

At that moment a man approached her. He was dressed very much like most of the other men she had seen around, except he wasn't visibly armed and he wore a blue cap with a Santa Fe railroad logo emblazoned on the front. He touched a forefinger to the peak of his cap and spoke to her in a gruff but gentle voice.

'Howdy ma'am. Is there anything I can help you with?'

She regarded his concerned and kindly, weather beaten face and decided maybe there were some decent people in this town after all.

'I'm fine thank you,' she replied unwilling to allow her vulnerability to show. 'Someone is coming to meet me but must have been delayed. I'm sure they will be here presently.'

He was taken aback by the clear and almost little girl sound of her beautiful voice, even though she would probably be around nineteen or twenty. However, he composed himself and responded with a bright smile.

'Well if you're sure ma'am.'

She forced a smile but was unable to completely hide the dismay on her face.

'Yes, I'm sure and thank you for your concern.'

He touched the peak of his cap again.

'Then I bid you good day and good luck.'

As he turned to leave, she impulsively, touched his arm.

'One moment sir,' she said hurriedly.

He turned back to face her.

'Yes ma'am?'

'Could you direct me to a hotel?'

He gazed at her and his concern for her wellbeing became apparent as he responded to her question.

'There's a lot of hotels in Wichita miss, but none would be suitable for a fine young lady like yourself, especially as you're alone. Most of 'em are full anyhow and the ones that ain't are only fit for low life criminals and the kind of ne'er-do-well you should steer clear of.'

'I think my contact may have been delayed considerably and I have no option but to stay overnight.'

‘Then I suggest you make your way to Ella Chamber’s boarding house. She won’t stand any nonsense from rowdies and only takes in god fearing gentlemen and women. I know for sure she has a small room available or did so a couple of hours ago and we ain’t expecting no more cattle drives any time soon.’

‘I am most appreciative of your concern sir and I will certainly take the room on your recommendation providing it is still available of course.’

‘If you will give me ten minutes to get the train on its way, I will escort you there. It will be easier to show you the way than to try and give you directions, especially as you may find Wichita to be a little more boisterous than what you may be used to.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t want to take you from your work.’

‘Once the train leaves, I won’t be needed for a while and I will be going your way for my lunch.’

She smiled brightly.

‘You are very gallant Mister...?’

‘The name’s Sam Chambers ma’am. I’m the husband of Ella, the woman who runs the boarding house.’

His revelation didn’t completely, take her by surprise. It made a certain amount of sense after the way he had sung his wife’s praises.

‘Well thank you Mister Chambers, my name is Beatrice Mellowday and I will gladly accept your offer to escort me to the boarding house.’

‘Then maybe it would be easier for you if you take the weight off your feet in my cabin while I dispatch the train. The cabin’s small, but very clean and there’s hot coffee on the stove as well as a comfortable chair and some old newspapers you can read if you’ve a mind.’

Twenty minutes later with Chambers carrying her valise, the pair headed along the rutted and dusty, main street while keeping to the uneven board walk. Beatrice’s wide and frightened eyes took in the sights and sounds of that busy and bustling thoroughfare as she stayed as close as she dared to the elderly gentleman by her side. He

was speaking but she didn't hear his words, so strong was her concentration on what was happening all around her.

The smells were the worst. Horse and cow urine and droppings, stale sweat and the smell of sour whiskey coming from the saloons. A dead cat covered in maggots, rotting just beneath the boardwalk and even the unpleasant stink of human excreta and urine, floating on the air from the many privies and bushes situated behind the buildings, or chamber pots that had been emptied into the street. There were so many odours mingled together, she almost gagged and constantly pressed her handkerchief to her nose in an effort to shield her delicate senses from the worst of the stench.

Though it was only midday, the saloons, dancehalls and brothels, were doing good business as cowhands anxious to spend the pay they had spent months earning, jostled at the bars and paid exorbitant prices for whiskey, beer and whores. Despite her misgivings, Beatrice's natural curiosity would not allow her to avert her eyes from the many sights that were presented before her frightened gaze. Cowhands and gamblers standing or sitting outside saloons openly leered at her as she passed. Scantly clad girls watching from balconies above saloons, giggled or laughed loudly when she involuntarily yelped because she was startled by the sound of a gunshot. An Indian woman with two small children by her side, begging outside one of the mercantile stores. A constant flow of wagons and men on horseback travelled in both directions coming and going to and from the railhead or the many stores that had sprung up since the cattle boom. At one point a fist fight spilled out onto the street from a saloon, the two men trading punches and kicking and gouging right in the path of the street traffic causing the horrified young woman to gasp with the certainty one or both would be crushed beneath the wheels of one of the wagons. But apart from a horse shying away from the battling men, nothing happened and the fight quickly broke up with both protagonists heading side by side back to the saloon.

