

Prologue

The year was 1885 and the American west was still a rough place. William Dean Ritter had left his small Montana farm two years earlier to become a cowboy. Having learned his craft on a large Wyoming ranch, he was about to head out again. This time on an even more difficult quest -- that to become a man.

This first novel follows him from his Montana farm to a Texas cattle drive. Along the way, he encounters a big slice of western life -- the good, the bad, and all that lies in between.

These are the stories of that young man who, guided by the lessons of his mother and father and the other strong men and women he meets along the way, searches for his place in a world that, in many respects, isn't all that different from today's.

Call Me Montana
The Beginning

A Novel By
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Chapter 1

I remember that morning like it was yesterday. The sky was blue as a robin's egg and there was a light breeze coming up from south. I was just two hours into my journey, and already having second thoughts.

New things are always a little scary at first, and my decision to leave home gave me pause to consider how my life was about to change. At the same time, I took comfort in the familiar scenery around me. Over the course of my youth, I'd ridden that trail many times, and knew it well, but as much as I tried to concentrate on the trip itself, my mind kept flashing back to the look in my mother's eyes as I'd said goodbye, just hours before.

Neither of my parents had been all that comfortable with my decision to leave, but in the end they both seemed to accept that it was going to happen one day, anyway. I know mother knew it because she was the one who'd exposed me to the rest of the world in the first place. Why would she have

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had me read all those books, if she didn't think I was actually going to go?

Father's reaction had been a little different. At first, he was dead set against my leaving. After a while though, once he could see there was no talking me out of it, he seemed to get a little more comfortable with it.

It would be another fifty or so miles before the scenery began to look new to me. I supposed it would probably not be much different for a while, but I was watchful for when it would change from old to new. I expected there'd be more adventure in looking at scenery for the first time.

My given name is William Dean Ritter. At home they called me Billy, but most folks call me Montana. I suppose it's because shortly after the war ended, my folks' wagon train dropped them off near a huge patch of nothing called Bighorn Lake in Montana country. There'd been some sort of argument between the wagon master and my father about directions. Story goes, they were on their way to Oregon, but got a little off the trail. To this day, my father maintains it wasn't his fault.

I was born and grew up on a small, bottom-land farm that bordered Bighorn Lake where the soil was rich and the winters hard. We grew potatoes, wheat and barley, but mostly potatoes. Seems they like the moisture in our little valley.

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My sister Mary came after me and both of us were home-schooled by our mother, who'd gone to college back east.

It was a good life, but at sixteen I'd learned just about everything there was to know about Bighorn Lake, and I was bored. I planned to work my way south to the Wind River country of Wyoming, where I heard a good cowboy could get a job. Now, truth is, at sixteen I wasn't really a good cowboy. I reckon I wasn't a cowboy at all, but I had lots of ambition.

Now, don't get me wrong -- my folks were good God-fearin' people and our farm was a great place to grow up for Mary and me, but our nearest neighbors were Cheyenne, and while we got along pretty well, I wanted to see more of the country and more folks like me. Bighorn Lake seemed pretty far away from the world in my mother's books and, by sixteen, it was clear to me that I was going to end up a farmer for life if I stayed there. Of course, nobody called me Montana when I lived there...it just seemed to catch on after.

I got my first real job as a cowhand on a large cattle ranch under the Tetons. The ranch bordered the Snake River, not far outside a little town called Jackson Hole. I told the boss that I didn't have a lot of experience with cattle but was eager to learn. He took a chance on me. A few of the older hands showed me the tricks and I learned fast.

After three months at the "Circle R" I was doing pretty well when near-disaster struck. I lost my old

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horse to a prairie dog hole. He broke his leg and had to be put down. A cowboy needs a good horse, and losing mine would have put me out of work if it hadn't been for my boss. I guess he'd taken a liken' to me. Dan Turner ran the ranch and he loaned me the money to buy a beautiful colt sired by his own horse.

I found out later that the colt was promised to Dan's son, Drew. But Drew was killed in a droving accident the year before and when the colt was born, Dan couldn't bear to sell him. It took me another year to work off the loan, but it was well worth it. I named the colt Spirit, and I knew right off he was special. What I didn't know, was that he was to become a big part of my life.

After almost two years at the Circle R I'd become a pretty good cowboy. Dan didn't want to lose me and I really didn't want to leave, but I'd heard that a good hand could make a lot of money moving cattle between Texas and Oklahoma, through Indian country, and I wanted to try it. I wanted to see more of the world and I liked the idea of making more money.

So it happened that early one morning, I packed up and headed south. I didn't know exactly where I was going, but with the two-hundred and twenty-two dollars I'd saved, and what was now one of the fastest horses in the territory, I looked forward to the adventure.

It was cold and rainy the morning Spirit and I left. It was only mid-October, but the winds of

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winter were already beginning to stir in the mountains, and there was a chill in the air that went right through you. The Snake had swollen to the point that I gave some thought to turning back and waiting for better weather. The water was fast and we had to search some time for a wide section where I figured the water would slow down enough for us to get across. We finally found one a mile or so down-river from the trail. Spirit isn't fond of swimming anyway and was pretty spooked as we entered the water. He balked a few times when the bottom dropped away. Halfway across, with the wind and rain pushing up my shirt-tail, Spirit gave up trying to walk the bottom and began to swim. We'd barely left and already my saddle and pack were soaked! But Spirit's strong legs kept going for the several minutes it took to reach the other side. I'm not usually superstitious, but had to wonder with this ugly start, if God wasn't trying to tell me something.

Over the next week, Spirit and I worked our way down the eastern edge of the Rockies. The endless rain blended the trails and fields into swamps and ponds. We were constantly wet. We camped each night on the highest ground we could find, but had increasing trouble finding dry wood for our fires. On the seventh day, the rain stopped and the sun came out. We dried out and things started to look a little better. I began to enjoy the scenery that only a few days before had been scary and threatening. I'd never been south of the miner's camp before,

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so everything that I saw, I was seeing for the first time. I guessed this was the new world my mother'd talked about.

After two weeks on the trail, we came to the little town of Green River. I was glad to see civilization again. Green River was just another little mining town, with a church, two hotels and several saloons, but it looked pretty big to me. The livery was on the west side of town and the blacksmith said he'd keep Spirit cleaned and fed for thirty-cents a day. The place looked clean and I figured he deserved a little special treatment as much as I did, so I paid in advance for two days, grabbed my bedroll and walked into town.

That night I checked into the Baxter Hotel and took a bath to get the mud and rain off me. I went right to bed and didn't get up until noon the next day.

That evening, I was sitting in the hotel saloon enjoying my first cool beer in weeks. I'd been in saloons before, in Jackson Hole, but nothing like this one. Dozens of men, dressed in all kinds of fancy clothes, mingled with young and old women who wore the most colorful dresses I'd ever seen. In the corner was a piano and a real good player. He played non-stop, and fast, too. I couldn't imagine where he learned all those songs!

While I sat there, taking in all these new sights and sounds, I was aware that two different poker games were being played at the tables behind me. At one point, in the midst of the saloon noise and

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activity, the piano player stopped cold. The crowd turned quiet. I looked around to see what had caused this oddity and noticed that everybody else was looking toward the door. There, standing in the center of the swinging doors, was one of the largest men I'd ever seen. A giant...bearded and dressed in skins. I thought to myself, if the sun had been out, he'd have surely blocked it and plunged us into darkness.

By the sudden silence, it was obvious that this man was either greatly respected or sorely feared. I was afraid to guess which.

The calm was broken when somebody behind me shouted, "Hey...Captain Daggot!" The giant just nodded as he waded through the crowd and took up a chair at the bar next to me.

He ordered a bottle of whiskey and, in a voice as rough as he looked, told the rest of the folks to stop staring at him and go back to what they were doing. Slowly, the crowd did just that, and resumed their previous commotion.

Now fully settled, he turned and looked right at me. "I thought I told you to stop looking at me."

Without daring to respond, I quickly turned back to my glass, staring into it, trying to find the courage to get up and move. "Sorry, sir," was all I could muster up as a response.

"You're new around here, aren't you boy? Where do you hail from?"

Not wanting to bother him any further, I turned back toward him and noticed I was staring at his

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chest. His head was somewhere higher than mine, so I had to look up to properly answer. "I'm from Bighorn Lake, Montana, sir. I'm a cowboy."

Captain Daggot glared at me as if I'd insulted his mother. Now I was really beginning to get nervous. After a long pause, his face opened up in a giant smile and he responded, "Well, cowboy from Montana, you're a long way from home. Is that butter-brown horse down at the livery yours?"

"Yes sir. That's Spirit. He's the fastest horse in the territory." With that he laughed and told me that was quite a boast since, as a newcomer, I couldn't have any way of knowing how fast the local horses were in Green River. "But then again, he's a fine looking horse and you might just be right."

At least this odd giant seemed to know something about horses.

As rough as he looked, I could see he had a glimmer in his eye when he spoke. It gave me some comfort this might be more a "gentle" giant than the rest of the saloon had let on. Over the next couple of hours, and several more beers, Captain Daggot explained to me how he knew his horseflesh so well. Seems he spent a career in the Cavalry, fighting everything from Indians to Confederates, retiring as a Captain after the war. After that, he'd spent some time in Kansas before settling in the country around Green River, where he hunted just enough buffalo to make a living.

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In the course of our conversation, he told me he was leaving in the morning for a buffalo hunt five days ride east and invited me to follow along. “It won’t get you to Oklahoma, but it’s on the way, so it won’t cost any time and I could use another fast horse.” Truth is I was getting tired of traveling alone, so the offer sounded good. We agreed to meet up at the livery at sunrise, packed and ready to move out.

He then bid me good night and walked out the door, drawing nearly as much attention from the crowd as he had on the way in.

Chapter 2

“Irish Dan” McVey was, at best, a drifter. At worst you could rightfully call him a criminal. He’d been in the territory since the war, though nobody was aware that he’d ever actually served. Given his general disdain for the law, he probably didn’t. Deserter, if at all. But, as bad apples tend to attract more bad apples, Irish Dan had recently assembled a small gang of n’er-do-wells, much like himself. As self-appointed leader, he’d been successful in directing a series of low-level robberies and assaults throughout the Cheyenne territory. They were beginning to be thought of as a pretty mean bunch.

Lately they’d become adept at robbing from ranches while the owners were away. Starting small with tableware and occasionally livestock, their criminal appetites were growing and they were becoming ever more bold...and more dangerous.

Contrary to what you might read, most folks in the Wyoming territory in 1885 weren’t gun-fighters. Most didn’t even carry guns. Those that did, did so mostly for hunting. Even fewer

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carried handguns, as they were not very accurate beyond fifty feet. But Irish Dan was an exception to the rule. In recent months, he and his gang had been arming up with both Winchesters and handguns.

The morning of November fourth found Irish Dan's gang working their way north to the stage trail, from a night's mischief involving two barns and a ranch house. Their saddlebags were filled with ill-gotten merchandise consisting of near forty-five dollars in cash, a handful of gold coins, a set of silver plate tableware, a custom made hunting knife, and a finely carved wooden box. *That* was the pride of their night's work. The box contained a matched set of silver, engraved, Colt 45 revolvers and they were beautiful! They'd run across them quite unexpectedly inside an old saddlebag that was hanging on a barn post at a small ranch some ten miles behind them. Irish Dan, a man who knew his guns, estimated them to be worth hundreds.

With his newfound prize, McVey planned to leave the area for one of the way stations on the stagecoach line and sell them to some unsuspecting traveler. The rest of the night's loot could be traded in the usual way, either in Laramie or in any of the camps they'd run across along the way.

The morning dawned bright for a change, and McVey's gang made the stage trail around nine-thirty. "We'll go west," he grumbled. "There's a station about an hour's ride from here." That was

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all he said but it was sufficient instruction for his partners in crime who, having been up all night, were too tired and hungry to argue. But, early as it was, McVey was already thinking. After last night's raids, he harbored the concern that the owner of those Colt's might return to find them gone and be persuaded to saddle up and come looking for them. Or as bad, that word of the loss of these special Colts might travel and catch up to them.

Within the hour, just as McVey had predicted, they arrived at the way station along the stage road. On hearing the horses, Amos Carey walked out front to see who had arrived.

"You boys surprised me," he offered. "We don't expect a stage until noon and we don't get too many other visitors. Feel free to water your horses and come in out of the sun to freshen up."

"Thanks, we'll do just that," McVey responded. "We've been up all night and we're dead tired. You say there's a stage expected around noon?"

"Should be, but you can never tell with stages. Might be sooner... might be later."

After watering the horses, McVey and his men followed Amos into the station and ordered a round of waters. "Where's your brother? I thought this was a two man operation," observed McVey.

"Oh, Isaak should be back shortly. He went hunting over the ridge this morning and I haven't seen him since. I hope he gets something 'cause we're getting a little low on grub. So...I can't offer

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you anything to eat but you and your men are free to freshen up and rest a while if you want. Of course we don't have beds but you'll find that the ground under the big pine in back is mighty soft on a tired back."

"Maybe we'll just take you up on that, but before we do, I got a little proposition for you. Seems I recently came into a nice pair of silver Colts and, as it is, they're for sale." McVey then walked outside and returned with a dark, carved wooden box, laying it on top of the cold stove. Amos Carey had no need for guns and no money to buy them with, but wandered over anyway to see what the stranger'd brought in.

McVey stood back letting Amos move his fingers over the polished wood box and the silver latch.

"That's OK, open it" whispered McVey.

With the curiosity of a child, Amos gently lifted the latch and opened the box. Inside, nestled in a pile of blue velvet, were two of the finest revolvers he'd ever had the pleasure to see.

"They're really something," said Amos as he reached to lift one from its velvet cradle.

"Hold it" McVey grew louder. "That's close enough. I don't want you gettin' 'em dirty."

Amos quickly removed his hand and turned back to McVey. "I hope you can stay long enough for Isaak to see these Mister. He's got the gun sense and I don't think I could do justice to describing

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‘em. But I hope you know we don’t have need for such finery and no money to buy them anyway.”

“That brings me to my proposition,” answered McVey. I’d like to wait out your next stage and see if any of the travelers would be interested in buying them.”

As Amos was about to respond, the door opened and in plodded Isaak with muddy boots and a large dead rabbit in each hand. “Amos, get a knife. You gotta clean these rabbits before they turn bad.”

As Isaak looked around the room, he saw the visitors whose horses he’d seen out front. “Looks like I interrupted something. What goes on here?”

Amos responded, “Mr. McVey here is looking for a buyer for his hand guns,” pointing to the opened box with the Colts. “Wants to wait out the noon stage and see if there’s a buyer aboard.”

Isaak placed the rabbits on the table and walked over to the stove. He stared at the Colts in their box for near a minute, speechless. He finally looked up and turned to McVey. “May I ask where you obtained these, Mr. McVey? They look somewhat familiar.”

McVey didn’t like being questioned and fumbled putting the cover back on the box. “Won ‘em in a poker game a while back. They’re too pretty to use, so I’m looking for a buyer.”

Isaak pondered McVey’s response and answered, “Poker, huh? Must have been a pretty high stakes game.”

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“Yeah, yeah,” replied McVey, “Are you going to let us wait out the stage here or do we have to stop it ourselves?”

“Doesn’t make no never mind to me,” answered Isaak, who turned to pick up his rabbits and the skinning knife that Amos had placed on the table with them. He walked out the door with nothing more to say.

With that, McVey sat down in a chair and poured himself a cup of water from the pitcher on the table. “Not very sociable, is he?” he said to Amos.

“That’s not like him Mister, but he’s probably tired from chasing those rabbits. You and your friends can wait in here or sleep under the pines. The stage should be along in a few hours.”

After a few minutes of puttering in the sink, Amos excused himself and went outside to help his brother clean rabbits.

The younger of McVey’s men spoke up. “What the devil do you think of that? You suppose he recognized those Colts? What are you going to do about it McVey?”

“Nothin!” McVey sniped back. “Not a damn thing. Even if he did, we’ll be long gone by the time he could tell anybody.”

Another of McVey’s men spoke up. “Just the same, it doesn’t seem too friendly around here. Maybe we ought to just move on.”

“I’ll decide when we move on,” McVey’s response was gruff. He knew there was some risk

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now in staying, but didn't want it to show in front of his men. He moved over to look out the window, but didn't see either of the Carey brothers in the yard. "Mighty quiet out there. Maybe I'll go for a little walk."

As McVey entered the yard, he heard horses rustle behind the station. He walked around the corner just in time to see both brothers mounting their horses. The rabbits were still in one piece on a nearby table.

"WHERE DO YOU BOYS THINK YOU'RE GOING?" shouted McVey, who had now drawn his handgun from his holster and was holding it on both Isaak and Amos. "Looks like my boys were right. Maybe you two should get off those horses and come back inside for a chat."

One more second and the Carey brothers could have ridden off, but they knew they couldn't beat a drawn pistol, so they both dismounted as instructed and headed back around to the front of the station.

McVey stayed a few paces behind, keeping them in his sight. "And take that knife out of your pants and drop it the ground."

Isaak McVey slowly pulled up his shirt and, with two fingers, removed the knife that had been hidden under it, allowing it to drop to the ground.

As the brothers were about to reentered the station door, Amos apparently panicked and started to run. McVey followed him with his eyes and pulled the trigger. A loud "Crack" exploded from his pistol and Amos Carey dropped to the ground.

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It was clear to all that Amos' decision to run had just cost him his life.

“Dammit,” cursed McVey, “where did he think he was running to?” By this time the other three of McVey's men were fully alert and on their feet. One spoke up.

“You never said anything about killin' McVey. “I didn't sign up for this.”

“Shut up,” was the only reply the nervous McVey could muster up.

With all eyes fixed on the body, no one noticed that brother Isaak had, himself, fallen to his knees and was slow-crawling over to where he had just dropped the knife. In a suddenness that startled the other men, Isaak grabbed the knife from the ground, raised it, and in a single motion, threw it at McVey, just missing his face.

On seeing the knife pass by his head, McVey's reaction was just as sudden. He pointed his pistol at the remaining Carey brother and again pulled the trigger. Crack! Isaak dropped, joining Amos in his journey to heaven.

This time there was no quick comment at all from McVey or any of his men. Just silence. They must have known their lives had just been changed forever.

Chapter 3

Sarah Rogers was supposed to have been a schoolteacher by now. She'd had already completed most of two years of teacher's college in Philadelphia, but with the news that her Uncle Stuart had taken sick out west in California, Sara's father and mother decided to pull up stakes and move west to help out. The trip, this late in the year, had already been long and uncomfortable. The Cheyenne-Laramie stage was working its way west, an hour out of Laramie, carrying Sarah, her father Tom, and mother inside. They were crowded onto two wooden seats just large enough to hold the three of them, and a very large trunk.

All the discomfort aside, the weather was surprisingly good for early November and they'd had a good sleep the night before in Cheyenne. All in all, Tom considered that things could be worse. Since none of them had ever been west of the Pennsylvania mountains, they were most anxious about the life they were entering. Mrs. Rogers hoped it would as satisfying as her life had been as

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a constable's wife in Philadelphia. Tom enjoyed his police work but had always harbored a wanderlust. Maybe he was bored, but he'd talked of moving west for years.

Law officers are usually practical men, not dreamers. Tom Rogers was a little bit of both. His only discomfort came from the fact that realizing *his* dream had to, by necessity, involve the two most important women in his life. He feared more for their comfort and safety than he did his own.

It was about noon when the driver yelled back, "WAY STATION IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!" It would be good to get off these hard seats for even a few minutes, thought Sarah -- a sentiment no doubt shared by her parents.

Stagecoach way stations were usually not much more than shacks, with a well, an outhouse, and wash-water for horses and travelers. Occasionally they would have some food, but not always. The one coming up was better than most.

It was operated by a pair of Swedish brothers, Isaak and Amos Carey. Both good men and usually quick to welcome the several stages that came through each week with good cold water and old-fashioned western hospitality.

Moments later, the stage pulled up in front, in a cloud of dust. But the driver thought things seemed a little different this time. Neither Isaak nor Amos came out to meet them and, after the dust had settled, a strange silence hung over the place.

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The driver, a thick man with thinning hair who referred to himself as “Red,” set the brake and jumped to the ground, ignoring Tom Rogers’ request that he open the stage door to let he and his family out. Red quickly disappeared inside the station.

Having to reach out and turn the door latch himself, Tom Rogers was about to exit the stage unassisted. As he placed his foot on the stage step, preparing to make the jump, Red reappeared hastily exiting the station and informed the family that this would not be a good stop. “We need to move on,” was all he said. Needless to say, the Rogers family didn’t receive the news well.

“What do you mean move on? We need a break and so do your horses.” But Tom Rogers might as well have been talking to himself. Red had already jumped up to the driver’s bench, released the brake, and set the stage in motion. Rogers had to quickly jump back up on the step and hold on for dear life until he could swing himself back inside the coach.

Twenty minutes down the rough trail, the stage again stopped. Red dismounted and walked back to the stage door, peering in as if to provide a little more information about their hasty departure just minutes before. Tom was still angry at the way they’d left in such a hurry. But when Red opened the stage door, Nel could see he didn’t look right. She put her hand on Tom’s arm to hold him back.

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“They were dead,” he said, having trouble getting the words out. “They were all dead!”

“Who was dead?” demanded Tom.

“They were -- the two brothers who ran that station. Blood all over. Not a fit sight for women-folk. Indians I reckon. Either way I think we should push on to Price’s Station if you all can make it.”

The Rogers family began their journey west three weeks before, when they boarded the train in Philadelphia for St. Louis. They’d been told that life in the west was going to be different...rougher, dirtier and maybe even dangerous. Over the past three weeks they’d been roughed up some and had surely experienced dirtier. However, this was the first time they had to deal with the latter. Given the shocking news, they agreed to abide by the driver’s decision and move out of there as quickly as possible, though none of them had any concept of how far “Price’s Station” would be.

The trip had suddenly taken on a different feel. The little family from back east sat in silence for most of the next hour, while Mrs. Rogers eyes remained locked on her husband’s. He wished he knew what she was thinking, but was afraid to break the silence and ask. Sarah was also concerned, but seemed to take it in stride better. And though he didn’t want it to show, Tom was the most concerned. He’d spent years dealing with such crime back east and had hoped that was part

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of his past now. What had he gotten his family into?

By the time I got down to the livery Captain Daggot was already saddled and ready to go. “Thought you’d never get here! Darn near left without you,” he muttered.

I wondered if the morning’s Captain Daggot would be the tough guy that had brought last night’s saloon to a whisper, or the talkative buffalo hunter who’d later spent a pleasant hour with me over a few beers? While these questions lingered in my mind, I noticed we weren’t alone.

“This is Whiteplume. He’s Arapaho. Best tracker in the territory. Just call him Whitey and stay out of his way. He can be a little moody.”

“*He* can be a little moody!” I thought. Looked a little like the Captain and Whitey might share that same trait. This looked to be a hard group to warm up to.

As Daggot spoke his name, “Whitey” looked over his shoulder at me and just smiled. I smiled back but couldn’t reconcile Daggot’s warning. Looked like a smile to me. He didn’t seem to be at all moody, but I guess I couldn’t judge him so quick. Time would tell. Didn’t matter much to me. I told myself if things got a little to tense with my fellow travelers, I could just head out on my own again.

When Whitey mounted his paint, I also got a quick peek at the big knife he had belted around

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his waist. It must have been fifteen inches long! Smile or not, for now I thought I'd heed the Captain's caution and stay out of his way.

The Captain's horse was well suited to him. One of the biggest I'd ever seen though maybe a little beyond his prime. Still, clearly able to carry this giant of a man with his long buffalo gun strapped to the saddle. A giant in skins, an Indian tracker and a cowboy! We must have looked a sight as we left the livery and headed east.

It was foggy when we left Green River but the fog burned off by mid-morning and the sun began to warm our bones. I knew from the maps I'd studied at home, that the town of Laramie was on our route east. I asked if we were going through it, but the Captain said he preferred to avoid it. I didn't pursue it any further but wondered if he'd had a bad experience there in the past. It didn't matter to me as I supposed I'd be seeing a lot of towns on my trip to Texas.

It was early afternoon when we arrived at our first stop, a little stagecoach station Daggot said was run by a man named Price.

We watered our horses and followed Daggot in to meet Mr. Price. He was tall and lanky, appearing to be in his mid-forties. He seemed to know Daggot well because they immediately began carrying on about his last visit. Turns out Daggot used his station from time to time, to sell buffalo skins to travelers.

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Mr. Price yelled out for Whitey to come on in after watering the horses. When he did, we all sat down for a good drink of water and I listened while the rest of them talked about old times. Mr. Price served us some bread he had just baked in the morning and told us to eat up before the stage arrived. He would need what would be left of the loaf and the space for the travelers, due to arrive in about half an hour.

