

pitching

HOSTILE TERRITORY #2

BLOODY **AND**
AFFLICTED

A Classic Western Adventure

By
GERALD L. GUY



Palm Coast, FL

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BLOODY & AFFLICTED

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ISBN: 9798470802323

Printed in the United States of America

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COVER ART: www.bigstock.com

COVER DESIGN: Gerald L. Guy

PUBLISHER: www.storiesbyguy.com

ACCLAIM FOR GERALD L. GUY

RUN LIKE THE WIND – “I love Gus McIntyre! Gus, a 14-year-old boy traveling with his father to gold rush territory after they lost everything at home, is ambushed. His father is murdered. All their belongings are stolen. Gus is left for dead. Alone in the Wild West, Gus must depend on his personal strength and skills to survive in this lawless land. “Run Like the Wind” pulls you into this western coming of age story while entertaining and scaring you at the same time. This needs to be a TV show.”

Carol Ann Kauffman, Niles OH

RUN TO DANGER — “I like this kid, Gus McIntyre! I love the way Gerald L. Guy draws you into a story and you can't leave until it's done. Gus stumbles upon a gang of rustlers that threaten the livelihood of the ranch he owes his life to. He sets out to return the cattle to the Circle H Ranch but needs the help of an old Apache Chief who befriends him. Times were tough. Gus has a maturity about him that even the old chief noticed and admired. They begin the journey together. A lot of twists and turns will keep you glued to the pages. A great read for teens and adults alike. I'm reading the third installment in this series and enjoying it every bit as much as the first two books! Thank you, Mr. Guy, for sharing your excellent story with us!”

Juliette Douglas, Benton KY

CHASING GOLD — “I thoroughly enjoyed “Chasing Gold.” It was even more of a page-turner than your previous works, definitely your best offering yet. Some of the twists and turns you put in there reminded me of another one of my favorite authors, Robert Ludlum. I also have read all of his works.

I'm anxiously awaiting continuing the adventures of young Gus. I'll be checking your web site frequently so I can get signed up for pre-ordering as soon as possible.”

Charlie Major, Palm Coast FL

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— **Amazon submission**

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Dean Poling, The Valdosta Daily Times

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WOLF PACT: DREAM CATCHERS — “My husband read and re-read this book. It brought back memories of his service aboard the Saratoga. He never talked much about his WWII experiences until "Sara" but then as he read, he explained so much. The book is like an old friend with whom he can relive experiences they shared.”

Ami Lane, Palm Coast FL

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Lynn Myers Freedman, Benicia, CA

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Richard Thompson, Warren OH

ALTERED LIVES — “Altered Lives by Gerald Guy is a great read. If you love character driven mysteries in the tradition of Agatha Christie, you will love this novel as much as I do. Guy not

only unfolds the stories and personalities of the main subjects but also the character of a small innocent town. He shows the impact one heinous crime has on its corporate DNA, resulting in the negative transformation of its history. Add a great twist at the end and voila, a perfect cozy rainy day read.”

Kathi Oates, Mammoth Lake, CA

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Amazon submission

IROQUOIS AWAKENING — “This book was nothing like I thought it would be and I loved it! This was a true can't put it down book. Please write more like this.”

Michael Kozlick, Amazon

NOVELS BY GERALD L. GUY

Gerald L. Guy is an independent author. His novels are available in multiple formats at online bookstores and his personal website. They include:

The McIntyre Adventures

Run Like the Wind

Run to Danger

PAYBACK: Eye for an Eye (Boxed set)

Chasing Gold

Chasing the Past

Coastal Capers

Act of Kindness

Act of Mercy

Act of Recall

Wolf Pact saga

Wolf Pact: The New Order

Wolf Pact: Escape from Captivity

Wolf Pact: Dream Catchers

Hostile Territory

Iroquois Awakening

Bloody & Afflicted

Derailed Dreams (Dec. 20210)

Other titles

Sara: A Hero's Story

Tree of Wonders

Secrets of the Heart

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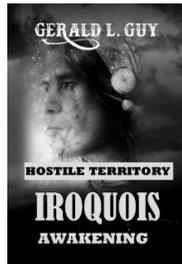
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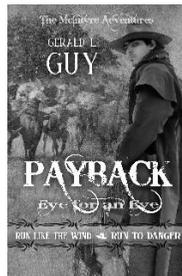
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Coastal Capers

The Wolf Pact saga

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DEDICATION

To my children — Jason, Kelly and Tom. I'm so proud of you. Many of my fictional characters are patterned after you. They are bright, intelligent and fearless.