Gradually, Beatrice became accustomed to everything that was happening all around her and became aware that her companion was speaking.

‘I’m sorry Mister Chambers,’ she said apologetically. ‘I was so involved with everything happening in the vicinity, I wasn’t really listening.’

‘That’s alright ma’am, I was just rambling on anyhow.’

‘Do go on Mister Chambers, was there something you wanted to ask me?’

‘Well since you ask Miss Mellowday; I did wonder why such a fine young lady would be travelling all this way alone.’

She debated for a few moments, upon how much she should reveal. Then decided there was no shame in what she was doing. She was a woman alone and destitute. Therefore, she felt justified in using any means at her disposal to survive in a land where women generally, relied on men to keep them safe and secure.

‘Did you hear about the great fire of Chicago last October Mister Chambers?’

‘Yes ma’am, I read about it and heard first hand stories from men coming in on the trains. A bad business from what I heard.’

‘That is quite the understatement Mister Chambers. The fire burned down most of Chicago. My own father perished in the fire when it consumed and destroyed his lumber mill leaving me alone and penniless after I was required to sell the house to pay our debtors.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that ma’am, I truly am. But that don’t explain why you’re alone in one of the wildest frontier towns in the west.’

Before she could answer, two horsemen rode their mounts at a gallop along the street and as they passed Beatrice and her companion, they began firing their pistols into the air. The terrified young woman screamed and threw herself at Chambers, flinging her arms around his neck and sending him staggering backwards. He quickly composed himself and steadied her with an arm around her slender waist. She shook violently as she sobbed against his chest certain she was about to die.

‘It’s alright ma’am,’ Chambers said soothingly. ‘It’s just a couple of cowhands letting off steam.’

She turned her dewy, tear-soaked eyes up to him and stifled another sob.

‘Oh, Mister Chambers,’ she cried. ‘I thought they would surely murder us.’

He smiled inwardly at her naiveté, but his expression remained serious as he indicated a split log seat beside a nearby doorway.

‘Would you like to sit for a spell?’

She moved away from him and composed herself even though her legs felt weak and shaky.

‘I believe I can carry on now sir but thank you for your concern and my apologies for throwing myself so wantonly into your arms.’

‘Well it ain’t far now ma’am and it’s in a quiet street that’s free of saloons and such.’

They carried on walking just as a horseman approached going the opposite way with a fully laden mule in tow. He was a big man wearing a grey shirt under a black, leather vest and a black hat which was pulled down low placing his eyes and most of his face in shadow. As he came nearer to the man and woman, she glanced his way and noticed he was armed with a pistol in a holster slung low on his thigh and a rifle in a scabbard attached to the saddle. Though she was unable to clearly, see his eyes, she sensed he was staring intently at her and though he unnerved her intensely and to her mind, appeared very menacing, she found she was unable to tear her eyes away from his shadowy face. He did not once avert his eyes until he had passed them by and she stared back the whole time unable to tear her eyes away as though mesmerised by him. She even stopped and stared at his back after he had passed.

‘Why was that man staring at me Mister Chambers?’

She glanced at his face and saw the concern and worry etched there.

‘I don’t rightly know ma’am, but he ain’t the kind of man decent folks have anything to do with. As bad men go, he is one of the worst

there is and if ever you find him approaching you, you would do well to cross the street and hide.'

Her mouth opened in disbelief. Chambers description seemed more befitting of the devil himself than a mere man.

'Who is he?' She gasped.

'You don't need to know ma'am. Looks like he's planning to leave town anyhow judging by that fully laden mule, so with any luck, you'll never see him again.'

She turned to stare once more, after the retreating back of the man.

'You clearly know him Mister Chambers. Who is he and why is he so menacing?'

Instead of answering, he steered her around a corner into a quieter street which appeared to house mainly, business premises. A brick-built bank, two stores and a newspaper office amongst others. The boarding house was situated between a post office and gunsmiths.

'Here we are.'

Chambers guided the young woman up three steps and onto the stoop before opening the door and allowing her to enter. She was surprised to find the door opened into a restaurant which at this particular time was quite busy with both men and women seated at most of the dozen or so tables scattered around the room.

