

Gerald L. Guy

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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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

CHASING THE PAST — This is the fourth book I have read from the Gus McIntyre series, and it just keeps getting better. This action-packed, page-turner will keep you entertained from the beginning to the very end. A great story of our forefathers. I highly recommend it to any western fans.

— **Amazon submission**

WOLF PACE: THE NEW ORDER -- Gerald L. Guy had the reputation of a hard-hitting newsman, not a guy who figures out how the appendix can explain his creatures' ability to transform from human to wolf. But he does so with a panache for fun with his novel, "Wolf Pact: The New Order."

Dean Poling, The Valdosta Daily Times

WOLF PACT: ESCAPE FROM CAPTIVITY — "I loved the whole Cossibye clan! I can't wait for the movie version to come out."

Gayla Smith, Flint MI

WOLF PACT: DREAM CATCHERS — One of the best writers I have met. His stories are compelled by thoughts and some personal experiences. They are captivating and exciting. I highly recommend anyone to read his novels. I have several of his books and I keep going back to Wolf Pact series, my favorite.

Elizabeth Chapman, Huntsville, AL

SARA: A HERO'S STORY -- 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

ACT OF KINDNESS -- I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The characters are well developed, and the connected stories are a pleasure to read. I hope Guy writes another novel along these lines.

Lynn Myers Freedman, Benicia, CA

TREE OF WONDERS — A great read. Take an hour or so and read a most uplifting book. You might even come out a little smarter for doing so.

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

SECRETS OF THE HEART — “I normally don’t read romance stories, but this book was suggested by a friend, and I was pleasantly surprised. Not only does the story flow smoothly but it is a heart-warming look at the possibilities of happiness late in life. A true story of resurrection and devotion makes this a must-read, especially in times such as these.”

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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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

Gerald L. Guy

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.

CHAPTER 3

Henry Walker wasn't a large man. He stood five-foot ten and had put on only about ten pounds of muscle since he turned sixteen. He had brown hair, brown eyes and a gentle smile that was partially hidden by his dark mustache. He had a passel of education and an easy-going disposition. That's what attracted Elizabeth Caldwell to him in the first place.

Her father grew corn and winter wheat on a farm outside of Philadelphia, and Henry was assistant manager at Quinby's Farm Market, where her father sometimes traded feed for supplies. They met at a barn dance in 1842 and fell in love immediately.

Elizabeth's father was more than happy to have Walker join the family. He had visions of opening a feed store and his bright son-in-law seemed like an ideal partner.

The Walkers produced a granddaughter in 1845 and disappointment in 1850. Philadelphia was far too crowded, and the young family had ideas of their own. They decided to relocate to America's burgeoning western territories, where land was free to homesteaders and far less crowded.

By steamboat, they made their way from Pittsburgh to Illinois via the Ohio River in the spring of 1850, and then booked passage on a sidewheeler down the Mississippi River to St. Louis, the jumping off point for settlers who were heading west.

The Walkers left Pennsylvania with their life's savings and two trunks of possessions. When they got to St. Louis, they purchased everything they needed to begin their long trek to Colorado. They joined a wagon train in the summer of 1850. As luck would have it, their wagon broke down in the Kansas Territory, just three hundred miles from St. Louis.

They separated from the wagon train and found fertile ground in

the wide-open territory between the Kansas and Wakarusa Rivers. The Walkers pulled off the trail to make repairs and planned to catch up with the wagon train in a few days. They never moved on, though. By the time Hank got his wagon fixed, he had fallen in love with the region and decided to make it their home. They rode south and staked a claim near where Baldwin City now sits. They were not the first travelers to settle in the Great Plains that stretched west of the Missouri River, but population still was sparse.

They grabbed the richest piece of farmland they could find and built a new life. With Elizabeth's knowledge of crops and Hank's determination, their dream of starting over became reality, despite the land's bitter refusal to embrace civilization. The territory was prone to violent weather extremes, freezing winters and sweltering summers that frequently spawned tornado activity.

Hank quickly went about constructing a shelter to protect them from the approaching winter weather. He had Elizabeth choose the best place for their first field of corn, and that's where Hank cleared timber for the walls of their modest home. He stripped the green prairie of its sod and used it for the roof and to fill the cracks in the logs that made up the walls of their cabin.

Working day and night, the Walkers finished their one-room cabin just in time. On December 1, winter roared across the prairie like a steam locomotive. Fueled by winds of fifty miles per hour or more, rain, ice and snow plummeted the Walkers' new home. Hank quickly boarded the holes in the walls he left for fresh and warmer air. When they woke up that first morning, they were freezing cold. A fine layer of snow covered the blanket under which Hank, Liz and six-year-old Kristine slept.

That began Hank's crazed obsession to keep Mother Nature at bay and his family warm. He cut prairie grass and dug below the topsoil for frozen clay he chiseled out in chunks. He warmed the clay at the family hearth, mixed it with bits of prairie grass and used it as a type of chinking in between the logs on the west wall of their cabin. That is where the wind was the fiercest. By Christmas, it had quit snowing inside the cabin, but Hank didn't stop.

He labored each day felling more trees and preparing the land for planting in the spring. The lumber he would use to build a bigger and better home. Each night when he returned for supper, he carried with him a bucket of clay chunks and prairie grass. The next day, when he returned to the fields, Liz and Krissy pounded and massaged the clay and grass. When it became pliable, they packed the concoction into three-by-six molds so it could harden into bricks that would be used for a fireplace in their new home.

Life was hard, but the Walkers survived that first winter and were successful in building a new life on the Great Plains. Over the next five years, the Great Migration west continued, and Kansas became a destination for European immigrants, drawn to the call of free land, and Americans fleeing the congestion of New England. In a blink of the eye, the entire region became a hotbed for abolitionists and proponents of slavery.

When border politics boiled over, Hank Walker's life was altered forever.

* * *

TWO DAYS AFTER leaving the Dillon farm, Walker was riding in a northeasterly direction along the Kansas River when he was confronted by two riders, who looked gruff and troublesome. One had long, greasy hair and a matted beard. The other was clean shaven and had brown hair tucked under a weather-beaten hat.

Hank let his head hang low as if he were asleep in the saddle but didn't take his eyes off the two riders. He knew instantly there was going to be trouble.

The big, bearded man reined his horse in Hank's direction and actually bumped his roan. Bullet snorted and stopped as Walker pulled his Paterson with such speed both men were taken by surprise. He pressed the barrel against the man's chin and pulled back the hammer. The chamber engaged and his weapon was ready to fire.

"Move one inch, and I'll blow your head off, pilgrim?" Hank snarled. "What makes you think you own this here trail?"

“We don’t. Just thought you was dead maybe,” the bearded brute said. “You didn’t move an inch when we rode up on you.”

“Thought I was an easy score, aye?” Hank said and pushed a little harder against the man’s chin.

“Hold your horses, there, pardner,” the clean-shaven partner said. “Billy there didn’t mean nothin’. Like he said, we thought you were dead in the saddle.”

“Shut up!” the one-armed man said. “I’m going to ask you a couple of questions. If I like the answers, you both might live. If you lie again, I blow the top of your friend’s head off.”

“Tell him what he wants to know, Jed,” the bearded one said. “I don’t want to die.”

“You Slave or Free-Staters?” Walker asked.

“We’re from Missouri. What do you think?”

“That means you’re Ruffians, just as I thought,” Hank replied. “If you’re on this side of the border, you’re up to no good.”

“It ain’t none of your business,” Jed said.

“Yes it is,” Hank said, smiling at Billy and pulling away his gun. He dropped it into his holster and said. “I’m looking for my cousins, two blonde-haired galoots who are running with the lot of you. I’ve got news from back home for them. Their daddy is dead, and their mama needs them to come home quick like.”

“You must mean Travis and Teddy. You’ll find ’em in a small town called Parkville, just outside the Town of Kansas?” Billy said with a snarl and rubbed his chin. “You damn near poked a hole in my jaw, mister. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Billy was angry the one-armed man got the drop on him. “A man with one arm, might be a bit more careful about who he draws on,” he added.

“Yeah, you’re lucky I didn’t shoot ya dead on the spot,” Jed said. “What are you to Travis and Teddy?”

Jed jammed his revolver back into its holster, leaned over to the side of his palomino and released a one-yard-long stream of brown tobacco juice.

“I’m their worst nightmare!” Hank said and retrieved his Colt with such quickness, neither of the Ruffians knew what happened. He put a bullet in Jed’s temple. It blew out the side of his face and somersaulted him from his saddle. The next bullet pierced Billy’s right eye and knocked him from his saddle. His horse reared up and stomped him before running off.

Bullet pranced between the bodies. Once the horse settled down, Hank wiped blood and gore from the front of his shirt and climbed down from the saddle. He confiscated the Ruffians’ possessions. They had a little bit of money that he tucked into a pouch in his saddle bag. Then, he bid them farewell.

“Thanks for the information, boys. I’ll see ya in hell, but not until I’m done with Travis and Teddy.”

* * *

WHEN WALKER RODE into the tiny town of Lawrence, it was abuzz with talk of statehood and Ruffians. Walker had had four run-ins with the marauders and not one had lived to warn the next he was prowling the countryside for the two yellow-haired men who had violated his family. Both were approximately six feet tall and hulking masses. Hank had seen their faces for only a fraction of a second, but their images were burned into his brain. He was confident he would recognize them immediately.

Lawrence, located about forty miles west of the Town of Kansas, was only about a year old but growing fast. Drawn to the region by the promise of homesteading on the fertile prairies, Lawrence was founded by a group of abolitionists from Massachusetts in 1854. Needless to say, it was a hotbed for Free Statehood.

Lawrence was home to only about twenty-five homes and businesses, which catered to the farm community of the region. The buildings were a combination of tents, cabins and wooden structures.

About one hundred people lived in the tiny community that had grown alongside the Kansas River. Businesses relied heavily on the steamboat traffic to provide supplies from their much larger neighbor to the east.

As the one-armed traveler hitched his horse at the rail outside of a general store, Walker overheard three old gents talking about a vigilante who was taking the fight to the Ruffians.

“I heard he saved a woman and her children not one hundred miles from here,” one old timer said. “He must be faster with a gun than greased lightning. He sneaks up on the bastards and kills every one of them before they can defend themselves, they say.”

“I heard he’s six and one-half feet tall and weighs almost three hundred pounds. The mere sight of the man makes them slavery hooligans pee in their britches,” a second man said.

“Harold, I don’t think a man that size could sneak up on anybody,” Sam Clayborn said. “Where on earth do you hear such things?”

“Heard two men talking about him over at the livery just yesterday. He’s a killer. That’s for sure.”

“Godsent, too!” said Fenton Black.

“I got news for you boys. He’s only about five-foot-ten, and he is about fifty pounds shy of two hundred,” Hank said as he climbed off Bullet and paused to talk to the old-timers.

“Really? Have you seen him?” one asked as he drew hard on a corn cob pipe.

“Yep! Helped him bury two Ruffians north of here up along the Kansas River,” Hank said. “He blew both their heads off and wasn’t one bit sorry about it. Said they had it comin’.”

“You don’t say?” Fenton said.

“I’d like to shake his hand,” Clayborn added.

“If he comes this way, you’ll know him right off. He’s only got

one arm.”

“You’re joshing us,” the smoker stated with a smile.

“No one-armed man could kill that many Ruffians,” Fenton said, not believing a word Hank said.

“Believe what you want,” Walker said as he entered the general store. “Just wanted to set the record straight.”

Henry bought cartridges for his Paterson and some supplies for the trail. He planned to work his way toward the Town of Kansas. It was the largest community west of St. Louis and growing leaps and bounds. It sat smack on the border and spawned much of the Slave State support.

When he exited the store, the three old gents were still chewing the fat on the wooden boardwalk. Walker tipped his hat toward them when he mounted Bullet. That’s when they noticed the empty sleeve of his shirt wave as he climbed into the leather.

“Why all be damned,” the smoker said, taking his pipe from his mouth and blowing a cloud of blue smoke toward his friends.

“What?” asked Fenton.

“That jasper’s only got one arm,” the smoker said.

The other two gossips stared at Walker as he turned his horse and started to ride off.

That’s when Clayborn called out to him, “Hey, mister, hold up!” he said and walked to the edge of the boardwalk.

Walker stopped and turned in his saddle to look at the trio.

“Didn’t you say that vigilante that was sending Ruffians to their grave had only one arm?” he asked.

“That I did, friend,” Hank answered.

“Might you be the man whose bringing justice to the Kansas Territory?”

“No! That I did not say,” Hank replied with a sheepish grin. “Whoever heard of a one-armed gunslinger?”

“You’re probably right. Just thought I would check, though,” Clayton said. He smiled broadly, reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver dollar. He flipped it to the vigilante and said, “Be careful out there, sonny. When you get to wherever you’re goin’, have a drink on us.”

The coin traveled twenty-five feet from the porch to the one-armed stranger. It glistened in the bright sunlight as it flipped end over end toward the vigilante. Walker snatched it from the air with the quickness of a Kansas rattler. He marveled them with his dexterity and let it tumble through his four fingers and into his palm before he jammed it into his pocket.

“Many thanks! I’ll do that when I’m finished,” Walker said. “And you boys keep your rifles handy. Kansas’s gonna get bloody before this is over.”

Walker’s response was closer to the truth than any of the old-timers knew.

CHAPTER 4

Parkville, Missouri was a tiny village located on the banks of the Missouri River and just north of the Town of Kansas. The population and importance of the Town of Kansas grew unchecked throughout the 1840s because it was not far from the start off point for the Oregon, Santa Fe and California trails that led thousands of settlers west. It would later become known as Kansas City.

One of those settlers was Colonel George S. Park, a gentleman of great foresight. After serving under General James Fannin in the Texas War for Independence, he moved northeast to Jackson County and laid claim to a large plot of land next to the Missouri River. He foresaw the growth coming to the Town of Kansas and began developing the land in the 1840s. The first thing he did was build a hotel that served as a stopping point for visitors en route to the western frontier.