FOREWORD

Being born and raised in the Midwest, I learned about the Civil War in my high school history classes but never gave it much serious thought. That was until I was awarded the editorship of The Valdosta (Ga.) Daily Times, a daily newspaper nestled near the Florida border and in what is affectionately referred to as the Deep South.

I was shocked to learn many Georgians still were bitter in the aftermath of the Civil War. Southern pride thrived among the statues at Stone Mountain, in the halls of justice in Atlanta, the cemeteries of Savannah and the dark shadows of the Andersonville Prisoner of War encampment near Americus.

I had an irascible newsroom leader named Jimmy Espy, who was a genuine expert on all things Confederate. After being called a “damned Yankee” for the millionth time, I asked, “Why are Georgians so fixated on the Civil War? It ended over one hundred years ago. I haven’t talked about it since my high school history class.”

He looked at me with confident eyes, knowing one day I would gain the courage to ask such a silly question. With a deep southern drawl, he answered, “I can answer that question in two words, boss. YOU WON!”

Suddenly, it made complete sense to me.

Experts estimate more than 750,000 lives were lost during the conflict between the North and the South, an average of about 500 per day. It remains a dark blemish on America’s storied history.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were killed when they knowingly or unknowingly got caught up in the civil unrest that percolated in the years leading up to that fateful day in 1861 when the first shot of the Civil War was fired at Fort Sumter, located near Charleston, S.C.

Bloody & Afflicted is the fictional tale of one man whose life was changed forever by the blood lust of the anti-slavery movement. I hope readers — especially my old friend, Jimmy Espy — enjoy it.

*“God's arrows of affliction are
sharp and painful so He can
get our attention”.*

Charles Stanley
American Clergyman

CHAPTER 1

Henry Walker awoke to searing pain in his arm and confusion. Why was he lying in the dirt of his small Kansas farm? When he opened his eyes, the intense sun was blinding and his mind spun out of control. Hot tears streaked across his cheeks. The only thing he knew for sure was his left arm felt like it was on fire. The pain was so severe he drifted in and out of consciousness. His fogged brain struggled to remember what had happened.

No matter how much he tried, he could not sit up. When he looked to his left, he couldn't believe his eyes. His arm lay detached in a pool of blood. A bullet had torn through tendon and bone. Only a few strands of muscle and cartilage held it together. He gasped. Beads of sweat populated his brow. When he could bear the pain no longer, everything went black.

He was in shock and, in his unconscious state, he saw men standing over his wife and daughter, followed by flashes of flame and loud concussions. He was horrified when he next opened his eyes; his farm and family were under attack.

He tried to raise up, but the searing pain in his arm wouldn't let him. When he looked to his wounded arm, the sight was horrific, but the images that lingered of Border Ruffians ransacking his home and abusing his wife and daughter were far worse. They needed his help. Again, he tried to get up, but a hand on his *chest* held him down. Brutal visions ravaged his mind. From the fog, a grim face hovered over him.

"Stop!" he cried out in delusion. He grabbed the man by the shirt and yanked him close. He was going to punch him, but again the pain in his left arm paralyzed him.

"Hang in there, Hank. I'm doing the best I can until the doctor gets here," James Galbreath said. That's when Hank realized the man he wanted to strike was his neighbor. He looked grim-faced as he tied a tourniquet around what remained of Walker's left arm.