Chambers led her between the tables to a door on the far side of the room where they entered a kitchen occupied by two women, one elderly and the other around the same age, or possibly, a little older than Beatrice. They both looked up from preparing meals to see the young woman and older man enter the kitchen.

'Ella,' began Chambers. 'This young lady would like a room if it's still available.'

The older woman smiled brightly.

'Yes,' she announced. 'It's still available, but I'm very busy right now.'

'Oh, please don't let me keep you from your work madam,' said Beatrice. 'I can wait.'

‘Have you eaten child?’ asked the woman. ‘If you’ve a mind you can take lunch here and when the busy period is over, I will show you the room.’

Beatrice hesitated for a moment, aware that the small amount of money she possessed may have to be spent sparingly if she couldn’t immediately, find a job. However, before she was able to give an answer, Sam spoke on her behalf.

‘Of course, she’ll eat, Ella. She must be starving after her journey.’ He turned to Beatrice. ‘If you’ve a mind Miss Mellowday, I would be honoured if you’d join me for lunch.’

The request took Beatrice’s options out of her hands, the only one left to her was to comply.

‘Oh, yes of course I will join you for lunch Mister Chambers if that is acceptable to your wife.’

Ella Chambers laughed and the young woman with her smiled.

‘My goodness, such a polite and obviously, well-bred young lady. Your usual table is free Sam. Take the young lady and get seated, Jenny will be out shortly to take your order.’

The young woman who Beatrice assumed was Jenny, smiled sweetly before she picked up two food laden plates she had prepared and headed for the door to the restaurant while Beatrice spoke politely to Sam’s wife.

‘I am extremely grateful that you are so friendly and kind madam. My name is Beatrice Mellowday and at the present time, I find myself alone and friendless in a town that is completely alien to what I am used to.’

‘Don’t worry your pretty little head Beatrice,’ replied the woman. ‘We’ll take good care of you until you have found your feet.’

‘Thank you so much madam,’ said Beatrice with a smile. ‘I feel so much better now.’

‘Oh, hush child and please call me Ella. Now get out of my kitchen and seat yourself in the restaurant.’

Sam laughed and ushered the young woman into the restaurant where they made their way to a table in the far corner. Ever the

gentleman, he pulled out a chair for her and she settled herself at the table.

‘There ain’t much by way of choice ma’am,’ said Sam as he sat down opposite her. ‘But what there is, is the finest grub in these here parts and I ain’t just sayin’ that ‘cos my wife is the cook.’

Beatrice smiled and glanced at the hand-written menu. There was a choice of three main meals and one desert. She didn’t think she would be able to eat the steak, which left a choice between beef stew and beef and potato pie.

‘I can recommend the pie, ma’am,’ offered Sam noticing her frown. ‘I could recommend everything; but the steak might be too much for a delicate little lady such as you and the beef stew is very filling.’

‘Then I will go on your recommendation Mister Chambers and please call me Beatrice if you wish.’

‘Only if you’ll call me Sam.’

She smiled sweetly.

‘It’s a deal Sam.’

He grinned happily just as Jenny arrived to take their order.

‘What’ll it be Sam?’ she asked as she gave Beatrice a friendly smile.

‘I’ll have the steak as usual Jen and Beatrice will have the pie.’

Jenny raised an eyebrow at Sam’s seemingly over familiar use of Beatrice’s name. However, knowing Sam, she recognized it was simply his friendly personality shining through.

After Jenny left to fill their order, Beatrice tried again to Question Sam about the mysterious horseman who had left such a notable impression on her mind.

‘You didn’t answer my question about that man who stared at me so intently, Sam.’

Sam’s normally, pleasant features clouded and she thought she saw fear in his eyes.

‘Let’s not spoil our lunch by talking about him. He’ll be long gone now and should no longer be of interest to you.’ He brightened up before continuing. ‘Maybe now would be a good time to continue your story; if you’ve a mind of course.’

'I will if you will tell me what you know about that man. Call it a woman's curiosity, but I would like to know if there is some kind of reason, he would stare at me so intently. It was almost as though he recognized me from somewhere. I suppose it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility that he could have spent some time in Chicago and possibly knew my father or one of his associates.'

'Anything's possible Beatrice, but it ain't very likely. He ain't no city feller and he don't care much for people neither.'

'What's his name Sam?'

'According to the town marshal, his name's Frank Zelletta.'

'What do you know about him?'

'My god, for saying you only seen him one time and ain't likely to set eyes on him again, you really are a curious young lady. I really don't understand why you're so all fired up about the feller.'