That's where Henry Walker headed, in search of the blonde brutes who murdered his family. It was a forty-mile trip from Lawrence to the Town of Kansas and another ten miles north to Parkville. He crossed the border into Missouri with considerable trepidation. He stopped one last time in the Town of Kansas and bought a half-dozen books he stored in his saddle bags. They would be part of the lie he would use to conceal his real reason for traveling to Missouri.

It was a good thing he did, too, because he was stopped by Ruffians several times once he crossed the border. He adopted a meek and quiet demeanor and told anyone who asked he was a teacher, summoned to Parkville by Col. Park.

“If you're from these parts, I'm sure you know or have heard of Col. Park. I served with him in that nasty business down in Texas. It's where I lost my arm,” Henry told one inquiring Ruffian. He raised his stump in the air for emphasis.

The tale gained him peaceful passage and he used it several times.

When he got to the Town of Kansas, he thought about buying a second Paterson with the money he had taken from the men he had killed. Instead, he added one of the new Sharps .59 caliber long rifles to his armory. It hung from his saddle in a sheath behind his right leg. Although unwieldy with one arm, it was loaded and ready to use whenever he might need it.

He didn't converge immediately on Parkville, he traveled farther east, made camp and practiced with the Sharps. It was a large-bore rifle with a heavy projectile. It was accurate from long range, though. He mastered its accuracy immediately but reloading with one hand was difficult. He practiced for two days until his speed improved to a level he considered acceptable. He'd seen men load flintlocks, and he was considerably faster than any of them.

When he felt he was ready to exact justice against the men who had killed his wife and daughter, he climbed aboard Bullet and rode into Parkville.

There wasn't much there other than a sizeable hotel, a tiny church, a livery, a blacksmith shop and a general store. The hotel was overflowing with activity. At least a dozen young men were loitering outside, pitching pennies against the side of the building and passing around a bottle of whiskey. They were laughing and enjoying a summer day on the banks of the Missouri River. Each had red bandanas tied around their necks.

It was one of those bright summer days Walker fell in love with when he first arrived on the Great Plains. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the landscape was as green as a field of corn on his father-in-law's Pennsylvania farm. There was considerable traffic up and down the Missouri, and a slight but refreshing breeze.

Walker went directly to the blacksmith shop to seek information. He wasn't surprised to see a huge African man putting hammer to metal. He lied and told him he thought one of the shoes on Bullet was loose and asked him to look at it.

“Be glad to, mister,” he said and followed Walker out into the street to inspect his roan. He pulled Bullet’s right hind leg up between his knees and inspected the shoe.

“No, sir, I think he’ll be fine for a time,” he said. “Of course, if you’re heading to Cali, like so many others, I’d invest in new shoes now. I can have you fixed up in a couple of hours.”

“No, but thank you. I’m not going far,” Henry said. “I thought I’d stop by the hotel for the night, but it looks like there is a lot of activity over there. What’s going on?”

“Oh, that’s them rough boys,” Lazarus Mast said, “They hang around the hotel and raise hell now and again. They don’t stay long, though. They meet here, I think, and then head over across the border and do some of their dirty work.”

“Dirty work?” Henry pried.

“They want to keep black men in chains and they’s afraid they might lose some of them if Kansas becomes a free state. At least that’s what I’ve overheard.”

“Why’s this Col. Park allow such a thing?”

“The colonel got him some slaves, too. He just ain’t ugly about it like most slave owners. He treats his black folk kindly, sir.”

“I heard he was an educated man,” Henry said.

“That he be.”

“Will that lot over at the hotel be leaving soon? I’m a little worried about walking among them. A man with one arm sometimes is a target for bullies,” Walker said and waved his stump in front of the blacksmith for emphasis.

“I understand. I wouldn’t cotton walking among that pack of wolves. You can probably find a place in Kansas Town or you might ask Sam over at the livery if you and your horse can bed down there. His hayloft is warm, and you wouldn’t be the first traveler to spend the night. If you decide to put new shoes on this roan, I’ll be here until

the sun sets.”

“Thanks for your advice and time,” Henry said. He reached into his pocket, pulled out two bits and flipped it into the air toward Lazarus. The blacksmith reached out a massive paw and let the coin fall gently into his palm.

“Thank you, sir,” he said with a big smile and turned to walk away.

That’s when Henry stopped him for one last question.

“I’m looking for two big blonde men, both about twenty-five years old. Names are Travis and Teddy. Heard they were traveling this way.”

“You some kind of lawman?” Lazarus asked.

“No, but I have a message for them about family back home,” he replied.

“Saw two big boys with yellow hair ride in today. Don’t know no names. You’ll probably find ’em eating over at the hotel,” the blacksmith said.

“I was hoping that was what you were going to say. Thanks again for your help,” Walker said and climbed into his saddle and rode toward the hotel.

Mast watched him and was surprised when he rode right on by the hotel. He wasn’t surprised to see a half-dozen Ruffians give the one-armed man a hard look and hurl a few indignities in his direction.

Hank didn’t recognize any of the faces out front of the Park Hotel and didn’t let the jeers of the rowdies distract him. He carefully sized up the place and loped out of town.

Walker knew there was too many of the Ruffians for him to challenge. So, he hobbled Bullet just around a bend in a spot where there was plenty of green grass. He climbed to the top of a rise that overlooked the Missouri River and gave him a good view of the hotel.

He was glad he did. His lofty perch revealed four outhouses at

the back of the hotel. Suddenly, two doors opened and slammed. Out of the privies stepped two blonde thugs. They were laughing and joking as if they didn't have a care in the world.

Hank's blood simmered and his heart pounded.

It was Travis and Teddy, and his plan of action became crystal clear.

He raced down the hill and led Bullet to the opposite side of the rise where he would be able to disappear into the dense forest without being spotted. Next, he grabbed the Sharps and headed back up. He used his knife to cut a Y-shaped oak branch, secured it in the ground and laid the barrel of the Sharps in its cradle. He laid flat and estimated the distance and breeze. Lastly, he took aim at the outhouses and waited.

He waited for hours. As dusk approached and he was just about ready to give up, a servant walked out of the hotel with four lanterns. He hung each of them on a hook that was positioned next to the door of each privy. Then, he struck a match and lighted them.

"Thank you, Jesus," Walker whispered. "You, too, Col. Park. It's right nice of you to light the way to the outhouses for your guests."

It was approaching midnight and the cool air coming off the Missouri was sending chills through the vigilante. His hands were shaking a little and he wondered if he would be able to get off a decent shot. More importantly, he questioned whether Travis and Teddy would ever return to empty their bladders.

He blew hot air into his cupped hand and rubbed it against his thigh to create some welcomed heat. Then he heard a door open. As sure as Bullet waited for him at the foot of the rise, it was the two men who he hated more than anything in the world.

They were laughing when they entered the two latrines closest to Walker's position.

"Have a good laugh son," he whispered. "It's going to be your last."

His hand became steady and his vision clear.

He waited.

When the first of the Ruffians stepped out of the outside john, Hank moved the Sharps a fraction of an inch and pulled the trigger. The chunk of lead entered Travis' neck and followed a downward trajectory. It exited through his hip. The bullet struck him so hard his dead body bounced and rolled when he hit the ground.

Hank didn't have time to watch the carnage. He jumped to his feet and reloaded. He looked from the Sharps to the line of outhouses and back at the Sharps. He had to move faster.

It seemed to take forever, but in reality it was less than sixty seconds. The next time he looked down the sights of the Sharps, Teddy was kneeling over his brother and searching for where the gunshot had originated.

Hank aimed carefully. Again, he gauged the gentle breeze and compensated for the downward trajectory.

Walker took a deep breath and held it. Then, he pulled the trigger. The huge rifle barked and spit fire.

When Teddy's eyes looked up he saw exactly from where the shot that killed his brother had come. But the flash of the Sharps was the last thing he saw.

The Ruffian's head exploded upon impact. His body somersaulted backward and landed in front of one of the privy doors.

Walker heard a gang of Ruffians emerge from the back of the hotel, but the assassin was long gone from his prone position. He was racing down the hill with the Sharps in his hand and trying to dodge low-hanging branches.

He was never so happy to see his faithful roan waiting for him. He tossed the Sharps into its sheath, climbed into the leather and galloped off into the wilderness.

The Ruffians spread out and searched the small town for signs of the shooter but discovered nothing. Nobody thought to climb the

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hill at the edge of town in the dark of night. It was too late anyway.
The assassin was long gone.

CHAPTER 5

A week after avenging his family's murder, Hank and Bullet were enjoying the warm summer sun as they loped along the Santa Fe Trail, north of Lawrence. He was wandering aimlessly and amusing himself by playing games with the Bobolink that were feeding in the tall prairie grass. When one called out with its one-of-a-kind song, he'd call back with a whoo-who-who of his own.

The day before, he decided it was time to flee bloody Kansas and its horrific memories. He wasn't sure he liked the killing machine he had become. So, it was time to start a new life, and that meant heading west. The Ruffians still were rampaging through border settlements and ranches. In larger numbers, they even began to roust wagon trains of immigrants, who sought the promise of free land to the west on one of three overland pathways — the Oregon, California and Santa Fe Trails.

Hundreds of thousands of settlers crossed the rugged and nearly one-thousand-mile-long Santa Fe Trail in the nineteenth century. The trail began in Independence, Missouri and crossed the territories of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado and finally New Mexico. Settlers came from all parts of America and Europe, drawn to the promise of land that was free for the taking.

All three trails were rutted and besieged by harsh weather, rocky outcroppings and dangerous water crossings. Some settlers walked, others traveled on horseback and the majority came in covered wagons. Often wagons, pulled by oxen, carried all of a family's possessions and broke down along the trail. It didn't take long before the passageway was pockmarked by debris — broken wagons and axels, dead animals and discarded furniture, castoffs by settlers who needed to lighten the loads as their animals succumbed to the constant burden and heat.

As one might suspect, the Santa Fe Trail was not one simple path through the wilderness. At some places it was ten miles wide, because

wagons often deviated from a singular path to hunt, allow their livestock to feed on the rich prairie grass or to avoid the suffocating cloud of dust kicked up by other wagons.

Walker hoped he might be able to hook up with a wagon train and share his knowledge of the pro-slavery renegades. It didn't take him long to happen upon a small group of settlers who would be easy prey for a band of Ruffians. He didn't think twice about reining Bullet in their direction.

He was greeted by wagon master Jeremiah Brown, who rode out to meet him. The settlers, mostly immigrants, had rifles at the ready when he rode up. Obviously, they had heard about the conflict raging along the Kansas-Missouri border and were leery of all approaching riders.

Brown, with his Winchester rifle gripped in one hand and the reins of his stallion in the other, met Walker halfway.

"State your business, mister," Brown declared with a stern look on his face. His only thought was protecting the twelve wagons he was hired to guide.

"I'm just minding my own business," Hank said. "I saw your train from Hogback Ridge. Thought I'd mosey on down and warn you of the Ruffians who have been rampaging through this area."

"You ain't one of 'em are you?" Brown asked, his stern look easing as he noticed the stranger was missing his left arm.

Hank laughed and said, "No, but you'd best keep a close watch on your backtrail; they're a devious and violent bunch. If they sneak up on you, you'll have hell to pay."

"That's what I've heard. It's right kindly of you to warn us, though. We're about to circle up for the night. Would you like to join us for the evening meal? We can discuss these Ruffians at length. I'm interested in learning anything you can share that might keep us safer."

That night around a crackling campfire, Walker related all he

knew about the Ruffians and confessed he had wreaked havoc on their numbers until he found the thugs who had destroyed his family and claimed his left arm. The male travelers — a mix of German, Irish and American settlers — listened intently as Walker warned of the ruthlessness of the attacks.

“I reckon, y’all best move west as quickly as you can,” he said. “The pro-slavery renegades don’t want any abolitionists settling in Kansas. And you’re vulnerable because there are only a dozen wagons in your group.”

“Since when do Americans have to ask permission to travel the Santa Fe Trail?” Brown asked angrily.

“These are violent and tumultuous times,” Walker replied. “My dear wife, Elizabeth, feared the growing animosity would split the country in half. She might have been right, bless her soul. There already are rumblings about the southern states withdrawing from the Union.”

“We’re God fearing,” said Henri Wenz, a German immigrant, in broken English. “We know oppression. But no own slaves in Germania. We come for freedom. That’s all!”

“The Ruffians don’t care. The size of your wagon train will lead them to believe you are aiming to settle in Kansas, and they won’t tolerate it. My guess is they’ll shoot first and ask questions later. You’ll be lucky if there be any of you left when the smoke clears.”

The statement sent tremors of fear through the group. They all grew quiet as the fire crackled and popped, sending sparks into the starlit sky.

A falling star darted across the horizon, noticed first by James Loftus, a farmer from Tennessee.

“Lookee there,” he shouted and pointed. “I think you are wrong, Mr. Walker. Back home they say a falling star is the sign of good fortune. I think we’ll get along just fine.”

“Let me remind you, mister. You ain’t home no more. This is the

Kansas Territory. It's wild, hostile and unforgiving. You can look to the heavens at night, but you best watch for Ruffians during the day."

After much discussion, a large woman stood and made Walker an offer that brought him great pause.

"Will ya hear an honest offer from an honest woman who has done nothing but fight against evil her entire life?" Martha Nielsen said, hands on her broad hips and looking straight at the one-armed guest.

"I'm listening," Hank said.

"Join me and my girls, if you've got nothing better to do," she said. "You'll get three squares a day and if da bloody Ruffians dare to challenge us, I'll fight at your side and shoot any bastard — yellow hair or not — who tries to steal our freedom. I reckon three hands are better than one, and I'd appreciate the help."

The golden-haired woman blushed and stormed off before Walker could answer.

Hank watched her stomp off. She was a large woman. She stood close to six feet tall, had broad shoulders and spoke with a Norwegian accent Walker found enticing. She wore gray long-johns with the sleeves rolled up and the top buttons loose. Her bib overalls strained against her full bosom.