As soon as Galbreath and his son, Clint, heard the shooting, they rushed to help. They saw the Ruffians riding off in a cloud of

dust. Only then did they discovered the atrocities they left behind. When Galbreath found his neighbor still alive, he sent his son into town to fetch a doctor while he tried to stop the bleeding.

Dr. Wilbur Parker was able to patch Walker up. The bullet in his left shoulder had passed straight through without hitting any bones or vital organs. The other bullet, however, did considerable damage to his arm at the elbow. He had no choice but to amputate just above the joint. With Galbreath's help, the doctor carted the wounded man back into town to his clinic and gave him a fifty-fifty chance of surviving his ordeal.

Walker clung to life. Trauma and loss of blood rendered him unconscious for several days.

Over and over the screams of his beloved ravaged his unconscious mind. In his dreams, sometimes he ran for days but he could never reach their cabin. It kept getting farther and farther away.

He cried out in the darkness, "Elizabeth! Krissy! I'm coming."

In the worst of his coma-fueled dementia, his tormented wife looked at him and begged for his help as a blonde man raped her from behind. "Just don't lie there, Henry! Can't you see what they are doing to us? Stop them, for heaven's sake!"

"Stop that! Leave them alone!" he cried out, still unconscious.

Finally, he envisioned the two men standing over him. Both were more than six feet tall. They had bushy, blonde hair. One had a mustache and large sideburns, the other a matted full beard. They looked an awful lot alike as they laughed at him. Both wore red bandanas around their necks.

"This oughta teach the abolitionists to clear out of the Kansas Territory," one said.

"Do you want me to put another bullet in him?" his partner asked.

"Nah, let him bleed out. He ain't goin' nowhere," he said and then he kicked his wounded arm, and everything went black again.

When Henry Walker emerged from his coma, he sat up in bed

and screamed for his murdered family. Ruth Parker, the doctor's wife, was there to calm him down. She gave him a sip of water and ran a damp washcloth over his sweaty face.

"Welcome back, Henry," she said with a wonderfully soothing smile. "You've had a rough couple of days, but I think you're going to pull through now. You lie still and I'll get Wilbur in here to tell you what's happened."

Walker watched her leave the room, but he didn't need the doctor to tell him what happened. The last vision he had of Elizabeth was horrendous. She and his young daughter, Krissy, were being violated by renegades.

He had been plowing a field when he heard his wife's screams. When he got to their small home, the front door had been ripped from its hinges and he could see two men assaulting his family. Two bullets lifted him off the porch and slammed his 150-pound frame on his back in the dirt. He was knocked unconscious when his head struck a rock on the edge of his wife's herb garden, a coincidence that absolutely saved his life.

The Ruffians had been attacking farms along the Kansas-Missouri border as political unrest prepared to tear the country in half. Kansas sought statehood and declared itself a free state, while its Missouri neighbors were staunch supporters of slavery. Missourians worried the admission of Kansas as a free state would disrupt the balance of power in Washington D.C.

In 1858, the nation was inching closer to all-out conflict as slave states talked of secession and violence erupted in the burgeoning plains, where thousands of immigrants sought freedom. Anti-abolitionists crossed into the Kansas Territory to demand settlers choose their side of the political debate. Those who did not concede often paid with their lives.

When violence boiled over at the Walker farm, the Ruffians unknowingly left a single survivor behind, thinking he was at death's door. Bedridden for days, Walker prayed for his own death. Haunted by the revelation his family had been stolen from him, he considered himself a failure. Now, with only one arm, he had no idea how he would continue. Death seemed a better choice.

Ruth Parker helped him emerge from deep remorse and depression so healing could take place. She spent long hours at the patient's bedside, reading verse after verse from the Holy Bible.

She read to him from Exodus and related the story of how Moses led the Israelites out of bondage and how Joshua overcame great odds at the walls of Jericho. Though based on faith, both tales were messages of perseverance and redemption.