'I don't understand it neither Sam but there was something about him that intrigued me and I have this strange feeling, I haven't seen the last of him. If that is so, it would be in my best interest to know more about him so that I'll know who I'm dealing with.'

Sam studied her face for a moment while he ran through what he knew about Zelletta.

'I doubt anybody in town knows much about him apart from the marshal. The first time I set eyes on him, was when I was sitting outside Mallory's Saloon having a beer before heading home after work. He rode in around five months ago covered in grime and dust and looking the worse for wear. His hoss was about done in and I figured he must have ridden the poor animal for god knows how long without any rest. He stopped at the jailhouse and had words with the marshal before taking his hoss to the livery. After that, I went home and missed what happened later that night.'

She regarded him with interest.

'Did he get involved in something Sam?'

'I can tell you he killed three men that night. Cut one's throat and shot two of 'em, one in the back.'

Beatrice looked horrified.

'Was he arrested?'

‘No ma’am, them fellers had a price on their heads dead or alive and I guess he figured it was easier to kill ‘em than try to take ‘em alive. But what I’m telling you is second hand and only what I heard from other folks.’

‘So, is he some kind of policeman?’

‘Bounty hunter. Makes a living hunting down fugitives for the price they got on their heads.’

‘Oh, my goodness,’ she gasped. ‘That is absolutely deplorable. He is surely no better than the men he hunts down using such an abhorrent method.’

‘I guess that’s so. But folks who commit crimes have to expect some kind of justice.’

‘But surely they deserved a trial for whatever crime they committed. They shouldn’t be shot down like rabid dogs’

‘I don’t know about that Beatrice. I figure they were just as evil as he is. From what I heard, they robbed a stage down near the Ozarks and killed all the passengers except two, a young woman who they took with ‘em and the driver who they shot but didn’t kill. He recognized the gang and told the lawmen who they were before he died. The posse found the woman’s body a few days later in an arroyo a few miles from where they took her. I heard she wasn’t a pretty sight and they’d done stuff to her that’s too sickening for tender young ears like yours.’

Beatrice was a young woman who had led a privileged and sheltered life, therefore, what Sam had told her was too much to take in. She simply couldn’t come to terms with this awful land where men murdered women and killed each other so readily. However, she was spared her immediate thoughts on the subject when Jenny arrived with their meals. After that, they ate in silence, but Sam’s revelation had quashed her appetite and she only picked at her food, unable to clear her mind of the horrific events her companion had revealed. However, she did not give up on ascertaining more information about Frank Zelletta. Therefore, once they had both finished eating, she began once more to probe.

‘Why did he stay on in town after he had concluded his business?’

Sam offered a lopsided, knowing grin before answering. He had been waiting expectantly for the inquisitive young woman to begin questioning him again.

'I believe he had to wait a couple of weeks before the bounty could be approved. After that, he hung around checking out faces of strangers against some wanted posters he carried.' I guess he figured this being a boom town, sooner or later somebody is gonna come here with a price on their head,'

'But if his sole purpose is to hunt down criminals, why do you fear him so much Sam? You aren't a wanted fugitive, are you?'

She asked it with a smile and a small giggle.

He debated denying he feared Zelletta, but that wouldn't be completely true. There had been something about the man that was very intimidating and Sam felt, at his age, any display of bravado to impress his young companion was totally unnecessary.

'I believe most of the law-abiding citizens of the town and many of the not so law-abiding ones, were unnerved by him and I guess there'll be many sighs of relief now he's decided to move on.'

'I don't understand Sam. I realise he is a very intimidating man and clearly a murderer. But as I understand it, there's no reason for good citizens to fear him.'

Sam mused over her statement for a moment.

'Maybe fear is the wrong word to describe the gut feeling you get if ever you're unfortunate enough to get in his way. It only happened to me the once and I honestly thought I was gonna die. It was a time when I was returning to the railhead after my lunch. I almost bumped into him as I walked by Mallory's just as he was coming out the door. That was the first time I saw his face up close and the first time I knew about his disfigurement.'

'Oh!' She exclaimed. 'What kind of disfigurement does he have?'

'I didn't look too closely. It wouldn't do to offend him, but one side of his face looks like it's been burned by a red-hot knife as though somebody tortured him at one time. It's healed but left a bad burn mark there in the shape of a knife blade. The rest of his face is also scarred as though somebody worked on him and cut him up some

with the same knife. Them there scars have disfigured him making him look evil and if that ain't bad enough, what is worse, is the way he looks at you with them green eyes. It's as though he can see deep into your soul like Old Nick himself.'