Walker turned to the wagon master and asked, "What's her story?"

"That's Mrs. Nielsen. We fondly refer to her as Big Marta, and she doesn't mind. She's as tough as any man on this train and has suffered greatly since she arrived here from Sweden," Brown said.

"Aye," said Claus Sassmanhausen. "*Sie kann ein Schwein machen, während.*"

"What did he just say?" Walker asked.

Wenz laughed and said, "Old German saying. She make pig whistle. Claus loves big woman."

“Where’s her husband?” Hank asked.

“The consumption got him back in the Carolinas. That’s why she packed up her daughters and decided to go west. Frankly, I’m glad she did. She’s the best cook of the whole bunch. You’d be wise to take her up on her offer.”

Walker immediately decided to investigate.

“If you gentlemen don’t mind, I think I’ll take her up on her offer, at least for tonight. I’ll sleep under her wagon and make sure no harm comes to her or her family. Did you say she has two daughters traveling with her?”

“Two cute blondes,” the wagon master said. “You’ve got my blessing. I’d be right happy if you stayed until we rolled out of Kansas. Another gun hand is always welcome.”

“*Sie ist ein Preis, Bleib unter dem Wagen,*” the German shouted as Walker sauntered off toward the Nielsen wagon.

He stopped and asked, “What did he say?”

“He asked that you stay under the wagon. Claus has taken a liking to Big Marta, I think,” Wenz said and everyone around the campfire laughed. Walker just shook his head and walked away.

Martha had a small cooking fire burning by her wagon. She was pouring a cup of coffee when Hank walked up on her. She handed him the cup and said, “Have you decided to accept my offer, Mr. Walker?”

He nodded his appreciation, sipped the hot brew and said, “I’m not sure, but I’m going to sleep under your wagon tonight if you don’t mind. I’ll keep you and your girls safe. Brown has invited me to tag along with the train until you pass through Kansas. What happens after that, I have no idea. I’m sort of trying to figure that out.”

“Good, you are welcome at this campfire anytime,” she replied with a warm smile. The smile took Walker by surprise. She had remained stoic and stern-faced in the group setting. Her blue eyes twinkled in the firelight and her perfectly white teeth glistened. She

had let her blonde hair down, and it hung long over one shoulder. He was taken by her beauty.

“My little ones, Elizabeth and Kristine, will be glad to have a man around. I have asked much of them on this journey. These western lands are beautiful, but they are hard on a woman and two young girls.”

“What did you say their names were?” Hank asked.

“Elizabeth and Kristine. I call them Lizzy and Krissy. You can, too.”

The names sent emotional tremors through Henry. He hadn't heard anyone say the names of the two people he lost in the Ruffians' attack in more than a year. Nielsen saw the astonishment alter his facial features as he slumped down on the log next to her.

They sat in silence for a long time.

Finally, Martha broke the silence.

“I didn't mean to insinuate you were going to stay with us,” she said. “Sometimes I speak my mind without thinking. I realize you are a man on a mission. Nonetheless, you are welcome. You can stay the night or as long as you want.”

“Oh, it's not that. I appreciate a woman who speaks her mind. My Elizabeth always did, and we made a good team,” Walker said.

Nielsen's eyebrows lifted. She immediately understood his reaction when she mentioned her daughter's name.

“I am sorry you had to lose your family in such a horrible way. Death of a spouse is devastating. I know. I lost my Carl eighteen months ago. It is for him I undertook this journey. If my oldest daughter's name brings you sorrow, you can call her Pumpkin. I do.”

Henry looked at her as he felt water forming in the back of his eyes. He asked, “How old are your girls?”

“Lizzy is seventeen and a pistol. Krissy is thirteen and as lovable

as any child you will meet on this wagon train.”

“My daughter’s name was Kristine,” he confessed. “You’ll have to excuse my reaction. It was more than I expected. I’m normally not the kind to show emotion.”

“Ah, so we stab at your heart twice. I am sorry for your loss,” the blonde beauty said. “If sticking around dredges up memories too horrible to bear, I understand. This is a free country, and you are free to stay or go.”

“No, I think I’ll stay, for a while anyway. I like the idea of making sure the Ruffians bring no harm to Elizabeth and Kristine, as well as their mother,” he said with a big smile. Then, he reached over and grabbed Martha’s large hand. It was strong and had the calluses of a frontier woman.

He took another sip of coffee and added, “I’ll make sure no harm comes to any of us.”

“I thank ya, Mr. Walker. I’d be proud to share our wagon with you for as long as you want. I think it’d be good for both of us.”

Her blue eyes sparkled in the moonlight. So did Henry’s.

CHAPTER 6

Henry couldn't remember the last time he woke up to the smell of coffee brewing or the clatter of a dinner bell. But that was the way of wagon trains on the trails west. Everyone rose before dawn, ate and prepared for the day's journey. There was gear to store, teams of horses and oxen to harness and orders to be issued. Everyone worked together to ensure the train moved out by eight o'clock.

Marta was up early and had coffee brewing over a campfire when the bell rang. Hank wondered how she had exited the wagon without him hearing her movements.

Walker gave her a hand with everything, including harnessing the horses and making sure the girls were prepared for the day's journey. He was like a new man around the young'uns.

Lizzy and Krissy seemed to giggle a lot. It was a sound he enjoyed. Their eyes sparkled when he showed them how he could roll a quarter between his fingers without dropping it. He gave them each two bits and told them to practice while they rode along in the wagon.

"You are too kind, Mr. Walker," Marta said. "Those girls ain't seen two bits in two years. I thank you! Mind you, though, we don't like charity."

"You call that charity, do ya?" he said. "I thought it might be a way to keep the girls amused during the long journey. If they can conquer the trick, I'll give them a dime to play with, and I promise you it has nothing to do with charity."

"And you can do the same trick with a thin dime?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Show me!"

Walker promptly pulled a dime from his pocket and let it roll across his fingers a couple times and smiled when he was finished.

"How did you learn to do that?" Marta asked.

“When I lost my arm, I had to teach myself to become more agile. After years of farming, my fingers were as thick and as cumbersome as logs. Now, they are like willow branches swaying in the wind, and I can do just about anything with one hand most people can do with two.

“Do you want to try it?” he asked and reached the coin out to her.

“Heavens, no! These fingers are good for kneading dough and massaging sore muscles. Nothing else!” she said, wiggling her fingers in front of him.

“As you wish,” he stated and smartly flipped the coin in the air. Before it could land in his outstretched hand, Marta snatched it from midair with amazing quickness and said with a smile, “My fingers are strong, but my hands are quick!”

She dropped the dime into his outstretched palm and called to her daughters, “Let’s get ready to move out, girls. This wagon train will not wait on us.

Hank mounted Bullet as Marta climbed onto the wagon and grabbed hold of the reins.

“I’ll be riding drag today, so I can keep track of stragglers and our backtrail,” Hank said. “I’ll stop by periodically to make sure all is well.”

“We’ll be fine, but you are welcome to check on us if you wish, Mr. Walker.”

“I think you should call me Hank, Marta.”

Her eyes twinkled as she replied, “I’d like that, Hank.”

* * *

RIDING BEHIND A wagon train was no pleasant job. The wagon wheels and cattle kicked up a cloud of dust that could be seen miles away. When the heat of the day arrived, the dust stuck to Hank’s face and hands. Even his horse had a hard time breathing within the dust-filled atmosphere.

Walker rode up to the Nielson wagon and filled his canteen from a barrel that was strapped to its side. He informed Marta he was going to ride a wider path to get out of the dust and promised to have game for their supper that night.

“I think I’ve spotted some prairie chickens or pheasant nesting in the long grass north of us,” he said. “With a little luck, I’ll return with our dinner in a couple of hours. I won’t be far off, though, and the train will never be out of my view.”

“Good luck, Hank,” she said.

Then, he rode off.

The wagon train moved at a slow pace, covering about ten or twelve miles per day. Hank rode a couple miles north and east, looking for game and signs of anyone following them. He was guiding Bullet through a section of tall prairie grass when he scared up a supper.

The grass was long and green. It had a pleasant smell to it and was up to his horse’s chest. Walker didn’t mind Bullet chomping at some of the grass as they plodded along at an easy pace.

Bullet was startled when they flushed the pheasant. Walker wasn’t. With lightning quickness, he pulled his Colt and picked the bird off amid flight. Once he secured the ringneck, he walked back to where he thought the bird’s flight began. Sure enough, he found a nest with three eggs, a special treat for the new women in his life. He smiled, wrapped them in a cloth and hung it with a pigging string from his neck for safe transport.

Before he returned to the wagon train, he changed direction and rode several miles south, scouring the horizon for trouble. He scared up two prairie chickens but succeeded in bringing only one back with him. As he stopped to field dress the bird, he noticed a dust cloud to the southeast of his location. It worried him. It was too small to be another wagon train and too big to be a single rider. Immediately, he worried a gang of Ruffians were in pursuit.

He jumped into his saddle and rode hard back to the train to warn Brown of pending danger.

He stopped by the Nielson wagon to hand supper off to the women before heading to the front of the wagon train, where Brown led the procession.

“Be ready to circle the wagons when the order comes,” he called out to Marta as he rode off.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Trouble!” was all he would say.

He reported his discovery to the wagon master, who promptly ordered the wagons to form a defensive circle, per Hank’s suggestion.

“I’m going to ride out and see if I can get behind them,” Walker said. “Whatever you do, let no one penetrate your perimeter. You won’t see me, but either will they. If they mean to cause trouble, tell your people to shoot to kill.”

CHAPTER 7

Hank rode back to the Nielson wagon as Jeremiah ordered the wagons to halt.

“We’re circling as a precaution,” he yelled to Marta. “I’m going out to see if I can head off what looks to be trouble heading our way. If there is gunfire, make sure the girls stay down and out of sight. Do you have a rifle?”

Marta didn’t say a word, but she reached down below her feet and pulled out a Remington long rifle.

“You know how to use it?” he asked.

“You betcha,” she said.

“I pray you won’t have to,” he said and galloped out in a cloud of dust.

Hank rode a wide arc to make sure he wasn’t spotted as he circled around behind the unidentified riders. When he was close enough to see them, their red bandanas signified their bloody affiliation the anti-abolitionist group and he was sure they hadn’t arrived to welcome the wagon train to Kansas.

The raiders stopped at the top of a rise about a quarter of a mile from the circled wagons. Obviously, they halted to formalize a plan of attack. Hank couldn’t let that happen.

The problem was, there were ten of them. That meant twenty guns to his small personal arsenal. Walker was outnumbered but had the element of surprise on his side. He rubbed the handle of the Colt and felt the hatred boiling up in every vein.

He had two loads of heavy shot in the scattergun, five bullets in his pistol and a knife in his right boot. If he got lucky with the shotgun, at reasonably close range he could take out two or three of them with the pull of one trigger. He’d have to count his Colt to do the rest of

the damage. There would be no room for error.

He worried because he had no military background and such an assault on a large party seemed foolhardy. All he could count on was instinct and the hatred that fueled his actions.

Walker hooked the sheath with his shotgun over the saddle horn so it would be easily accessible, patted Bullet's neck and said, "I'm depending on you to carry me to safety, big boy. Are you ready?"

He advanced slowly from the rear of the ten riders. His only hope was to do enough damage to convince any survivors to abandon their assault on the wagon train. When he was within twenty yards, nobody had noticed him. He pulled the Paterson from the holster on his hip, slipped the reins between his teeth and dug his heels into Bullet's side.

When he attacked, it was without caution. His first five bullets caught victims who were unaware of his approach from behind. He shot two in the back, two in the head and the fifth square in the heart when he turned to mount a defense. By that time, he was shoulder to shoulder with the bad guys. He was close enough to see the sweat on the men's faces. Fortunately, their attention was divided between his assault and their panic-stricken and defiant horses.

With one quick and fluid motion, he holstered his Colt and pulled the shotgun out. He leveled it at the three horsemen to his right and pulled one of the two triggers. Men and horses howled in bloody agony. A cloud of blood sprayed across his field of vision.

He didn't pause to survey the damage; he simply wheeled the barrel on the last outlaws to his left. They had cleared leather and were ready to fire but were struggling to control their prancing mounts. He heard two bullets whiz past his ear. He didn't think. He just pulled the trigger. The scattergun exploded a second time. Fire and shot burst from the shortened barrel, and the Ruffians disappeared in a cloud of cordite.

Hank threw the shotgun into its sheath, hugged Bullet's neck and raced for the safety of the wagon train. The entire assault took no more than fifteen seconds, and ten men were wounded or dead. As he

approached the circled wagons at a full run, he heard Jeremiah yell out, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! It’s Walker.”

Bullet had to jump the tongue of one wagon to make it safely inside the protective circle. Hank reined to a halt, jumped from the saddle and raced to the wagon master’s side with his Colt in his hand and the hammer cocked. He was on adrenalin overload and gave no thought to the fact he had expended all five shots.

“How many are following me?” he asked as he dove behind a wagon wheel.

“Hell, they’re all down, Walker. That’s the damnedest thing I’ve ever seen,” the wagon master said with a shocked look on his face.

“What do you mean?”

“Every cursed man of them is either dead or wounded, I presume.”

“No!”

“Hell, yes! Take a look!”

Hank looked out from behind the wagon and saw eight horses milling atop the knoll but there was not a Ruffian to be seen.

“I count eight horses. Where’s the other two?” he asked.

“They ran off when fire spit from that shotgun of yours. I still can’t believe you did that with only one hand. Most men with two couldn’t have done that.”

“Hate and fear can provide a great catalyst, I believe,” Walker replied and let out a deep breath. “I’m with you, though. I can’t believe I done it either.”

As Hank sat in the dirt, his back against a wagon wheel, every member of the wagon train approached to congratulate him. It made him feel uncomfortable, somewhat embarrassed. He didn’t feel like a hero or like celebrating. He felt empty and wondered what kind of killing machine he had become. He put his face into his hands and

wept.