It wasn't ten minutes later, the Cheyenne stage arrived -- early. In keeping with the traditions of running a way station, Mr. Price went out the door to greet them. I guessed that was our signal to finish up, clean up, and disappear.

After I cleared the table, I heard a commotion out front between the stage driver and Mr. Price. By then, Captain Daggot had left the station and joined in, and they were all taking real serious. As I walked out to see what all the excitement was about, the stage door swung open and out came the prettiest girl I think I'd ever seen. Behind her, a middle-aged man and a good looking woman. The man joined in the conversation briefly before he and the women headed toward the station house. My eyes followed the girl in the white dress until she disappeared behind the door. I snapped back to reality when Daggot yelled to Whitey and me to hold up. Something was wrong and I was getting real curious about what it was.

As I got closer to the conversation, they were talking about two men who'd been shot in the next

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way station. Apparently, the driver had come on their bodies when they stopped there earlier in the morning. The driver was so upset, he just left them where he'd found them.

The morning sun was getting warm so the conversation moved into the station. The women were excused to a back room to rest while all the men joined in the meeting. As much as I wanted to see more of that girl in the white dress, my curiosity got the best of me and I stayed to listen.

At one point Mr. Price said they should send Red, the driver, on to Laramie to get a telegram off to the Marshal's office in Cheyenne, informing him of the killings.

The Captain believed that would take too long and by the time the Marshal got to the Carey Station, the killers, were they not already, would be long gone.

There was also some guessing as to who might have done it and why? While Red maintained that it looked like the work of Indians, Mr. Price observed that station was run by the Carey brothers, Isaak and Amos...“who didn't have much and certainly not enough for Indians or anyone else to kill them over.”

“No, doesn't sound like Indians to me,” argued Daggot. “I know the Crow in the area and they've been peaceful for years. It doesn't set well with me that it's Crow.”

No matter, someone would have to go to that station and get them or bury them. Mr. Price

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offered to ride to Laramie to notify the stage company and get a telegram off to Cheyenne to send someone out.

“But,” Price added looking directly at Daggot, “at best it’ll take some time for that to happen, so it will be left to you to go and investigate, while any evidence is still fresh.”

Having been a lawman back east, Rogers couldn’t help but take an interest in the investigation, though he remained more concerned for the safety of his wife and daughter. He told Daggot that their journey to their sick relative’s place in California required them to bring along everything they had. Their entire life was contained in the trunks on the stage. He would need to protect them as well as his wife and daughter.

Turning to Mr. Price, Rogers stated, “I’m awful sorry about those two men, but this stage company owes me and my family some protection and I think that would be best served if you took us to Laramie with you.’

“Everybody slow down,” responded Daggot, who seemed to have taken charge of the situation. “I don’t think the Crow had any part in this, but I won’t know for sure until I see the bodies. In the meantime, Price, you need to ride to Laramie and notify both the Marshal’s office and the stage company. We can’t have stages continue to drop in on that station. On top of everything else, they’ll mess up any evidence that might be there and then we’ll *never* know what happened.”

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Rogers spoke up. “If Price is going to Laramie I don’t see any reason why we can’t join him.”

At that, Daggot began to lose patience with Mr. Rogers. “The reason *is* that we’ll need the stage to transport the bodies. Price, here, will be going to Laramie on horseback! I suspect that won’t work for you, your family, and all your possessions.”

“Well,” Rogers responded, losing his patience as well, “if you’re all going back to the scene of the killings, what are we supposed to do? Wait for the killers to come here and kill us?”

“I understand your concern, sir,” replied Daggot. “You said you were a lawman, right? I take it you’ve investigated crime scenes before?”

“Certainly... thousands of ‘em,” responded Rogers, “What are you asking?”

Daggot continued, “I just thought that without the Marshall or a Deputy, we might be able to use your experience in looking the scene over.”

Bothered, but at the same time flattered, Rogers responded, “You might be right, but there’s no way I’m going to take my wife and daughter back there and there’s no way I’m going to leave them here. So what you propose would be impossible.”

Without really working the words out in my head, I blurted out, “*I’ll stay with ‘em! I mean if that’s alright with you Mr. Rogers.*”

The more Daggot thought about taking Tom Rogers with him, the more he became convinced it could be useful.

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“They’ll be safe right here with Montana and if we leave now, we could be back by sundown... should only take three to four hours. I’m not sure there’s much else we can do there anyway. What do you say, Rogers? It’s not Philadelphia, but how about being a lawman again for a few hours?”

“I don’t like it but give me a minute to discuss it with my wife. Incidentally, how do I know they would be any safer with this young man ‘Montana’ than they would on their own?”

“I can vouch for him,” replied Captain Daggot, “and Price here can vouch for me.” With that, Mr. Price nodded his head and Mr. Rogers walked outside to talk it over with his family.

After a few minutes of muffled conversation, Mr. Rogers returned and said he would go with Daggot and Red to the other station but needed Daggot’s assurance that he could get back in time to get his family to Laramie that night. Daggot agreed. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Turning back to me, Daggot said, “Montana, I stretched my neck out for you here son, so don’t let me down. I’m leaving you a handgun which, along with your Winchester, should be all the firepower you need to keep these women safe. Mind your manners and stay put. We should be back before dusk. If we’re not, come sun-up, put a team together and take them on to Laramie yourself.

Daggot then turned to Rogers and asked if he wanted to ride inside the stage, “...or up top?”

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“I’d just as soon ride inside, out of the dust, but take it slow -- I’m already sore from this morning’s ride. Let’s just get this over with.”

At that, the four near-strangers -- Captain Daggot, Whitey, Red the driver, and Mr. Rogers of Philadelphia, all boarded the stage and rode off across the open field, down the east trail.

I watched them until they’d disappeared from sight behind the trees. I then walked back into the station and was quickly met by two of the coldest stares I could remember. I guessed my suggestion to stay with them wasn’t as popular with the ladies as it was with me. I suddenly kind of wished I’d kept my mouth shut.

Chapter 4

After shooting both Carey brothers in cold blood, Irish Dan McVey told his men to pull the bodies into the station and close the door. He quickly restored the prized pistols to their fine box and put it away in his saddlebag. He then instructed his men to move out.

But, instead of heading west, he started out in a southerly direction. He thought it best to avoid the stage road for a while, where they'd more likely be spotted by other travelers. By heading south, they could pick up Copper Creek and follow it west, paralleling the stage road. Once sufficiently west, they could come back north, putting them some distance from the Carey station.

After half an hour of hard riding, they came to Copper Creek and turned west on the creek trail. Davy, the youngest of McVey's gang, voicing the concerns of the others, finally asked McVey why they were taking such a strange route?

Bothered again by his gang's lack of trust, McVey angrily responded, "We need to get to

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Laramie tonight but I don't want to take the stage road. Just follow me and we'll get there when we get there." As is often the case, what McVey lacked in leadership, he more than made up for in his ability to annoy people.

So the rag-tag gang headed west alongside the creek. With no instrument to help him navigate, McVey wasn't sure when or where to turn north again, so he waited until it just felt right. An hour later it must have felt right because he turned the gang back north, believing they were well down the road from both the Carey Station and the next one west, the Price Station. He figured the next stop should be Laramie but he would soon discover that he had miscalculated and wasn't as far west as he'd hoped. Irish Tom McVey and his gang were not several stations down the trail as he'd planned, but headed right into Price's Station.

Adam Price wasn't used to riding horseback, so while he felt the need to get to Laramie as quickly as possible, his aging body forced him to take it slow. Once there, he planned to go immediately to the stage company office and notify them of the killings. Then, if there was no Marshal or Deputy in town, he would go to the telegraph office and get word out to the Marshal's office in Cheyenne. Hopefully, they could dispatch a deputy right away so he could get back to his station and the rest of them could go on about their lives.

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In the meantime, things hadn't warmed up much back at his Station. If they spoke at all, the two ladies kept their conversation to themselves. I couldn't tell if it was me that bothered them, or just the fates that put us together.

Daggot and the others had been gone half an hour and the silence in the station was so thick you could taste it. I had to get out of their company for breath of air. I offered to get some fresh water from the well.

"That would be nice," answered Sarah.

Well, if I couldn't make conversation with both of them, at least she wasn't afraid to talk to me. I grabbed the water jug and walked outside to the well.

The sun was beginning to get low in the sky and I wondered what Daggot and the men would find back at the Carey Station. Would they be able to tell how those men died? Would Mr. Rogers be of any help? What if they didn't return by sundown? I'd promised the Captain that if they didn't return by sun-up I'd take the ladies on to Laramie, but I was sure hoping that wasn't going to be necessary. Mrs. Rogers didn't seem any too happy with the situation already, and having her husband fail to return when expected would likely not improve her mood.

"We're really not mad at you, you know." I turned to see Sarah walking up behind me.

"Oh, I know. This must be hard on you both," I offered.

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“Yes, the trip has been hard on us -- on Mother in particular. She’s no wall-flower, but she left a wonderful life back east and I’m not sure she realized how difficult this would be.”

“Well,” I responded, “the West *can* be a rough place, but it can also be a beautiful place. Don’t worry, I’m sure your father will be back soon and by this time tomorrow, you’ll all be in Laramie and all this will just be a bad memory.”

“Maybe not all bad.” she replied.

I didn’t quite get her meaning, but having filled the jug, I tied off the bucket and turned to carry the water back toward the station. Sarah took a moment looking off to the west, across the openness of the station lot, over the small pine stand that bordered it and over the prairie hills to the distant mountains that made up the spine of the Rockies. And for the first time, I could take a good look at her. She was as pretty as those ladies in the magazines. She had a little hat on but I could see that her hair was the color of a wheat field. Her eyes sparkled when she spoke and I thought she was the prettiest thing I’d ever seen.

I felt the need to comfort her and tell her everything would be all right, but I knew that was just my heart talkin’. I really didn’t know if everything would be alright, and her mother, who was now standing in the doorway, seemed to prefer that I keep my distance.

“It’s a big country out there isn’t it,” she said, breaking the brief silence.

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“I suppose so,” I responded. “I’ve only seen a piece of it myself, but it does seem to go on forever.”

We both walked quietly back to the station and I offered to pour them both a nice cool drink. To my surprise, it was Sarah’s mother that spoke up, offering to do it for me.

“Thank you, ma’m,” I replied. “I’d like that very much.”

With that, Mrs. Rogers located three cups and poured water for each of us. Just as I was about to put my cup to my lips, I heard horses.

It was too early for the Captain, Red, Mr. Rogers and Whitey to have returned. I wondered who our visitors could be?

When I got to the door, I could see that it wasn’t our stage. The four horses coming up on the station were being ridden by men I didn’t recognize. Moreover, they each had handguns strapped to their waists and rifles on their saddles.

“Do you recognize them?” asked Mrs. Rogers, as if I might have.

“I don’t think so, ma’m. I don’t recall ever seeing any of them before. They’re probably just cowboys, passing through.” I hoped I was right.

“Hey in there!” shouted one of the men. “Anybody home?”

I suggested that Sarah and Mrs. Rogers stay in the station and went out the door to meet them.

“Station master isn’t here. I’m just watchin’ it for him. Is there anything I can do for you men?”

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“Well,” replied the same man, “My name is McVey and me and my men have come a long way. We’re pretty tired. We need some water and grub before moving on. Can you help us out?”

“Like I said, this isn’t my station. I’d like to help you out, but there’s no food left here and there’s a stage due anytime now. You can help yourselves to all the water you want, but unless the stage brings some, I’ll be needing some food myself.”

Disregarding my response, all four men dismounted and commenced lashing their horses to the front rail. Again, I noticed that each was carrying a handgun, which struck me as a bit unusual. I thought I’d try again...a little harder.

“The well’s over there and the water’s nice and cold.”

This time McVey answered in a more hostile tone, “Maybe you didn’t hear me clear, sonny. I said we need more than water. We need some food.”

“I’ll say it again. I’m expecting a stage shortly and I can’t feed you. You might be able to find a few potatoes in the stable but that’s the best I can do. If you can find any in there, help yourselves.”

I hoped they’d water up and move out without finding out about the two ladies, but it wasn’t working out that way. Now I was getting worried. As I nervously contemplated my next move, all of a sudden, I heard Mrs. Rogers behind me at the station door, yelling at the top of her lungs.

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“I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TO GET A BUCKET OF WATER YOU LAZY GOOD FOR NOTHIN! NOW STOP WASTING TIME WITH THOSE TRAIL BUMS AND GET THAT WATER, YOU HEAR!”

You could have knocked me over with a feather! Not only did she reveal herself to these men, but she was acting like a crazy lady! What happened to that reserved and polite lady I’d just left a minute before? And what did she think was she doing?

“Yes ma’m,” was all I could muster up as a response, whereupon I headed straight for the well to fill the bucket. All the while, Mrs. Rogers remained in the doorway with her hat off and her eyes fixed on me. I didn’t know what she was doing but decided it best to play along.

Mrs. Rogers had taken a big chance. She hoped that being forceful and loud would turn these men away. For the moment it remained to be seen if it had worked.

McVey didn’t immediately respond. The quiet seemed to last for a lot longer than it probably did. I couldn’t help but wonder what was going to happen next.

The answer would start to come with McVey’s response. “Who’s that sonny, your maw? Mean one isn’t she?”

“Yes sir,” I replied, “and you don’t want to cross her.”

“All right.” replied McVey, evidently too tired or intimidated to take it any further. “Me and the boys

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will grab some water and check out the stable for potatoes. You be a good boy and get your maw what she wants. I'd just as soon not hear her shrieking voice anymore."

Having won for the moment, I grabbed the bucket and turned back to the station while McVey and his men walked their horses over to the trough near the stable. As I entered, I could see Mrs. Rogers looking at me with eyes as big as horseshoes. She didn't say a word and neither did I. Sarah was nowhere in sight and I assumed she was going to stay in hiding until they left.

Ten more minutes would pass before we heard their horses leave. Whatever brought Mrs. Rogers to behave that way, it looked like it had worked. Those men, that only moments before had planned to make trouble for us, were now out of the station yard and, hopefully, out of our lives. We all felt very relieved. The day had already held enough excitement. But I couldn't help thinking that there was something unsettling about those men. I also had the strange feeling that I'd not seen the last of them.

Chapter 5

The afternoon shadows were getting long when Captain Daggot, accompanied by his companion Whitey, Red, and a very uncomfortable Mr. Rogers, arrived at the Carey Station. On reaching the yard, they dismounted and cautiously walked the horses up to the house, not knowing exactly what they were about to find.

They tied the team to the rail and, with Daggot in the lead, all walked to the door. Looking down, Daggot was the first to see the blood.

Rogers knelt and touched it. Rubbed it between his fingers then, holding his fingers to his nose, seemed to smell it. "Fairly fresh. Probably not more than eight to ten hours old. At least one of them got hit out here and was dragged."

Carefully stepping around the blood, Daggot turned the knob and pulled the door open. There on the floor, in front of them, lay both Carey brothers. The trail of blood from outside the door ended in a pool under the bodies.

Mr. Rogers knelt down next to the first body and carefully turned it over. "This one was shot in

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the chest. He's the one who was dragged in. Probably the second one shot."

"How could you know that?" I asked.

"See his foot? It's on top of the other body's leg. If he'd been shot first and dragged in, he wouldn't be on top. The other man went down first."

Rogers then shifted over to the other body that was laying face down. "This one was shot in the back. Being the first one killed, it stands that the fight started in here, if there was a fight at all." Looking around the station house he added, "Doesn't look like much disruption. I'd guess the decision to shoot came quick. I can't tell much more than that, other than they've been dead less than a day. Must have happened just before the stage got here."

"This doesn't look like Indians to me," Daggot noted. "Nothing appears to be out of place and at this close a range, Indians would be more apt to use a knife. Also, I noticed the tracks in the yard all had shoes. Crow ponies would be shoeless. White men did this," stated Daggot.

Whiteplume walked back out to the yard and walked around for a few minutes, studying the ground. He then pointed down, raising his hand as he spoke toward the southwest. "Four horses and four riders. Headed that way."

"Listen Daggot, if the Indian's right, the men who did this headed in the general direction we came from. I'm not sure how we missed them, but

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they could be on their way to Price's Station!" exclaimed Mr. Rogers. "I don't like it."

"Relax Rogers, we'd have seen them if they were going there. Anyway your women are in good hands with young Montana."

Captain Daggot continued, "Let's find some blankets and wrap them up. We'll strap them to the stage. Let's also get those other two horses out of the corral. We'll have to bring them with us as we can't leave them here alone."

At that, the four went about the business of wrapping and strapping both Carey brothers to the stage and tied off two more horses to the back of it. They then started the wagon back down the trail, back toward Price's station. Mr. Rogers was anxious to get back and check on his wife and daughter.

All three were quiet as they followed the stage tracks back toward the dimming sun.

Back at Price's station, with McVey and his men now gone, Sarah returned to the kitchen from her hiding place and the three of us sat around the table discussing our strange visit.

"I have to tell you Mrs. Rogers, I don't know about those men, but you scared the heck out of me! What made you do such a dangerous thing?"

"Montana, I may be just a school teacher from back east, but I'm not so slow as to think those men were up to anything good. I didn't like the way that McVey man became rude to you, and I

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could see they had their heads set on spending some time here. With the killings just a station away, I was concerned for all of us. I just thought that they would be less apt to want to stay if they knew you weren't alone. Anyway, who wants to mess with a crabby old school marm!"

"You even scared me, mother," Sara added. "I heard you from the back room and wondered if you had lost your mind!"

"No, but I may get there!" she replied.

We all laughed.

"Well," I said, "Whatever you *were* thinking, it worked. After checking out the stable, they headed right out and never looked back. I'm not sure I'd call you an old school marm though. You're no older than my school teacher back in Montana. Of course I was home-schooled and never thought of my mother as that old!"

We all laughed some more. Sarah proceeded to tell us that she had planned to follow in her mother's footsteps by becoming a teacher herself. Unfortunately, she had to leave school before she had completed her course work. She said she hoped to find a teaching job out west just the same.

An hour or so later, just as the sun was beginning to set, we heard horses again in the yard. This time I grabbed my Winchester before I looked out the door but was relieved when I saw I wouldn't be needing it. It was the stage and horses we'd sent to the Carey Station.

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Dark as it was getting, I could see that one of the horses was a lot bigger than the others. That would be the Captain's, and knowing Daggot was back with us, my nerves began to settle down even before I could make out their faces.

As they entered the yard, Mr. Rogers jumped from the stage and ran by me to his waiting wife.

"I'm so glad to see you Tom. It's been a very long three hours. How did it go back at the other station?"

"It was sad more than anything else. Two good men...dead of gunshot wounds for no apparent reason. I agree with Captain Daggot that it didn't look like the work of Indians, but it's not clear what it was all about. How did things go here?"

"Young Mr. Montana took good care of us, but we did have visitors. Four men with guns rode in and seemed to want to stay. But Montana chased them off."

"That's not exactly how it happened," I responded. "Mrs. Rogers did most of the work herself."

Somewhat confused, Mr. Rogers was about to pursue my comment when Captain Daggot, who had overheard her both of us, joined in. "Tell me more about the four men. Montana, what happened?"

We all went inside where Mrs. Rogers and I described our visit in detail to the other men.

"Whitey tracked four horses out of the Carey brother's station. I'd be real interested in knowing a little more about those men," resolved Daggot.

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“They seemed pretty beat up so I suspect they made camp close-by. Maybe we should go pay them a visit,” I replied.

Mr. Rogers spoke up, “Listen Daggot, I share your interest in following up with those men, but I have my wife and daughter to think of and it’s high time we move out toward Laramie, like you promised.”

The Captain responded, “I promised I’d get you there tonight and will do so if that’s what you want, but the situation has changed since I made that commitment. I agree with Montana that those men are probably haven’t gone too far. I also suspect that, based on what we just heard, they’re not likely to return here, so I think it would be safer to bed down here tonight and move out in the morning. But it’s your call.”

After some more conversation, it was Mrs. Rogers’s opinion that prevailed. She’d considered Daggot’s comments and decided it was safer for her family to remain in our company for the night, instead of riding out on an unknown trail and running the risk of encountering McVey and his men again.

The Price Way Station was small with only three rooms. We gave the Roger’s family the station while Daggot, Whitey, Red and I made camp in the stable.

We removed the Carey brothers from the stage and placed them in a small feed shack just off the

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stable for the night. Not very respectful but it was the best we could do.

About an hour after everyone had retired and nearly asleep myself, I heard movement from across the stable, where the others had bedded down. I opened my eyes and, in the near dark, saw Daggot and Whitey pulling their boots back on.

“Where are you two going?” I inquired.

Daggot replied quietly, “Whitey and I are going to do a little moonlight exploring. You and Red stay here. We’ll be back in an hour or so.”

I hadn’t known Captain Daggot long but long enough to not question him. I knew they were going out to see if they could find McVey’s camp. I wasn’t sure what they were planning to do if they found it. I guessed I’d leave that up to him. Moments later, they walked their horses out of the yard and shortly after that, I fell sound asleep.

Some time later I woke up to the movement of horses when Daggot and Whitey returned. I’d lost track of time so I didn’t know how long they’d been gone. As they got back into their blankets, I was curious what they’d found, but figured I’d find out in the morning.

After a few more hours of sleep, we all got up around sun-up. After washing up at the well, the four of us entered the station to join the Rogers and plan our day. Daggot hadn’t shared anything of last night’s ride with me yet, and I held off asking.

In the station house, Captain Daggot told us that we should plan to leave for Laramie right away.

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Naturally, the Rogers were pleased to be finally getting on with their journey. Whitey and Red had already re-loaded the Carey brothers, this time on two horses that were roped behind the stage. I rode Spirit and Daggot rode his great horse. The rest were either in or on the stage. Shortly thereafter, we headed out.

Yesterday's good weather had drifted out and been replaced by high clouds that dimmed the sun. The trip to Laramie would take about two hours and it began quietly with the Captain taking the lead.

The stage road from Price's Station to Laramie started out through a low pine forest then broke out into open prairie. I couldn't help but think that we'd been on this trip for several days now and were currently going backwards! As much as I enjoyed the company of Sarah and her mother, I was getting anxious to get back to our buffalo hunt.

About an hour into the trip, Daggot fell off the lead and circled around to my position. Whitey replaced him in the front.

"I suppose you're curious about what we found last night?" Daggot was finally going to tell me about their late-night ride.

"As a matter of fact, I am. Did you find McVey and his men?" I inquired.

"Whitey was able to track them by moonlight to a small clearing about three miles south-west of the station. We got close enough to see there were four of them but left them alone. I don't know if they're

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responsible for the Carey killings or not, but if they were, I didn't want to provoke them in the dark. Since they didn't know we were watching them, they'll probably move on to Laramie on their own. If there's a Marshal or Deputy in town we ought to be able to deal with them there."

I appreciated Captain Daggot letting me know what we were doing, but recognized that he didn't want to disturb the Rogers any more than necessary, so I would keep this information to myself as he clearly intended. I suspected our time in Laramie would be interesting.

Chapter 6

It was mid-morning when we arrived. I was struck with how big a city Laramie was. On our way east the other day, we'd gone around it and now I was sorry we did. Before today, I'd never been to any town bigger than Green River, but Laramie looked to be three or four times bigger.

We entered town from the east. The weather had been getting worse since last night and the cold mist we'd been riding through was starting to turn to real rain. I was looking forward to just getting inside, anywhere, and warming up. Looking back at the Rogers, I knew I wasn't the only one thinking those thoughts.

But the Captain was duty-bound and had different plans for us. He seemed to know the town's layout and took us past several saloons and hotels, heading directly to the Stage Company office.

When we got there, he shouted back to Red and Whitey to drop the Rogers off with us and then

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head down to the jail and see if there was a Marshal or Deputy in.

“If there’s anybody there, leave him the bodies. If not, take them on to the undertaker’s to hold until we can find one. Montana and I will catch up to you at the livery,” Daggot added.

Mr. and Mrs. Rogers and Sarah left the stage and we helped Red unload their trunks. We left the trunks on the step in front and all entered stage office together.

The office also served as a ticket office and there was a large wooden bar with a bank-style window in the center. Behind the window a clerk, wearing eyeglasses and a green visor, was shuffling papers.

“You must be the folks from Price’s Station. Price told me you’d be along today.”

Daggot replied, “I take it you’ve already spoken to Price about the killings?”

“Oh yes. Mr. Price filled us in yesterday.” The clerk put down his papers and walked around the bar, joining us in the open area.

“What a tragedy. Those Careys were good boys and ran a fine station. I take it you’re Captain Daggot and these must be the Rogers?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Rogers. “This is my wife Mrs. Rogers and my daughter Sarah. Sir, the events of the past day or so have caused us some delay in our schedule. We need to get on to California as soon as possible. When is the next stage scheduled out of here?”

