was short lived for she was unceremoniously dumped from the horse and landed with a sharp yelp in an ungainly heap on the hard ground.

She turned her face upward to regard her former captor and saw that he was a big man who carried a lot of excess weight and with his greying beard and moustache, she put his age at around the mid-fifties. He returned her stare and she shuddered at the cruelty she found in his cold, grey eyes and quickly averted her eyes from his sneering face.

‘Rat!’ he yelled. ‘Get your ugly ass over here and watch this woman while we uncover the entrance.’

A horse came close and somebody dismounted and quickly came to stand behind her depriving her of a chance to see him clearly.

The big man also dismounted and walked toward the other men leaving the one he called Rat, to watch over her as she half sat, half lay on the ground.

‘Watch her good you ugly bastard or you will get your goddamned head knocked off, savvy?’

Rat remained silent but she could hear him breathing behind her, a rasping sound as though he had some kind of restriction.

‘Answer me damn you,’ insisted the big man.

‘Yes pa I hear you, I’ll watch her good.’

Rat spoke as though he had a mouthful of food and with a nasal sound that made his words barely coherent.

She watched the big man walk toward the other three riders who had also dismounted and were busy clearing brush and branches away

from what appeared to be a solid rock face. The man joined them in their labours and pretty soon, she was shocked to see they had uncovered a wide fissure at the bottom that tapered to a crack in the rock face as it neared the top of the cliff. The opening they had uncovered was wide enough and tall enough to allow a man and horse to enter and she wondered if it was a large cave where they planned to hide from potential pursuit and her fears grew ten-fold at the thought of being interned in an enclosed space with five desperate ruffians.

One by one the men entered the crevasse leaving their horses behind with the big man who was clearly their leader bringing up the rear. Just before he entered the opening, he turned.

‘Bring the woman,’ he bellowed.

The man standing behind her touched her gently, on the shoulder.

‘We gotta go ma’am,’ he wheezed.

She climbed unsteadily to her feet and stood swaying for a few moments as a dizziness overcame her and her legs became weak leaving her with a feeling that she was about to faint. However, her guard gripped her arm gently but firmly and held her steady. She turned to regard him and he quickly turned his face away.

‘We have to go ma’am, it won’t do to make him angry.’

He gently urged her to step toward the opening with his firm grip on her arm and she briefly wondered if she might have an ally in this young man whose politeness was totally unexpected. With his help she made her way unsteadily toward the opening with him by her side and leading his horse. When they reached the entrance, the big man grabbed her and hustled her roughly inside before turning to his son.

‘You know what you’ve gotta do. Fuck it up and I’ll slice the other side of your goddamned ugly face.’

‘I won’t let you down pa.’

‘Damned right you won’t, cos if you do you had better not come back here, cos if ever I set eyes on you again, I’ll skin you alive and feed you to the vultures.’

‘Maybe Roy or Zack would be more reliable than me, I’m not all that confident I can pull it off.’

‘There aint no maybe about it, either one of them could do a better job than you with blindfolds on. But they aint as expendable as you, your life aint worth two bits as far as I’m concerned, but they mean more to me than you will ever do, now get to it before that town marshal organizes a posse and catches you.’

The boy called Rat mounted his horse and gathered the reins of the lead horse of the four that had been tethered together and spurred his horse away taking along the other four animals with him. He had been well schooled on the task at hand and made sure he covered terrain that would be easy to read for sign of his passing.

‘When he had left, the man he called pa got to work replacing the brush and branches over the entrance until he left a small enough opening for him to enter then he brushed away the footprints leading to the crevasse with a some brushwood, leaving just the hoof-prints of the horses where they had milled around to show that they had stopped here. Once inside the opening, he replaced a final branch leaving the entrance well camouflaged to anybody passing by who failed to scrutinise it too closely.