She finally got through to him when she read from the book of Jeremiah. It told of a potter whose creation was unsatisfactory. So, he reshaped his work into something that was more acceptable. Ruth explained the parable by saying all things — even lives destroyed by hate — could be reshaped to be productive.

“God has a plan for you, Mr. Walker,” she said, “or he wouldn’t have seen fit to let you survive. Put your faith in the Almighty and He will lead you to a land of promise. Sometimes God breaks your heart to save your soul.”

That is when Walker realized surrender was out of the question. It was time to reshape his life, regardless of his deformity, and exact vengeance against those who had brought evil to his doorstep.

He began eating and healing. Within a week he walked out of the clinic, with a word of appreciation for the Parkers and his heart heavy with vengeance.

Before he could do anything, he had to become more proficient at functioning without his left hand. The task was not easy. He had to relearn everything, from buttoning his own shirt and pants to saddling his horse, Bullet. The simplest tasks now were difficult. His fingers were calloused from years of labor in the fields but thick and uncoordinated.

So, he created a series of exercises that helped improve his agility and strength.

He took a fifty-cent piece from the tin box his late wife, Elizabeth, kept hidden under a floorboard. He tossed it, flipped it, and tried to make it roll between his fingers, all to create a rhythm of movement uncommon to him. The coin went with him wherever he traveled. When he took a break from his farm chores, he worked with the coin. After two months, he returned the Liberty half dollar to its hiding place. Lady Liberty had nearly been worn off of it from

his constant handling. Next, he grabbed a Liberty quarter from the tin box and began the routine anew. When he mastered the quarter, he grabbed a dime that was lighter and more difficult to control.

While the coins helped his fingers adapt, his right arm lacked the strength he needed to perform daily chores. So, he spent every morning in the nearby forest, where he bent saplings of various size, shape, and species. When it felt like his bicep was going to explode, he moved on to the next most important task: loading and unloading his Colt Paterson pistol with one hand.

The Paterson was one of the newest evolutions in handguns and held five shots that could be fired repeatedly. Loading it was cumbersome with two hands because the chamber had to be disassembled. Walker had to learn to do it with five fingers instead of all ten. That was where his stump came in handy. His first attempt took an entire afternoon to complete, but he kept at it — hour after hour, day after day until he became proficient.

In the evenings, he practiced drawing the pistol from a holster that hung at his side. The simple action created another problem he did not foresee. The holster had to be tied to his thigh to draw the gun quickly, which was nearly impossible with one hand. He took it to town to have the holster modified. Leather straps and a small buckle were added so he could quickly, and easily secure it whenever the need arose. And the need was quickly approaching. He could feel it in his bones.

When he stopped at the general store for cartridges, almost twelve months after the assault at his farm, he saw Ruth Parker for the first time in months.

“Henry, it is so nice to see you out,” she said, sizing him up to make sure he was getting enough rest. “Doc and I were going to ride out and visit you this weekend. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine. It’s just taking a little longer than I suspected to get used to this,” he replied, holding up his stump for emphasis. He had the end of it wrapped in a piece of denim, made from one of his wife’s blouses and secured with his daughter’s favorite scarf. “Thank you for asking. I owe you and Doc for saving my life. I’m sorry I haven’t stopped by to thank you properly, but I’ve been pretty busy preparing for what lies ahead.”

Just then, the storeowner returned to the counter with Walker's re-engineered holster and handed it to him. "See how this works for ya, Hank," he said. "Judith took great care in sowing these straps and the buckle on. I hope they meet with your approval."

Walker quickly buckled the holster around his waist and made even quicker work with the strap around his thigh. He slipped the Paterson into place and retrieved it with a quickness that surprised the doctor's wife and the store owner.

"I don't like the looks of that, Henry," Ruth offered.

"Oh, I can draw faster. I was just testing the new strap," he replied.

"Good gracious! Henry, I didn't mean how fast you could draw your pistol," Ruth replied. "I'm surprised to see you wearing a holster and gun, let alone one you strap down as if you were a gunfighter or something."