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“The next stage won’t do you any good...it’s heading east. If you’re going to California, you’ll need to wait until noon tomorrow for the first west-bound. May I recommend the Laramie Hotel, just across the street and a few doors down. They don’t have a saloon so it’s nice and quiet. I can have your trunks sent there shortly.”

“I suppose that will have to do,” replied Mr. Rogers, who had been hoping to get on with his trip today. “Plan the three of us for that stage and I’d request that you get those trunks over to the hotel as quickly as possible.”

“Where’s Price?” inquired the Captain.

“He told me to tell you he’d be waiting for you in the Crystal Saloon, just up the street the other way,” replied the clerk. “What did you do with the Carey boys?”

“They’re probably down at the jail house unless there’s nobody there,” answered Daggot. “I told your driver to take them on to the undertaker’s if he couldn’t find a lawman.”

“Well,” the clerk replied, “I thank you for bringing the bodies in, but your men won’t find a lawman in today. We tried to get him yesterday and were told Marshal Kopper is out at a mining camp about two days ride from here. He’s investigating a claim jumping and another killing. We don’t expect him back for a day or two. I hope you boys can wait out his return. I’m sure he’d want to talk to you about what you found.”

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“Those Carey boys will be hard to replace,” he continued, “Price told us you don’t think it was Indians. Is that still your thinkin’?”

“It is,” replied Daggot. “We took Mr. Rogers with us when we went to collect the bodies. He was a lawman back east and looked the scene over with us. He noted that one of the brother’s had been shot in the back and one in the chest. Other than the tracks, we didn’t find any clues at the scene, but it looked like the work of white men to all of us.”

The clerk continued on that yesterday, after Price first arrived and reported the killings, he had telegraphed the main office in Omaha and they were going to send out an investigator as well as a temporary stationmaster.

Daggot replied that Mr. Rogers would be leaving but that we’d stay a day or two until either the investigator or the Marshal arrived. We then said goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Rogers and Sarah, and headed out to the livery. I had really grown fond of them during our brief time together and hoped to be able to see them again.

Over the next hour, Daggot and I boarded the horses, met up with Whitey, and the three of us checked into the Laramie Hotel where I finally began to warm up. Whitey didn’t like the idea of staying in the hotel until Daggot told him he could bunk in his room.

Being tired, hungry and thirsty, three of us decided to go to a nearby saloon and get something

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to eat. We ordered steaks all around and had just started to eat when in through the front doors walked Irish Dan McVey and his three friends.

The room was pretty crowded and they didn't appear to see me. They made their way to a table across the room where folks were playing poker.

"Captain," I whispered, "that's McVey and his men... the ones that came to the station while you were at Carey's."

"Uh huh," muttered Daggot. "It was their camp we visited last night. Looks like they finally found their food."

"That one with the box under his arm is McVey, the one who gave me the hard time. What do you think Captain...you reckon they killed the Carey brothers?"

"No way of telling, Montana, but they do look mighty suspicious. I'd also like to know what's in that fancy box he's holding so tight."

"Why don't we go over and find out?" I replied.

"I don't think so. Not yet."

Daggot was insistent that we lay low and just keep an eye on them until the Marshal returned. "We don't know that they did it and if that McVey is as miserable as you say he is, I'd rather have the law deal with it. We don't need a saloon fight and, anyway, it doesn't seem like they're in any hurry to leave."

So it remained a little uncomfortable for a while. Neither McVey nor his men had spotted me yet and might not even recognize me if and when they

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did. In the meantime, I found myself enjoying a nice thick steak just thirty feet from the man that, only yesterday, had argued with me at Price's Station. I don't think Captain Daggot realized how bothersome he had been as I had pretended that it was no big deal. But I didn't trust McVey or his men and figured they were somehow tied to the killings of the Carey brothers.

By the time we'd finished dinner, the saloon had filled up and was getting a lot noisier. McVey and one of his men had joined a poker game across the room and it was beginning to draw some attention from the crowd.

About then one of McVey's men walked by our table and spotted me. I'm not sure he recognized me right away, but he paused right next to me and thought about it.

"Well if it isn't mamma's boy! What brings you to the big city, boy? Did mamma finally let you out of her sight for a few minutes or is she here working the saloon?"

As I started to get up, Captain Daggot noticed the pistol strapped to his hip and put his arm across to block me. "Take it easy Montana, that's just the whiskey talkin'. I'm sure he doesn't mean any harm...right mister?"

While he spoke, Daggot had moved his free hand to his pistol.

Noticing Daggot's move, McVey's man paused. Alcohol or no alcohol, he could see that Captain Daggot was nearly as tall as he was while still

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sitting down. His better sense took over and he backed off.

“Yeah, sure -- anything you say Gramps,” he replied in a surly kind of way, and turned to amble away.

“Montana, here’s a free lesson for you. *Don’t ever let another man’s behavior dictate yours... particularly in a strange saloon. I’ve seen a lot of good men meet their end doing otherwise.*”

“I know this bunch gets under your skin, but there’s four of them and three of us, and we don’t have a lot of support here. I don’t care for the odds. Just bite your lip and ignore him for now. Remember, time is on our side.”

“That’s good advice Captain, but that’s getting harder to do,” I replied.

Not long afterward, there was an outburst at McVey’s poker table. It seemed to have something to do with that box he’d been carrying around. As we looked more closely, McVey had put the box on the table and opened it to reveal a pair of silver Colt 45’s. Pretty as they looked from across the room, one of the other players appeared unhappy about it.

“This set of Colts is worth at least \$100!” McVey stated in the loud and abusive voice I was beginning to think was normal for him.

“How do I even know they’re rightfully yours?” demanded the other player.

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“Sonny, all you have to know is that I got em’, they’re on the table and they’ll easily cover my bet,” McVey continued the aggressive tone.

One of the other players at the table jumped in to say he didn’t like McVey’s attitude.

“How do we know what they’re worth?” said the first player. “How do we know you ain’t been cheatin’ all along?”

I’d learned early on at the Circle R that calling somebody out for cheatin’ at cards is fight’n words. People get killed doing that. This seemed to be true in Laramie as well because as soon as it was said, the saloon went silent and everybody that wasn’t sitting at a table and some that were, got out of the way and moved back to the nearest wall. McVey also stood up and it looked for all the world like he was about to draw his gun. But before words turned to gunplay, a very unexpected thing happened. Having just received the ultimate insult and with his three partners behind him, McVey backed off! He was the first to sit back down.

“Take it easy Mister. I’m no cheater and if I was, I’d have a bigger pile of money in front of me. If you don’t want the guns on the table, I’ll fold. Take the pot, it’s yours.”

McVey’s reaction at being called a cheater in front of the entire saloon was a real surprise and clearly out of character for him. Something had made McVey back down, but none of us were sure what it was. But he was sure acting peculiar.

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Shortly after that, McVey and his men gathered their remaining money, chugged down their drinks, and took off. A minute later, the saloon was back to normal.

“Looks like your man McVey doesn’t want to attract any more attention than he already has,” said Daggot. “And I wonder what the story is on those pistols. He seemed to be pretty concerned about keeping them to himself.”

A while later, just as we were just finishing up, the saloon doors opened again and in walked Mr. Rogers.

“Surprised to see you here Rogers...in a seedy place like this. Where are the ladies?” asked Daggot with a smile.

“I left them down the way where, I was told, they’re having their hair cut. That gave me a few minutes to hide out and thought I might run into you folks in here. Can I buy you a drink?”

Daggot was first to respond, “We were just leaving but would surely stay a while to enjoy a drink with a real live Philadelphia constable! Particularly if he’s buying!”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Rogers, “Have you had any luck meeting up with the law out here?”

“Not yet,” responded Daggot, “but we did have the pleasure of running into those men that scared Mrs. Rogers back at the Station. The one who calls himself Irish Dan was making friends here just like he did yesterday with young Montana. Almost got himself shot in the process.”

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“Wouldn’t have bothered me any if he had,” replied Rogers. “Any man who threatens my family deserves nothing less.”

As they ordered another round of drinks, Daggot explained to Mr. Rogers the strangeness of McVey’s behavior at the poker table.

“Whether or not he was cheating, he let his mouth get him in trouble and just when it looked like somebody was going to get shot, he backed off and nearly apologized for the whole thing. Didn’t appear to be his nature to be sure, but he looked like a man trying to avoid too much attention.”

Rogers answered, “You say he had a pair of matched Colts in the box? Maybe he just changed his mind and decided to hold on to them.”

“Maybe.” answered Daggot, “Or maybe he killed those two men yesterday and didn’t want to attract any attention from the local law.”

I asked Mr. Rogers if he and his family were planning to take the noon stage out tomorrow?

“Oh yes, Montana. Mrs. Rogers and Sarah want to get California in the worst way and we still have half a country to cross. We couldn’t interest you in coming along could we? It seems you made quite an impression on Mrs. Rogers and Sarah yesterday.”

Quite an impression? I’d made an impression on Sarah? I quickly tried to think back to how that might have happened, but the answer didn’t come easy. It couldn’t have been my awkward attempt to keep McVey and his men from staying at Price’s

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Station. No, that seemed clumsy even to me. Try as I could, I couldn't imagine why Sarah and her mother would be partial to me at all.

“Well, Mr. Rogers, they made quite an impression on me, too, but as you know I'm heading down to Texas to make some real money, and California would be the wrong direction for a cowboy. I do appreciate your asking though. Please give the ladies my best.”

“Alright,” he replied, “you can consider the invitation open if your circumstances ever change.”

We finished our drinks and all left the saloon for the hotel. Captain, Whitey and I headed upstairs to our rooms and Mr. Rogers left to join his family.

My room was small but it was warm and I was so tired it didn't matter anyway. I opened the window to let some cool air in and went right to bed.

Chapter 7

After leaving the poker game, McVey and his men picked up their horses and headed out of town to make camp in a nearby woods.

One of his men, Carl, broke the silence. “Irish Dan, I never thought I’d see the day you backed down from a fight. Are you sure you’re not turning yellow in your old age?”

“Any other time I’d have taken him on, but we don’t need any more trouble right now. If we’d pushed it any harder tonight, we might have ended up in jail and that’s not a good place for us right now.”

“Good thinking,” Davy joined in, “but we’ve run out of food and you left the rest of our money back on that poker table. We can’t go on without a stock of food. When can we sell those Colts and put some money back in our pockets?”

“I think the smartest thing for us to do is put some real distance between us and that way station back there. We can sell the Colts when we get where we’re goin’,” McVey replied.

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“That’s fine for you all, but I’m gettin’ hungry. We need a better plan,” Carl responded.

“Here’s the plan. Tomorrow morning we’ll take an early ride back into town and get what we need. Then we’ll head for the mountains until all this blows over and those Carey boys are long forgotten,” answered McVey. He didn’t like it that his men were getting jumpy. McVey knew that killing the Careys could end up putting his neck in a noose. His “men” had been suitable for small crimes but the seriousness of this new situation caused him to take a fresh look at his gang...and his discomfort was building.

Carl spoke again, “You know, in all the ruckus, I forgot to tell you. Back at the saloon I saw that kid we ran into at the other way station yesterday. He was eatin’ with some big guy and an Indian. I think he was surprised to see me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” demanded McVey, “he might have been trailin’ us!”

Davy spoke up, “I don’t think so. I saw him, too, and he was just eatin’ his supper. Other than bein’ surprised, he didn’t seem to care whether we was there or not. If he’d had anything to say, there was nothin’ stopping them from sayin’ it.”

“Just the same,” responded McVey, “I don’t like it. Too many people showin’ up for no good reason. We go back for supplies in the morning and then straight west. Get your rest tonight -- we’re goin’ for a long ride tomorrow.”

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The next morning dawned a little brighter than the past few days. McVey and his gang broke camp early and headed into town, intent on acquiring some money and food for their trip.

The Rogers family ate breakfast at their hotel while their three large trunks were being moved down to the station.

I got up not knowing what to expect of the day, but hoping the Marshal would arrive so we could tell him our story and head back east toward the buffalo grounds.

Around seven-thirty I decided to go down to the livery and check on Spirit. We hadn't been apart this long since I'd owned him, and I suspected he was getting lonely.

I slipped on my boots and started the long walk down Main Street. The town was quiet at this time of the morning and it looked a lot prettier in the sunlight than it had in the rain the day before. I'd walked several blocks when four horses and riders approached from the west. It was McVey and his gang! Of all the luck. I just couldn't seem to shake these guys. Before I could duck out of sight, they saw me.

Again, I was unarmed. As they saw me, one of them headed right over to where I was standing, pulling up not ten feet away.

"Well lookie here. It's the mamma's boy again. I'm beginning to think you're followin' us. Are you followin' us boy?"

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“I have better things to do,” I answered and turned my back to him, continuing my walk toward the stable. As I did, I listened to see if his horse followed me. He didn’t. McVey told him to knock it off and I could hear their horses moving in the other direction.

Whether or not they would, in time, be tied to the killing of the Carey brothers, I was really beginning to dislike those folks. However, I remembered the Captain’s advice from the night before. “*Don’t let a stranger’s behavior dictate yours.*” They’d had me at a disadvantage the last several times we’d met. As I thought about that I could see the sense in the Captain’s “lesson.” Though, in my heart, I suspected that the day would come when we’d meet on more favorable terms.

Continuing on, I arrived at the livery to the sound of the smithy banging out a tune on a red-hot horseshoe.

“Mornin’,” I offered, but he couldn’t hear me over the noise. Instead, he waved his hammer in kind of a silent greeting.

I worked my way back through the stalls until I found Spirit. He was standing at the door, eating oats from a bag that hung on it. As soon as he saw me he seemed to perk up.

“How are you doin’ old boy?” I reached over, unlocked the gate and entered the small but cozy stall. Spirit immediately stopped eating and came over to nuzzle.

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“I’ve missed you boy. It shouldn’t be much longer. We should be done with our business and on our way to the hunt in no time at all.”

Spirit seemed to understand. I wasn’t used to city living and I know he wasn’t, but we could take one more day of it. So, content that he was being well treated, I picked the brush off the wall hook and began brushing the straw dust off him. It wasn’t long before the blacksmith, now finished with his shoeing, stopped over.

“That’s quite a pony you have there, young man,” he said. “I’ve seen hundreds of them and your “Spirit” is one of a kind. I don’t suppose you’d be interested in selling him?”

“No, sir,” I responded, “I’ve seen a lot of horses myself and I appreciate Spirit for what he is. I’d never be able to sell him.”

“Well, I had to ask. I don’t blame you a bit. I’ll bet he can run too.”

“Like a jackrabbit from a lightening strike!” I responded.

“Thought so. Well, I’ll take extra special care of him for you,” he replied. “How much longer you boys plan on stayin’ around?”

“We’re almost done with our business,” I replied. We hope to be pulling out sometime tomorrow. I’m much obliged for the good care you’re giving him.”

With that, we said our goodbyes and I turned to start back up Main Street.

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I'd walked about thirty yards and, as I approached the block with the general store, the quiet of the morning was interrupted by a single gunshot that echoed all over town. Just then, several men ran from the store and mounted their horses. I didn't have to look to know it was McVey and his gang. I didn't know then what manner of trouble they'd gotten themselves into this time, but was soon to find out.

They were pushing their horses hard and heading in my direction.

Behind them, a woman had come out of the store and was screaming for help. My first reaction was to block McVey and his men with my body, but with no gun I knew that wouldn't work. As they got closer it was clear that one of the horses was carrying two riders. One of them was a woman! My God...it was Sarah!

On seeing her, I bolted into the street to stop them but was knocked aside as they passed. My blood began to boil. I needed to know what had happened so I started running as fast as I could toward the still screaming woman. As I got closer I could see it was Mrs. Rogers! By the time I reached her, a small crowd had gathered. She was yelling at someone in the crowd to get the doctor -- someone had been shot!

As I finally reached her, I could see the tears in her eyes and the panic on her face. "Montana...thank God! Please get help. Tom's been shot and they took Sarah!"

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“Yes, ma’m” was all I could say and I started running again, this time in the direction of the hotel. As I approached, I could see Captain Daggot and Whitey, already in the street, heading toward me.

“Captain! Mr. Rogers was shot in the General Store and McVey’s men did it. They took Sarah! I was in the street when they went by. We need to get her!”

Daggot and Whitey both turned in my direction and the three of us were now running back toward the hotel. “Montana, get your rifle and let’s get down to the horses as fast as we can.”

We each ran to our rooms, got our guns and regrouped back on the street. With no time to lose, we continued running...this time toward the livery I’d visited just minutes before.

As we passed the General Store, a crowd had gathered. Daggot stopped us and ran in to check on Mr. and Mrs. Rogers. He came right back out and told Whitey and me that Mr. Rogers was still alive and the doctor was with him. We started running again toward the stable and our horses.

When we reached the livery, we quickly saddled and, moments later, were heading out in the direction I’d seen McVey’s men take. There wasn’t much talk and there didn’t need to be. We all knew that McVey or one of his men had done something in that store that had resulted in Mr. Rogers getting shot...maybe killed, and they’d taken Sarah. That was enough for me.

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The Captain's horse was past his prime, but still strong. Starting out, he carried his giant master as if he was a boy. Whitey stayed with us on his Paint, but I knew that a long chase would belong to me and Spirit. At some point I knew we'd take the lead. I hadn't pushed Spirit this hard since our last race, but he must have sensed my urgency, as his strength even surprised *me*.

We'd ridden hard on open trail for near half an hour, and were fast coming to a woods. As we approached the entrance, Daggot slowed us down.

"What's going on?" I yelled. "Why are we stopping?"

Daggot just raised his arm and slowly lowered it. "We need to be careful or we could be dry-gulched. Let's not be in such a hurry we get careless."

As we slowed, Daggot had Whitey take the lead. We remained behind him while Whitey watched the tracks McVey's men had left.

"Follow Whitey's directions Montana. He sees things."

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally motioned us to start running again.

During our chase, none of us knew exactly what had occurred in the General Store. McVey'd been so careful to avoid trouble the night before that it didn't make a lot of sense. Why would he try so hard to avoid attention only to rob a store in broad daylight, shoot an innocent bystander, and kidnap Sarah? As much as it didn't make sense, it seemed

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to be true. I was concerned for Mr. Rogers but I was most worried about Sarah. What were they planning to do? Use her for cover and then drop her off? Keep her with them longer, as a bargaining chip? It didn't figure that they'd harm her, but these were evil men and they couldn't be trusted. I just hoped we could get to them before they hurt her.

A mile or two through the woods the trail opened up again into the low hills that were common around Laramie. I was hoping that when we moved over high ground, we'd be able to see them. That would make me feel a little better.

As we continued to ride, I recalled Captain Daggot's words when he introduced me to Whitey the morning we started out from Green River. He'd referred to him as the best tracker in the territory. I hoped he was right. It wouldn't stay light forever and as it got darker I was afraid we could lose the trail.

Chapter 8

The McVey gang's four horses were all getting tired...more than tired. Forced to maintain their full run for so long, their muscles ached and their hearts were straining. Davy's horse was the strongest, but he was getting the worst of it, carrying two riders.

Sarah'd fought at first, but was told if she kept resisting she'd be knocked out, and she thought it best to stay alert.

Her memory of the scene in the store remained horrific. She and her mother and father were in the store early to pick up a few items for their trip before the stage arrived. They were in the back of the store when a man, in the front, began yelling. It didn't take but a moment for her father to determine that the store was being robbed.

Tom Rogers told his family to stay hidden in the back while he quietly crept out to get a better look at what was happening. While one of the men held a gun on the clerk, two others moved around the store, filling bags with food and other supplies. At one point, one of them headed toward the back and

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would have discovered them had Mr. Rogers not stepped forward into the open.

When McVey's man saw Mr. Rogers, he pulled a gun and told him to come out into the light. He did. Then something went wrong. Sarah couldn't see from her hiding place, but one of them yelled, "He's got a gun," and a split second later, a shot rang out. Neither Sarah nor her mother knew who'd fired the shot but when Mr. Rogers cried out, they both knew he'd been hit. By the time they ran from their hiding place to his side, he was already on the floor and there was blood all over his jacket. Then things went really crazy.

Mrs. Rogers started screaming at the men with the guns, while the clerk, taking advantage of the confusion, jumped from behind the counter and ran out the front door into the street. Another of the gang had remained in the street, acting as a lookout. When he heard the shot and saw the clerk run out, he left the horses and ran into the store to see what was happening.

It was about then that Irish Dan saw Sarah and told Davy, "Grab this one and get her to the horses. We're taking her with us."

Sarah fought back, but was forced out of the store and into the street.

She was frightened -- both for her father and herself. She was pulled on to the horse by Davy and placed on the front of his saddle. He reached

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around her to hold the reins, trapping her in his arms.

To make matters worse, positioned as she was on the front of the saddle, Sarah had no stirrups for her feet. The horses began running fast and with every stride, her body bounced, slamming her to the saddle. When the shock of what had happened began to subside, it became clear that she, herself, was in pain. But she figured that she had to be smart. She was fighting for her life as well.

Back in town, Mr. Rogers had been carried to a bed in rear of the store. Mrs. Rogers stayed by his side while the doctor cut back his shirt to examine the wound. He removed several instruments from his bag and called quickly for some boiling water. Mrs. Rogers held her breath. She'd been through too much with her husband to lose him in the back of this cluttered little store in the middle of nowhere. And as painful as it was to see her husband in this condition, she was equally worried about her daughter, taken by the same men that had done this to him. It wasn't in her nature to hate, she thought, but she hated those men.

The minutes that passed felt like hours. Finally the old doctor spoke up. "No organ damage -- lots of blood but the bullet passed right through the shoulder. If we can stop this bleeding, he should make it." Those were good words for her to hear, but she remained troubled by his use of the word "*should*." Before she had a chance to respond, her

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husband stirred. He opened his eyes and looked up at the doctor.

“How bad is it, doc?” he whispered.

“You’re going to make it son,” replied the doctor. “The bullet passed through your shoulder. Just take it easy while I pour some alcohol into

Before he could finish his sentence, Mrs. Rogers grabbed her husband’s good arm and interrupted. “TOM, THEY TOOK SARAH!”

He started to push himself up but the doctor grabbed his arms and shoved him back down. “You can’t move right now. I still have to close this wound. If you get up now, you’ll bleed to death.”

Short of breath, he whispered in his wife’s ear. “Get Captain Daggot.”

“I already did, Tom. He and Montana rode out after them. I feel so helpless. I wish there was more I could do.”

“There isn’t, Nel,” he replied. “But I have faith in those men and I’m certain they’ll get our Sarah back safe.” He then passed out again.

Captain Daggot, Whitey and Montana continued their furious ride, pushing their horses to the breaking point. Whitey’s horse had stayed strong but the Captain’s was beginning to show signs of tiring.

At one point Daggot yelled across the charging horses, “I don’t know how much longer I can keep

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up with you two. Don't wait for me. If I fall back, just keep going -- be careful."

A moment later the Captain fell off the pace and Whitey and I were riding alone. Whitey remained in the lead, making sure they didn't lose the tracks. Now on open prairie there were fewer tracks and that was making it easier to see the fresh ones.

So on they rode -- horses gasping, dust flying, and bodies pounding. We must be catching up, I thought. McVey's gang only had a fifteen or twenty-minute head start and one of their horses was carrying two riders!

We were now a good ten miles from town. All the bumping and pounding was even starting to get to me. Suddenly, my tired eyes finally caught a puff of dust on the horizon ahead. "That's them," I yelled to Whitey. "We're catching them."

A few minutes later Whitey's horse must have turned an ankle or something because he started to fall back as well, leaving the chase to Spirit and me. As much as I wanted him with me, truth was I didn't need a tracker now that they were in sight.

Spirit remained as strong as ever and as we closed on the four horses, I could begin to see riders. I squinted to see if Sarah was still with them, but they remained a little too far away to be sure.

Then something unexpected happened. The four horses began to separate. Still all going in the same general direction, they were fanning out -- putting distance between themselves. No, not all of 'em.

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Now it was clear that only two had split off. The other two were still together. Those would be the two I'd follow. Soon, the two horses that had split off were out of sight. I continued closing on the other two.

Over the past hour, my rage had boiled off and been replaced by a different feeling. As Spirit continued to run the race of his life, an odd sense of calm had come over me. It seemed like I was riding in slow motion. Exhausted as I was, I began to think more clearly than I had in a while.

I'd always known I'd had a special calling but was never sure what it was, or where or how it would appear. This must be it, I thought.

I recalled my boss at the Circle R who had taken me under his wing and trusted me his dead son's colt.

I remembered my first meeting with Captain Daggot, who befriended me when I was alone and scared. I wasn't raised to believe in fate, but something or someone had brought these people into my life. It all seemed to point to this moment and to this spot on this lonesome Wyoming trail, so far from home. I wondered how it would end. I said a quiet prayer and asked God for his help.