Beatrice shuddered involuntarily. She hadn't been able to see him clearly with his hat pulled down low placing his face in shadow. But she had felt his eyes on her for a long time and that alone had sent shivers of trepidation coursing through her body.

'What did he do when you nearly ran into him?'

'Nothing. He just looked down at me with them green eyes and waited for me to get out of his way. Never said a word, so I apologised and went around him, then got away from there as fast as my legs would take me.'

'You're quite a tall man Sam, yet you say he looked down at you. Surely he can't be that big.'

'Bigger than any man I ever met and from what I heard, he has the strength of a grizzly bear.'

The more she heard, the more engrossed she became in Sam's revelations about the man. She held an uneasy fascination for him that even had she tried, she would not be able to eradicate from her mind.

'What did you hear Sam?'

'I have a drinking pal who happens to be the dentist in town. He was playing cards in the Long Bar saloon when a couple of buffalo hunters came in and though it was still early evening, they were clearly drunk and lookin' for trouble. Zelletta was minding his own business at one end of the bar when the biggest of the bufflers spotted him. He must have been loco or too drunk to see the menace he was facing, cos he figured on challenging Zelletta to fist fight. Went straight up to him and prodded his arm with a finger. Zelletta didn't even wait to hear what the guy had to say. He hit him with a big fist, full in the face and the buffler staggered back and fell to the floor. He must have been a tough ole boy though, cos he came off the floor with a knife in his hand and rushed at Zelletta aiming to

stick him. You realize what I'm telling you is second hand talk but quite a few folks swear it true.'

'Go on Sam.'

'Well they say, despite his size, Zelletta is lightning quick and sidestepped the buffler and in one quick movement, drew that Colt Peacemaker he has slung on his thigh and brought it down hard on the other man's head. They say the force of the blow would have killed most men but still, the buffler tried to get back up onto his feet but couldn't quite make it. Zelletta hadn't finished though. He picked the man up by his pants and his shirt as easy as you like and the guy must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds or more. But Zelletta tossed him head first through the big glass window as easy as tossing a log. Then he went out and dragged the buffler back inside, went through his pockets and took out all the money he had. He must have just sold a lot of pelts 'cos he was loaded. Zelletta tossed the money on the bar and spoke just a few words.

'For the window and a doctor.'

Then he finished his whiskey and turned and left leaving the buffler covered in cuts and bleeding everywhere. The other buffler was nowhere to be found. They figured he'd hightailed it out of town in case Zelletta came looking for him.'

Though Sam's story had intrigued her, Beatrice was horrified at the brutality of men and their blatant disregard for human life.

'What happened to that unfortunate buffalo hunter?'

'Don't rightly know. The doc patched him up as best he could, and the barkeep returned what was left of his money after taking out the cost of replacing the window and the doc's fee. The guy went and got himself a hotel room where he could try and recover, but the next day he'd gone and nobody saw him again.'

'Why didn't the marshal arrest Mister Zelletta?'

'The marshal's a good and brave man but he don't interfere in personal disputes like fist fights and gun fights. He'll only interfere if a crime has been committed and he don't consider duels and fights to be crimes.'

'What an awful and lawless land this is,' she whispered.

He studied her attractive face, brown eyes and dark hair and figured she could be descended from Mexican stock had she been born this far west. She was in fact, part Italian on her mother's side.

'I have to get back to the Railhead Beatrice. Ella will be in shortly I guess, to show you to your room. Would you like a cup of coffee or tea while you wait?'

'No, I'll be fine thank-you, I just want to get in my room and lie down for a while. I believe the long journey here has taken its toll and the disappointment of having nobody here to meet me is quite disconcerting.'

'Then hopefully, you'll take dinner with Ella and me and perhaps enlighten us on the reason you have undertaken such a long journey to this awful land as you put it.'

'I will Sam if the arrangement is acceptable to your wife.'

'Believe me she will be thrilled by your company.'

Beatrice blushed a little as Chambers turned and headed for the kitchen to inform his wife he was leaving. She looked around the room, noting that almost all the diners had left and only one other table was occupied by what looked like a businessman judging by the clothes he wore. Her eyes strayed to the window close to where her table was situated. She idly glanced out onto the street and involuntarily squealed in fright and shock. For standing on the opposite side of the street was Frank Zelletta. He was holding on to the pack mule and two horses and was staring directly at her.