* * *

BROWN DIDN'T KNOW what to make of the situation. One minute the one-armed vigilante was a mounted terror and the next he was sniveling like a child. He ordered the settlers back to their wagons so Walker could have some space.

“He’s obviously remorseful for taking the lives of those men. Now that the danger has been neutralized, we’ll rest here and restart in the morning. Let’s get some fires started and supper cooking.”

Hank was oblivious to what was said but felt hands helping him to his feet. When he looked to his left, Marta had one of her big arms wrapped around his waist and was guiding him to her wagon.

“You come with Marta, Hank. We’ll fix what ails ya. and have you ready for the trail on the morrow.”

When they got back to the Nielsen wagon, Marta ordered Pumpkin to gather the makings of a cooking fire from the back of the wagon as she sat on the ground and wrapped Hank in her arms. Then, she began to whisper in his ear, her lips so close they almost touched his flesh. Only he could hear as she spoke.

“Marta understands, Henry! She knows what you are feeling. You’ve let hate control your life for long enough. Now, it is time to let it go!”

They sat in silence for some time, rocking back and forth as if they were on a porch swing instead of the hard ground. When Marta felt his tense muscles relax, a Norse tale unfolded from her lips.

“Only you can release the *Nattmara*,” she said. “It is said the *Mara* appear young and beautiful when they first cross your path. But soon the witch reveals her true being — a skinny, old crone dressed in a black nightgown. Our Viking forefathers said she used her black fingernails to claw her way into a man’s mind.

“Once she latches on, she is hard to cast off because of her devious ways. She can turn herself into a mist and slip through the

tiniest openings during the day. At night she has been known to dance on a man's chest while he sleeps and introduce all kinds of horrors to her captives.

“The Vikings cast her out with fire. They placed a molten piece of metal against the temple of a tormented man, causing her to flee and never return. I would not dare to do such a thing, but drink this, *modig hjälte*. Perhaps we can chase the Mara away with a bit of Carl's secret brew.”

Then, she raised a cup to his lips and whispered a tiny verse in his ear as he drank:

“Odin, with this *mästare*,
Forgive our failure.
Cast out the *Nattmara*,
And grant us thy favor.”

As the fiery liquid hit Walker's throat, he began to spit and sputter. He wasn't used to strong drink. The burning liquid did the trick, though. It allowed him to emerge from his morose and become aware of his surroundings, especially the burning sensation in his throat and stomach.

“What the hell was that?” he bellowed and pushed himself from the woman's arms.

“It is an ancient potion, a recipe passed down from my husband's ancestors, who once ruled all of Scandinavia. Carl proudly said it was created by the legendary Ragnar Lothbrok, whose Viking army invaded England in the ninth century.

“Ragnar was the greatest of all Viking warriors. Legend says it was the drink of *mästare*, blessed by Odin himself, that cleared the minds of his brave warriors before battle. I thought it might help you,

too, in the aftermath of your great victory.”

“It’s vile stuff, sure to turn a skunk’s topside black and make me forget my name,” Walker said. “I have no doubt Ragnar’s men fought hard just so they did not have to drink that dreadful stuff again.” He spat onto the dirt in an effort to get the foul taste from his mouth.

Marta laughed and said, “You may not like it, but it had a positive effect. It brought an end to your sorrow, no?”

“What are you talking about?” Hank asked.

“After you disposed of that gang of brigands singlehandedly, you collapsed and sobbed uncontrollably. I have seen men return from war and react the same way. The horrors of taking human life sometimes can be too much for the mightiest of men to bear.”

“Not this man,” Walker replied.

“Good! Then, you will come sit by the cooking fire and talk to me while I prepare our meal. I am planning a feast of roast pheasant this evening, thanks to your hunting skills.”

“I’ll gladly accompany you, but I need to talk with Jeremiah first,” Hank said as the two rose to their feet. “I’ll be back shortly,” he added and sauntered off in search of the wagon master.

He found him at the Wenz wagon, recruiting volunteers to bury the dead. Henri was pulling a shovel from the back of his wagon when Walker showed up.

“I was just going to suggest you send a detail out there to bury the renegades,” Hank said, “but I see you are one step ahead of me. There is a gully the other side. Bury the bastards in one mass grave, which is more than they deserve. There’s no need for the customary reverence. They’re all knocking on the door to hell anyway.”

Henri nodded somberly and joined three others on the detail.

“Did you send someone out to round up their horses?” Walker asked.

“Sure did! I sent Clay and Elyssa Anderson’s son,” Brown said.

“Jake’s seventeen and dying to prove his manhood. He’ll do a good job, hoping to impress you.”

“Me?” Hank said, surprised.

“You’re a hero, pard. What you did out there not only saved lives, but it was something these greenhorns will tell their grandchildren about. You dispensed fire and brimstone unlike anything I have ever seen.”

“Hrumph! I don’t remember much. It all happened in a blur.”

“I’ll bet. Go rest! We’ve got everything in hand. I’ll see you at the Nielsen wagon this evening when I make my rounds.”

“You bet!” Walker said and sauntered off.

As he walked across the open space between the wagons, all eyes watched him. Some were joyful; others were wary. The big German, Sassmanhausen, was envious.

CHAPTER 8

When he got to the Nielsen wagon, he grabbed Krissy and went out to collect firewood for the night and the next day. They always stored at least one day of dry kindling for the next day's fire in case rain left nothing dry to be found.

"Why did you kill those men, Mr. Walker," the inquisitive young girl asked.

"They intended to kill some of us, honey. I couldn't let that happen," he said.

"But the Good Book says, 'Thou shalt not kill,'" she added.

"You are right. But the Holy Bible also says if a thief breaks in at night and man has to strike a fatal blow, he is forgiven," Walker explained.

"Is that what them men was gonna do?" she asked.

"You bet!"

"How did you know? Did God tell you?" she asked innocently.

"No, honey. I recognized them. They were part of the same gang of men who took my arm and left me for dead. I was afraid they were going to do the same thing to the folks of the wagon train."

"You mean they was comin' to kill Mama and us?" she asked with a startled look on her innocent face.

"Those men were heartless. They would have killed everyone, darlin', including me and your ma, given the opportunity," Walker said softly.

"Are you gonna stay and protect us?" she asked as tears began to form in her crystal blue eyes.

"Yes, honey. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure no harm comes to anyone on the wagon train, especially you, your sister and your mama."

Almost before the words escaped his lips, Krissy dropped her armload of firewood and lunged at the one-armed newcomer. She wrapped her arms around his waist, hugged him tight and proclaimed, “Good!”

The young girl’s affection provided a warm feeling for the Walker. Slowly, he was beginning to feel good about himself. The self-loathing he felt after taking so many lives was beginning to dissipate.

By the time he returned to the wagon, Marta and Lizzy had both birds roasting over an open fire. His host was whipping up a yellow concoction in a cast iron Dutch oven. He didn’t invade her space but prayed she was not cooking up more of her special potion.

“These birds are starting to smell wonderful,” Hank called out as he took a seat next to the campfire. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, you just rest a bit. I’ll be there in a minute,” Marta said.

As promised, she finished whipping the contents of the Dutch oven, placed it on the coals and took a seat next to Walker.

“What’s in the pot?” he asked. “I’m hoping it’s not more of that awful brew you poured down my throat earlier.”

Marta laughed and said, “No, it’s something special in honor of your victory over those men who threatened the wagon train.” She had a twinkle in her eye when she said it, and Hank noticed a slight dimple in her right cheek when she smiled.

Sometime during the heat of the day, she had traded her long johns and bib overalls in for a skirt and flannel shirt. She had loosened a couple of buttons on her shirt so that a bit of cleavage caught his eye, too. For the first time in their short friendship, he appreciated her uncanny beauty. Instantly, his thoughts wandered back to Pennsylvania. He wondered what Marta Nielsen might look like in a fine, silk dress and dancing with him at one of the barn celebrations of his youth.

The thought shocked even him. It was the first time since his wife's murder he had thought about another woman. He abandoned the memory, and said, "I don't think we should make a big deal out of what happened. It made quite an impression on Krissy. I think she was worried I might have broken one of the Holy Commandments."

Marta laughed and said, "What do you mean 'might have?' You did! Were you able to explain it to her?"

"Yes, I told her forgiveness is one of God's blessings, and I acted on behalf of everyone on the wagon train."

"Did she accept your explanation?"

"Yes, and I even got a hug for the trouble," he said and smiled proudly.

"You are a strange man, Mr. Walker. One moment you are as fierce as Joshua at the walls of Jericho. The next you are as kind as Mary's Joseph. I hope you stay around for a while."

Hank blushed and poked at the coals with a stick. "You've done a good job raising your girls, Marta," he said. "It's kind of nice being around a family again. I just might remain beneath your wagon if you'll allow it."

"I won't run you off, Henry. And if you bring me pheasant for my fire every night, I might ask you to marry me," Marta said and laughed heartily. She was blushing when she added. "I'm sorry! Sometimes the words slip out before I can stop them."

"I promised Krissy I'd keep you all safe, and I won't renege on my word. As far as marriage is concerned, you deserve only the best, and I fear I am what the people back in Smith Creek called 'damaged goods.'"

"We ain't in Smith Creek no more, Henry Walker. And I have a feeling you are as good a man as any woman could find in these parts. You've got a home here for as long as you want it and no commitment required. Frankly, it's nice having an adult to chat with on occasion. Of course, it's been a couple years since a man brought home

pheasant for supper.”

“Well, I’m as hungry as a grizzly at springtime. Now, tell me what’s in the pot. It smells heavenly.”

“Thanks to you, I’ve made cornbread,” Marta said.

“Me?”

“I negotiated with the Douglas family and traded one of those eggs you found for a cup of goat’s milk. It’s been a long time since me and the girls had milk and eggs to make a proper cornbread. So, thank you, again.”

Marta lifted the lid to show him the campfire delicacy was almost golden brown and ready to come off the coals. The aroma made his mouth water.

“Mrs. Nielson, did you ever hear the saying: ‘The easiest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach?’”

“I believe I have,” she replied and smiled so wide her dimple showed up again.

* * *

THE GIRLS WENT to bed almost immediately after supper. Their journey was difficult for adults, and especially hard on young people who needed rest. The adults generally stayed up later, gathered around a campfire and discussed the trials of the day and what to expect at sunrise.

Marta and Henry did not join the others. They stayed at their own fire and enjoyed each other’s company instead. But it wasn’t long before every member of the wagon train stopped by to thank Walker for his bravery. The vociferous Claus Sassmanhausen was the last to happen by.

He spoke in one- and two-word sentences and waved his arms for emphasis. “Big, little man! Boom! Boom! So good! Proud! Thank you!” the big German shouted. Then he pulled the one-armed man to his feet and kissed each cheek in appreciation. He tried to do the same

with Marta, but she fended him off easily. She felt he was a bit too amorous toward her and did not want the tongues of the closely knit travelers to wag unnecessarily.

When the German strutted back to his wagon, Hank asked, “What the hell was that about? I’ve never been kissed by a man before.”

“I think he likes you,” Marta said with a mischievous smile.

“What?”

“It’s a European thing, a sign of great respect and admiration. Soldiers and warriors are held in high regard in Germany,” Marta explained. “Even during Roman rule, the Germans were a feared enemy. Seeing you kill ten men in the blink of the eye made you his friend for life. He now considers you a brother of sorts, and you may ask anything of him.”

“He has nothing I want,” Walker said with some disdain.

Marta giggled and said, “Aye, maybe so. But it is you who has what he wants.”

“And what is that?” Hank asked.

“Respect, for one thing. You see, he befriends you with the hope a little respect will rub off on him. In his country, he once was a highly regarded businessman. But here he is nothing more than a poor immigrant seeking a new start and free land. He’s no different than the rest of us but maintains a high opinion of himself. That’s why he talks so loud and tries so desperately to choose the right words in English.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, there might be one more thing.”

“What could that be?” Walker asked.

“Me!”

“You? I don’t understand.”

“Since me and the girls joined the train, he has been enamored, flirting and trying to provide for us. I have spurned his overtures. I have little regard for a man so pompous. Now, he is jealous another man shares my wagon,” she said.

“But I do not share your wagon; I sleep under it.”

“You and I know that, but it does not register with the once mighty Claus. I believe he is jealous. So, you should be careful around him.”

“That’s interesting. Thanks for enlightening me. I think I will keep my new brother at arm’s length,” Walker replied and winked at the straight-talking woman.

“And thank you for accepting my offer to join us on this wonderful journey. Perhaps Sassman... hauser... bouser... mouser... will leave us alone now,” she added with contempt in her voice.

“Do not worry, Marta. I will keep my eye on Mr. Sassmanhooter.”

They both laughed and decided it was time for bed, Walker under the wagon and Nielson and her girls inside.

* * *

CLAUS SASSMANHAUSEN was a man of many skills. He was of immense size, six-and-one-half feet tall and weighed more than three hundred pounds. His booming voice carried whenever he spoke. He didn’t mind at all because he reveled in the attention his words attracted. He spoke good English but feigned difficulty. He wanted others to think he had trouble understanding. It was a trait he inherited from his father, Lee Sassmanhausen, a well-respected brewer in Munich.

The family was one of six renown brewers who dominated Munich in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only the family’s beloved *Münchens Beste* and five others were permitted to serve lager at the renown Munich Oktoberfest, and it made the Sassmanhouses one of the richest families in all of Germany.

Claus was the youngest of three children born to Theresa and Lee and a free spirit. His high intelligence allowed him to excel in school and choose whatever occupation caught his fancy. When his size, handsome features and wealth made him a favorite in many social circles, he discovered he could live off his family's wealth and become a charmer of the fairer sex.

Young women were attracted to his fierce bravado, and older — sometimes married — women were enamored by his knowledge of all things and his vast skills. He worked in his father's laboratory, where he dabbled with different fruits, grains and herbs to enhance the family's stout, full-bodied beer. By the time he reached his twenty-eighth birthday, he was considered one of Munich's young lions.