Back to the moment at hand, the chase had been so consuming, I hadn't given much thought to winning it...catching McVey. I figured that McVey probably wouldn't be alone when it happened. He still had one of his men with him and they were likely experienced gunman...and I

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wasn't. Could that make the difference? My desire to win Sarah back was strong, but could it win out when put up against older and more experienced men?

Or worse -- could my excitement put Sarah in even greater danger than she already was? The more I thought about it, the more my brain swirled with the possibilities. I decided to just not think about it for now. I just needed to ride and deal with one problem at a time.

The horses ahead were tiring. The race had been too hard and too long. Their pace was clearly slowing. I could now see that one of the horses had two riders. Sarah *was* still with them. Now I had to think. They had Sarah and they had guns. Winning the chase was one thing but saving Sarah was all that mattered.

As Spirit continued his driving pace, I was now close enough to see that both the horses had pulled up. This could be it. Were they planning to make their stand there, right out in the open? It didn't seem logical with better cover up ahead.

I could see the riders moving around. Then, just as quickly, the riders re-mounted and proceeded to move out in separate directions. It must be that the horse that carried Sarah had tired more quickly than the other. McVey had switched her to the other horse...probably his.

As Spirit and I continued to close, I could now easily see the horse with two riders and was determined to catch him. The race was now down

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to two horses, and I knew Spirit would win. Also, with the other riders having split off, the fight for Sarah would be one on one. Much better odds than would have been the case earlier. But I was still concerned. With Daggot and Whitey having fallen back, I was out here on my own. As much as I could use it, I couldn't expect any help. It was going to be up to me and me alone.

There was fifty yards between us now and I was really getting tired. While I resisted my tendency to daydream, I couldn't stop my mind from flashing back to that look of desperation in Mrs. Roger's eyes. "*...they took Sarah. Please help!*"

At the time I could only respond with a "Yes, ma'm," but I'd meant it. I could help, and the time for doing so was coming fast.

Up ahead the trail climbed a small rise that was topped with large boulders. I could now see the riders clearly. As I suspected, it was McVey himself. When his horse topped the rise, McVey pulled him to a stop and jumped off, yanking Sarah down with him. In one continuous motion, he used his free hand to pull his rifle from its scabbard and slapped his horse's flank to move him out. Then, dragging Sarah behind, he took cover behind one of the larger rocks.

I knew I only had seconds to react. I glanced around my position at the bottom of the rise for cover. There wasn't much. I spotted an old log several yards away and whipped Spirit's head around toward it. When we got to it, I jumped from

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my saddle, taking my Winchester with me. Just as I dropped behind the trunk, a shot rang out and the sand next to my exposed leg exploded in the air. That was close!

When I grabbed the rifle from my hotel room, I hadn't had time to check it for ammunition. I knew my Winchester had a capacity of sixteen rounds, but seldom kept it fully loaded. My best guess was that I had less than ten shots...maybe eight. I'd have to be careful not to run out as I hadn't had time to grab any ammunition when I jumped, and Spirit had now moved back out of the way.

I slowly raised my head over the log to see if I could get a clean shot off. As my eyes cleared the log I saw McVey's rifle barrel pointing straight at me. I ducked. Crack! Another shot just missed. I could hear Sarah's voice talking back to McVey as she continued to resist.

"Boy..." McVey yelled from his hiding place. "If you want to see this girl stay alive, you better back off. Throw out your guns or I'll shoot her."

"If you hurt her, I'll shoot you," I replied. "Why don't you let her go and we can settle this like men."

"I don't see any men over there," replied McVey. "Just a boy who's in this way over his head. Your big friend can't help you now. You throw your guns out in the open and I'll let you walk away. This is your last chance."

"So you could shoot me down, just like you did the Carey brothers? I don't think so. You may have

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me pinned down, but I have you pinned down too, and I can go a lot longer without water than you can.”

It got quiet. The standoff continued for a few more minutes when McVey, again, broke the silence. “We’re coming out. Throw out your guns or I’ll shoot her. I swear I will.”

I was worried. If McVey *had* killed the Careys, he’d be desperate to save himself. He was certainly capable of killing us both.

Then McVey stood up holding Sarah in front of him as a shield. They were now in full view. McVey’s rifle was in his right hand and his left arm was stretched across her throat. He was starting to walk toward me. Peering over, I could see the fear in Sarah’s eyes.

My mind was racing again, trying to come up with a plan, but I couldn’t think of one. Not a good one.

“He’s going to shoot us both anyway,” Sarah choked the words out around his ever-tightening grip. “SHOOT HIM, MONTANA. SHOOT HIM NOW!”

As much as I would have loved to be able to follow her direction, I knew I couldn’t. He’d won. My plan wasn’t good enough. I couldn’t risk Sarah’s life to save mine.

I knew it was suicide, but I stood up from behind the log and held out my rifle in a sign of surrender.

“Throw it away, now. Any pistols, too.” McVey instructed with a devilish fire in his eye.

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Following his direction, I threw my Winchester to the right and stepped clear of the log. “I don’t have a pistol,” I replied.

McVey then released his arm from Sarah’s neck and let her go, pushing her toward me. With both hands now free, he leveled his rifle in our direction.

“My boys told me you’ve been dogging us since we first met up at that way station yesterday, where you wouldn’t feed us. I don’t know what your problem is with me sonny, but I’m fixin’ to solve it. You and the girl better start saying your prayers.”

He had us cold and was going to kill us both. I couldn’t reason with him. I’d failed. I couldn’t have messed things up worse if I tried. All I could do was hold Sarah in my arms and wait for the shot. We both closed our eyes. If this was to be the end, at least we’d go together.

“Crack!” I jumped...but I was still standing! My next reaction was the shot didn’t sound close. It sounded more like an echo. It wasn’t McVey!

I opened my eyes to see McVey flying backwards toward the ground. Blood flew out a hole in his chest and he was dead when he hit the ground.

I released Sarah and spun around to see who was responsible. There was nobody there! Sarah had dropped to the ground, but was unhurt as well.

I turned back in McVey’s direction and walked over to where he now laid, his rifle still clenched in his right hand...finger still on the trigger. A shiver

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went up my backbone to think that's how close we came to dying.

I reached for Sarah and lifted her to her feet. She looked over at McVey's body and back at me. "What happened?" she asked.

"There's only one kind of rifle that could drop him like that from such a long distance."

"Who, what?" replied Sarah, still confused.

"A buffalo gun," I answered. "Daggot!"

I turned back in the direction the sound had come from. Using my hand to shield my eyes, I searched the horizon for any kind of reflection or movement.

"There he is. Over that ridge to the left. There's two of 'em. Must be over five hundred yards! Best shot I've ever seen."

Chapter 9

We didn't know that Mr. Rogers had survived the shooting until we got back to Laramie later that night. We were all relieved to see he was doing so well.

Sarah was bruised and sore, but had survived. She was a fighter, and in spite of my failure at the final showdown, I was happy the way all it turned out.

But as much as I could never repay Captain Daggot for saving us, I still felt bad about my role in it. I'd hoped to be a hero, but it didn't turn out that way at all. With McVey threatening Sarah, I never felt so weak or helpless in my life. It sure didn't seem like the special moment I'd expected.

I went to bed that night with a thousand thoughts running around in my head. This had been a tough day and I was glad it was over.

The next morning after breakfast, Daggot, Whitey and I walked over to the Rogers' hotel, to see how they were doing. To our surprise, when we arrived, Mr. Rogers was sitting up in bed and looking much better than anyone had expected.

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“I don’t know how to thank you all,” Mr. Rogers said. “You saved our daughter and for that Mrs. Rogers and I will forever be grateful!”

“Your welcome,” replied the Captain. “She took us on one heck of a ride!”

“Yes, I understand she did.” replied Mr. Rogers. “I heard you wore out all the horses but one.”

Mrs. Rogers then walked over and put her arms around me, giving me a hug I hadn’t seen the likes of since the morning I left the farm.

“Montana, I especially want to thank you. When I turned to you for help I had my doubts that you were up to challenge. Those were very bad men and there were four of them. I feared I was sending you on a fool’s mission. Of course I didn’t know much about you or that horse of yours. It *was* Captain Daggot’s true eye that saved you and Sarah, but none of that would have happened if you hadn’t outlasted them all. Neither you nor that wonderful horse of yours gave up when it would have been an easy thing to do. It was really *you* that saved my family, and for that, I will always consider you a part of it. God bless you and your special horse.”

Captain Daggot spoke up. “I couldn’t agree more, ma’m. After my horse winded, I couldn’t keep up with them. Whitey joined me later and all we could do was just keep following their trail, hoping at some point I’d get a chance to help. That

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chance wouldn't have come without the courage and determination of this young man here, and his horse."

Sarah then walked over to me and gave me a big kiss on the cheek. "All I know is that you saved my life!"

"Hey, hold on there!" Mr. Rogers broke the seriousness of the moment. "Mother said he was now part of the family, but we were thinking *brother!*" We all laughed.

I felt better. Maybe Daggot and Mr. Rogers *were* right. Without Spirit and me keeping up the chase, McVey's men wouldn't have split off and Daggot would never have gotten the clear shot he needed. I needed some time to think it through, but I felt a little better about myself.

"I thank you all for those nice words," I replied, "but I'm no hero. The real hero is down at the livery, filling himself up on oats. But I'll be sure to give him all your best when I get down there."

"You do that," replied Mr. Rogers. "If the Doctor lets me, I'd like to come down there with you to thank him myself."

"Sure thing, Mr. Rogers. I know Spirit would like that."

As we left the Rogers' hotel, I still wasn't feeling "special" in the way I'd always thought about it, but maybe I was getting there.

Chapter 10

As much I was happy with how things turned out in Laramie, I was looking forward to the peace and quiet that the buffalo hunt promised. Daggot planned on our leaving Laramie early the next morning but asked that we all meet in the hotel saloon later that evening to talk about the trip.

I was anxious to know what he had on his mind so I got there a little early. Sitting at the bar, it felt good to be able to order a beer and not have to look over my shoulder for McVey or his men. McVey wouldn't be bothering anybody, anymore, and his men probably scattered like dust in wind.

I'd just finished my beer when the Captain and Whitey walked down the stairs and found us a table. I noticed some stranger had given Whitey a bad look as he sat down. I kept forgetting he was an Indian, but I suppose there were always some men around that wouldn't let *him* forget it. Daggot must have noticed as well because he returned the look. On seeing Daggot's size, the stranger immediately turned and went about his business. I grew up with Indian friends and found nothing at

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all odd about Whitey's company. In fact, he'd become a good friend throughout the past week, and contrary to Daggot's early warning, I hadn't found him moody at all. If the Captain was becoming a kind of a father figure to me, Whitey was fast becoming my brother.

But this was the Wyoming territory in the year 1885 and there were a lot of places Indians still weren't welcome. I figured we'd try to stay away from those places. I guess to me there were Indians and there were Indians. Just like white folks. There's some you take a liking to, and there's some you don't want anything to do with. This past week I'd seen my fill of both.

Captain Daggot was obviously a man with a lot of history. He told me that before the war, he'd spent many of his Calvary years fighting Indians. Yet, he picked one as his hunting partner! I liked that in him. He did what was right, whether or not other people approved.

I also liked the way he took charge of things. It was important sometimes that somebody did, and I didn't see anybody else doing it. After the Carey brothers were killed, most people we ran into were thinking more about themselves and how the killings would effect them...even the stage line. I guess that was what my father called leadership -- taking charge when it was important that somebody did.

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My thoughts were interrupted when the Captain, now pouring himself a whiskey out of the bottle, spoke up.

“Montana, I guess you are wondering why I wanted to meet tonight? Well, I’ve been doing some thinking and I want to make you a proposal. As you know, it’s getting pretty cold out. I expect the snows to start in a few weeks, and after that, it’ll turn even nastier. That makes it hard to hunt buffalo and I’ve been thinking about your plans to head south. There’s really nothing keeping Whitey and me here and I seem to recall that winter’s a lot easier down Texas way. What would you think about moving our hunt south? You’d have some company on part of your trip and my old bones wouldn’t have to put up with another of these Wyoming winters. What do you think?”

I didn’t need to think about that at all. “That would be fine with me, Captain. As you say, I could use the company. But you know I’m not really a buffalo man. I like being a cowhand and hope to meet up with one of those big outfits that runs cattle up from south of the Red River.”

“I’m not askin’ you to change your plans at all,” Daggot continued. “As much as you’re not a buffalo man, I’m not a cowboy and am getting too old to try. I spent half my life on horseback and would just as soon leave all that behind me. You want to run cattle from Texas and I know a little town in Kansas called Dodge City, where the Chisholm Trail ends. If we head out that way, you

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might be able to hook up with one of those big outfits there.”

Captain continued, “When I got out of the Army I worked for a while in Dodge City. I was even a lawman there briefly. I know the town pretty well. It would put me back in familiar territory and that wouldn’t be half bad. The buffalo have been thin since the big kill-off a decade ago, but there are a lot of other critters with good hides down there and I wouldn’t have to wade through two feet of snow to get to ‘em. I also read that Congress in Washington is working to open up some of the Indian lands in Oklahoma. Might be an opportunity to pick up a ranch of my own someday. Now I don’t want you to feel pushed. If you’d just as soon go on down there on your own, I understand. You’ve just come off a big week and if you’d rather part company for some quiet time, that’s fine with us. I’ve done the same myself on occasion and it’s good for a man to just think once in a while.”

“Captain Daggot,” I replied, “I suspect you’re right about that time-to-think idea, but this is all new territory to me and I could use the company. I’ve tried traveling alone and, while I can do it, I think the three of us match up pretty well and could help each other along the way.”

“Then it’s settled,” responded Daggot as he poured himself a second drink. “We’ll leave in the morning and see if we can beat the darn snow.”

We got up early the next morning, and left Laramie in the dark. This time of year the sun

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doesn't get up until almost eight, and by then we'd already been on the trail for a couple of hours.

While we rode, Captain started talking again about where we were going.

"In those days, Dodge City was a pretty rough place, what with all the cowboys ending up there from the big drives. It's where they got paid, and there were a lot of people interested in getting to that money. That's how I got hooked up with the law. I left a saloon one night and got hit over the head and robbed by a couple of cowboys. Sheriff's name was Lawrence Deger and he hired me as one of his Deputy's. During the year I worked for him, I also worked with two of his assistants that later became pretty famous. You might have heard of Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson?"

I didn't know if the Captain was spinnin' a yarn or not. I'd heard of Wyatt Earp even up in Bighorn Lake. It would be great to think that Daggot actually knew him, but I'd have to have a little more proof than his say-so at this point. Though the more I heard about Dodge City, the more it sounded like the kind of place I wanted to visit.

Over the next week or so we worked our way to Cheyenne and then south, staying east of the mountains. I'd been around mountains most of my life but our views as we rode on toward Kansas were the likes of which I'd never seen. Colorado territory was like two different territories. To the west were the Rockies and some of the highest mountains in the range. To the east, the land fell

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off fast and was very flat. That's where we were. Lots of ranches and farms, but not much to fix your eyes on as we rode. It all looked pretty much the same. But the views behind us were something. I was used to the sudden rise of the Tetons off the Wyoming flatland, but this was different. The Colorado Rockies were bigger and looked to go straight up. From our trail, it looked like a giant wall, with snow on top. The wall started well north, around the Wyoming border. As we rode south, it got bigger, even as we moved further away. I couldn't imagine any wagon getting through those mountains. It was now clear to me why the wagon trains mostly took the Oregon Trail through the Wyoming country.

A few days into our second week on the trail, we were so far east that the mountains finally disappeared behind us. This particular morning was sunny and a little warmer than it should have been for November. We'd just crossed a stream and, rising up the east side of the gully, we saw smoke way up ahead. Captain and Whitey talked some about prairie fire but decided the smoke was too dark and wasn't wide enough, so we kept heading toward it.

As we got closer we could see that it was coming from a small area in a woods. Still closer, we could hear the fire crackling, though by that time it seemed the smoke was beginning to die down.

We got to a clearing we saw what had been a pretty good sized house and barn -- both burned to

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the ground with only the rock chimney left standing. Oddly, between the house and barn, a small split rail corral was still intact, and there were two horses in it. Both looked like draw horses but they were very spooked over the fire. It seemed strange how the fire burned down both the house and barn, yet jumped the corral between them. I wondered where the rancher'd gone, and why he didn't take the horses away from the fire.

Daggot quickly dismounted. "Let's check out the house first," he said. Whitey and I dismounted and joined Daggot in walking around the house ashes, some of which were still smoldering. After a few minutes of not finding much, I noticed Whitey left the house ashes and walked over to the barn area. A moment later he yelled, "Over here Cap," he said, pointing to a pile of burnt timbers in what looked like the middle of the barn. "Man and woman."

I'd seen dead people before but never burned. At first you couldn't tell they were people at all. Just black ashes.

"How do you know it's a man and a women?" I asked.

Whitey pointed to what must have been a hand and fingers on one of the bodies. There was a blackened ring with a stone in it on one of the fingers.

"They were probably out here to save the barn with the timber fell on them," added Daggot. "Very

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sad to see folks die this way. When the cinders cool, we'll bury them."

While we were waiting, I walked over to the corral and tried to calm the horses down. I wasn't sure what we would do with them. Probably take them with us to the next ranch or town where we could tell somebody about the fire. While I was in the corral, I noticed that Whitey'd moved again. Now he'd left the fire area and walked back into the woods, thirty or forty feet off the main lot. I didn't think much of it until he yelled. "CAP HERE, CAP HERE!" he yelled. Captain Daggot and I walked around the ashes to where he'd entered the woods. It was then I first heard the other voice. A kind of muffled cry. It wasn't Whitey's voice and didn't sound like an animal. It sounded like a small person.

We walked up to see that Whitey was standing ten feet from a child. I wasn't sure if it was a boy or girl. The clothes looked more like a nightshirt than regular clothes and were wet and dirty. The child looked scared and was crying.

Captain Daggot put his arms out and approached the child slowly. "Settle down now, little one. We need to know who you are and what happened. We're not going to hurt you."

Seeing that we were there to help, the child stopped crying and walked out into the sunlight. She told us her name was Daisy and that she'd been in the woods since her mother sent her there

during the night. We weren't sure if she knew her folks were dead.

Captain asked her how old she was and she replied that she was "almost thirteen." Her full name was Daisy Peterson and those were clearly her folks back in the barn.

"Where are my mother and father?" she asked, looking over to the still smoking ashes that used to be her home.

"Your parents are dead," replied Daggot, in a much more straightforward way than I would have done it. "We found them in the barn."

I expected the child to burst into tears on hearing the news, but she didn't. Instead, she started walking over toward the pile of charred wood that had been the barn. Daggot motioned for me to stop her so I walked over quick to block her path.

"Daisy, you don't want to go into that area," I said, "The fire is still hot and you could get hurt."

"I know, but I want to see them," she replied.

"That's not a good idea, little one," said Daggot, now standing next to me. "I have a better idea," he continued. "We'll stay with them until we can get them properly buried but we'll need someone to tend our horses. If we're going to be here a while, we need to get those saddles off and get them some water. Do you suppose you could help Montana here do all that?"

"I guess so," she replied, and reluctantly followed me in the direction of the horses.

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Daisy and I unsaddled the horses and led them over to their nearby stream for water. She was very upset over the loss of her home and parents but I tried to keep her away from the mess, and get her mind off it a little.

I introduced her to Spirit and told her he was one of the fastest horses in the territory. She told me she had an uncle back in New York, who raised horses.

“I’ve never been there, but my father told me that his brother raised racing horses for the racetracks.”

“I’d love to see them someday,” I replied. “I’d like to see what he’d think of Spirit. I might even race some of his race horses, and see how fast they really are!”

After about half an hour, Captain Daggot came down to the stream and told us it was time we said some words over her parent’s graves. When we got back to the clearing, there were two fresh graves next to each other, under a large tree on the edge of the property.

Captain Daggot asked us to bow our heads and pray with him.

“Dear God, please take these two folks into your kingdom of heaven. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and their little girl Daisy.”

It wasn’t much of a ceremony but it was the first time I’d seen Captain Daggot so serious. He’d

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never mentioned God before and I didn't know he was a religious man, but his words were right for the situation and maybe helped Daisy. She would need all the help she could get.

I thought back to *my* folks, probably working the fields, getting ready for the first freeze. Captain's words made me think that one day I would lose them, too, and I felt bad for leaving. I hadn't been home in a long time, and wondered how they were doing without me. I also wondered how my sister Mary was doing. I made a promise to myself to send them a letter as soon as I could.

Daisy told us knew the way to the neighbor's ranch, an hours ride east. There was no saddle for her to ride on as not much had escaped the fire, but she said she could ride one of her horses bareback. Fortunately, we managed to find a bridle hanging on one of the corral posts, and proceeded to get one her horses ready.

We left with Daisy riding bareback next to me, and the other horse following along behind. The trip to Dodge would take longer now, but we needed to get this girl to a neighbor or a relative as soon as we could. I know that Daggot was curious about how the fire that had taken her parents had started, but that would just have to remain a mystery for now. As strong as Daisy was trying to be, we knew she needed more help than we could give her.

Following her directions, we rode southeast, at first on a horse trail through the woods, and after

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the woods ended, out on open prairie. With our group now having grown to include a little girl riding bareback and two draw horses, our progress was slow. About an hour out, we came over a small rise and could see another ranch ahead. This ranch house wasn't on the main trail, but set maybe thirty yards off it, on a private road. As we made the turn onto that road, we rode under a wooden arch with the name "Triple T" carved into a large board. The main house was quite large -- three stories. Surrounding it were several out-buildings that included a big barn and two or three corrals, suggesting some sort of livestock ranch -- probably cattle, though none were visible.

Daisy told us this was the Taylor place. Mr. Taylor had been a friend of her father's and, lately, a regular guest out at their place. We rode up on a man who was mending a fence near one of the smaller buildings.

"Mornin'," said the Captain. The man stood up and took notice.

"My name's Daggot and we're here to report a fire up the trail."

"You need to go see Mr. Taylor at the main house," he said, pointing toward the house, and immediately returned to his work.

"Not a very talkative fellow, was he?" I commented.

We rode up toward the main house. On our approach, the front door opened and a man we assumed to be Mr. Taylor, came out to greet us.

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"What do we have here?" he said.

The Captain responded, "We've brought the girl here to report a fire out at her place. We were heading for Dodge City when we saw the smoke. We followed it in. Her house and barn were burned and her folks killed. She thought you might be able to provide some help."

"My God!" responded the man. "Daisy may have already told you, my name's Taylor. Walt Taylor, and we were neighbors. What happened?"

"Mr. Taylor," answered the Captain, "We really don't know. By the time we got there, the fire was nearly out. The house and barn were burned to the ground. We found her folks under a fallen beam, in what was the middle of the barn. Didn't see girl at first as she was hiding in the woods."

By this time a woman who I assumed was Mrs. Taylor came out as well. On hearing Daggot's explanation, she went over to Daisy's horse and helped her down. "You come with me Daisy. You look a sight, girl. Let's get you out of those wet clothes."

Daggot dismounted and shook hands with Mr. Taylor. Whitey and I dismounted as well, to join them.

"This is terrible," exclaimed Mr. Taylor. "Did she tell you anything about it?"

"She didn't seem to know much about it," replied Daggot. "Her folks got her up in the night. Got her out of the house and left her safe to try to save the barn. Looked like they were inside when the roof

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collapsed, pinning them down. We could barely recognize them. The girl was hiding in the woods nearby. We heard her crying and brought her out. It's a sad thing to see for anyone, much less a young girl like Daisy. She brought us here on one of the two horses that survived. Strangely, their corral didn't burn and was still in good shape."

"We appreciate your bringing her here," said Mr. Taylor. "Peterson was a good neighbor and I find it hard to believe he and the Missus are gone. Daisy's mother was a fine woman and it's easy to understand that she was out there trying to help save the barn. Where are they now?"

Daggot responded, "We buried their ashes under a tree in the yard. The graves are covered with rocks so they're easy to see. Maybe you could get a real preacher out there to say the right words and put up a marker. We tried for the girl's sake, but I'm sure it could be done better."

"We'll take care of it," Taylor said. "I understand Peterson may have a brother somewhere back east. We'll see if we can get in touch with him. In the meantime, she can stay in my daughter's room while she's away at school. We can't thank you enough for helping out. You say you were on your way to Dodge City? It's an hour's ride east of here. Is there anything we can do for you? How about some food and drink? We were just about to have lunch."

"I'd never turn down food," replied Daggot, "but we'd like to get back on the trail as soon as we can."

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Could we water up and maybe buy some flour and meat from you?"

"No problem. You and your men water your horses over at the main barn and we'll put together some food for you to take along. It won't be long."

"We'd be much obliged," answered Daggot. "I'd like to see the little girl once more before we leave it that would be alright with you and the Missus."