Walker laughed and said, "Whoever heard of a one-armed gunfighter, Ruth? I just don't want to be vulnerable if any of those Ruffians cross my path again."

"You're not fooling me, Mr. Walker. The Good Book says you should turn the other cheek. I thought I had led you to a more righteous path during your convalescence."

"I appreciate all you did for me, Ruth. But the day I decided not to surrender was the same day I decided an 'eye for an eye' was sound advice.

"The Good Book you so generously shared with me says, 'God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.' I was sorely afflicted, Ruth. I won't be unarmed or unready the next time a thug decides to accost me."

"Hrumph! If you go looking for trouble in the political climate of today, you most certainly will find it, Henry. The world is teetering on the verge of war for gosh sakes!" Ruth said.

A hard look passed from Henry to the physician's wife, and he said, "With all due respect, Ruth. The war started when those evil men killed my wife and daughter." He pulled the Colt from his holster one more time and added, "Mr. Paterson here is going to

make them wish they had checked to make sure I was dead before they rode off my property a year ago.”

Then, he quickly bid his two friends farewell, pivoted and departed, leaving behind two astonished faces.

CHAPTER 2

Walker spent the next weeks honing his shooting skills. He always had been a crack shot, but he wanted to make sure he was adept at drawing with lightning speed and firing accurately. Then, he rode into town one last time and stopped at the blacksmith shop.

Abraham Biggers, the blacksmith, owed him a favor, and he was stopping in to collect.

“Do you have my gun ready, Abe?” he asked when he walked into the stable where the smith toiled over hot coals.

“I sure do, Hank. I did as you asked, but I’m worried sick the alterations I’ve made might damn well kill you or get you killed,” the big blacksmith said.

Hank had asked Biggers to reduce the length of his double-barrel shotgun to eighteen inches. He wanted it as a backup in case he ran out of bullets in his Colt. With half the barrel missing, the rifle was much more deadly. Abe wasn’t so sure it wouldn’t blow up in Walker’s hand the first time he tried to shoot it.

“Don’t worry about me, my friend; worry about the bastard I aim at,” Hank replied, raising the scattergun in one hand and leaning the shortened barrel against his stump. It made the weapon much easier to manage and aim with just one hand.

“Yes, this is going to work just fine,” he added with a smile.

“I reckon you’re right about that,” Biggers replied. “Woe be whoever or whatever you aim at. That cannon will blow them from here to kingdom come, Hank.”

“That’s the whole point, ain’t it, Abe?”

“I can’t imagine how a one-armed man is going to manage the recoil of those twin barrels,” Biggers said. “You’d better have your feet planted and your back against something solid.”

“Don’t worry about me, my friend,” Hank said. “I’m stronger and more adept with one arm than I ever was with two.”

“I reckon you’re planning on going after those men who killed your family,” his friend added. “You be careful out there, Hank. Need I remind you vengeance is God’s work?”

“God wasn’t looking when those men took my arm and my family, Abe. I’m hoping He ain’t looking when and if I find them.”

“Just make sure you come back in one piece and not a pine box.”

“I’ll be back. I promised you I won’t be gone too long. I need a couple more favors, though,” Walker stated.

“You name it, Hank.”

“If you don’t mind, take a ride out to my place now and then to check on it. I don’t want any of those Ruffians squatting on my property,” Walker said as he threw the scattergun into a sheath he carried over his left shoulder.

“You got it! Is that all?” the amicable blacksmith asked.

“No, there is one more thing,” Walker said as he reached into one of his saddlebags and pulled out an envelope. He handed it to Abe and added, “Just in case something unexpected happens, I want you to have this.”

“What is it?” the blacksmith asked.

“It’s the deed to my farm. There is also a note that says ownership shifts to you if I do not return by the first of the year.”

“No... no... no... I can’t accept that!” Biggers said and shook his head adamantly.

“I figured that is what you might say. That’s why the deed will be placed in your wife’s name. Cleo’s a good woman, Abe. She deserves better than to live above a blacksmith shop. You tell her my Elizabeth wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“But...”