At age thirty-six he was still unmarried but under attack. One of the city's aristocratic daughters accused him of serving her an exotic potion that rendered her unable to resist his charms. She awoke naked and violated the morning after their very first date.

He proclaimed the charges foolhardy and accused the woman of falsehoods when, in fact, it was she who seduced him to her virgin bed. Quickly, Claus became the scourge instead of the toast of town.

When the young woman's brother publicly accused him of rape, the brash Sassmanhausen pulled a pistol from his waistband and shot him dead in front of a dozen witnesses. Fearing prosecution, the German fled the murderous scene, collected whatever valuables he could and sought refuge in Hamburg, a five-hundred-mile trek on horseback. Once there, he boarded a sturdy vessel for the long and arduous journey to the United States.

He set his sights on California, where he understood enterprising men could make a fortune quickly.

CHAPTER 9

As usual, the bell rang an hour before dawn arrived, signaling the beginning of another day of travel for the settlers. Hank already was putting together the makings of a small breakfast fire when Marta walked out, dressed again in her dungarees and long johns. She was twisting her hair and tying it up as she walked toward Walker.

Again, he found the sight of her unsettling. There was something about the way her healthy bosom swayed as she wrestled with her long, blonde hair that made his stomach churn. He smiled, turned away and continued to feed the tiny flames of the fledgling fire.

“Good morning!” she called out to Elyssa Anderson in the neighboring wagon. “Where’s Clay this morning?”

“Meeting with the wagon master. He wanted an accounting this morning of firearms and ammunition in case we ran into any more trouble. We missed you at the fire last night.”

“Sounds like planning went on just fine without me,” the Swede replied. “We’ll be there tonight.”

Next, she turned her attention to Walker and flashed her dimple at him once again.

“Good morning, Mr. Walker. I pray you slept well, and I appreciate your help with the fire.”

“It was a restful night, Mrs. Nielsen. Thank you for asking. I reckon I’ll go hear what Brown has planned for today.”

“And I’ll get some coffee brewing and have breakfast ready when you return,” Marta said.

“I shouldn’t be gone long,” Hank added.

When he stood and turned to walk off, Marta added, “If you are riding drag again today, tell Jeremiah the Nielson wagon will bring up the rear, too.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Walker said. “Why choose to eat dust when you don’t have to?”

“It’s my wagon, and I can choose to do as I wish with it. Besides, if you manage to rustle up another pheasant, I don’t want you sharing it with your new friend, Claus Sassmanclutter,” she said and giggled.

As he walked up on the group of men discussing the day’s travel plans, Claus saw him coming and shouted, “Good morning, Walker. Come! Come! Much Talk!”

Walker nodded to the wagon master but didn’t interrupt his instructions.

“I think we have plenty of weapons and ammunition. As we travel today, I recommend you clean them and make sure all are in working order,” he said. “If you have any problems, bring your concerns to me or Walker.

“Mr. Walker, I trust you know a little something about firearms. Am I right?”

Walker nodded his approval and added, “I’ll guard our backtrail again, and Mrs. Nielsen and her girls have volunteered to ride drag, too.”

“I’m sure you’ll get no complaints from Claus; it was his turn,” Brown replied.

Walker turned to the big German at his side and noted the scowl on his face. It appeared ever so slight and quickly gave way to a deceptive smile of approval. Hank could sense his disapproval.

“Do you anticipate us having any more trouble with the Ruffians?” Herm Douglas asked and turned to Walker for an answer.

“I hope not. Being there was such a large number in the last group, I cannot rightly say. We don’t know if they told others they were coming this way, if they will be missed when they don’t return or if this train has been rumored as an easy target. Everyone should remain alert and do as Jeremiah suggests.”

“The farther we get from Missouri, the better off we will be,” the

wagon master explained. “We may leave the Ruffians behind, but Indians and outlaws lie ahead of us, as I explained at the start of this journey. Everyone should be vigilant. Let’s get rolling in an hour, friends.”

When Hank returned to the Nielsen wagon, the girls were up and warming themselves with coffee, and each had a piece of cornbread left over from the night before. Marta handed Walker a steaming cup of joe and pointed to a frying pan, where one last piece warmed.

“We left you one bit of cornbread, Mr. Walker,” little Krissy said with a smile.

“Thank you for the eggs you found yesterday that allowed Mama to make it. It’s delicious,” added her big sister.

“You’re quite welcome. One never knows what can be discovered while wandering across the prairie,” Hank said and flashed an ominous look at the Swedish woman. “When you walk next to the wagon today, keep your eyes open for surprises.”

Marta noted his look of concern and urged the girls to finish their breakfast and take care of their personal business before the train began moving.

When the girls disappeared on the other side of the wagon, Marta asked, “What’s going on?”

“Jeremiah is worried about more Ruffians coming after us. The sooner we are out of Kansas the better,” he replied and shifted his eyes from hers.

“Agreed!” she said. “What else?”

“Nothing else.”

“Henry Walker, I’m no spring chicken. I know a worried look when I see one. Spit it out!”

He glanced sideways at her and smiled when he saw fire in Marta’s eyes. So, he voiced his concern, as she asked.

“Sassmanpooper didn’t like the idea of you riding drag. It was his turn, and he snarled ever so slightly at the news. I saw it, though. You’re right. He is suspicious or jealous or something. We both should keep our eyes on him.”

“Hrumph! *Den ruttna jävel!*” she muttered under her breath.

“What did you say?” Hank asked.

“I called him a fatherless imp. I apologize,” the hot-blooded woman stated.

“No apology needed.”

* * *

WHEN THE WAGONS pulled out, Hank and Marta were surprised to see Claus hold his wagon back to take up a position at the back of the procession. Neither of them liked the new alignment, but there was nothing they could do about it. Hank winked at the Swedish beauty and kicked Bullet to the east to search their backtrail for any sign of pursuit. He galloped five miles back and then made a wide arc as he returned to the train.

Walker was at least a mile north of the procession when he reappeared. Marta had been watching closely for him and breathed a sigh of relief when he came into view. He waved his hat to signal all was well. A little before noon, the heat began to rise, and dust began to overwhelm the girls. So, she steered her wagon out of the single-file formation and guided her team of horses in a diagonal direction toward where Hank rode Bullet. It gave the girls a break from the dust and brought them closer to their protector.

When Marta reached a point where her schooner was halfway between the train and where Walker rode, she straightened out and continued west across the bumpy and rutted plain. The girls chose to walk beside the wagon instead of enduring the jostling of the uneven ground.

By midday, the sky darkened, and thunder rolled in the distance. Immediately, Walker galloped over to the Nielsen wagon to advise

them of the impending weather. Marta reined the horses to a halt when she saw him approaching at a gallop.

“Everything okay?” she called out as he drew near.

“Yes, but it looks like we’re in for a whopper of a storm,” he warned. He ordered the girls to the back of the wagon and told them to hang on. Next, he jumped off Bullet and said, “Stay close, boy!”

When he climbed into the seat next to Marta and grabbed the reins, she became defensive. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“Protecting you!”

“I’ve handled this team all the way from Independence. I don’t need your help,” she said bluntly.

“You’ve never tried to control a team of horses in a Kansas storm, the likes of which we are driving directly into. I’m hoping Jeremiah circles the wagons soon because all hell is about to break loose.”

“What makes you think...”

Before she could finish the sentence lightning streaked across the sky and struck the ground in front of the wagon train. The sound was deafening, and the already jittery horses bolted forward at a dangerous pace.

“Hang on!” Hank called out as the schooner bounced and tossed across the uneven terrain. The horses were impossible for Hank to stop, however. The reins of a rampaging team required two hands to maintain control. Hank was one short. Finally, he handed the reins to Marta and said, “Pull as hard as you can, woman! I’m going to get the girls.”

The girls were being tossed about like ragdolls in the back. He reached back and caught Krissy by the arm as she was tossed airborne toward the front of the wagon. He pulled her to the front next to her mother and shouted, “Hang on as tight as you can.”

Marta somehow managed to pull the bun from the back of her head so her long hair cascaded over her shoulders. As she struggled to stop the horses, she yelled to her daughter, “Wrap your hands in my hair, darling, and hang on for dear life until I can get these horses stopped!”

Krissy did as she was told, and Marta pulled with all her might and ordered the team to stop. They had a mind of their own, fueled by the tumultuous storm that was worsening by the second.

Hank found Lizzy pinned under a heavy chest and bleeding. He quickly lifted the wardrobe off her leg, and she pulled free. Then, he grabbed her in his arm and told her to hang on as he climbed back into the front of the wagon.

Rain was hammering the riders as the out-of-control wagon headed for a rocky escarpment that marked the edge of a deadly ravine. Marta’s arms and legs were taut. She was fighting with every muscle in her body and chastising the team with Swedish curses. Her efforts were in vain.

Lizzy sat on Hank’s lap and hugged his neck. She screamed in pain each time the wheels of the wagon left the ground and slammed back down on the hard surface. Walker reached out and wrapped an arm around Krissy and shouted to her mother, “It’s hopeless, Marta! We must jump or we’re all going to die.”

“*Inte än!*” she shouted in her native tongue.

“What the hell does that mean?”

”No, damn it!” she barked.

The rain was coming in sheets, making it hard to see how close they were coming to the ravine that most certainly would kill everyone aboard and the horses, too.

“I’m counting to five. Then, I’m jumping with the girls.”

“One! Whatever is in this wagon is not worth dying for.

“Two! The girls need you, Marta!

“Three! You must save yourself!

“Four! I can’t marry you if you are dead, woman!

“Five! Jump now!

Hank leaped from the wagon with one girl wrapped around his neck and the other secured tightly in his arm. It felt like he was jumping into a raging waterfall. Sheets of rain hampered his vision. He hoped it would help cushion their fall.

The minute his feet hit the ground, he released Krissy and shouted for Lizzy to let go. He was afraid of crushing the two teenagers when he landed. Unlike their well-defined mother, both girls were thin and fragile.

Somehow Lizzy heard him and obeyed. They all rolled and tumbled in the wet, long grass. The thunder in the sky roared as if it had won the first round of a rugged fight.

Seconds later Hank heard the horses cry out in agony as the wagon crashed over the rocky embankment and tumbled down the steep decline.

“M-A-R-T-A!” he called out in anguish while praying the stubborn Swede had heard his plea and jumped to safety. It was raining so hard he could not see three feet in front of his face.

He found the girls unharmed and reunited them, instructing Krissy to comfort Lizzy, whose leg was still bleeding.

“You two wait here,” he shouted above the roar of the intense storm. “I have to find your mother.”

He immediately raced to the edge of the ravine and strained to see the damage. The wagon was lying on its side and the family’s belongings were strewn across the prairie. The horses were still running toward the western horizon.

Again, he called to the stubborn Swede but this time with more sorrow than rage in his voice.

“M-A-R-T-A! N-o-o-o-o!”

He fell to his knees in torment. He knew no one could have survived such a catastrophic crash.

Why me? Why must death be my constant companion?

Every bone in his body ached as he raised to his feet and glanced at the Nielsen girls. They were now his responsibility because the stubborn woman refused to jump to safety.

He was walking sorrowfully toward them when he thought he heard a sound. Or was it just the rain pounding on the rocks?

Then, he heard it again.

It was Marta!

Hank turned and ran to the other side of the rocky escarpment and there she was.

She was covered in grass and dirt. Her clothing was soaking wet and her long blonde hair was plastered to her cheeks and shoulders.

He ran to her, feeling a greater joy than he had in a very long time. She had jumped after all.

Her chest heaved from exertion, but she managed to smile at him as he stood over her.

“Were you trying to give me a heart attack, woman?” he chastised when he saw she was unhurt.

“No!” she replied as she sat up. “Twas the damned horses that nearly killed us all. How are the girls?”

“Bruised and worried about their mother,” he said with his hands on his hips and a look of contempt on his face. “One day your stubbornness is going to get us all killed.”

“Oh, shad up and help me up!” she said, shaking water from her golden locks.

He reached his hand out and pulled her hard to her feet. Her whole body slammed against him, and she had to wrap her arms

around his neck to keep him from careening over backward.

Their lips were inches apart and rain was still falling but with less intensity.

“Thank you, Mr. Walker,” she said and planted a kiss on him that was so passionate he almost toppled over anyway.

“What the hell was that for?” he asked, startled but pleased.

“It was for saving my life and the lives of my girls!” she said and released him.

“You could have decided to jump a little bit sooner, ya know, Mrs. Nielsen. When I said five you still were tugging on those reins.”

“Oh, I decided to jump on four,” she said. “It took me until five to get my hands untangled from the reins.”

“You could have said something, so we might have known you jumped instead of going over the edge to your death.”

“I said, ‘I do!’ she added. “Did you not hear me?”

“‘I do?’ What the hell does that mean?” a bewildered Walker asked as they walked toward the girls and the rain began to slow.

“I distinctly remember you proposing to me on four,” Marta explained.

“I did not! Are you sure you didn’t hit your head on the fall, woman?”

“Don’t act dumb, Henry. You spoke from your heart, and I’m holding you to it. We make one heck of a team,” she said and kissed his cheek.

He wrapped his arm in hers, smiled and said, “I’ll have to search my memory for what exactly I said in the heat of such mounting danger, and I’ll let you know. In the meantime, you should know you are the most stubborn woman I have ever met. At the same time, you can be beautifully persuasive.”

“Oh, you have no idea, Mr. Walker.”

CHAPTER 10

Walker climbed down the ravine to inspect the damage to the Nielsen wagon. Lizzy's leg injury wasn't nearly as bad as it looked because the rain increased the flow of blood. Marta wore a kerchief around each wrist to keep the sweat from her hands and for just such emergencies. She wrapped the wound in one of them and pulled her daughter to her feet.

"Can you walk on it, sweetie," her mother asked.

Lizzy took a couple steps and grimaced. Nonetheless, she nodded that she was okay.