"I'm sure that won't be a problem. I'll get her out here as soon as Mrs. Taylor settles her down. This must be very hard on her and I'm sure she would want to thank you men herself. Incidentally, Mr. Daggot, you look a bit familiar to me. Have we met before somewhere?"

"It's Captain, and I'm not sure. I spent some time in Dodge City some years ago, and met a lot of folks. If you spent any time in town, I suppose it's possible."

"I'm not sure either," Taylor responded, "I'm pretty good with faces and names and you look familiar. Maybe it will come to me."

We walked our horses over toward the main barn and found the trough.

"What do you think, Captain? Did Mr. Taylor look familiar to you," I asked.

"Face is different, but it might be that I've heard that voice before. The problem with being a lawman in a place like Dodge is that you meet a lot of people and most of them are in trouble with the law in some way or another. It's not the best way to meet them. And, like I said, it was nearly ten years

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ago.”

The man who we’d spoken to on the way in, was up now and walked by us on his way to the house without any comment at all.

“He didn’t even look our way,” I pointed out. “Seems funny.”

“A few things seem funny around here,” replied Daggot. “Lots of barns and fences, but no cattle, no horses or anything.”

“Maybe they’re out grazin’ in pastures somewhere,” I offered.

“Could be,” replied Daggot. “But there’s no feed around and the few tracks near the trough are ours. I’m not sure what the Triple T Ranch ranches, but it doesn’t look very active.”

About then, Whitey walked up and pointed toward a smaller barn just off the main lot. He whispered something to the Captain and they both walked back to it. I left the horses at the trough and followed them.

Behind the smaller barn were two wagons, full to the brim with mechanical equipment. I walked over to one of them and pulled back the canvas tarp that covered most of it.

“What’s all this?” I asked in a quiet voice?

“Looks like pumping equipment of some kind,” replied Daggot. “All pretty new too. Maybe Taylor isn’t a rancher at all.”

We moved back to where the horses were drinking and a few minutes later Mr. and Mrs. Taylor came back out with Daisy. She looked a

little more comfortable in dry clothes. Mr. Taylor gave the Captain a small sack, tied off at the top.

“There’s some bacon and beans in here for your trip. Hopefully it will be enough to get you where you’re going,” he said.

“We thank you very much and I’d like to pay you for it,” responded Daggot.

“No need,” answered Mr. Taylor. “Seems like a fit reward for your good work today,”

“Again, we’re much obliged,” Daggot responded.

“No,” replied Mrs. Taylor. “We’re the ones that are obliged to *you* for bringing Daisy to us. I’m sure she thanks you, too.”

“Yes ma’m,” Daisy said. She then walked over to Captain Daggot and looked up. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Captain.”

She then turned and walked over to where Spirit and I were standing. She reached in her pocket and pulled out a skinned carrot, offering it to Spirit who immediately began gobbling it up.

“You’re very welcome, Daisy,” Daggot responded. “You’ve had a very bad thing happen to you today but you’re safe now with these folks and you need to get some rest.”

Daisy patted Spirit’s head while he chewed up her offering. I could see tears in her eyes for the first time since we found her. She didn’t say anything else, but her tears said it all.

Daggot threw me the sack and I put it in my saddlebag. I thanked Daisy for the carrot and we

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mounted our horses and headed out. As we rode, our thoughts remained on the little girl we'd just left behind. I kept thinking that it must be hard enough to lose one parent at her age, much less both at the same time. All we could do was hope the Taylors would take good care of her.

Chapter 11

The sun was already low when we got into Dodge City. Having heard stories about Marshal Earp, Boot Hill, and the famous Long Branch Saloon, I thought it would be bigger. As we rode down Main Street, it had a small town feel, reminding me more of Laramie.

Captain Daggot must have been telling the truth about having worked here because he seemed to know his way around. As we passed by the Long Branch, Daggot pointed out the alley where he'd been robbed those many years ago.

We continued on into town, passing several other hotels and saloons, and finally arriving at the jail. There was a deputy with a star on his shirt sitting in a rocking chair on the boardwalk, just outside the door.

"Evenin'," said Daggot. "Who's Sheriff around here nowadays?"

"Who's askin'?" replied the man with the star.

"John Daggot."

"Well, Mr. Daggot, Marshal Tilghman is County Marshal, but he's gone home for the day. I'm one

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of his deputies. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I wanted to talk to the Marshal about a fire we ran into a ways back, but it can wait until tomorrow. When do you expect he’ll be in?”

Marshal Tilghman’s usually here by eight o’clock. If you stopped by after that, you’d likely catch him.”

“Much obliged,” said Daggot, “we’ll do just that.”

The Captain then led us out toward the east end of town, to a hotel named “Hotel.” As we entered, there was a bearded man standing behind the counter, counting money.

Daggot stared at him for a moment before he spoke. “Jim...is that you?”

The man looked up and focused for a moment on the Captain, seemingly unsure of who he was looking at.

“Is that you Daggot? I’ll be darned. It’s been a long time!” As the Captain assured him that he was right on both counts, the man walked out from behind the counter and shook the hand of his old friend.

“Shoot, John, how long’s it been? Nearly ten years, I’d guess. What have you been up to?” he inquired.

“Jim, first let me introduce you to two friends of mine. This is Whitey, my skinner, and this young fellow goes by Montana. We just came into town from Wyoming and are looking forward to meeting up with the Marshal in the morning. Can you put

us up?”

“Sure can if you boys don’t mind sharing a few rooms. We’re a little tight for the next few days with a new drive in town.”

The man turned to me and reached for my hand. “Name’s Jim Masterson, good to meet any friends of the old Captain here.”

Turning back to Daggot, Mr. Masterson continued, “I’m glad you remembered my hotel business. Keeps me so busy I’ve left most of the lawman work to Bill. He’s probably who you’re waiting to see. Truth is, the fine folks of Ford County saw fit to elect Bill, county marshal, and me, town sheriff. Bill was supposed to be helping *me*, but with my hotel work, I guess I’m more *his* assistant nowadays. But, since I still carry the title, I’d be glad to help if I can. What’s on your minds?”

“We might just take you up on that, Jim,” replied Daggot. “What’s say you get us those rooms and we’ll get cleaned up and meet you later for a drink?”

By this time, two other cowboys had come in behind us and were waiting for rooms themselves.

“That’d be fine with me,” Masterson said. “Give me a little time to finish up around here. I can give you six and eight up the stairs.” With that, he handed Daggot two keys and told us where to bed down our horses.

We met up around seven in the hotel lobby. Sheriff Masterson had changed clothes and now wore a silver star on his shirt. There wasn’t a bar in

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his hotel so he led us down the street to the Stage Saloon where we quickly ordered a round of drinks.

“So, Captain, what are you so all fired up to tell the law here in Dodge?” opened Masterson.

“Jim, I’m not so sure this is anything at all, but we ran across a fire while riding in and thought it best if we reported it to someone.”

Captain Daggot proceeded to tell his old friend how we discovered the house fire and found Daisy and her parents.

“I suppose it was just one of those unfortunate things but the fact that the house and barn burned while the corral in between survived, left me with an uncomfortable feeling about the whole thing. It just didn’t seem natural. Also, the little girl told us that the neighbor Taylor had been out to their place several times lately. She didn’t know why.”

“What do you think John, that the fire was deliberately set? Do you suspect Taylor?”

Masterson’s response surprised me. We’d never spoken about *that* even among ourselves, but having heard the Sheriff put it into words, we must have all been thinking the same thing. Sheriff Masterson must be a pretty good lawman, I thought. He’d picked right up on that.

“I wouldn’t jump there yet, Jim,” responded Daggot. “I guess it could have just been a terrible accident. Taylor seemed like a nice enough fellow when we were there. One other thing though, while we were at his place, we saw a couple of wagons

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full of new pumping equipment behind one of his barns. No livestock, just a lot of new pumping equipment. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It might," responded Masterson. "John, there's a lot of history here and I'm not sure you want to know about it. I'll make you a deal. You can finish your drinks and go about your business here, or...you can stick around and hear a long story about brothers. It's your call, but before you make your decision, let me warn you. This story involves some people you know and you're going to have a hard time hearing it and not getting involved. Take a minute to think about that before you answer."

Daggot listened, and turned his eyes from his old friend to his drink. After a quiet pause, he looked up at Whitey and me. We both nodded as if to approve whatever he was thinking.

He then looked back at Masterson and spoke. *"We've got to know, Jim. Let's have it."*

Chapter 12

Our talk with the Sheriff looked like it might be a long one, so Captain told me to buy another bottle before Masterson began. I did and returned to the table just as he started.

“First Jim, remind me when exactly it was you left here. I don’t need to tell you things you already know.”

Captain Daggot responded, “I believe I pulled out about the same time Deger was appointed Sheriff. I never took to Deger the way some did, and couldn’t support his taking the job. Truth is, I thought Bat or Wyatt should have gotten it. I guess I just got tired of the politics. It was in October of that year that I went west. Seems to me it was late Fall of ‘75, just about ten years ago this month.”

“I would have guessed around then,” Sheriff Masterson began. “I do remember that you didn’t have much use for Deger after he arrested Bat. Young Montana, what you don’t know is that I have two other brothers that figure fairly prominently in the Dodge City history. My older

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brother Bat, my younger brother Ed, and I, all worked at one time or another as lawmen for either Ford County or Dodge City. Your friend, Captain Daggot, worked with us here in Dodge for a while.”

“Back in those days a good old boy named Charlie Basset was Sheriff of all Ford County. Charlie was a good man and hired the best to work for him. You should understand that as wild as Dodge is today, ten years ago it was much wilder. There hadn’t been much law here before that, and, with the cowboys coming up from Texas, and the buffalo hunters coming in from anywhere and everywhere, there was a lot of money coming into town. There were robberies, gunfights and outright killings every week. The good people of Ford County wanted it to end, and they hired Charlie Basset to end it. Charlie knew he needed some good men to help him, so he hired a number of assistants and deputies. My brother Bat and Wyatt Earp came on as assistants. Along the way he also hired my brother Ed, Larry Deger, and the man sitting right between us.”

He continued, “Those were some crazy times. Your Captain here got himself hired after he’d been bopped over the head and robbed, right outside the Long Branch. He was so determined to catch the men that robbed him, he caught the eye of Charlie, who talked him into signing up as a deputy himself -- and he was a good one. I know because that was about the time I signed on, too,

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and we worked many a night together. Well, as your friend explained, Larry Deger became Sheriff in late '75. At that time both Bat and Wyatt were still assistants. A few years later, both of them were made full time sheriffs. At any rate, things went pretty well until summer of '77."

"There was a killing in town that summer that involved a thirteen year old boy. Looked to most folks like the boy'd been murdered in cold blood. A local character with a long arrest record named Bobby Gill was accused of the killing. Only problem was that Bat had done the investigation, and he never thought Gill was guilty. Supposedly, under orders from Charlie Bassett, Deger ended up ordering Bat to arrest Gill, but Bat refused. For his refusal, Deger had Bat arrested, too. Of course, if you all knew Bat the way Captain and I do, you'd understand better why he refused. You see, Bat placed a lot of stock in people being honorable, and he was convinced Gill was innocent. That wasn't real popular with Sheriff Deger, and since Charlie was in the process of leaving his job and preoccupied, he left the whole matter up to Deger to handle. Bat went to jail for a few months until the real murderer was discovered. It later turned out that the boy'd been approached by the local drunk for money that night. When he refused to give him any, the drunk pulled a gun and hit the boy over the head, killing him right then and there, on that dark street. Not long after, Bobby Gill happened by and found him. While Gill always

denied any involvement, his reputation wasn't good either, and people rushed to judgment. Gill stayed in jail for several months until the man who'd actually done the killing had too much to drink again one night and boasted about it in front of one of the deputies. Gill was later cleared and Bat's reputation restored. But, Bat never forgave Deger, mostly for not listening to him, and some for having him arrested in the first place. In the fall of that year, Deger was up for re-election for County Sheriff. Bat ran against him and won."

By this time I was having a little trouble keeping it all straight. "With all due respect Sheriff, what's any of this got to do with the Peterson's fire?"

"Slow down Montana," replied Sheriff Master-son with a smile, "impatience is a dangerous virtue in Dodge. What I *didn't* tell you was that the drunk who killed that boy, was named Curtis Taylor. Curtis hadn't always been the town drunk. They say he got that way when his brother cheated him out of his inheritance. You see, Curtis was Walter's older brother! That's until Curtis got himself hung for killing that boy. Their father, Jacob, used to own half of Ford County. All that land you rode through from the Peterson place to Dodge, used to be Taylor land. Years before, Jacob's wife had died of consumption. Not long after that, that Jacob himself died, leaving all his property to his two sons, Walter and Curtis. But problems began right after Jacob's funeral. We never knew all the facts but we do know that, at

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some point, Curtis was turned out, leaving everything to Walter and his wife. Curtis never got over it, and drank himself near to death before he killed that boy. We never knew all the facts around that either, but after he'd admitted it, he was tried, convicted and hung. His brother never attended either the trial or the hanging."

Daggot spoke up, "Now that you mention it, Taylor's voice did seem familiar to me. Did we ever have reason to deal with him in those days?"

"Very likely," responded Masterson. "Walter was the smart one and had been sent off to school in the east. When he came back home he was a little wild himself. Got into a number of scrapes in town before he settled down and got married. For a time, he was a regular guest in our jail...mostly for disturbing the peace and such. You well might have run him in once or twice. I know I did."

Masterson continued, "Anyway, after he married, he and his wife settled back at the ranch and we haven't heard too much from him lately. His father used to run a lot of cattle out there, but there was some trouble with water and Walter ended up selling off most the herd. I'm not sure what they're doing out there now and, except for church on Sunday, we don't see either of them in town too often."

Daggot interrupted, "So what do you think all that equipment he's got there at the ranch is for?"

"Can't tell exactly -- might have something to do with his water problem. You see before old Jacob

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died, his cattle business had shrunk to the point where he had to sell off some land to keep the place going. A few sections went to new folks in the area. Peterson was one of them. Before he died, Peterson was probably sitting on a couple of hundred acres that used to be Taylor land. I know the area because I used to hunt it with Bat and Ed. There's a nice little fishing lake up there, too. I suspect that's why Peterson bought it. That land tends to be too dry to grow much. Said he planned to irrigate it from the lake and farm it. I guess he never got that far along."

"Where's Bat now?" asked Daggot. "Is he still around the area?"

"Not right now," answered Masterson as he poured himself another drink. "Sheriff'n took Bat out of town a lot and in '79 he lost the election. I was appointed to the job a few years later. I've had him back off and on since, to help me out, but he hasn't stayed around. A few years ago he came back and started up a small newspaper, but sold it last year and took off back to Colorado. I haven't heard much from him in the past six months, but with Bat, that's good news."

"How about Wyatt?" Daggot continued. "I heard he left as well."

"Somewhere around '80, when things were just starting to settle down around here, Wyatt left for Arizona. Folks down there had heard about him and offered him a lot of money to come out and to be sheriff of a little town called Tombstone. You

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might have seen his name in the papers a few years back. Seems Wyatt, along with Morgan, Virgil, and Doc Holiday, took on the Clanton brothers. Morgan and Virg got hurt in the scuffle. But I haven't seen any of them since.”

“Well, it's good to see you again Jim, and getting caught up a little. I'm glad to see you're doin' well,” replied Daggot, “but I'm still a little troubled by what happened back at the Peterson place. I'd like to look into it more, but need get hunting before I go broke. Is there anyone on your staff that could handle that?”

“Our staff's gotten a lot smaller over the past few years John,” responded Masterson. “It's down to Tilghman, Ed, me, and a few deputies. I don't suppose I could talk *you* back into the law business again?”

“I don't think so, I had enough of that years ago. I'm a hunter now. Don't have much and don't need much. And Montana here says he wants to run cattle up the old trail, so I suspect he's going to be doing other things, too. Still, I have a bad feeling about that fire and what you've shared with us tonight hasn't improved it a bit. I hate to just leave it the way it is.”

“I'll tell you what,” replied the Sheriff. “You go about your business and I'll take a ride out that way in a few days when my schedule opens up and see what it all looks like to me.”

“I'd feel a lot better about that, Jim. I'd like to help but it's been too long since Whitey and I had

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a good hunt and we're overdue."

"How about you, Montana?" asked Sheriff Masterson. "What's your plan for the next few days?"

That was a good question. Now that I was here in Dodge City, I was expecting to get a job with one of the Texas outfits, but I didn't have any immediate need to do so, and was flattered that the Sheriff would ask.

"Turns out I have no plans for the next week or so, Sheriff. The Captain knows I'm no hunter and I'd be proud to be able to say I'd helped one of the famous Masterson brothers."

"I don't know about that," he replied. "I can't deputize you, so I can't pay you, but if you'll give me a hand I'll keep you in the hotel and see to it that you don't go hungry."

"That's good enough for me. When do you think we should head out?"

"I need to tend the hotel for another day or two, until my manager gets back from a trip. Why don't you get used to town and we can head out after I free up. In meantime your stay at the hotel is free and you'll eat dinner with me."

"I'll do that," I replied. Then, turning toward the Captain and Whitey, I said, "I guess that means we're finally parting ways Captain. I want to thank you for letting me travel with you over the last few weeks, and I'll really miss you both."

"Montana," Captain said, "we'll miss you, too. This is a big country out here, but not so big that

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we won't run into one another again. Whitey and I may stop by from time to time to see how you made out with this fire business. You stay out of trouble and listen to Sheriff Jim. There's a lot he can teach you but you have to stay alive to learn it."

"I'll do my best to do just that," I replied, shaking hands with both Captain and Whitey. "Here's to a good hunt," I said, raising my beer glass.

"To both of us!" added Daggot, raising his as well.

Chapter 13

As Sheriff Masterson had suggested, I spent the next few days roaming around and getting familiar with Dodge. At first, I limited my wanderings to the main streets but after a few days, I began to poke around at the edges. One of the things that impressed me the most was the stockyard. Located just north of town, I'd never seen anything so big. One of the hands out there told me it was over two miles long! He said over three-hundred thousand cattle come through there every year. The main corral could hold over five-thousand cattle at one time! There weren't that many there now but I imagined what it might look like when it was full. And every one of them driven in by hundreds of cowboys. I imagined that Sheriff Masterson wasn't exaggerating when he said it was a lot to handle.

Speaking of Sheriff Masterson, I took him up on his offer for dinners and ate with him the next two nights. I was surely beginning to miss having the Captain and Whitey around, but the Sheriff was a very interesting man, too, and he had no problem

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sharing some of his own and the town's history with me. I was particularly interested when he talked about when he and Daggot worked with his brothers, Sheriff Earp and Doc Holiday. Stories of them, particularly of Earp and Holiday, had traveled the west for years, and even gotten as far north as Montana. I was curious to find out how much of it was really true. From what Sheriff Masterson told me, much of it was.

My third day in Dodge was to be my last for killing time. Sheriff Masterson told me to stick around, as we'd be visiting Taylor's some time tomorrow. The weather'd turned sour and I stayed pretty much in town anyway, spending time in and out of the dry goods and hardware stores.

Sometime mid-morning, I had just come out of one of the stores when I spotted Daisy sitting outside the church across the street. I guessed Mr. Taylor was likely talking to the preacher about services for her folks.

"Hey, Daisy!" I shouted as I crossed the muddy wagon tracks to see her. "What brings you to the big city?"

"Oh, hi Montana!" I'm here with Mr. and Mrs. Taylor. They're in the church now."

"I guessed as much. How have you been doing? Are you adjusting to life at the Taylor's?"

"I guess so," she replied. I have my own room there and Mrs. Taylor has been real nice. But I miss my mother and father and my own house."

"I'm sure you will for a long time," I replied.

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“But I’m just as sure that you’ll adjust to it in time and be happy again soon.”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I hope you’re right. Where’s Spirit? How is he?”

“Oh, Spirit’s fine,” I said, “he’s staying out of the rain, down at the livery. I’m sure he’d like to see you whenever you can stop by.”

On hearing those words, I could see a little brightness come to Daisy’s face. She looked up at me, “That would be great. Let me ask Mr. Taylor if we have time now.”

I waited with her a few more minutes until we were joined by Mrs. Taylor, who had come out of the church first.

“Mornin’, ma’am,” I said as she approached.

“Good morning to you, sir,” she responded. It was clear she remembered me, but not my name.

“Montana,” I offered.

“Why, yes...Montana. How are you today?”

“I’m doing fine, ma’am. Thank you for asking. We were wondering if there was time for Daisy to come down to the livery with me to help feed my horse?”

“Oh yes, Mrs. Taylor. Could I?” pleaded Daisy.

“Well, Mr. Taylor and I do have another appointment here in town. We’ll be at the Land Office for another hour or so I suspect. If it’s not too much of an imposition on you, I don’t see any harm in it. Can you have her back here in an hour?”

“Yes ma’am,” I replied.

With that, Daisy’s face lit up and she quickly left

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her place on the bench to join me in our wet walk down to the livery.

By now it was raining even harder, so we stayed in the shadow of the buildings as long as we could. I looked back to see that Mr. Taylor had also come out of the church and he and Mrs. Taylor were heading the other direction.

I recalled she said their next errand involved the Land Office. I thought back to Sheriff Masterson's comments from a few days ago and wondered if the Taylors were planning any new land deals. Maybe something involving their neighbor's now-available land.

The livery was about a quarter-mile across town and even though we tried to stay out of the rain, Daisy and I were pretty wet by the time we got there. To my relief, we found Spirit had been kept inside the stable and was warm and dry.

I don't know if he recognized Daisy or not, but it seemed like he did. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because Spirit liked kids.

Daisy and I found an empty bag and filled it with oats, then took it into his stall for a mid-day snack. Spirit immediately dropped his head into the bag and took a mouthful. He liked the oats and the attention.

After finishing the bag, Daisy grabbed a brush and began brushing him down. Spirit seemed to be enjoying himself, so we took our time. I think it was good for Daisy to get her mind off her recent tragedy, but it also occurred me that she might be

getting a little too attached to Spirit, and, since they would be separated soon, I began to turn the conversation to something else.

“Daisy, how have you been spending your time out at the Taylor’s?” I asked.

“Mostly helping Mrs. Taylor,” she replied. “We’ve been doing some canning and cleaned out a room for me to stay in. Mr. Taylor is in town today to see the Preacher about a proper funeral for my parents and to send a telegram off to my uncle. If they can reach him, I might be leaving the Taylor’s to stay with him, back east.”

“I know this must be very hard for you,” I said. “But I’m sure it will work out, somehow.”

I didn’t have a clue how it would work out for her, but she needed to start thinking less about her loss and more about school and friends and other such things that twelve year olds should be thinking about.

We spent a little more time with Spirit and then said goodbye and started our walk back. By the time we left the livery, the rain had nearly come to a stop. That was appreciated, too, because we had just begun to dry out. The street, however, was muddy as before and we had to alter our course several times to avoid big puddles.

“Do you ever miss *your* folks, Montana?” Daisy asked as we approached the middle of town.

“Yes,” I replied. “I often wonder how they’re getting along without me. Also, how my little sister is doing.”

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“I didn’t know you had a sister,” replied Daisy. “How old is she?”

“Mary is two years younger than I am, so that would put her at sixteen now. Gee, I hadn’t thought about that before. She must be near grown up by now. Maybe I’ll make a point of getting back up to Bighorn Lake next year. Good idea, Daisy.”

“I’d like to visit with you when you go,” she said.

“If you’re still in the area when I go, I’ll make a point of checking in on you. How’s that?”

“It’s a deal,” she said, reaching to shake my hand. “There, now it’s official.”

We arrived back at the church within the hour like I’d promised the Taylors, but they weren’t back yet, themselves. About ten minutes later, their wagon pulled up.

“We’re ready to head back now,” said Mr. Taylor, bringing the two horses to a stop.

“Did you have a good time?” Mrs. Taylor asked.

“Yes ma’am,” Daisy replied. I got to feed Spirit and we had a nice walk.

“Well, you both look a little wet,” Mrs. Taylor replied. “You climb up here with me and get under this blanket before you catch your death.”

Turning back to me, Mrs. Taylor nodded. “Thank you for watching her Montana. I hope she wasn’t a bother. You should get out of those wet clothes as soon as you can, too.”

“She was no bother,” I replied, and, “yes ma’am,

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I'll get myself dried out as soon as I can. Daisy can help me feed Spirit anytime."

We said our goodbyes and Mr. Taylor snapped the reins, getting the horses to begin following the muddy tracks down the street.

As I watched them pull away, I began to think that the Taylors seemed *too* nice to be involved in the burning of the Peterson place -- particularly Mrs. Taylor. I watched until they turned the corner and hoped I was right.

Chapter 14

The next morning, Sheriff Masterson and I met early in the hotel lobby. We'd each packed enough food and water for a full day on the trail.