“No buts, friend. You and Cleo deserve it. All I have back there are horrible memories. If I don’t see you soon, I’ll send you a telegram when I settle somewhere new out West.”

Then, he mounted and rode slowly out of town aboard Bullet. A

tear ran down the cheek of the powerful black man. He felt blessed and couldn't wait to show the envelope to Cleo.

As Walker passed down Main Street, he waved to Will and Ruth Parker.

"There goes a man who has let hate overtake his sound judgment. I didn't bring him back from the depths of despair to become a killer," Ruth said.

"Hank Walker isn't a killer; he's a man on a mission," the doctor replied. "What happened out there on his farm was an abomination. If killing is required, I have no doubt he's up to it."

"All this because some men want to keep others in chains," she added. "I don't know what this world is coming to, Wilbur. I just don't know." She stormed off as her husband watched his one-armed former patient ride off.

The sun was high, the day was warm, and the residents of Smith Creek went about their business as usual. So, did Hank Walker, but his business was of the deadly kind.

* * *

THE RUFFIANS WERE a product of the anti-slavery movement that was splitting the country in half by the 1850s. Loyalties in the United States Senate were split between slavery and free states. Both sides were meticulously careful when it came to statehood admissions; they didn't want the delicate balance of power tipped too far one way or the other.

The Kansas Territory had become a home for abolitionists from Boston, Philadelphia and other large cities in the East. Of course, Europeans were arriving on the American shores every day. Many had had a bellyful of servitude and sought the fertile lands of Kansas for a new start. So, when the abolitionist settlers of the Kansas Territory began making overtures for statehood in 1854, their Missouri neighbors were adamant its admission should be as a slave state, based on its geographic location. That was the same year the Kansas-Nebraska Act was enacted so territories could vote on their statehood status instead of having it determined by location on the ever-changing map of the United States.

As a result, Missouri began flooding the state with pro-slave immigrants and settlers. Hostilities along the border became violent when Southern loyalists from Missouri took exception to the Free State wishes of new settlers. Violence soon got out of hand along the Missouri-Kansas border.

The Walker family was one of many that got caught in the crossfire of the political and ideological differences of the time. Henry wasn't the only man to arm himself against the violence. He was the only one-armed man to take the battle to the Ruffians in a way that became legendary.

* * *

WALKER FACED HIS first confrontation outside of a Kansas border town. He was traveling under a full moon and there was a slight breeze rustling the prairie grass. He heard a wolf's howl in the distance. It brought him a sense of calm. Wolves were night stalkers; so was he. He searched the dark landscape for the campfires of Ruffians who continued to rampage through the region.

They were a bold and brassy bunch, who dished out carnage during all hours of the day and night. They weren't afraid of intervention because they traveled in numbers of three or more. They didn't bother to cover their faces, because they seldom left witnesses behind who could identify them. God help the community they raided with a dozen or more thugs. The effect could be devastating because most small towns in the territory had no marshal or sheriff to keep the peace.

As luck would have it, Walker discovered a trio of renegades just after nightfall. They were camped along a little creek and paying little attention to their surroundings. He left his horse tied at a distance and snuck close enough to the night camp to hear the renegades laughing and carrying on about their destruction of a small farm family.

His blood boiled, and he decided to face the trio head-on. The moon shined down from above and the night breeze carried a slight chill. The crickets were singing their nightly song as he retrieved his horse and walked to the edge of where their campfire lighted the night. He called out, "Weary traveler seeking respite at your night camp, gents!"

“Don’t know if we got that, but enter slowly,” one of the men responded.

Walker tethered his horse to a tree and walked nonchalantly into the fire-lit camp. The Ruffian who had given him permission had his pistol drawn as he walked into the flickering light. The other two were watching warily as they shared a bottle of whiskey.

“No need for that,” the traveler said and raised his stub over his head as he approached.

One of the drinkers laughed and said, “Hell, he’s only got one arm. Put that iron away, Matthew.”