Marta heard horses' hooves splashing through the prairie and turned to see young Jake Anderson riding up with two horses in tow. He jumped from his mount and turned his attention immediately to Lizzy.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a worried look on his face. "I thought for sure those dang horses were going to carry you right over the cliff."

Lizzy, tall for her age, stood up straight and grinned warmly at the young boy. They had become friends over the last couple months, Jake was about a year older at seventeen and handsome.

"We're fine. Mr. Walker saved us," she said.

"We just got the wagons circled up when that storm hit," Anderson said. "I saw you headed for the ravine and prayed everyone jumped to safety. We could not see anything through the downpour. Where is Mr. Walker?"

"He went down to check on the condition of the wagon," Marta said. "Glad you brought a couple horses. We'll probably need them to get the wagon back on its wheels."

"I brought the horses for you and Krissy," Jake said. "I figured

you'd want to ride back to the wagon train. Mama has coffee and blankets waiting on you. Mr. Brown is organizing a work party to help with your wagon and that German feller is making room for you in his schooner."

"I'll just bet he is," Marta said with distain. "I'm going to stay here with the wagon. Would you be so kind to escort my girls back to the wagon train, Jake? Tell your mama, I'm beholdng to her. We'll come in before nightfall, I reckon. It all depends how seriously our wagon is damaged."

Just then, Walker appeared at the top of the embankment. He was shaking his head as he walked toward Jake and the girls.

"What's the damage, Hank?" Marta immediately asked.

"The wagon survived surprisingly well," he said. "The tongue and double tree got busted up pretty good and will have to be replaced. That will take a couple of days. The hardest part is going to be getting the wagon back up on its wheels."

"Pa and a work party should be here soon, Mr. Walker. If my Pa can't fix your wagon, nobody can," Jake said. "We're just glad Lizzy and y'all survived.

Hank looked at Marta with a smile. She raised her eyebrows in response. They both suddenly realized the Anderson boy had developed a sweet spot for the oldest of the two Nielsen girls.

"Well let's get at it," Marta said. "Now that the damn rain has stopped, we've got a mess to clean up."

Marta hugged Lizzy and Krissy and promised to return shortly. She led Krissy to one horse and was about to help Lizzy aboard the other when Jake intervened.

"That other horse is for you, Mrs. Nielsen. Lizzy can ride with me," he said and helped her aboard his palomino.

"That's very thoughtful, Jake. Ride slowly with my girls," she order. "And, Pumpkin, make sure you thank Mrs. Anderson for her kindness. We will see you soon."

* * *

WHEN MARTA FIRST set eyes on the damaged wagon, she was shocked any of them had survived.

“What a mess,” she said as a work party showed up. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to gather up some of our belongings while you men survey the damage.

By the time the sun began its afternoon retreat across the horizon, Jake had located the Nielsen’s prodigal horses and the men had the wagon upright. Clay Anderson felled a nearby oak that would provide the lumber to shape a new tongue and doubletree. He explained the process to Hank and Marta and left them with an axe, saw, spud and drill.

“I’ll carve the pegs that will hold the two pieces together tonight and have them ready for you in the morning,” he said. “I figure you have a couple of days work ahead of you.”

“We’ll rest here for a day and then move on,” the wagon master said. “That storm was a gulley-washer, and the trail will be too wet to travel tomorrow. That will put you a day behind us, but you should be able to catch up quickly, given Marta here knows how to handle a team on the run.”

“Real funny, Jeremiah!” Marta said with a big grin. “I have half a mind to tell Hank to shoot them ornery horses. They about killed us all.”

“Don’t blame the horses,” Herm Douglas said. “We all had our hands full when the thunder and lightning struck. I ain’t never seen anything like it.”

“Thanks for your help, everyone,” Walker said as the work party prepared to return to the wagon train.

“Will your missus watch over my girls tonight?” Marta asked. “We’ve got a passel of clean up to do here.”

“Of course. Don’t worry about them. Elyssa loves both of them.

She's probably spoiling them rotten as we speak," Anderson replied.

"We'll camp out here for the night," Hank said. "Like Marta said, there's lots of work to be done. We don't want to be separated from the train for too long."

"I don't like it, but do what you must," Jeremiah said. "If you need anything, fire off your pistol and I'll come a runnin'."

Once they were alone, Henry and Marta went back to work, Walker carving wood and the Swede continuing to gather up the scattered contents of their wagon.

* * *

SOMEWHERE AROUND midnight the two gave out, sore from the near-death experience and bone tired from hard work. Hank had the doubletree just about completed to Clay Anderson's specifications. It was hard work with only one hand, but he persevered. Part of the time he balanced the three-foot piece of lumber between his feet and whacked at it with the ax. Marta purposely stayed away because she could tell he was determined to complete the crossbar even if it cost him a couple toes. She remained focused on restoring the contents of their wagon. She had stored away about half and had most of the soaked clothing strewn about on lines, hung between trees to dry.

By the time the moon was directly overhead, they tried to warm themselves by the fire, but it was hopeless. Their clothing was still damp from the storm, and the cool evening temperatures had them shivering.

Walker wrapped his bedroll around their shoulders, but it wasn't enough to keep either of them warm. Marta's teeth were chattering, and her lips had turned blue when she finally made the decision to retreat to the wagon.

"I can't take this any longer, Hank," she said. "The air is damp and cold from the storm, making my wet clothing feel like ice against my skin. We've got to get out of these wet clothes."

"Come with me. I've got one dry blanket in the wagon and there

is enough space for us to sleep under the canopy. It has to be warmer than this.”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the back of the wagon. She climbed in and he followed. Everything she had retrieved was stacked haphazardly in the schooner, leaving only a small spot for the two of them to recline.

“Um, that spot is barely big enough for the girls,” Hank said. “There is no way the two of us can...”

With trembling hands, she reached for his shirt and began unfastening the buttons and said, “Just shad up and get out of those wet clothes. We’re two adults, who are about to freeze to death. That small space will help us keep each other warm.”

“What? You mean...”

“Yes, Mr. Walker, we’re going to snuggle and keep each other warm, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to undress you when I’m shaking like a leaf. Get on with it; strip for God’s sake.”

Then, she turned her back and shed her clothing so quickly, he was still gawking at her with his mouth agape.

Naked as the day she was born, Marta put his bedroll down on the wooden floor of the wagon and covered herself in the heavy down quilt she had brought all the way from Sweden. He was still standing and staring, half-dressed and stunned by the brazenness of the woman.

Her dimple returned when she pulled the blanket back and said, “Well, are you going to join me or stand there like a dad-blame fool?”

When he saw the wonders of her ivory white skin, he couldn’t resist. Henry Walker shed his clothing and climbed beneath the quilt without worrying where he discarded them.

The heat generated by their bodies and the softness of Marta’s lips allowed them to stay warm throughout the night. It also forged a new and intimate bond in their relationship.

CHAPTER 11

The bell ringing to awaken the wagon train participants, echoed across the prairie and stirred the new lovers within their cocoon. Still warm and locked in each other's arms, neither wanted to be the first to surrender to the wake-up call.

"Don't move!" Marta ordered. "That bell tolls for those who are within the wagons' circle. We are far removed."

"Why Mrs. Nielsen, are you suggesting we remain naked for longer than necessary," Hank said with a smile and kissed her forehead.

"I'm saying I'm more comfortable than I have been in several years, and I'm not ready to give in to Jeremiah's confounded bell just yet. We ain't going nowhere!"

"Well, I am," he replied. "One of us has to build up the campfire, and I'm volunteering. You stay here. I'll take some of our clothing out there and stretch them out next to the fire. Maybe by the time the sun comes up, they'll be toasty and warm."

"But Henry..."

He kissed her to shut her up and slipped out from beneath the warm blanket. "I'll be back in ten minutes," he said and slipped out the back of the wagon.

Marta wondered how such a violent man could kiss so gently as she watched his bare backside slip over the railing of the schooner. She pulled the blanket over her nose and waited patiently.

Walker's teeth were chattering by the time he returned to their love nest. Marta had slipped off to sleep again when he slid under the blanket and reached for her with a hand that felt like an ice cube.

"Holy mother of God!" she screeched, aroused by his icy touch. "Did it snow overnight, Henry?"

"Of course not."

“Ya could have fooled me. You’re colder than a grave digger in January. Come here and let Marta warm you up, darling.”

It was an offer Hank could not refuse.

The two must have quickly fallen back asleep, because the next thing they heard was Claus Sassmanhausen trumpeting their names from outside the wagon.

“Marta! Walker! Where are you?” he barked.

Of course, the two lovebirds were startled and concerned. The last thing they wanted was to be caught in what many would consider and adulterous act when they were supposed to be repairing their prairie schooner.

“Of all the dad-blamed, idiotic, big-mouth no-accounts to come calling in the morning, it would have to be Sassmanhawker,” Walker proclaimed.

Marta giggled and said, “What should we do?”

“We don’t have a lot of choices. I’ll go see what he wants,” Hank said.

“But our clothes are stretched out next to fire. You don’t intend to walk out there stark naked do you?” Marta asked.

That was when Claus called out a second time. His voice was a bit louder and gruff because he had spotted the couple’s clothing lying next to the campfire. The German was enraged.

“Walker! Come out! I demand it!” he shouted.

“This ends today!” Henry spat with anger and determination on his face. “I’m going to teach that braggadocious bastard a lesson he won’t forget. Where’s my gun?”

“Your holster is over there on the hope chest,” Marta said.

Hank shucked off the blanket, reached for his holster and took a kneeling position in front of the woman he intended to marry one day.

Marta was laughing at the sight of him struggling to buckle the ice-cold holster around his waist. When he had it hooked, she reached over and buckled the strap around his thigh and asked, “What on earth are you planning to do?”

“It depends on Sassmanhanger, but I guarantee he’s going to learn not to bother us again,” he said.

Marta was still laughing when he strutted to the exit. Her joy with the situation made him even angrier.

“What in God’s name is so funny?” he chastised.

“You are an unpredictable, beautiful man. Be careful and don’t accidentally shoot off anything I especially enjoyed last night.” Then, she fell backward and bellylaughed.

The German, still seated atop his horse, was shocked when Walker jumped from the back of the wagon stark naked. He couldn’t believe the audacity of the uncivilized man. He stuttered and spit and had trouble speaking. Finally, he shouted, “*Ich glaub mich knutscht ein Elch!*”

Henry had no idea what the German said and was too angry to care. He was hotter than a groundhog caught in a buffalo stampede.

“W-W-What mean this?” the German barked and waved his hand at Walker. His face was beet red and it wasn’t from the morning’s chill.

“You woke me from a sound sleep, you blasted Hun!” Henry shouted.

“*In Deutschland...*” the German started and stopped because Walker interrupted him.

“If you haven’t noticed, you’re not in your country, Claus. This is my country. What is it you could possibly want at this hour?” Henry said, staring up at the German with his only hand hovered above the handle of his Paterson revolver. His ugly stump was waving angrily in the air when he added, “And tell me in English, damnit!

“I come. Check Marta,” he said, flabbergasted.

“I’m here. She doesn’t need you checking on her, Sassmanshitter!” Walker shouted.

The loud voices were making Claus’ big stallion nervous and it began to prance. “Damn you,” he said as he tried to get the steed under control. “Get clothes!”

“Not until I teach you a lesson,” the gunfighter said sternly.

He pulled his pistol, twirled it twice on his index finger and fired a bullet between the hooves of the big black stallion. The horse reared and toppled the German off and onto his back.

He landed hard and growled, “*Marta, ist meine Frau!*”

Hank marched to him, straddled his torso and lowered the pistol to within six inches of his nose.

Sassmanhausen’s eyes grew to the size of pie plates as he stared into the black barrel of the Colt revolver. Never had he been in such a compromising position. He didn’t know if the angry cowboy was going to empty his pistol or his bladder.

“Who do you think you are barging in on us like this? The last man who woke me up like that is six feet in the ground,” he lied and smiled.

Nielsen emerged from the wagon, wrapped in the warm blanket, when she heard Hank’s voice turn threatening.

“Calm down, Henry!” she called out.

“Do you know what he just said?” Hank asked her.

“Yes! I think he was claiming me as his woman,” she replied.

Walker lowered the revolver so the barrel rested against the German’s bulbous nose and said, “She ain’t your woman, big man. So, get that out of your head before I put a hole in it with one of these bullets.”

Sassmanhausen was red-faced, confused and unable to reply. Finally, he managed to say: “*Dafür wirst du sterben.*”

“English, fat man!” Hank ordered and pulled back the hammer.

“Me! Kill! You!” he said with contempt and anger.

Walker’s mouth was an angry gash. His teeth grinded. Marta grabbed his arm and said, “Don’t shoot him, Henry. He’s done nothing but make a fool of himself.”

“Go, and leave me and mine alone,” Marta shouted at the man and pulled Hank away. “Next time, I let him kill you.”

“We! See! That!” he said boldly, but his voice was trembling. His eyes were dark and deadly.

As the German stared angrily at the Swedish beauty, Hank handed him the reins of his stallion and said, “Get out of here! You are not welcome anywhere near this wagon!”

Sitting proudly atop his stallion, Claus cantered off, muttering in his native tongue. Vengeance filled his heart.

* * *

“THANKS FOR STOPPING me from killing him,” Hank said. “I don’t know what got into me. I was so furious, I could have pulled that trigger and not thought twice about it.”

“It would have been murder, Henry,” she replied. “He was defenseless. You stormed out of the wagon, intending to teach him a lesson. You did that. I don’t think he will bother us anymore.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” he replied as they walked toward the campfire to retrieve their warm clothing. When Hank had the final button snapped, he heard more horses coming their way. It was Brown and Anderson.

“What happened out here?” Jeremiah asked immediately. “We heard a shot and Claus was muttering in German. I couldn’t understand a word he was saying.”

“Sassmanhausen came out here to claim Marta as his woman,” Walker explained. “I convinced him otherwise.”

“He’s a pompous ass!” Marta blurted out to everyone’s surprise.