"It would have been easy for me to put this off again, Montana," he said, "but I told you and John that I'd get out there this week, and I mean to do so. Let's get going before more business crops up in town and keeps me here."

Sheriff Masterson's horse was a tall, golden palomino, with a matching mane and tail. Of course, I was partial to the butterscotch brown of Spirit, but that golden horse was handsome. He was about Spirit's size, but fully grown, where Spirit was still a youngster. Sheriff Masterson wasn't what I'd call a big man, and reminded me of a toy soldier sitting atop that big, golden horse.

The day'd dawned cold but dry for a change. The late fall sun came up late, and stayed low in the hazy sky. Given it was almost December, I thought, conditions could have been a lot worse.

Early as it was, we rode the first hour or two in relative silence, letting the horses get to know one

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another as they carried us west.

After a considerable ride, we stopped at a small stream to give them a rest and some water.

“Sheriff Masterson,” I asked, “What’s our plan? Do you want me to ride in with you? I’ve grown kind of fond of the little girl and wouldn’t want her to think we suspect the Taylors of any wrongdoing, at least at this point.”

“*We* can’t be wrong, Montana! It was *you* and the Captain that tied Taylor to this, not me! But, from what you told me, it does deserve some checking into, so I thought we’d just stop by and poke around a little. You might be right, though. Maybe I’ll ride in alone and you can stay out of sight. Might be a little less suspicious at that. You know, Montana, you might try your hand as a lawman someday. You seem to have a good read on people.”

“I’m obliged,” I said. “But I’m not so sure I was cut out for the law. Seems to me like it gets pretty rough from time to time. I’ll keep that in mind though. For now, I’m just concerned for that little girl, particularly if Taylor is tied up in this.”

When we got about a half-mile from the Taylor ranch, the Sheriff told me to stop and wait him out, from the edge of the nearby woods. I watched as he rode over the hill and disappeared onto the Triple T.

It seemed to take hours, though it was probably

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more like twenty-five minutes or so. Finally, Sheriff Masterson rode out of the brush and into sight. As he passed me in silence, he just motioned for me to follow. Another mile down the trail, he finally spoke.

“It was an interesting meeting, Montana. We talked about the little girl and his plans for her, as well as the ranch and the equipment.”

“He claims he’s trying to contact the little girl’s uncle, back east. If he can reach him, and he’s partial to the notion, Taylor would send the girl to live with him. If not, he says he’s offered to keep her.”

“What was his explanation for all the equipment?” I asked.

“This is where it gets interesting. Taylor claims that, before the fire, he had reached an agreement with Peterson to pump water from the lake, to irrigate his land. That would allow him to get back into the cattle business. The equipment is water pumping gear he plans to use.”

“Does he have anything in writing to prove he had this “deal” with Daisy’s father?”

“Claims they were just about to have the Land Office draw up the paperwork, when the fire happened.”

“Sounds mighty convenient to me,” I said.

“I like your suspicious mind. Taylor realizes it looks bad, so he’s offered to buy back the Peterson property when it’s determined who actually owns it.”

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“If Daisy is the only survivor, wouldn’t she own it?” I asked.

“Not necessarily,” replied the Sheriff. “It’s possible that the court could award it to this ‘uncle’ if he really exists. In that case, Taylor would have to buy it from him.”

“What if he’s never found,” I asked. “Wouldn’t Daisy then own it?”

“Probably,” the Sheriff replied. “But if the uncle is never found and Taylor adopts the girl, he’d end up with it anyway.”

“Pretty good deal for him. No wonder he offered to adopt Daisy,” I said. “Taylor wanted Peterson’s land for its water and is going to end up with it, whether or not he killed him! There must be something we can do to check this out further.”

“I don’t know, Montana,” Masterson said. “I can’t charge a man with murder with no evidence. Once we get back to town we can check with the Land Office to verify his story and see what they know about it. Beyond that, we may just have to live with whatever he did or didn’t do.”

The conversation ended there and left me with a growing knot in my stomach. The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that the Peterson fire wasn’t just an accident. I decided that if Sheriff Masterson would have me, I’d like to stick around Dodge long enough to see this settled once and for all.

Sheriff Masterson and I rode the next few hours in silence again. I don’t know how uncomfortable

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he was about the Peterson fire, but I knew I was.

Arriving back in Dodge in late afternoon, we went directly to the Land Office. As we entered there was an older lady working at a desk.

“Hello, Marge,” the Sheriff said. “I was hoping you could give me a little information.”

“Certainly, Sheriff Jim,” she responded. “What can I help you with?”

“It’s about your meeting the other day with Walter Taylor. Can you tell me what he was doing here?”

“Sure, Jim,” she replied. “Walter and the Missus stopped by to place an offer for the Peterson property. He told me that after Peterson and his wife were killed in the fire, he and Mrs. Taylor had taken poor Daisy in. He said that they would need to acquire the land in order to be able to support her. He also seemed to be in a big hurry to finalize the paperwork.”

“Marjory,” the Sheriff asked, “In a case like this, who would actually inherit Peterson’s property?”

“That would be up to the judge,” she replied, “But with no wills on file, there’s good chance that Daisy would inherit anything that was left.”

“Taylor told me there was an uncle somewhere back east and that he was trying to contact him. Did any of that come up?”

“He told me the same thing, Jim. He said that if this uncle actually existed and if judge awarded him the property, he wanted us to notify him of his offer to buy the land back. He seems to want that

land awful bad.”

“Thanks, Marge,” the Sheriff said. “I don’t know what we have here but please keep our conversation private for now, all right?”

“Sure thing, Sheriff. I’ll let you know if anything else turns up on this,” she responded.

“I would be very appreciative if you would,” Masterson replied.

He motioned to me to follow him as he left the building.

Outside, we untied our horses and began walking them back toward the jail.

“Well, Montana, it seems pretty clear that Taylor not only wants that lake, but planned to acquire it some time ago.”

“How do you know that?” I inquired.

“Just stands to reason,” he answered. “If he’d only recently succeeded in getting Peterson to agree to give him rights to the lake, how do you explain the fact that he’d been buying and stockpiling pumping equipment for what appears, months? I doubt if he’d spend that kind of money until he was sure he could use it.”

“What do you think that means?” I asked.

“Not sure,” the Sheriff responded. “But it certainly seems that he knew well ahead of time that he was going to get those water rights. Maybe even before Peterson agreed...*if he ever really did.*”

We walked a little further, finally arriving at the jail.

“Well, that’s it for today, Montana. Thanks for

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keeping me company.”

“It’s me that has to thank you, Sheriff. Like I said, I’m concerned about Daisy and my bad feelings about Mr. Taylor haven’t gotten any better. I appreciate you’re letting me get involved.”

“You’re very welcome,” he responded. “I’m going to be pretty busy the next couple of days. What say you stick around and help me with this case?”

“I was hoping you’d ask,” I replied. “What can I do?”

“I’d like you to go down to the telegraph office tomorrow and talk to Mr. White there. Tell him I sent you and see if you can get any information regarding the telegram that Taylor sent to Daisy’s uncle. I’d like to know what it said.”

“I’ll take care of it first thing,” I replied.

“Also,” he continued, “I’d like you to visit Ted Willock down at the mercantile next to the Long Branch. Ted might know something about that pumping equipment, like when it was ordered and so on. In the meantime, you continue to stay at the hotel for free. You’re not a real deputy, but you’re working for me on this, all right?”

“I’m much obliged,” I said. “I’ll get on all that in the morning and get back to you with what I find.”

“Thanks, Montana. Do me a favor and take both horses back to the livery. Then, get a good night’s sleep and I’ll see you sometime tomorrow.”

I left the Jail thinking about my meetings tomorrow with Mr. White and Mr. Willock.

John E. Richman

Thinking back to the Sheriff's comments about being a lawman, I never really hankered to be one, but I had to admit that this type of work was more interesting than pushing cattle.

Chapter 15

I arrived at the Telegraph Office at nine o'clock sharp to find the door closed. I knocked, but no one answered. I tried it and found that it was unlocked, so I turned the knob and walked in. As I entered, I didn't find anybody in the main office, at least in the part I could see. Just as I was about to call out, I heard a clank like something hitting a floor. I walked to a room in the back and saw a man on his hands and knees in a pool of liquid.

"Damn stove!" he cursed. "Coffee's always too hot. Now I've got to work all day in wet trousers!"

As he was getting up with a dripping coffee pot in hand, he looked over and saw me.

"Oh, sorry," he said, "I didn't know anyone else was here this early. Don't mind me, I rather enjoy throwing coffee all over myself first thing in the morning...it wakes me up. What can I do for you this early morning?"

"I take it you're Mr. White?"

"Yes I am, and you are...?"

"William Ritter sir, but most folks call me Montana. I'm sorry about your coffee."

John E. Richman

“Don’t give it a thought young man. What brings you to the telegraph office?”

“I’ve been asked by Sheriff Masterson to ask you some questions about a telegram.”

“If you’re planning to send one, Mr. Montana, it will take me another few minutes to get the switch gear up and running.”

“No sir, and it’s just Montana. I’m not here to send one. Sheriff Masterson needs to know something about one you’ve already sent -- for Mr. Walter Taylor.”

By now he’d wiped his trousers off with a towel and poured himself a short cup of what remained in the pot.

“You know, Montana, Sheriff or not, telegrams are supposed to be private -- between the sender, the recipient, and the telegraph office. What kind of office would I be running if I told everybody about everybody else’s private business?”

“I understand, sir,” I responded. “But this one might involve a crime. The Sheriff said that if I had any trouble, I should go down and see the Judge about it.”

Mr. White took another drink from his coffee cup and gave me a long look, up and down.

“That shouldn’t be necessary. If there’s a crime involved, I guess I can discuss it with you. What specifically is the Sheriff looking to find out?”

“Mister Taylor told the Sheriff that earlier in the week he sent a telegram to a relative of the Peterson family. He needs to know if he really did

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and, if he did, what the telegram said.”

“He did,” replied Mr. White. “I keep a carbon of all outgoing telegrams. Give me just a minute and I’ll find it.” With that, he spun his chair around and opened a nearby cabinet drawer. After another moment of shuffling, he pulled out a small piece of paper and looked it over carefully.

“The telegram was addressed to a Mr. Albert Peterson of Elmira, New York. It notified him that Mr. and Mrs. Peterson’s home burned and that they’d been killed in the fire. Also, that they left a young daughter and that he and his wife had taken her in for now. It goes on to request that Mr. Peterson contact him for instructions regarding where to send her, and money to do so. He also indicated that the house and barn were total losses and that he would offer to buy it back for the same price his father had sold it to them for. He closed by asking that Mr. Peterson respond as quickly as possible. That’s about it. Is that what Sheriff Masterson was looking for?”

“He’ll be glad that you were able to help with this. I’m sure it’s what he was looking for.”

“Well,” replied Mr. White, “Give the Sheriff my regards and tell him I’ll let him know if and when we get a response.”

I thanked Mr. White and left for the mercantile. As I was walking past the church I noticed the preacher was just leaving. It occurred to me that with all the attention lately on the Taylors, Sheriff Masterson and I had not checked to see if there

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was a funeral planned for the Petersons.

“Mornin’, Reverend,” I said as I walked up behind him. He turned in my direction.

“Why, good morning son,” he responded with a smile. “To whom do I have the pleasure?”

“My name is Montana, sir, and I’m one of the men that found the Petersons after the fire.”

“Terrible thing, that fire. It took two of my newest parishioners,” he replied. “The Devil’s work, no doubt,”

“I suppose so,” I replied. “As you know, sir, we were unable to give the Peterson’s a proper burial out there. Can you tell me if you are planning a funeral in the church?”

“We are, Montana,” he replied. “But we’re leaving the remains where you buried them. We’re planning a small ceremony Saturday morning in the church and after, we’ll ride straight to their homestead where, I’ll commit them to the earth, right where they lay. Were you planning to attend?”

“I’d like that very much,” I responded.

“Well in that case, I’ll see you there,” he said, as he turned and continued walking away. “Remember, the church ceremony will start at nine o’clock sharp!”

“I’ll be there.” I replied.

I was glad I’d run into him. That would mean the Taylors and Daisy would be back in town, and that would give me a chance to ask some more questions, if I could work any out any in my head

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before Saturday.

I'd been in the mercantile a few times during the week and had found it great place to browse. It was full of all kinds of clothing, food, hardware and other good stuff. I'd never, however, seen anything there as big as that pumping equipment, but Taylor had to get it somewhere and this seemed a good place to start.

As I walked in out of the cold, I took my jacket off to shake out the rain that I'd picked up on the way over. I gave it one good shake and heard a scream from behind me. I quickly turned around to see a girl wiping her eyes with both hands.

"Sorry, ma'm. I didn't see you there. I hope you didn't get too wet!"

"I'm not sure I know what 'too wet' is...but you got me pretty good," she replied, slowly removing her hands from her face.

Until now, I'd thought Sarah was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, but suddenly I wasn't sure. This girl had night-black hair and the face of an angel. She was wearing a green apron and appeared to work there.

"I'm...I'm...awful sorry. Can I help?"

"I think you've helped enough for now," she said and picked up the basket she'd been carrying and continued on, right by me.

Boy did I mess that up, I thought. The first really pretty girl I'd met in Dodge and she already hates me! I was doing great.

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I put my jacket back on and walked over to the main counter where another woman was busy counting colored ribbons.

“Excuse me, ma’m. I’d like to speak to Mr. Willock please, if he’s here.”

“He’s upstairs. Who should I say is calling?” she replied.

“My name is Montana, ma’m, and I’m here for Sheriff Masterson,” I answered.

“You just have yourself a seat Mr. Montana and I’ll see if he’s free.”

I started to tell her that I was just Montana, but having already offended one of their employees, I thought better of talking too much.

Moments later, Mr. Willock came down the stairs. He wore the same green apron I’d seen on the girl and was carrying an armload of blankets. He laid the blankets down on the counter and extended his hand.

“I’m Ted Willock. I understand you’re looking for me?”

“Yes sir. My name’s William Ritter but most folks call me Montana. Sheriff Masterson asked me to speak you about the burning of the Peterson place. Is there anywhere we could talk more private?”

“Certainly, Montana. Follow me to my office.”

We walked to the rear of the building, into an enclosed office behind the store room. Once we were both inside, he closed the door and sat down at a large desk.

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“What is it that you and the Sheriff want from me?” he asked, taking a cigar from a tin on the desk.

“Well sir, the Sheriff and I are investigating the fire, and while out that way we stopped by the Taylor ranch.

“The old Triple T?”

“Yes sir. While we were there, Mr. Taylor told us he’d been planning to set up some sort of pumping station out at Peterson’s lake, to get some of that water down to his place. We noticed quite a lot of pumping equipment on his property. The Sheriff is trying to find out where and when he got it? He was wondering if he got it from you?”

“Well, you might say he got it *through* me, but not *from* me,” he replied. Around the end of the summer he stopped by and inquired about where he could get such equipment. I sent for a few catalogs for him and I guess he did the rest. It’s all from Wilson’s Drilling Equipment up in Wichita. Taylor and his man went up there themselves and brought back whatever he ended up buying, in their own wagons. I only know that because Wilson telegraphed me from Wichita asking if Taylor had good credit. All I could tell him was that he paid his bills here, and I guess that was good enough.”

“How long ago do you suspect he actually bought the equipment?” I asked.

“As I say, we first talked maybe late August, but I didn’t get the catalogs for three weeks and

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Wilson called me around the first week in October. So...I'm guessing he picked up the equipment mid-October, just a little over a month ago. Also, he may have purchased several lots. I'm not aware of exactly what he ended up buying. Does any of that help?"

"I'd say it helps a lot, sir. Thank you. And I'd ask that you keep this conversation to yourself if you would."

He finally struck a match and lit his cigar. "Not a problem, Montana. I hope you and Sheriff Master-son are successful in finding out exactly what happened out there. The Petersons were good people and I just hope the fire was truly an accident. Incidentally, how's the little girl? Daisy isn't it?"

"She's fine, sir. She's staying out there with the Taylors until her uncle, back east, can be contacted."

"Well if there's anything else I can do to help, you let me know, ya' hear?"

"Yes, sir. I'll do that. I understand from the Preacher that Daisy will be in town Saturday for the services at the church. Maybe you'll see her while she's here," I offered.

"I'll look into that. My daughter Ellen taught her Bible class last year. I know Ellen was very concerned when we heard about the fire. Maybe you met Ellen on your way in? She's about your age and works here in the mercantile. I'm certain she'd like to hear how Daisy's doing direct from

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you. Do you have a minute?”

“Certainly,” I responded. “I believe I may have run into her on my way in, if she’s wearing an apron like yours.”

“That would be her,” he said. “Right handsome young lady, isn’t she? You follow me and we’ll locate her.”

He butted his newly lit cigar into the ashtray on his desk and moved around me to re-open the door. As we pushed our way past racks of cloth and such, I couldn’t help but wonder how my second meeting with Ellen would go. The first one sure hadn’t gone well.

Chapter 16

Mr. Willock had it right. Ellen was a handsome young woman, but it was hard to compare her to Sarah Rogers, because Sarah was always prettied-up in fancy dresses. As Mr. Willock and I approached her, it was clear that she was in her working clothes. Her dark hair was curled up on top of her head with some sort of comb holding it together. Her long green apron covered some sort of brown dress. Pretty, but not fancy.

“Ellen, come over here. I’d like you to meet someone,” Mr. Willock blurted out in front of the whole store.

On hearing her father’s request, she straightened up from her stooped position and put down the pile of clothes she’d been sorting. She was two aisles away and, to get to us, had to walk by us to the end of the aisles, then work her way over to ours. As she did, I got a better look at her. The thing that struck me first was her eyes. They were big, and she had the longest eyelashes I’m sure I’d ever seen. Also, her nose. It wasn’t one of those normal, long sloping noses. Instead, it was small and a little

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turned up at the end. And she looked young. Probably younger than she really was, if her father was right that we were about the same age. He had described her as “handsome.” I would rather say she was pretty...very pretty. I hoped she was as forgiving as she was pretty.

“Ellen,” her father said in a voice that was still too loud. “I’d like you to meet Mr. Ritter, though he seems to prefer Montana.”

“We’ve already met, father,” she stated. “But I didn’t catch his name while he was dousing me with water.”

Confused by her comment, Mr. Willock continued, “Montana is a deputy, sent here on business by Sheriff Masterson. During our conversation, he mentioned that he’s had recent contact with Daisy Peterson, and I thought you’d like to talk to him about her while he was here.”

“I’m not officially a deputy, ma’am. I’m just helping out Sheriff Masterson while he’s busy working on other things.”

She extended her hand to shake, like a man.

“It’s very nice to finally meet you, Mr. Ritter, and please call me Ellen. I was just kidding about the dousing. How is it that you know Daisy Peterson?”

“Why don’t you two go for a walk and talk, so your mother and I get back to the business of running the store,” her father suggested.

“We better do our walking inside if that water on

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your shirt earlier came from the sky,” Ellen said.

She reached for my hand and escorted me out of the clothing aisles and out the front door to two rocking chairs that were on the store’s covered boardwalk.

“I don’t think there’s much sense in our trying to walk in this weather,” she said. “We’d do better right here, where we’re outside, but still dry. I wouldn’t want to get wet all over again...”

“I’m sorry about that, and please call *me* Montana,” I repeated. “When people say Mr. Ritter, I think they’re talking about my father.”

“Oh, I’m only kidding, Montana. How is it again that you know Daisy?” she repeated.

“I was in the group that first came on the fire. We were riding to Dodge from up north last week when we saw smoke up ahead of us. We followed the smoke to the Peterson place where we found their house and barn burned to the ground.”

“I suppose you found the Peterson’s bodies?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. We found them together in the ashes of the barn.”

“Where was Daisy?”

“We didn’t see her at first. One of my friends is an Indian tracker and he was the first to find her. She’d run into the woods, probably to get out of the rain. Whitey heard her crying and found her hiding. She was wet and cold. Other than that, she was in pretty good shape. We got her warmed up and she told us about how the fire had started at

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night and how her mother got her up and out of the house. We assume that her mother then went to help her father try to save the barn. We believe they were trapped inside when a big beam fell and pinned them down. It was a terrible sight.”

“I feel so badly for her,” Ellen said. “I knew Mr. and Mrs. Peterson from church and taught Daisy’s Bible class. She’s such a bright girl. I hope this experience hasn’t permanently injured her.”

“I’ve been able to spend some time with her since then, and she seems like she’s adjusting as well as she could. She took a liking to my horse Spirit, and her folks let me take her down to the livery to spend some time with him while they ran errands in town a few days ago. I wish I’d known that you two were close. I would have brought her by.”

“That’s alright. You couldn’t have known. I heard they’re going to have a service in the church soon. I’m sure the Taylors will bring her in for it. I’ll see her then. I’m kind of surprised, though, that the Taylors were so quick to take her in,” she added.

“How do you mean?” I inquired. “They seem like nice folks to me, at least in brief time I’ve known them.”

“I don’t want to speak badly of anyone, and I think Mrs. Taylor is a good person, but Mr. Taylor used to have quite a reputation around town. We were all surprised when they married. On Sundays, we usually only see Mrs. Taylor in church. Mr.

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Taylor seems to stay away as much as he can. Maybe I'm wrong about him, but I just never liked that man much."

"Well, I'd trust your judgment more than my own on the subject," I said. "You certainly know a lot more about him than I do. I *do* know that they're trying to contact Mr. Peterson's brother, back east. I sure hope they do, so Daisy can get back with family as soon as possible. I also heard that the service for her folks is Saturday morning. Right after, the preacher's going out to their place to say words over the graves. I plan to go to both services. Maybe I'll see you there?"

"We'll be there," Ellen responded. "Father has already posted a sign in the door that the mercantile will be closed Saturday morning."

Ellen stood up from the rocker and again held her hand out to me. "It's been a pleasure making your acquaintance, Montana. Thank you for letting me know about Daisy and I hope to see you at church, Saturday."

"Me too, Ellen," I said. "Let's hope the rain lets up by then. I wouldn't want you to get wet again..."

Ellen laughed and went back through the door, into the store. I could hardly wait for Saturday, when I could see her again.

As I left the porch and started back toward the jail, I couldn't help but think about what she'd said about Mr. Taylor. She didn't trust him. That seemed to fit with some of the other information I was

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finding out about him. I took some comfort in the fact that she thought well of Mrs. Taylor, though, and that put Daisy in good hands...for now.

It was still raining, so by the time I got to the jail, I was all wet again. This time it wasn't just my jacket. The rain had been coming down harder and I was wet to the skin.

I walked in to find a deputy seated behind the desk, cleaning a rifle. He told me that Sheriff Masterson was out of town on a call with Marshal Tilghman and that they weren't expected back for a few more hours. I figured it was time to go back to the hotel and get out of my wet clothes when the door behind me opened and Mr. White, from the telegraph office, walked in.

"Montana," he said, somewhat out of breath. "I'm glad I caught you. I just heard from back east and wanted you or Sheriff Masterson to know right away."

"I just found out the Sheriff's not in right now, but if you tell me, I'll make sure he gets the message as soon as he gets back."

"Peterson's brother won't be coming for the girl -- he's dead! Seems he caught the fever last year and didn't make it through the winter. According to the telegram, he never married and didn't leave any other family that they knew of. I knew you'd want to know before I told Walt Taylor."

"I appreciate you're coming down in this weather to let us know, Mr. White. I'm sorry to hear the news though," I replied. "That means

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Daisy will probably have to stay with the Taylors. I was hoping that wasn't going to be the case. I thank you again for letting us know, and I'll make sure to tell Sheriff Masterson as soon as he gets back."

"Anytime I can help, just let me know," he responded, and walked back out the jailhouse door.

Now I was not only wet, but my stomach hurt, too, when I thought of Mr. Taylor getting to keep both Daisy and her land. I told the deputy that I'd be back later and went back out in the rain toward the warmth of my hotel room.

Chapter 17

Saturday morning dawned bright and dry for a change. Even though it had now been more than a week since the fire, I knew the Peterson's service would be sad. Maybe, I thought, the improved weather would make it a little more tolerable for those of us attending.

Sheriff Masterson had gotten back to town Thursday night, as expected. I returned to the jail after supper and informed him of the news I'd received from Mr. White earlier that afternoon. He was as concerned as I was. He suggested we let things lie for a few days and get the funeral behind us before we got back into our investigation. Neither of us were comfortable with the situation but neither did we know what the next step would be, or even if there was one.

I was beginning to think that I wouldn't make a very good lawman after all. I found the investigation work interesting, but was disappointed that it didn't seem to have gotten us anywhere. Like Sheriff Masterson told me, it might just be that Taylor *did* set the fire, and it might just be that

he'd get away with it. Didn't seem right to me, but then again, I was beginning to learn that no matter how much you want them to, things don't always turn out right.