“Not until I know which side of this here border dispute the man stands,” Mathew said, but he did lower the point of his pistol.

The third man took a sip of brown liquid and said, “Hell! We’ve got him out numbered six arms to one. Does it matter?”

“It does to me,” the ringleader said. “I ain’t sharing my fire with no damn Free-Staters.”

“Y’all part of the Ruffian bunch from Missouri?” Henry asked.

“You ain’t answered my question yet, stranger. Who are you and where do you stand?”

Walker’s eyes turned dark, but his expression didn’t change as he lowered his arm and explained, “I’m just a tired pilgrim, looking to rest for a piece. I’ll be heading on once my business is finished.”

“Then state your business, and make it quick,” the ringleader said and reached for the bottle the other two shared. The decision cost him his life. Walker pulled out his Colt and fired in what seemed like a blur. A bullet exploded in the bottom of the bottle before the brown liquid touched the ringleader’s lips. He managed a partial scream as glass shredded his face. He went silent as the careening piece of lead took out his throat. He fell backward and twitched in the dirt.

With their reflexes slowed by their alcohol intake, the other two never got a chance to mount a defense. Bullets two and three exploded in their chests and sent them rolling off the log on which they had been sitting. Their eyes stared up at the night sky, as if they were watching shooting stars. Blood pooled beneath them, though their

devastated hearts no longer pumped.

Walker nonchalantly walked up and kicked the boots of each of the bodies. Only the ringleader looked at him with horror in his eyes. Walker stood over him and said, “Your fellow renegades left me for dead and with one arm. You get to reap the reward.”

He pulled back the hammer and aimed at the fallen man, who raised a hand in defense. Henry pulled the trigger, delivering a bullet where his family jewels once resided. More blood puddled beneath him.

“My wife, Elizabeth, who your friends also brutalized and murdered, would think my actions inhumane. She would say enough is enough. What do you think?”

The ringleader was beyond hearing a word Walker said. His pain was too severe and death was approaching. Henry obliged him and delivered his last bullet to his forehead and took off the top portion of his skull. Gray matter exploded into the darkness.

Walker twirled the Paterson on his finger, returned it to his holster and said, “To those who afflict, so too shall they be afflicted.”

He went through their belonging and took what money they had and left the bodies to the vermin. He found a significant number of gold coins in their pockets. He wondered from where they had come. Was someone paying the worthless cowards to rape and pillage across the border?

Before he rode out, he looked at the three dead men and said, “I guess my business is done for now. See you in hell, boys.”

* * *

FOUR DAYS LATER, smoke marred an azure horizon at mid-afternoon. Immediately, Walker suspected it was a sign Ruffians were up to no good again. He spurred his horse to a gallop and raced to intervene, praying he wouldn't be too late this time.

When he entered the yard, a small barn was fully engulfed in flames and two horses were hitched to a rail in front of a small sod house. Inside he could hear cries of distress. Just as he approached the threshold with intent to peer inside, a tall, red-haired man with full

beard and a smile on his face, stepped outside. The bullet Walker put in his chest blew through the Ruffian's heart. It left a hole the size of a fist in his back and killed him instantly.

Walker knew it was no time to hesitate. He immediately entered the tiny one-room shelter and spotted a grisly scene. Two children were tied up in a corner, and a man lay dead on the dirt floor. A woman was crawling on hand and knee to help her children.

Henry didn't know if she had been raped or not, but her clothing was in disarray and her face was bruised. It really didn't matter. The other Ruffian was going to die anyway. He was struggling to pull up his pants when the shotgun blast lifted him off his feet and slammed him against the sod wall. When he landed awkwardly, his entire midsection was missing. Blood and guts dropped from the sod walls as his intestines disintegrated.

The woman shrieked and pulled her young children into her arms. The children were screaming and covering their ears because the blast of the shotgun was so loud. Trembling, the battered woman prayed he wouldn't turn the scattergun on her.