“He’s lucky to be alive.”

“I don’t condone violence between the settlers on my wagon train,” Brown said sternly. “I’ll need to get the German’s take on what happened. We’ll discuss it around the campfire tonight. I respect both of you, but there could be ramifications from this.”

“Ramifications?” Marta howled. “That fat skunk has been pestering me since the day the girls and I joined the train.”

“She’s right, Jeremiah,” Anderson said. “He’s a pompous ass and, from what I could see, suffered nary a scratch from this dustup. I’ll stand with Marta and Hank on this one.”

“It’ll be up to the rest of the wagon train to decide,” Brown said and nudged his horse back toward the circled wagons.

CHAPTER 12

Given Brown's concern over the incident between Walker and the German, Anderson rushed back with the dowels he whittled to secure the doubletree to the tongue and decided to stay and help Walker with the carpentry.

The men were working on the tongue when young Jake rode up at noon with word of growing dissent among the settlers.

"Pa, what happened out here?" the seventeen-year-old asked. "That German fella is saying he was attacked when he came out here to help Mrs. Nielsen. He's getting people all riled up. Ma says she thinks there will be a vote for sanction tonight."

"Damn! That's not good, folks!" Clay said. "The mere suggestion that a vote is going to take place means he has a majority on his side."

"That good-for-nothing scallywag," Marta blurted out.

"This is all my fault," Henry said. "I'll ride in and talk to Jeremiah."

"Brown has nothing to do with it, Hank. He doesn't even get a vote unless there is a tie," Anderson added.

"Ma's taking up your defense," Jake added. "She doesn't want to see you leave the train, and neither do I. Lizzy is the only friend I've got out here."

"That's my Elyssa. She's a fighter," Clay said. "But you know what they say about a voice in the wilderness. Not everybody hears it."

"I can't believe this is happening," Marta said and threw her hands in the air in frustration. "I haven't had a cross word with anyone other than Claus since joining the train."

"It's not you, Marta," Hank reasoned. "It's me. I'm sorry."

“Just a week ago, you saved us all from hardship and possible death, Henry,” she replied. “I can’t believe they are turning on you.”

“That’s at the heart of it,” Clay commented. “Nobody pays much attention to the big German, but you got their attention when you gunned down that gang of Ruffians, Hank. While being appreciative, most of those people are afraid of you. They’ve never seen such fury.”

“I understand that. They don’t have to take a vote. I’ll leave the train willingly as soon as we get Marta’s wagon repaired,” Hank offered.

“No, you won’t do anything of the kind, Henry Walker,” Marta barked, grabbing him by the arm and spinning him toward her. “I ain’t letting you take the blame for this. We’re a team. If you leave; me and the girls are leaving, too. I’ll be damned if I’ll let those people dictate my future.

Walker grabbed her hand, squeezed it and said, “I know, but...”

“No buts about it!” she proclaimed. “Stop flapping your jaws and get this rig fixed. We’re striking out on our own in the morning. To hell with that ungrateful wagon train.”

“I guess we were just given our marching orders,” Clay said with a big grin. “Let’s get busy. A couple of more hours and we’ll have this doubletree and tongue back together.”

* * *

CLAY AND JAKE returned to the wagon train when the tongue was repaired. They were in time for supper and joined the gathering around the campfire for the crucial vote.

Jeremiah, as wagon master, introduced the case and reason for concern, based on Sassmanhausen’s complaint against Walker. It wasn’t as if it was a secret. Everyone in the wagon train heard the gunshot echo through the prairie. Henri Wenz spoke on behalf of the complainant because his friend, Claus, still was too shaken up to describe the incident in passable English.

“This very simple,” Wenz said. “Claus go to help broken wagon. Caught one-arm gunman and Swede in carnal state. He angry for interruption. Shoot at Claus and threaten to kill. Not right. No belong.”

Several travelers had questions. Wenz answered after conferring with Claus. When he revealed Walker’s shot caused the German to be thrown off his horse and could have caused serious injury, the gathering seemed to understand. When he explained the hero of the outlaw attack made his threats while standing over Claus without clothing, the listeners gasped. It sealed Walker’s fate.

With Elyssa at his side, Clay voiced his support for the outcasts, but it was to no avail. Walker, a hero turned villain, was banished.

“That means we’ll lose the Nielsen wagon,” Clay explained.

“No! Marta no leave,” the German shouted angrily. “Me. Talk.”

“Suddenly you have recovered from your trauma, aye,” Clay said sarcastically. “I think this proves what we all know. This overbearing jackal is enamored with Mrs. Nielsen. He went to that wagon, not to help but to woo a woman who has befriended every member of this wagon train.”

“You! Wrong!” Sassmanhausen shouted.

“I think you’ve talked enough, Claus,” Clay replied. “I suggest you stay away from the Nielsen wagon if you know what’s good for you. You’re not welcome there.”

Elyssa didn’t like anyone contradicting her man and wheeled on the big German. Before her husband could rein her in, she spat at his feet and snarled, “You self-righteous ass! If you go near those folks, I’ll shoot you!”

Claus laughed and said, “No fear woman. You make joke!”

Anderson spun and placed the barrel of his rifle under the German’s chin and said, “This is no joke, and you will show my wife respect!”

Claus smiled smugly. He knew Anderson would not pull the

trigger. Then, he smirked and muttered in German, “*Bringen Sie Ihrer Frau bei, sich zu benehmen.*”

Clay was angry and he became angrier when he had no idea what the troublemaker said. He looked at Wenz, who was seated next to Sassmanhausen, and demanded, “What did he just say?”

Wenz, a meek and kindly member of the wagon train, shook his head and looked away. It was obvious he didn’t want to answer.

Anderson shouted, “Tell me!”

“Speak up, Henri,” the wagon master said. “This is no time to be shy. I’d like to know what Claus said, too.”

“He said you should teach your wife to behave,” Wenz said and hung his head shamefully. He knew the words would only enflame the situation.

Anderson pushed the barrel of his rifle harder into the chest of the antagonist and said, “You ignorant blowhard. I oughta...

Brown jumped to his feet and pulled Clay and Elyssa away from the German, who was still smiling and showed no fear.

“That’s enough!” he shouted

“Yes, it is,” Clay replied, still seething mad. “Me and my family are leaving the wagon train, too. We’ll not travel another mile with the likes of this worthless Hun.”

“Both of you should cool down,” Brown said. “Don’t make any foolish decisions in the heat of anger. What you do in the morning is your business. This train will leave at dawn, as usual. All should be ready. Now, this meeting is adjourned.”

Everyone sat in awe of the caustic exchange. Clay and Elyssa stormed off to their wagon without saying another word.

Claus pulled a decanter from his pocket and said, “Now, we share drink.” He took a long pull and passed the flask to his friend, Wenz. Henri rejected the offer, shook his head in dismay and left the

gathering, along with everyone else.

* * *

WHEN DAWN ARRIVED, Marta and Hank rode on horseback to the wagon train to retrieve the girls, who had been staying with the Andersons while they made repairs. They were surprised when their friends' wagon pulled out of the circle and headed their way.

“Look at that,” Walker said. “The Anderson wagon has pulled out early and they are heading our way. Clay must have forgotten we planned to ride in and get the girls.”

“It was so nice of Elyssa to keep them while we made repairs, but they didn't have to come this way to return them. Why didn't they just send them out with Jake?” Marta said as they kicked their horses into a canter.

Elyssa and Clay greeted them with smiles, as did the children who were riding alongside the wagon with Jake.

Marta humbly scolded the couple for going out of their way to return the girls. “You must have known I wouldn't let you leave with them. Hank told Clay we'd be by early.”

“Last night, we decided we didn't like the company of the wagon train any longer,” Elyssa said. “We thought we might join you, if you'll have us.”

“*Ah herre gud!* Why would you do that?” Marta asked with a shocked look.

“The German got under my skin, and I almost blew his head off at the meeting last night,” Clay said. “So, I figured it is best to separate. If you don't want the company, we understand.”

“Don't be silly,” Walker said. “We are better off traveling together than separately. I'm sorry! This disruption is my fault. I lost my temper and Sassmancrapper happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Everybody laughed, and Krissy was the first one to speak up and say, “I don't think that's his name, Mr. Walker.”

“It was a joke, honey,” Marta said.

“Oh!”

“And he’s one person we all want to forget about,” Jake added.

“Hear! Hear!” said his father. “How has the new tongue worked out, Hank. Are you ready to move out today or do you need additional help? You know what they say, three hands are better than one.”

Elyssa elbowed her husband and said, “Everyone seems to be in a joking mood today. I apologize for my husband. Some things should be hands off!”

Walker smiled, raised his stump and said, “I think that was his point. It’s already off.”

Marta flailed at the gunfighter with her hand and said “That’s enough! We were just getting ready to have breakfast. We’ve got coffee brewing. Why don’t you join us, and we can decide what to do next?”

* * *

THE COMPANION WAGONS were careful as they charted their next move. The direction of their travel was most important. As long as they were still in Kansas, settlers risked attack by all kinds of outlaws, as well as the Ruffians. Outside of the Kansas Territory, Indian attacks could be added to the mix.

“As you know, I’ve been riding drag for the past week or more,” Hank explained. “I have no idea what is ahead, but I can tell you what I know of the trail behind us. I’ve seen the tracks of wagon wheels three and four miles to the north. There is no set path for this Santa Fe Trail. I suggest we choose a set of tracks that are a good distance from our friends in the Brown wagon train and travel at our own pace.”

Anderson whistled at the revelation and said, “I suggest we stay at least a mile north of our friends. There is no sense eating their dust or moving at their pace.”

“I’ll leave that up to you, Clay. You lead the way, and we’ll follow,” Hank suggested. “Me and Bullet will continue to ride our perimeter to make sure we all are safe. I’ll also try to scare up game for our evening meal and scout out locations where we can find fresh water.”

“Pa, could I ride along with Mr. Walker on occasion. I’d love to learn more about the prairie,” Jake asked.

“That’s up to Hank,” his father replied.

“I’d welcome the company, son,” Walker said. “It gets hot and lonely out there sometimes. I’ll gladly teach you what little I know.”

They moved out at around noon, heading westward under an azure sky and a brilliant sun. The heat got oppressive but had cooled by the time they stopped for supper at around seven o’clock. They were about four miles behind the Brown procession and two miles north. Everyone agreed the less they saw of the Brown train the better it would be.

The only thing that changed was the sleeping arrangements. Marta joined Hank under the wagon instead of inside with the girls. She didn’t want him to catch cold, and he was happy to have her warm company.

CHAPTER 13

It was the middle of their fourth night on their own, Hank awoke with a start. He thought he heard something out in the tall grass and nothingness that cloaked the Kansas wilderness. Clouds had cast a blanket over the moon and stars. So, the prairie was shrouded in an inky darkness. The campfire that burned between the two wagons still flamed and cast its yellow glow against the white canvas coverings of the two schooners.

Generally, they traveled under azure skies and high cirrus clouds for a far as the eye could see. That made for clear, crisp nights and starry skies. The cloudy skies kept the air warmer. The insects that were attracted to the tall grass hummed in a nightly chorus the travelers were accustomed to and acted as a backdrop to the natural sounds of the wild — the occasional howls of coyote and the cries of winged predators of the night.

The sound Walker heard was different, perhaps human. At least he was pretty sure a human was about. He thought he heard a horse stamp its hooves in the distance and a voice mumble something. He immediately pulled his arm out from around Marta and grabbed his rifle. He rolled onto his stomach and slipped the rifle into the “Y” stand he always drove into the ground just above where his head rested. It made it easy for him to defend the wagon if anyone or anything snuck up on them in the middle of the night.

He slipped the barrel of his Sharps into the “Y” and surveyed the landscape. He laid his Paterson on the ground beside it and released the safety so his finger rested against the trigger. If anything moved, he was ready to shoot.

“What is it, Henry?” Marta whispered.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Someone is out there, though. I feel it in the pit of my stomach.”

“Do you think it is Indians?” she asked and her voice trembled a

little.

“I wouldn’t have heard an Indian,” he said. “I’ve got the feeling somebody is spying on us.”

“Nej! Det kan inte vara.”

“What?”

“It cannot be,” she repeated in English. “Who would want to spy on us? Outlaws?”

“Two wagons in the middle of nowhere make an easy target,” he said.

“Hrumph!”

“Go up top and sleep with the girls. I’ll stand guard down here and make sure nobody sneaks up on us. You make sure the girls are safe.”

“Should I go warn the Andersons?” she asked.

“No! There is no need to interrupt everyone’s sleep because I’m jumpy.”

“I’ll stay with you, make you less jumpy,” she said and curled up next to him. She kissed his cheek and smiled as if there was nowhere else she would rather be than with him under a wagon in the middle of the Kansas prairie.

Marta’s crystal blue eyes were sparkling as she looked at him affectionately. It was a look that put him completely at peace. He marveled at the fact it made no difference to her if he toted a Bible or a six-shooter, if he had one arm or four. She loved him unconditionally. He realized he couldn’t ask for anything more. She was a prize, and he knew he would lay down his life for her and her girls.

Walker listened and watched for about an hour, then fell back asleep. He awoke again, just as the night sky was beginning to disappear as the eastern horizon brightened. In the distance, the skyline began to change color. Bright shades of orange, red and purple

painted the morning as the two stirred and were about to take on the day's chores.

When Hank moved, so did Marta.

"Ack! Is it time to get up already?" she asked drearily. "Didn't we just fall asleep?"

"Seems so," he said, "but that's my fault. Sorry I woke you a few hours ago. I don't know what got into me, thinking we were being spied upon."

"You never have to apologize for protecting your family," she whispered in his ear.

"Family, you say. Have you adopted me now, woman?" he said.

"De kan du ge dig pa!"

"What?" he asked and looked at her oddly. She strung the words together so quickly he had no idea what she said.