Just the same, I was looking forward to seeing both Daisy and Ellen again, so I put on my cleanest clothes and went over to the church early. Turns out, I didn't have to because nobody other than Reverend Bragan was there until around quarter-to-nine. Once they did start arriving, however, they filled up the little church pretty quick. By nine, there were still families coming in.

Mr. and Mrs. Taylor and Daisy arrived in about the middle of the group. Daisy saw me right off and came over.

"It's nice to see you again, Montana," she started. "I looked outside for Spirit but he wasn't there. I was afraid you might not come."

"Don't worry about Spirit, Daisy. He doesn't like being tied up for too long. He's still living the rich life down at the livery. And it's good to see you, too. Incidentally, I met a friend of yours the other day."

"Who?" she inquired.

"Ellen Willock," I answered. "I was doing some shopping over at the mercantile and ran into her. She said she teaches your Bible class and likes you very much."

"I like her, too. Sometimes I think of her as my big sister. I wonder if she's coming today. I

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haven't seen her since all this happened.”

Just as Daisy spoke, in walked Mr. and Mrs. Willock, and Ellen.

“She told me she was planning to come and, there she is...” I said, pointing her out to Daisy, who hadn't yet seen them.

“Ellen!” Daisy shouted, and immediately left me for her old friend. As they met across the church foyer, they embraced one another in a long hug. As they parted, I saw Daisy say something to her and then they both headed back my way.

While they made their way back toward me through the growing crowd, I saw that Ellen was no longer dressed in her work clothes. Instead, she was dressed in her church goin' clothes -- a long dark dress with her hair covered up by a black scarf. I wasn't sure what a “handsome” woman was, but maybe her father had been right the other day. This was more than just pretty.

Reverend Bragan had climbed up on the alter and it was clear that he was about to call the meeting to order. No sooner had Daisy and Ellen made it back over to me, than he did. So as quickly as they had come over, they both had to turn around and go back to their people -- Ellen with her folks, and Daisy with the Taylors. I really hoped we would have a chance to get together after the service.

Reverend Bragan began in a voice that shook the church and immediately silenced the congregation...

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“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

And Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

We gather today to pray for the souls of our dearly departed friends, Thomas and Sadie Peterson, who the Lord took from us just a week ago, and for the care and welfare of their daughter, Daisy.”

The service, that began shortly after nine, ended around ten. After the final prayer, Reverend Bragan announced that there would be an additional service out at the Peterson place later in the day.

“I expect to conduct the interment service at one o’clock. Those of you who can attend, are invited. In either case, this morning’s service will be immediately followed by a short reception, next door in the parsonage. Mrs. Bragan will be serving coffee and cake. You are all invited to attend and share your memories of Mr. and Mrs. Peterson

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with one and all.”

After that, we all filed out to the church foyer. I'd made a point of waiting until the Willocks passed by, to join the flow.

“Good morning, Montana,” said Mr. Willock. “enlightening service, wasn't it?”

“Yes sir,” I answered as I found myself right next to Ellen.

“Are you able to join us in the parsonage?” he continued.

“Yes, sir,” I repeated. “I also plan on attending the second service out at the Peterson place.”

“We wanted to attend as well, but we promised our customers we'd reopen the mercantile at noon.” Mr. Willock replied.

“Father,” Ellen interrupted. “I would very much like to attend the later service with Daisy if you and mother could get along without me for the afternoon.”

“Handling the store isn't a problem Ellen, but I'm sure your mother and I wouldn't be at all comfortable with you making that trip alone. I'd prefer that you stay with us.”

“I could take her with me,” I blurted out, no doubt startling everyone within ear-shot. “I mean if that would be alright with Mrs. Willock and yourself.”

Mr. Willock glanced at his wife, and she at Ellen. It was clear from Ellen's expression that she was fine with the idea, but we would need her mother's agreement to make it happen.

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“Ellen,” said Mrs. Willock, now looking at her daughter, “Mr. Ritter has offered to accompany you to the Peterson’s. Should you wish to join him, I would only ask that he drive our wagon.”

“I would be happy to be accompanied by Mr. Ritter, if he was willing to drive our wagon,” she responded, now looking at me. I guessed it was my turn again.

“I’m fine with that,” I said, “but if we’re going to make a one o’clock service way out there, we should think about leaving pretty soon, wouldn’t you think, Mr. Willock?”

“Can I go, too?” said the little voice from somewhere below us. I looked down to see that Daisy had joined us and was now part of the conversation.

“Have you asked Mrs. Taylor?” Ellen inquired.

“Not yet, but I would if you would agree to take me.”

At this point, Mr. Willock rolled his eyes and said, “Ellen, that’s up to you and Montana. Just make sure you get permission from the Taylors before you commit anything to the child.”

He continued, “Montana, why don’t you come by the mercantile’s back door in about thirty minutes and I’ll see that the wagon is ready to go.”

With that, the Willocks left for a quick visit to the reception next door. Ellen suggested we take Daisy’s request to the Taylors, so the three of us headed in their direction.

“Good afternoon,” Ellen said to Mr. and Mrs.

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Taylor who were just heading out the church door. “I’m planning to attend the second service out at the Peterson’s place, accompanied by my friend Mr. Ritter. Daisy has asked if she could ride out with us and while I would enjoy her company, the decision is up to you. Is that something you might consider?”

Mrs. Taylor turned and spoke to Mr. Taylor, “I don’t have any problem with it if Daisy would like to, do you?”

“Can I assume you would be taking a wagon?” asked Mr. Taylor.

“Yes sir,” I responded. “We’d be going in the Willock’s wagon.”

“Fine with me then. Just make sure you get her there by one. This service is as much for her as it is for anybody.”

“Montana,” Ellen said, “Now that that’s all settled, Daisy and I need to get ready. How about if we meet you behind the store when the wagon’s ready?”

“Fine, I’ll look for you there.”

So we had a plan. The three of us would meet up behind the mercantile within the hour, to start our ride out to the Peterson’s. I hadn’t been looking forward to these services, but was pleased that things turned out the way they had, and pleased as well for the chance to spend some time with these two ladies who, so recently, had entered my life.

Chapter 18

When I left the church I headed directly for Willock's mercantile. The front doors were still closed and locked, so I guessed I was the first one back. I walked around to the rear of the building. Behind the mercantile I found a wagon backed up to the loading dock. I assumed this was the wagon Mr. Willock wanted me to drive, though clearly the horses were somewhere else.

I continued to poke around for a few more minutes when Mr. Willock came into view, coming up the street from the livery with two horses in tow.

"Montana, how about giving me a hand pulling the rig together?" he said. "You'll find the harnesses and collars over there in that shed. Be careful with this one," he pointed to the horse on the left. "He's been a little spooky for the past few weeks. Don't know why. Keep a tight rein on him until he gets to know you. And, Montana, this is an old rig so I'm trusting you to take it easy and keep the wheels on it. That trail out to the Peterson's can be a rough one."

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“I understand Mr. Willock. I’ll take it easy. If we leave soon, we’ll be in no hurry.”

“Were you planning to take a gun?” he asked.

“Wasn’t, sir, but I will if you think it best.”

“I’ll get you one. I’d feel better about your trip if you were armed. I’m sure you won’t need it but that’s quite a ride and you can never tell around Dodge, who or what you’ll run into. You know how to handle a hand gun, don’t you son?”

“Yes sir.”

“You get the rig ready and I’ll be back in ten or so minutes.”

Fifteen minutes later the wagon was ready and both Mr. and Mrs. Willock came out the dock door. Mr. Willock handed me a small burlap bag.

“You take this and remember it’s loaded. Only use it if you have to,” he said, as I peeked in the bag to see a holster with a Colt in it and five or six extra rounds looped in the belt.

“You can hide it in the box under the seat.”

Just as I did, both Ellen and Daisy came out the same dock door. Both dressed the same, except for the winter coats they were now wearing.

“Mrs. Willock handed Ellen a blanket. “You keep this around you or you’ll catch your death. Keep Daisy covered up, too. Mr. Ritter’s just going to have to fend for himself, unless you want one too?”

“No thanks, ma’am,” I replied. “I’ll be fine. Remember, I’m from Montana and this weather still feels like summer to me.”

Daisy climbed into the back of the wagon and sat herself right behind the seat. Ellen looked at her and appeared to consider doing the same but, instead and still holding the blanket in one hand, climbed up on the right side of the bench, right next to me. I then climbed aboard and snapped the reins to move the horses out.

“We’ll be looking for you around dinner time,” her mother said as we followed the wagon tracks down the back of the buildings.

The girls waved goodbye and we were on our way.

“Your father told me to keep an eye on this horse on the right,” I said, to break the quiet.

“All I know about it is that we went on a picnic a few Sundays ago and Elmer jumped around so much he almost threw us off the wagon.”

“Elmer?” I asked. “The horse’s name is Elmer? What kind of a name is that for a horse?”

“A little bit better than Zeke. That’s the name of the other one. They’re brothers and when we bought them, father named them after the brothers he bought them from. It probably wasn’t very imaginative, but it was easy and they’ve been Zeke and Elmer ever since.”

“Daisy, how are you doing back there? There’s room for you up here on the bench if you want to join us?” I said.

With that, she was up and already throwing a leg over the bench. “Good idea, Montana. I’m afraid if I don’t come up, I won’t hear what’s going on!”

Ellen responded, “Well, you might be disap-

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pointed with what's going on, but I do want to talk to you. We haven't really had much time to talk since the fire. You know, we're all just sick over it. Your folks were such nice people. How have you been getting on at the Taylor's?"

"OK, I guess," Daisy replied. "I'm not sleeping much because every time to start to, I have bad dreams about that night and the fire."

"I'm sure they'll end soon," Ellen replied. "How are you getting along with Mrs. Taylor?"

"She's nice and tries to help, but no matter what she does, the dreams keep coming back."

"Are you having any fun at their place?" I asked. "I mean, during the days?"

"Well, I'd like to get out more but there's no one to play with. Mrs. Taylor stays in a lot and we've been busy canning and cooking. Mr. Taylor goes away during the day and doesn't come home until dinnertime, so I have to stay in with Mrs. Taylor. I think she wishes she had her own little girl again, and hopes maybe I'll stay."

As Daisy spoke, it occurred to me that she didn't yet know that her uncle was dead and that she wouldn't be going back east. As much as I wanted to let her know what I knew, it wasn't my job to tell her. I supposed Ellen didn't know either, so I decided to keep quiet until the Taylors told her.

"That's a pretty nice ranch they have, though," I said. "When you're feeling better, there's probably a lot to do around there."

"Mrs. Taylor told me I might be able to get a

pony when they're able to get back into the cattle business."

"That would be great," I responded. "Spirit keeps me so busy sometimes that I don't have much time for anything else."

"Who's Spirit?" inquired Ellen.

Before I could answer, Daisy answered for me. "SPIRIT IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND FASTEST HORSE IN THE WEST!" she said.

"Seems like she's exaggerating a little...but she's not. It's true," I added. "Spirit is the most beautiful and fastest horse in the west. At least in the parts of the west we've been to."

Ellen responded, "I'd love to see this Spirit some time. Where is he?"

"He's back at the Dodge livery, getting fat on oats while I'm out here pushing Zeke and Elmer!" I laughed.

"I supposed it isn't much of a contest," Ellen answered. "Spirit wouldn't have to be much of a horse to beat these two lazy louts!"

Ellen then took Daisy's hand and got serious again. "Daisy, it's going to be a long hard journey for you to get over the fire. You'll never forget your folks and you shouldn't, but I know they would want you to be happy again and think of them in heaven, watching over you all the time. Remember our Bible stories about heaven. Your mother and father are there now, with God. I know you wish they were here with you, but you need to get on with your life. You need to be thinking

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about what kind of woman you'll grow up to be."

Daisy was quiet for a moment and then said, "I guess, but I just wish Mr. Taylor liked me more."

"What makes you think he doesn't like you?" I asked.

"Well, the last time he and Father were together, they got in a terrible argument and yelled at one another. I think he was mad at father and now he's mad at me," she said.

"That's silly," replied Ellen. "They were probably just joking. I'm sure Mr. Taylor likes you a lot."

"I don't think they were joking," Daisy answered. "I heard father tell Mr. Taylor that he wasn't going to sell our lake or it's water to him, and I think that made him mad because he yelled something I didn't hear and left without saying goodbye to mother or me."

"You heard them talking about lake water?" I asked.

"Yes. He'd visited us a few times and was usually talking to father where we couldn't hear. But, when he left, I heard father tell mother that it was about our water. I think Mr. Taylor offered a lot of money to buy the lake back, but mother wanted to keep it for us. I think that's why he got mad and went away. So I think he's still mad at me, too."

"I'm sure you're mistaken," Ellen said, comforting Daisy with her arm around her shoulder. "They may have had a disagreement, but it had nothing to

do with you and the Taylors were quick to take you in when you had no where else to go. That says something, doesn't it?"

"I guess so," replied Daisy. "I guess I hadn't thought about that."

"Well, don't think about it any more," added Ellen. "Whatever happens, you have a nice place to stay with people who love you. Think about that."

"I'll try," Daisy sighed. "Maybe I'll feel better after today's services."

"You better!" I said, "Or I'll tell Spirit you're too sad to like him."

"Oh, don't do that!" she responded. "I want Spirit to like me enough to take me on a really fast ride someday."

"All right then, you need to cheer up for him to do that," I answered. "Spirit is a happy horse and doesn't want any sad or grumpy people around him."

"I promise," she answered. "You just need to bring him around so I can get my ride."

"You have a deal," I said.

Neither Ellen nor Daisy could have known how Daisy's comments about her father and Mr. Taylor hit me. I could barely keep from telling them about it. Just two days ago, Walter Taylor told the Sheriff that Mr. Peterson had agreed to allow him to pump water from his lake. Now, due to the unexplained fire and the deaths of the Petersons, he was pretty free to do so. The Sheriff had said to me that he lacked "motive" in tying Taylor to the fire. It

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looked like he had it now, but I was troubled that all the evidence was wrapped up in little Daisy, who was living at the Taylors. If Mr. Taylor knew that she knew about the water deal, she might be in danger, too. It was clear that as soon as we got back to town, I'd go straight to the Sheriff, and see what he thought should be done.

An hour or so later, we pulled in to the Peterson homestead. I could see Daisy's eyes fill with tears as she looked the site over. This had been her home and now it was gone. It had been over a week since the fire and what remained, didn't at all resemble the house or barn that once stood here. All that was left were two piles of jagged charcoal and an empty corral.

As we pulled in, we could see that we weren't the first there. We beat the preacher and his wife, but not the Taylors. Their wagon was next to the corral and Mrs. Taylor was standing over the two rough graves. She had just laid small bunches of fresh flowers on both of them.

In the rear of their wagon, there were two, newly made, wooden crosses, clearly intended for the graves as well. With all her care, it was obvious that Mrs. Taylor knew nothing about whatever evil her husband had been up to. I wondered how she'd react when she found out.

After pulling our team to a stop, the girls and I all got out together. Mrs. Taylor was glad to see Daisy and came right over.

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“How was the ride?” she asked.

Ellen replied, “A little cold but we had a nice chance to talk and I think it might have helped Daisy a little.”

“Good,” Mrs. Taylor replied. “She hasn’t been sleeping well. I guess we’re a little early. I have some food from the reception in a basket in the wagon if you are at all hungry. Feel free to take some.”

“Not right now, thanks,” Ellen replied.

Looking over the ashes from the fires, Ellen commented, “How horrible. To think that Daisy was almost lost, too. I don’t think I could eat here.”

“I understand,” replied Mrs. Taylor. “I feel the same way. What a terrible way to go. We’re so lucky that Montana and those other men were riding by to save her from Lord knows what might have happened out in those cold, wet, woods.”

While the ladies talked, I quietly asked Daisy which way their lake was from the home site. She pointed to a small trail that went into the woods from behind where the house used to stand.

“It’s not far...just a short walk up that path,” she said. “Do you want to go see it?”

“Not right now, Daisy, but if I get a chance I might stop back tomorrow morning and look around. I think we might better get ready for the service now.”

I wondered if I’d have a chance to check it out while here, but it wasn’t likely with the wagon, Daisy, and Ellen. I decided *would* come back

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tomorrow and do some more checking. It would be much easier and safer if I was alone.

A few minutes later, two more wagons arrived. Reverend Bragan and his wife were in one, and several other friends from the church were in the other.

Mr. Taylor finally showed up from wherever he'd been, and he and the Preacher took the two crosses out of his wagon. I helped carry them over the graves and used Mr. Taylor's sledge to pound them in after he positioned them at the heads of the small graves.

Reverend Bragan then took his position between the crosses, opened his Bible and bowed his head. "Let us pray."

"Jesus said, I am the resurrection, and I am the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

In my Fathers house are many rooms; And I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am, you may be also."

After the prayer, Reverend Bragan spoke briefly again about how much the church and community would miss the Petersons and how it would work to make sure Daisy was properly cared for.

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At the end, he bent and picked up a handful of dirt from each grave and tossed it back on them.

I'm not sure who's idea it was to have a proper burial ceremony out here, but I was glad we did. I think it helped Daisy to know that her folks were now in heaven.

After the ceremony was over, Mrs. Taylor invited everyone over to their wagon for some of the reception food. I took the opportunity to do something I knew had to be done, and there just didn't seem like a good time to do it.

I called Daisy over to tell her about the news I'd received from Mr. White.

"Daisy, I know this has been hard for you and I don't want to make it any harder, but I have some more bad news to share with you. I found out from Mr. White in the telegraph office that your uncle got the fever last year and died. So, it doesn't look like you'll be going back east. I'm sorry, but I wanted you to know. I'd also ask that you not tell anyone. I'm not sure Mr. White has reported this back to Mr. Taylor yet, and we should let that happen. In the meantime, I don't want you to worry about the future. However this turns out for you, I'll make sure you're taken care of. Okay?"

"I won't tell anyone, Montana. Thanks for telling me. I never knew him anyway, but I'm sorry he died."

"So am I, Daisy, but it will all work out in the end," I said. "For now, just trust me."

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Shortly after our conversation, Daisy left for the Triple T with the Taylors. That left Ellen and me alone for the trip back to town. At first we just talked about the ceremony and how it seemed to help Daisy. But a little later, Ellen asked where I thought Mr. Taylor had been when we got there.

“I don’t know. Probably checking out where he was going to run his water pipes,” I said.

“What makes you think he’s going to run water pipes?” asked a surprised Ellen.

“He told the Sheriff that he and Mr. Peterson had reached a deal, giving him rights to the lake water. He already has a considerable amount of equipment for pumping it,” I replied.

“Daisy said they argued about it and that her father didn’t want him to take any of it. How does that stack up with he told the Sheriff?”

“It doesn’t,” I replied. “And I’m going to make sure the Sheriff knows about it as soon as we get back to Dodge.”

I’m not sure that Ellen fully appreciated how important the information Daisy shared with us was, but I didn’t want Ellen to too involved in this yet, so I changed the subject.

“It’s starting to get cold again,” I said. “Probably going to freeze tonight, given how clear the air is.”

Ellen reached back and grabbed the blanket that Daisy’d left behind the bench. She wrapped it around her.

“Montana, what are your plans now that the services are over? Are you planning to stay in

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Dodge for a while or go on about your cattle drive business?"

"I hadn't thought much about it," I responded. "I do want to hook up with one of the cattle drives and head south, but for now, Sheriff Masterson seems to need my help so I'll probably stick around another week or so. I also promised Daisy a ride on Spirit and I can't leave town without giving it to her, or she'd never forgive me."

"I think Daisy has a crush on you," she said. "Well, either you or your horse. I'm not sure which."

"She's a tough girl, but I do worry about her," I replied.

"In the meantime," Ellen continued, "if you find yourself getting lonely, feel free to stop over to the mercantile. Father keeps it nice and warm and if you came by late in the day, you might be able to help unload stock and maybe wrangle a dinner invitation from mother. You know, she's a great cook. I'd also like to see this horse of yours for myself at some point. I'd like to see for what all the excitement's about."

"I might just do that," I replied. "Spirit is a special horse and I'll make sure to bring him by when it's not too wet out."

"Why, isn't he waterproof?" she asked, with a note of sarcasm in her voice. "I thought all horses were waterproof!"

"Oh, he's waterproof," I said. "but the way I figure it, Spirit is only half horse. His other half is

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‘people’. He *can* put up with any kind of weather, but he does like his comforts. I guess that’s his people half.”

We laughed and joked the rest of the way back. I was really getting to like Ellen and the prospect of sticking around Dodge for another week or so was becoming evermore appealing to me.

On returning to town, I dropped Ellen and the wagon off at the mercantile, and headed straight up the street to the jail. I couldn’t wait to tell Sheriff Masterson what I’d found out from Daisy. But, I was to be disappointed again. The deputy told me Sheriff Masterson had headed out of town again with Marshal Tilghman and they were expected to be gone for a few days.

Unable to share my new information on Taylor’s “water deal,” I went back to the hotel and went to bed. As long as I had to wait a few more days to get with the Sheriff, I decided I’d run Spirit back out to the Peterson place in the morning, and take a better look around. Something funny was going on out there and I meant to find out what it was.

Chapter 19

I didn't sleep well that night and rolled around in bed for most of it. I couldn't stop thinking about the possibility that the Peterson fire was set. As the Sunday morning sun struggled to rise out of the mist, I could see that the nice weather of yesterday had blown out and been replaced by a cold, wet mist. I don't like that kind of weather and, like I told Ellen, neither did Spirit. But, we had work to do, so I got up, washed the sleep out of my eyes, and put a leather vest on under my jacket to help keep me dry.

Leaving the hotel, I remembered Mr. Willock's caution of yesterday and reached for my Winchester. Also recalling my confrontation with McVey, I took a minute to open the chamber and check the magazine to see how many shells I had in it. Good thing, too, as I was down to three bullets. Fortunately, I had a box of shells in my drawer and filled the magazine with thirteen more, leaving the chamber empty for riding.

After a quick breakfast at the saloon across the street, I walked down to the livery to wake my old

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friend. As I entered the livery, I could see that I didn't have to. Spirit must have sensed I was coming because he was already fully awake and munching on the open bale of hay in his stall. Of course, he didn't know yet that the weather had turned foul, or I fear he wouldn't have been that happy to see me.

It was bright enough outside to ride now, so I saddled him up and we left Dodge down the west trail, back toward the Triple T and the Peterson place.

It hadn't occurred to me that it was Sunday morning until we started seeing wagons coming at us, heading for church. I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for out at the Peterson's, but thought it best not to have to explain it to the Taylors, should they pass me on the way in. I decided to leave the main trail and move a ways north, then continue to ride along side it, but just out of sight from it. I didn't know if the Taylors would be attending church today, but knew if they were, they'd probably have Daisy with them and she'd be quick to spot me and Spirit.

Spirit and I were far enough off the main road, that there wasn't much of a trail to follow and the going was a little more difficult, but we were in no particular hurry, so we just trotted along, letting Spirit choose the path.

After about an hour I figured we'd passed by the Triple T. Shortly thereafter, we worked our way back to the main trail that would take us to the

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Peterson place. Another forty minutes got us there -- right back to where I'd been yesterday. The place looked even gloomier in the rain.

We stopped for a minute at the grave sites. The flowers Mrs. Taylor had laid there yesterday, were still fresh.

As Spirit and I stood there, next to the graves, I noticed something a little odd on the ground around us. The morning rain had softened all the horse and wagon tracks from yesterday's visit, while our new tracks on the wet ground were fresh and sharp. There were, however, other new tracks that were nearly as fresh as ours! It looked to me like someone else might be in the area.

I remembered that Daisy said the lake was just north of the house, so I quietly dismounted and walked Spirit away from the gravesite and into the woods, in that direction. Again, I kept off the main path so as not be seen.

Thirty or forty yards up the trail, I began to hear a clanking sound. Sounded like someone was pounding on a metal stake. At that point I tied Spirit's reins loosely over a low hanging branch, and continued on foot.

"Keep quiet, buddy," I whispered, as I left him.

I slowly worked my way toward the sound, but it suddenly stopped. I stepped out to the edge of woods into a small thicket where I could get a better look. From behind the bushes, I saw that I was right next to the shore of a good sized lake. Down the way to my right, nearer where the path

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was, there was a clearing. There was a wagon pulled up in it and two or three piles of dirt between the wagon and the lake's edge. I could see that the dirt had come from a number of holes dug right next to the lake. I could also see there was a pile of iron bars and ropes on the ground around the same area. It looked to me like someone was digging footers in the ground. Probably, I thought, to support pumping gear.

While I was looking, a man walked into view from around the side of the wagon. He was carrying a sledge hammer. It was the hired hand we'd met at the Triple T when we first got there after the fire. I watched as he picked through the pile of iron and ropes on the ground. After he found what he was looking for, he'd take it back around to the other side of the wagon, and the hammering would start again.