Hank slipped the shotgun in its sheath, held his hand out to the traumatized woman and said, "You're safe now. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Bless you!" she said as she wiped blood from her mouth and tried to cover her naked torso with the remnants of the blouse she wore. The woman had dark hair and bruises that made her seem older than she was. Despite her ordeal, Hank saw a graciousness in her green eyes.

He helped her loosen the bonds that held her children and led her outside into the sunlight. They took harbor under a large tree and on a patch of grass in the front yard.

"I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner, ma'am," Walker explained. "I saw the smoke from the fire and came as soon as I could. Are you hurt badly?"

She looked at him angrily and said, "What does it look like, mister? I'm hurt, but I'll heal... thanks to you. I have no idea why my Billy brought us to this hostile territory. It's been nothing but misery

since we arrived.”

Her children, a boy and a girl less than ten years old, clung to her like newborns and didn't say a word. She peppered them with kisses and tried to calm them down. The trauma of the violent attack and seeing their father slain would probably haunt them the rest of their lives. They whimpered in their mothers arms.

“Can you ride? You and your children can't stay here. There may be more of these Ruffians about. Is there somewhere I can take you where you'll be safe?”

The woman's demeanor softened as reality sunk in. She needed Walker's help.

“There's another farm a few miles west of here,” she said. “The Dillons will help us. Can you take us?”

“I'd be obliged, but we've got to go now.”

“Can I grab a few things?”

“Sure! But make it fast.”

While she threw clothing and a few belongings into a blanket and tied the corners to keep it secure, Walker went through the saddle bags of the two men's horses. Each had a small bag of gold coins, which he stuffed into his pocket.

When the woman returned with the blanket filled with the family's clothing, he secured it to one of the horses, and helped her board the other. Then, he raised the children to her. The oldest rode behind and hung on for dear life. The other sat in front of her mother and stared at him. Neither said a word but their sobbing had stopped.

As they plodded a trail west, the woman finally asked, “Who are you?”

“Just a man who abhors the violence that is tearing the territory apart,” he said.

“We'd all probably be dead if it wasn't for you,” she admitted. “I don't know how to thank you.”

“Thank me when we get to this nearby farm and you and your children are safe,” he said, checking his backtrail to make sure they

weren't being followed.

“My name is Lenora. Lenora Cochran. My husband...” she said but paused at midsentence as images of this senseless murder crashed through her traumatized brain. “Billy and I came here from Virginia to start a new life. It’s been nothing but heartache since we arrived.”

“It hasn’t always been this way ma’am. Politics has taken over the territory like a flashflood at springtime. These are harsh times. I lost my own family to a bunch of Ruffians a year ago,” Henry said. “Once I get you settled, I’ll go back and bury your man behind the house and get rid of the bodies inside.”

She screamed and spat, “Don’t you dare bury those heathens next to my husband.”

“That’s not my intention, ma’am. I’ll drag ’em off and let the wildlife feed on the carcasses of those good-for-nothing criminals. Burial is too good for them.”

The Dillons had a good-sized spread and wood-framed house. They willingly took in the Cochran family and heeded Walker’s warning about the Ruffians roaming the area.

“They come by here, they’ll get more than they bargained for. Me and my boys will make sure the women and children are safe,” Derwood Dillon said, surrounded by three teen-age sons.

“Can I offer you some advice, sir?” Walker said.

“I’d be obliged.”

“Have every gun you own loaded and ready to fire. The minute they come into range blast away if you wanna live to see tomorrow,” Walker said.

“That’s my intention exactly. I won’t give an inch to the damned slave loving heathens,” Dillon said.

Walker bid them farewell and fulfilled his promise at the Cochran farm. He buried the husband and drug the dead bodies a good mile away in the tall prairie grass. He went back to the house, built a small campfire behind it and fashioned a cross for Billy Cochran’s grave. He used some of the timber from the smoldering barn.

He spent a restless night. The screams of the Cochran children burned in his brain and mixed with his own haunting memories. He slept little and woke determined to find the men who had turned his own life upside down.