Other than the fact that Mr. Taylor was obviously proceeding with his pumping rig, I couldn't think of any reason why I had to be so secretive. Maybe it was time I got to the bottom of all this. I decided to go back and get Spirit, so my appearance would look more natural.

As I worked my way back through the woods, I was surprised by a loud voice that broke the silence.

“HOLD ON THERE, MISTER. WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

I spun around and there was Mr. Taylor standing not twenty feet away.

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“Mr. Taylor,” I answered. “You surprised me. How are you doing? I was just riding by to pay my respects again at the Peterson place and heard some noise. I came out to take a look. I had no idea it was you.”

“Montana,” he replied, recognizing me now that I was facing him. “You scared me, too. You never know who’s running around in these woods out here or what they’re up to. You say you were just visiting the Peterson graves again?”

“Yes, sir. I’m just as surprised to find you out here on this bitter day. What brings you out here so early on a Sunday morning?”

“One of my boys and I are doing a little work on our pumping station. We plan on placing a steam engine next to the lake and need to prepare a solid base for it. The engine hasn’t been delivered yet, but with winter just around the corner, we wanted to get a little head start on our work for the week,” he answered.

“That explains the banging I heard. Can I give you a hand?”

“No need,” he responded. “I have my man Bob out here with me. Come on over and take a look.”

I followed him back toward the lake. When we got to the clearing, the other man looked up.

“Bob, this is young Montana. One of the men who brought Daisy to the ranch after the Peterson fire. You might remember him.”

The man simply nodded and kept about his work.

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I decided this was as good a time as any to pursue a little more information.

“I’m a little surprised you’re moving ahead with all this,” I said, “before the judge figures out who owns the land.”

Mr. Taylor appeared to bristle a little at my comment and replied, “Peterson and I had a deal that I could use the lake water for the Triple T. I’ve already acquired considerable equipment for the project and need to get moving as fast as I can before the snow and ice stops us. Peterson’s unfortunate death doesn’t really change anything. I plan on continuing with the project while the weather allows, and let the land ownership get sorted out in its own time. I’ve already put in a purchase offer for the land if it turns out for sale.”

I knew I was pushing my luck, but wanted to push him a little further.

“I also understood that there’s no record of your agreement with Mr. Peterson.”

“Where did you get that idea?” he answered.

Of course I couldn’t reveal where I got it or I would be putting Daisy at risk.

“Don’t exactly recall,” I replied, “but I know I heard it somewhere.”

My challenge must have touched a nerve because Mr. Taylor stopped what he was doing and just stared at me. A long moment later he turned away and walked over to his wagon. He reached his arm

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inside and pulled it back with a gun in his hand -- which he immediately leveled in my direction.

“Montana, I don’t know where you’re getting your information, but I’m getting the impression that you’re accusing me of something. I suppose you think I also burned the Peterson’s out so I could take their precious water on my own. Right?”

“Now wait a minute Mr. Taylor,” I said with a sudden and uncontrollable rise in the pitch of my voice. “There’s no reason to get excited. I’m not accusing you of anything like that at all. I’m just mentioning that you’ve gone to a lot of trouble and expense given the fact that the new owner might not honor your deal with Peterson. I don’t see any reason for the gun.”

With a new look of strain on his face, Taylor continued to hold the gun on me and began walking in my direction.

“Bob,” he shouted over the hammer clanking in the background. “Bob, get over here now.”

I couldn’t believe I’d let my big mouth get me in trouble again. Why was it that I keep letting bad guys get the drop on me? This time looked to be even worse than with McVey. At least last time I had Captain Daggot and Whitey somewhere behind me. This time I was pretty much on my own.

“Bob” had now joined Mr. Taylor, and he still had the sledge in his hand.

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“I’m through being second guessed by every drifter that rides by the Triple T. You made a big mistake this morning Montana. You’ll never get to know about my deal with Peterson, because you’re going to join him.”

My mind was racing, trying to figure out what to do. Like with McVey, my next move wasn’t obvious. I was staring down the barrel of a loaded .45 as well as a strange guy with a sledge hammer. If there was a way out of this, it needed to come to me fast. Unfortunately, again, it didn’t.

As Mr. Taylor and “Bob” proceeded to walk toward me, I began to back up. For the next few moments we were in lock-step as I tried my best to keep the same distance between us.

“You can hold up any time,” Taylor said. “I don’t think you can walk backward as fast as a bullet.”

“I’d like to try,” I responded, knowing that my desperate sarcasm was not likely to improve the situation. Why hadn’t I grabbed the Winchester when I left Spirit?

It seemed like the next few moments lasted ten minutes or so. I kept back-stepping and they kept coming.

Then my right foot hit something. I tripped. All I knew is that the ground fell away and I was falling. Down and down I went until I could no longer see Taylor, or the sky, or anything.

THUD! I hit the bottom. All I could think was that I fell in a hole -- maybe a well. Whatever it

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was, it was dark. Also, my legs hurt. I must have fallen twenty feet or so. I looked up to see the light coming through a circular hole about twice the diameter of my body. I supposed this was the place I was going to die. The thought scared me.

“Well look at that, will you?” I heard Mr. Taylor say. “Looks like our young friend Montana must have fallen down an old well hole. Probably killed him. Too bad.”

Then he laughed.

I think that got to me more than anything else. Ellen’s suspicions were right. He was evil. I figured he was either going to shoot me where I was or leave me to starve to death. Either way, I’d done it again. How, I thought, was I ever going to live to grow up if I kept letting crazy men get the best of me? In all other respects, I’m a pretty bright guy, but this was clearly a character flaw I had to work on. I vowed that if I got out of this, I’d work harder at being smarter.

When the pain in my legs subsided, I found that I was in mud up to my knees. The mud had cushioned my fall, but at the same time, trapped me like quicksand.

I waited for what would happen next...but nothing happened. Mr. Taylor stopped talking and no one was shooting, so I figured they’d left -- left me to die in the mud. Of course this meant that he *had* burned the Peterson’s place down and killed them both, just as I suspected. But my knowing this now wasn’t going to do anybody any good.

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Sheriff Masterson would never know it. All he'd know is that after the Peterson funeral, I decided to leave town. No one would look for me. Maybe Ellen would try to get a search going, but even if she did, no one would ever look out here.

A minute later I heard horses moving. The wagon was leaving. They were so sure I was going to die here, they were content to just let it happen...in the quiet of my mud hole. I understood. By letting me die in the well, Mr. Taylor could take himself out of it altogether, and go on pretending that he was a righteous citizen. He didn't kill me. I just came by and fell in an old well on my own. Probably, no one would ever even know *that*, but if they did, it'd be just another sad accident.

I didn't want to die this way, but more, I didn't want Taylor to get away with it. My options, however, seemed limited. Even if I could get my legs out of the mud, there didn't seem to be any way to scale the slick sides of this old shaft, which were getting wetter and wetter all the time. And I worried about Spirit. Tied to the bush as he was, he might not be able to get free and he might die with me. Well, not exactly with me, but because of me. I didn't want to start feeling sorry for myself, but I knew I was in a pretty bad way...and it kept raining.

I'd been in the hole for probably ten minutes when I heard something above me.

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A worried voice cut through the silence.
“Montana, are you all right?”

I looked up to see a small head peering down into the darkness. All I could see was a silhouette, but it sounded like Daisy!

“Daisy, is that you?”

“Yes, are you okay?” she answered.

“It’s sure good to see you! I think I’m okay ...maybe a few bumps and bruises. What are you doing out here?”

“I think we need to get you out first. Can you climb at all?”

“No, the sides are too wet and I’m standing in two feet of mud. I saw some ropes back by the lake. Can you go get one?”

“I’ll go look. Don’t go anywhere,” she said.

You have to love her sense of humor, I thought.

“Daisy,” I yelled, “when you go, look around to your left as you walk toward the lake. I left Spirit out there, tied to a thicket. Bring him too.”

It seemed like she was gone a long time and I was beginning to worry that she’d run into Mr. Taylor.

Finally, I heard noise again above me.

“Montana, I tied one end of the rope to Spirit’s saddle horn. Here’s the other end. Watch out, here it comes.”

I really couldn’t move much, so the rope hit me in the head and bounced down my backside. I reached around my back, grabbed it, and moved it around my body to the front, where I could get a

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better grip. I pulled down the slack and tugged on it to test it. It was tight.

I then reached up and grabbed it as high as I could and, with what little room I had, tied a small loop in it. I gripped both hands inside the loop and pulled, trying to pull my legs out of the mud. It wasn't working and after a few tries, it was clear that I'd need some help.

"Daisy, start moving Spirit back now -- but slow. The rope's wet and I don't want to lose my grip."

I heard her talking to Spirit and moment later the rope began to tighten. As it did, I pulled again. This time, with Spirit's help, my body started lifting. I had to stretch my toes up, so my boots would stay on until they broke free of the mud.

Spirit continued to pull and I continued to rise. Finally, I broke the surface and my body changed direction. I was now being pulled sideways and clear of the hole. I released my grip and lay there on the ground, trying to catch my breath. I looked up to see Daisy running over to me from where Spirit stood, with the other end of the rope still looped around the saddle horn.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she repeated in a real anxious voice. "You're covered in mud!"

I got to my knees and pulled myself up.

"I'm fine...covered in mud, but fine. How in the world did you find me?" I asked.

"I remembered that you said you might come back out here this morning to take a look around. After Mr. Taylor left this morning, I got worried

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and snuck out and see if I could find you. By the time I got here, I saw Mr. Taylor pointing his gun at you. I saw you fall in the hole and stayed hid over there until they left,” she replied. “Do you really think he set fire to our house?”

By that time we’d walked back to Spirit and pulled the rope off him.

“Good boy,” I said, as I patted his neck and gave him a big hug. “Good boy.” That wasn’t saying near enough, but he understood.

“I’m afraid so, Daisy,” I answered. “It seems he was going to get this lake water one way or the other.”

I then picked Daisy up and gave her a big hug. “I don’t know what to say to you Daisy, but thanks! You were crazy for coming out here on your own, but if it hadn’t been for you taking the chance, I’d probably have died in that well and nobody would ever have known.”

I put her back down. “You’re welcome, Montana. I knew you promised that I’d meet up with Spirit again, but didn’t think it would be like this!”

“Me neither,” I said. “We’re both cold and wet. Let’s get your horse and get out of there before they change their mind and come back to shoot me.”

“Where do we go?” she asked.

“We need to go right back to town and tell the Sheriff. Do you think you can make it?”

“I made it this far. I can make it the rest of the way,” she replied.

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We walked Spirit over to where Daisy's horse was tied, and I helped her up in the saddle.

“We gotta stay off the main trail back by the Taylor place, so just follow me.”

Chapter 20

I wasn't sure where Taylor and his man had gone after they'd left the lake, but figured they went back home. I didn't want to run into them again, particularly now with Daisy, so we had to make our own trail again. On the bright side, the rain and mist made good cover for us. We rode under the ridge of a series of small hills. There were lots of ups and downs, but the land was mostly open and we made better time than I'd expected.

As we rode, I did some thinking about what had happened. I guess I'd been careless in taking on Mr. Taylor out at the lake like I did, and even though his response showed him to be guilty of setting the fire, in the process, I'd let him get the upper hand. This time it had nearly cost me my life. I felt like going right back to his ranch and bringing him in myself, but knew that would be making the same mistake again. Also, I had to think about Daisy. By now they'd know she was gone and probably started looking for her.

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We needed to get to Dodge and to Sheriff Masterson as quickly as possible.

As we rode, I kept thinking about Captain Daggot's advice. "*Don't ever let another man's behavior dictate yours.*" I vowed not to do that again.

It was early afternoon by the time we got to town. We headed straight to the jail and I kept my fingers crossed that Sheriff Masterson had come back early. If not, Daisy and I would tell our story to the deputy on duty, and try to get him to arrest Mr. Taylor.

When we got to the jail, there were two horses tied out front. I was glad to see that one was Sheriff Masterson's. They were both still steaming so I knew they'd just come in.

Once in the jail office, we found Sheriff Masterson and two other men holding a meeting over the desk. One was the deputy I'd spoken to before. The other was an older man with a different badge on his coat. The badge said "Ford County Marshal" so I knew right off it was Marshal Tilghman.

"You look a sight, Montana," Sheriff Masterson said. "I knew it was getting muddy out there but didn't know it was knee deep yet! What brings you and young Miss Peterson out on such a miserable day?"

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“Bill,” he continued, now directing his voice to the Marshal, “this is the young man from Montana I was telling you about.”

“Good to meet you, young man,” said the Marshal, as held his hand out to shake.

“Sheriff Masterson says you’d make a good deputy. You ought to give it some thought.”

“A pleasure to meet you too, sir, and I’ll do that, but right now I have some news about the Peterson fire and we need your help. Mr. Taylor and his man just tried to kill me out at the Peterson place. We need to talk.”

Tired and wet as they were, Sheriff Masterson and Marshal Tilghman stopped what they were doing, sat themselves down, and listened to my story. Daisy sat down next to the stove, but I was too excited to sit and didn’t want to get mud all over everything, anyway.

I started with Daisy telling Ellen and me about the fight her father and Mr. Taylor’d had over the lake water. I also told them that Mr. White had found out that her uncle was dead. I told him about the equipment already going in at the lake and how Mr. Taylor and his man had tried to kill me out there, leaving me to die in a muddy well.

When I finished, Marshal Tilghman said, “Your trousers would suggest that you recently spent some time in a well, so I guessing that all this is true.” He turned to Sheriff Masterson, “What do you think, Jim?”

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“MONTANA WOULDN’T LIE,” Daisy jumped in. “IT ALL HAPPENED JUST THE WAY HE SAID!”

“I agree with the girl, Bill. I’d asked Montana to do some investigating for me while we were gone, and it looks like he did a pretty thorough job. I’ve had my doubts about the ‘new’ Walter Taylor since the beginning, and I think it’s time we bring him in.”

“I agree and I’ll join you. By now they’ve certainly discovered that the girl is gone so we better get right out there, before they come to us,” said Tilghman. “Good job, young man, but I’m getting the feeling this long day will never end.”

As they got up to leave, Sheriff Masterson turned back to me and said, “I agree, Montana. You’ve done a good job. Now you stay here with the girl and find her a place to get cleaned up and dry before both of you catch your deaths.”

I mostly wanted to be there for the arrest, but part of me didn’t. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for Mrs. Taylor when she found out that her husband killed Daisy’s folks. But for now, I had to take care of Daisy.

She and I walked back outside the jail and I looked down the darkening street. There was still a light on in the window at the mercantile. That was it, I thought. I’d take her to the Willocks. I was sure they’d take her in.

“Grab your horse and walk with me, Daisy. I’m taking you down to Ellen’s.”

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With only a partial explanation of all that had happened, the Willocks agreed to take Daisy in for the night.

I got back to the hotel an hour later after taking both horses down to the livery and drying them off. It was time for me, now. I needed to get cleaned up and settled down, too.

There was nobody but the night clerk in the hotel foyer, so I went right outback to the water station, removed my muddy boots and trousers in the dark, and dumped five or six buckets of water over me and my clothes. I left the trousers over the line in the rain and carried my wet boots upstairs to my room, in my long Johns. I hoped the Sheriff's confrontation out at the Taylors went well but I was too tired to do much about it, so I went to bed.

Monday dawned a little clearer. The rain had finally let up sometime during the night. I like mornings anyway but was happier than usual to see this one, particularly when I thought back to how close I came to *not* seeing it. My curiosity wouldn't let me sleep in, so got up early and went over to the jail to see how the arrest had turned out. The lights were out and the front door was locked. I was too early. I walked by the mercantile and found it, too, wasn't yet open. I checked my pocket watch and it was only six-thirty.

With little more to do, I wandered down to the livery to see Spirit. He was already up and eating again.

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“Spirit, I swear if I don’t get you out of Dodge fast and back on the trail, you’ll be so fat you won’t be able to chase cattle!”

I found a grooming brush and spent the next hour combing and talking to my buddy about all my troubles.

I’d been there almost an hour when I decided it was time to check the jail again. About half way down the narrow livery aisle, I stopped cold. I thought I saw him out of the corner of my eye, but now I was looking straight at him. There was no doubt about it. I was looking at Captain Daggot’s giant horse! I don’t know how I missed him on the way in, but it had been dark and I guess I just wasn’t looking. A few stalls further down, I found Whitey’s paint. They must have returned from their hunt some time during the night. I remembered that when he left, he said they’d try to stop back now and then, to check up on the investigation. Their timing might be perfect.

I quickly walked back up the street to the jail but it was still locked up. As I turned to head back to the hotel I looked up to see the Captain walking back toward me with Sheriff Masterson.

“Couldn’t wait, could you?” the Sheriff said, as we met outside the jail door.

“I’ve been up for over an hour trying to catch you coming in,” I replied. “Captain Daggot, it’s great to see you again. I saw your horse down at the livery. Did you get in last night?”

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“Yeah,” he replied, grabbing my hand to shake it. “Jim here tells me you’ve been at it again. A well this time. If you keep this up, you’re never going to see twenty-one!” he laughed.

“I think you’re right,” I said. “Did the Sheriff tell you what all happened?”

“All that, and probably more,” he replied as we walked in to the jail office.

“Tell me Sheriff, how did it go last night?” I asked.

“Wasn’t hard at all, Montana. When you’ve been a lawman as long as I have, you try to find easy ways to do things,” he said while pouring water in his coffee pot.

“We went out to the Taylor’s and found them searching the ranch for Daisy. Mrs. Taylor told us Walter was out looking on horseback. Marshal Tilghman stayed back with her to explain what had happened. While he was doing that, I rode around the ranch looking for him. It didn’t take me long, as he was calling her name out pretty loud. I rode up and told him that Daisy had come into town earlier and that we were holding her at the jail until we could fetch him. I also told him that he should come right in with me and that Marshal Tilghman would stay with Mrs. Taylor until he returned. We rode, nice and quiet, back into Dodge, where I placed him under arrest for the murder of the Petersons.”

“Where is he now?” I asked.

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“Right behind that wall. He spent the night here and I hope he found it comfortable, because he’s going to be spending a lot more of them here until the circuit judge comes by the first of next month.”

“I don’t suppose he admitted to trying to kill me?” I asked.

“No, he denied it at first. It wasn’t until I mentioned that we had a witness that he softened up a little.”

“Does he know who the witness is?” I said.

“He does now. He claims that he and his man were just trying to scare you into leaving the area and what Daisy saw was just an accident and that they were going for help. Funny thing is that when he got back to his ranch, he never mentioned any of it to Mrs. Taylor, so his story is pretty weak. I suspect the judge will see right through it.”

“Marshal Tilghman,” I asked, “how did Mrs. Taylor take the news?”

The Marshal replied, “You know, I’ve always had a lot of respect for that woman. Went to school with her years ago. At first she couldn’t believe it but when I explained to her about the water and all, she stopped fighting it and admitted that he’d been acting very strange lately. She’s still having trouble believing that he could set fire to Peterson’s home, but she felt just as bad about you, Montana. Turns out she kind of likes you and when she heard that Daisy saw him pull a gun on you and leave you in the well, I think she felt worse for you.”

“What will happen to Daisy now?” I asked.

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“It will still be up to the judge,” the Sheriff responded, “but I doubt if he’ll leave her with Mrs. Taylor. Too bad about her uncle being dead. I’m not sure what will happen to her.”

Captain Daggot interrupted. “Montana, while Jim’s taking care of his prisoner, how about you come up and join Whitey and me for breakfast? You can tell me all about your week.”

That was the best offer I’d had in days, so we left the jail to meet Whitey across from the hotel. On our way up the street, I felt a lot better about things. I knew Mr. Taylor would lie about everything, but Daisy saved the day by being out there and seeing it all. Without her, I couldn’t even guess how this all would have turned out.

We met Whitey at the saloon and they told me about their hunt. The reason they got back so soon was that they had just left town when they ran across one of the biggest remaining buffalo herds. They didn’t take too many because they didn’t have a wagon and their horses could only carry a small number of skins. They also made sure the carcasses went to the locals.

As we were finishing, Captain Daggot reached in his vest pocket and took out a piece of rolled up paper. He handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s not for you,” he replied. “It’s for that little girl.”

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I carefully opened up the paper and in it was the ring that the Captain had taken from her mother's finger. He'd cleaned it up and was shiny as new.

"Thank you Captain. Daisy's had a hard time and I'm sure this will cheer her up a lot," I said.

"I'm sorry I didn't think to give it to you before. I had it with me but clean forgot. You make sure the little girl gets it."

"I sure will," I responded. "I'm sure she'll be surprised."

"So what's the future hold for you, Montana," Daggot asked. "Are you still looking to catch on to one of the big drives?"

"I am," I said. "but I'm sure the Sheriff will want me to testify next month at Mr. Taylor's trial, so I guess I'm going to be around Dodge a little longer. Are you and Whitey going back out on another hunt?"

"We're leaving tomorrow, but this time we're leaving the area. It's getting cold here and we can hunt just as well down Texas way. We might run into you down there, if you ever get there."

"I'll get there, and I'll be watching for you. I understand that most of the big drives come out of Fort Worth. Stop by there occasionally and try to look me up."

"We'll do that," said Whitey as he stood up and reached into a small bag on his belt. He brought out a small, black flint carving of a man's head and handed it to me. I took it and looked it over closely. "It's beautiful," I said. "Who is it?"

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“Montana,” he replied. “You keep it for good medicine.”

I took a closer look at it and Whitey was right. It looked like me!

“I’ll keep it right around my neck for luck. I suspect I’ll need it. Thank you, Whitey. It’s beautiful.”

Whitey just nodded and left the table.

“He’s been working on that for two weeks,” Captain said. “You keep it with you and see if you can stop getting yourself in trouble.”

We shook hands again and I knew I’d miss these men a lot. I really hoped that our paths would cross again.

Chapter 21

It was Christmas Eve and the prairie was quiet under the brightest moon I'd seen since leaving home. I would've usually made camp by now, but neither Spirit nor I were tired. We'd left Kansas three days ago and were following the southern stars across the Oklahoma panhandle, toward Texas.

Back in Bighorn Lake, my mother used to read Mary and me plays written by a dead Englishman. I remember one of them was called, "All's Well That End's Well." I decided that pretty much described how my time in Dodge turned out.

I took up Mr. Willock's offer and worked in the mercantile until the trial. The circuit judge didn't get to Dodge until mid-December and the trial took another week. The jury found Mr. Taylor guilty of setting the fire that killed Daisy's folks, and he was sentenced to prison in Wichita, for the rest of his life. There were some who wanted him hung, but I was just as happy it turned out the way it did. It all was hard enough on Mrs. Taylor.

Last I heard, she was going to keep the ranch and

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try to work out a water deal with whoever ended up with the Peterson place. She could have bought it herself, but didn't feel right about it, after what had happened.

Daisy's staying with the Willocks, who filed papers to adopt her. Now her "big sister" Ellen will likely turn out to *really be* her big sister.

I'll always remember giving her mother's ring to Daisy. Ellen was with me when I did it. Just like Captain Daggot did to me, I handed it to her all wrapped up in the same piece of paper. I think she thought it was a note of some kind until she got it open. I didn't have to tell her what it was...she knew right away. She had held it to her face and started to cry. I was really grateful that the Captain thought to retrieve it for her. The next time I saw her, she was wearing it on her right hand. She still misses her folks and her home, but she's happy to be with Ellen and the Willocks, and I was happy for her.

The hardest thing for me was leaving Ellen. She asked me to stay, but I told that I needed to get back to the cattle business and knock some pounds off Spirit before he couldn't even get up anymore. The day I left, she gave me a kiss goodbye and said she hoped I'd come back soon. I promised I would.

Sheriff Masterson introduced me to the ramrod of a large cattle outfit and I agreed to join them for a spring drive up the trail from Fort Worth.

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That means I could be back in Dodge by April. I promised Ellen I'd visit the mercantile as soon as I got back.

I also thought back to the others I'd been fortunate to meet over the past few months -- Captain Daggot, Whitey, Sarah, Sheriff Masterson and Marshal Tilghman. I supposed Sarah and her family were in California by now. I hope it turned out to be worth all their trouble.

Looking out at the silvery landscape, I also thought back to the little ranch up in Bighorn Lake. I hoped all was well there, too. I'd been gone nearly three years now and it seemed like forever. I made a promise to myself that once I got to Texas, I'd try to get a telegram up there to let them know I was doing okay. I'd try to visit up there, after the drive. Maybe I could convince Ellen to come with me.

As Spirit continued to poke along, I reached down and gave him a pat. He played no small role in my recent adventures and I hoped he'd be around to keep doing so for years to come.

I then looked up and made a wish on the stars that my family and friends were as much at peace on this holy night as I was, out here on the moonlit prairie.