"You're damn right, Henry Walker," she said, bussed his lips suddenly and crawled out into the fresh, prairie morning. She was wearing a thin, flannel nightgown. When she stretched, he pearly white bottom peeked out beneath it, and Hank could see the shadow of her curvaceous body against the dawning sunlight. He shook his head and realized it was a long time since he was part of a family. He liked the idea.

Marta tossed a blanket around her shoulders and trudged off into the morning to take care of her personals. Before she disappeared, he called out, "I accept!"

"Hrumph! I had no doubt you would, Henry Walker."

As she disappeared into the tall grass, he watched her lovingly, and then crawled out from under the wagon to rekindle the fire for breakfast.

* * *

THE GERMAN HAD watched the prodigal settlers chat while their

children played around the evening campfire. He didn't like the way Marta snuggled next to the one-armed gunslinger in the evening hours. She was supposed to be *his* woman. How she could be attracted to such a vagabond was beyond his imagination. Sassmanhausen was rich and could offer Marta and her girls far more than anything the cowboy could provide. He was determined to prove it to her when they got to California.

A bit of relief gripped his heart when he watched Marta escort the girls to their wagon, as she did each night. When she stepped down and slid under the wagon with the worthless drifter, hatred oozed from every pore.

What is she doing? Has she lost her mind? Das kann nicht toleriert werden.

His blood boiled and he pulled the shiny Prussian Calvary Pistol from his waistband and made sure it was loaded and ready to use. Although seldom fired, the pistol was in perfect working order. He cleaned it regularly and kept it wrapped in oilcloth during his long journey to America. When he joined the wagon train, he secured it beneath his feet in his prairie schooner, hidden in an ornately carved wooden box.

The pistol was no match for American firearms but had been distributed widely among the German cavalry since 1850. It was a single-action percussion pistol that could do some damage with its .59-calibre load. The problem was it often misfired or fired prematurely.

The German had complete faith in the fifteen-inch revolver because it was manufactured by a family friend, Valentin Christian Schilling, who gifted it to him the year before he fled his homeland. He and the pistol were partners in crime, so to speak. He used it to kill once before in Munich.

The weapon felt warm in his fist as he vowed to kill Walker in order to prove his love to the buxom Nielsen woman. Of course, he considered himself the better man, a whole man.

How dare the woman leave the wagon train with the banished

gunslinger. If the independent woman intended to choose a partner, it would be he, not the likes of Henry Walker.

So, he waited and watched, as he had two times earlier. This time, however, he intended to stay nearby so he could talk some sense to the Swedish beauty when Walker wandered off on horseback. The wait only made his abhorrence grow stronger. He watched in disbelief as the two of them cavorted under the wagon.

Did the woman have no self-respect?

He observed for hours as he tried to formulate a plan to rescue her from the one-armed brigand. He knew it wouldn't be easy. Walker seemed always to be alert. Each time he moved closer, he stirred in his sleep. When his muffled sneeze roused the man from a sound sleep, he was immediately ready to shoot anything or anyone who approached the wagon.

Secretly, he begged the American to step into the tall grass. He would shoot him dead and then rescue Marta and the girls.

But Walker didn't venture out into the cold grass that had a slight covering of dew. Two hours later, it was Marta who walked toward him, humming a Swedish melody he recognized. Her crisp alto voice resonated deep to his soul. Immediately, he knew he had to rescue the Swedish beauty.

CHAPTER 14

Marta's melodic serenades were something Henry had grown accustomed to each morning. After months of rehabilitation and vigilante justice, he thought he would never find peace and happiness again. Now, he woke up each morning to the voice of an angel singing. It marked the beginning of another glorious day with people he truly enjoyed. As always, he rushed to build the fire so, when she returned, he would be able to listen to her croon a Swedish ballad as she stirred her girls. He didn't understand the words, but the merriment was heavenly.

With the fire started, he walked to the horses to get them ready for the day's journey. Horses react just like humans at times. Some wake up grumpy and irritable. Others are eager to get to work. All are ready to eat. He brought them their morning ration of oats, and suddenly realized he hadn't heard Marta's voice waking the girls.

He stopped what he was doing and walked to the back of the wagon. She was nowhere in sight. Inside, the girls were still sleeping.

Worried, he walked into the prairie grass to look for her. It was unlike her not to return immediately. He called her name as he followed a path of bent and trampled grass away from the wagon. Clearly, it was the same path he knew she had walked.

She didn't answer.

He raised his voice and called louder. No longer was he worried about waking up the rest of the camp.

Still, she did not respond.

When he got to a spot where two trampled paths converged, more grass than normal was trodden. His racing heart skipped a beat as he realized something terrible had happened. A struggle had taken place in that very spot. He screeched her name again, this time in horror. Marta had been taken.

Hank pulled his pistol and followed the path of flattened grass that led away from the wagon. He called her name repeatedly to no avail. His worst fears were realized when he came to a spot where obviously a horse had grazed. Hoofprints led off to the west, signaling the Marta had been kidnapped.

He was angry and frantic. Who would do such a thing? Was it an Indian or an outlaw?

He raised his pistol in the air and fired off a single shot. It was a signal to her captor that he was coming to retrieve his beloved and a warning to the Anderson wagon that danger was near.

His shot awakened the rest of the travelers, and everyone — although weary-eyed — was waiting for him when he returned.

“What’s happened?” Clay asked, fully dressed and brandishing his Winchester.

“Someone has taken Marta?” he replied.

“Oh, my word!” declared Elyssa.

“What do you mean taken? When? How?” asked Clay.

“She hasn’t been missing long. We’ve only been awake for maybe fifteen minutes. She took her morning stroll into the tall grass and never returned.,” he said.

“Who would have done such a thing?” Elyssa asked.

“I have no idea,” Hank answered.

“Do you think it is Claus?” Clay asked.

“No, he’s smarter than that. I saw one set of tracks. My guess it is a mountain man wandering the prairie on his way back to the higher elevations,” he said. “Whoever it is, I’ll find him and bring Marta back.”

Elizabeth gasped and Krissy began to cry.

Jake, Lizzy’s constant companion, wrapped his arm around her

shoulders to comfort her. Hank grabbed Lizzy's hand and knelt in front of Krissy to make a solemn promise.

"Don't your worry. I'll get her back!" he vowed. "While I'm gone, the Andersons will take care of you. Be good and do as they say."

Lizzy hugged her sister and smiled confidently.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Walker, I won't let anything bad happen to them," Jake said.

"I know," he said. Then he turned to his traveling companions and said, "I've got to catch up with them. Hopefully we'll be back before nightfall."

"We'll wait for you," Clay said.

"No, the tracks head west. So, you should, too. Move out, and we'll catch up with you."

"We can't leave your wagon behind," Elyssa said.

"Let Jake drive the wagon. I trust him will all of our possessions, especially the girls," he said as he saddled Bullet. "It's important we don't stray too far away from the larger wagon train."

When he turned one last time to bid the girls farewell, Lizzy handed him a bag of food. "You and Mom will need this. She'll be hungry by lunchtime."

"Thank you!"

"You'll need this, too," Jake said and handed him an extra canteen, filled with water.

"Good thinking, lad," he said and climbed into the leather.

"I feel I should be coming with you," Clay said.

"No, my friend, I need you to watch over both of our families until I return."

Clay nodded and Elyssa called out, "We all will pray for your safe return," as he rode off into the tall grass.

* * *

THE GERMAN'S MASSIVE ego viewed Marta's departure from the wagon as an omen. His inflated self-image had always been a problem for him. Now, tired and cold after a night of surveillance, he was not thinking straight. He believed Marta had recognized the error of her ways and was coming to him for help.

He walked up on her just as she had quit squatting in the tall grass. His heart raced when he saw the heave of her breasts under the flannel nightgown she wore.

"*Fräulein*, you have no idea how happy I am. Your senses return. That good," he said as he stepped out of the tall grass.

"Claus, what are you doing here? You scared me," she said, immediately wary of the German's intent. Again, she threw the blanket over her shoulders, this time to hide herself from his leering eyes. Spittle escaped from the corner of his mouth.

"Always, I here for you, dearest," he said.

"I am not your dearest!" she rebutted angrily. "And if Henry finds you here, you're in big trouble. So, go and leave us alone!"

"Cowboy no scare me," he said boldly and pulled the German pistol from his waistband. Then, he reached for her arm and added, "Come! We go!"

She tried to pull away but couldn't. His large hand was like a steel trap that was unwilling to release its prey.

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" she proclaimed.

"You learn. Do as I say, *Fräulein*," he said as his eyes turned dark and menacing. "Me make happy in California. You see."

"Unhand me, you brute. I'm not going anywhere with you!" again she replied indignantly and tried to pull away to no avail.

Claus turned suddenly and pressed the business end of the pistol against her chest, smiled and said, "You no come, I shoot. Break heart

to damage such great beauty.” He licked his lips lustfully.

“I’d rather die than go anywhere with you!” she proclaimed.

“Choice not yours, dearest.”

“*Jävla din dolda!* That’s what you think,” she said, balled a fist and popped him just under his right eye.

The punch stung, but did not phase the big German.

“You bad. No hurt. Sometime, love give pain,” he replied.

“I’ll never...” she said. Before she could finish the sentence, the pistol crashed down on her skull and Marta’s world disappeared into blackness.

He stowed the pistol, grabbed her by the arm and hoisted her over his shoulder. Ten minutes later, he had her seated unconsciously in front of him as he kicked his stallion west toward California.

CHAPTER 15

Walker assumed whoever kidnapped Marta was only about an hour ahead of him. All he had to do was follow the matted down grass in order to eventually overtake them and rescue her. The direction was obvious. Unfortunately, throughout the night, many animals — large and small — had meandered through the long grass. Maintaining the correct path became confusing.

Several times, it was obvious he was on the wrong trail, especially when blood-streaked grass revealed a kill site. Then, he had to double back and restart from the last junction. It was agonizing work that frustrated him. He often wondered if he was traveling in circles. His worry for Marta was growing desperate as morning blended into afternoon.

The only sign he was sure of was the imprint of a damaged horseshoe he discovered at the site of the kidnapping. The horse Marta's captor was riding was leaving an irregular print with its right-front hoof. The problem was it was hard spotting the print in the downtrodden grass. After taking several wrong turns, Walker dismounted and decided to do his tracking on foot. It would be slower, but he was confident it would end his misguided decisions.

By late afternoon, he found Marta's discarded blanket along the trail. He sighed because it was a good sign and then worried because he knew she wore only her flannel nightgown.

"That a girl. Help me out! I'll catch up soon," he whispered.

As he rolled it up and placed it behind his saddle, he noticed a small blood stain. It ignited more worry, even though the stain was small. He hastened his pace as best he could but not at the cost of losing the hoof print that was his guide.

By the time evening arrived, he looked at the trail he and Bullet had left behind and then into the setting sun. It assured him his prey

was heading west, the same direction as the Brown wagon train and the Andersons, who he hoped were not far behind. He tracked for another hour and then surrendered to hunger and fatigue. He had to stop and re-energize or he would be of no use to Marta when he found her and her captor. He said a quiet prayer for her safety.

He built a small fire for coffee and dined on jerky and cold biscuits. He gave Bullet some water from his canteen, hobbled him where he could have plenty of grass to graze on and brushed his reddish-brown coat with the sweet-smelling prairie grass. Then, he slipped into his bedroll, repeated a quick prayer for Marta and fell fast asleep.

* * *

CLAUS DIDN'T HAVE any trouble navigating back to the wagon train. He knew exactly where it was when he snuck away shortly after nightfall; he had done it three nights in a row. Each night, though, the Nielsen wagon fell farther and farther behind the main wagon train, and it took longer to return. This time, he had stayed too long to observe. Although, he had Marta between his arms, he felt sure the wagon train would have pulled out without him.

Marta, of course, slowed him down, too. She was a large, strong woman who was infuriated when she regained consciousness. If the woman wasn't cursing and cussing him, she was driving her pointed elbows into his ribs and belly. Once when he ordered her to show more respect, she reared her head back and practically broke his fat, German snout.

Blood exploded from his nose and a familiar pain shot through his brain. She wasn't the first woman to strike him. The last one was repaid with more than she expected from a gentleman. He struck back, knocking her unconscious. Then, he violated her unconscious body and left her along the roadside.

There would be none of that for the coveted Swedish beauty, but he had to thwart her combativeness. Sassmanhausen was tired, and he had had a belly full of trouble from the ornery woman. He dismounted and helped her off the big stallion. He tied her hands loosely together

in front of her and tethered the other end of the rope to his saddle horn. He remounted and gave the rope a yank. She yelped and complained, but he pretended not to hear. He wanted to teach her a lesson, as well as wear her down physically.

He was wrong. There was more fight in Marta Nielsen than a mama grizzly separated from her cubs. She gave him little time for rest. Whenever she wasn't tugging on the rope or cussing him, she was leaving sign for Henry, whom she knew would follow. When the German wasn't looking, she tied long stems of prairie grass together and point it in the direction they were traveling. She didn't know how long it would stay that way, but it didn't matter. She was feeling helpless and she was determined to do something to hasten her rescue.

As nightfall approached, she spotted Claus' schooner. It stood alone in the Kansas prairie, like a scarecrow in the middle of a cornfield. Its white canvas covering glistened in the fading rays of the sun. Claus grimaced and groaned at the sight of his horseless wagon. Marta laughed and made light of the situation.

"Damn ya ta hell, Brown!" he grumbled under his breath but loud enough for Marta to hear. "You no wait. You leave me behind like bloody Plague. You *Schlamp* and *Miststück*."

"Ya think mightily highly of yourself Sassmandonkey," Marta called out. "As you can see, the others don't share your lofty opinion. Nor do I. You are as worthless as the shit from ya horse's ass."

"My name Sassmanhausen," he said with an ugly glare. "You behave, I untie. Cook supper."

"Supper ya say. I'll not break bread with the likes of you, ya swine," she said and plopped down hard on her backside. She was worn out from the long walk at the end of a rope.

She smiled as her eyes surveyed the surroundings and realized there were no horses or oxen in sight.

"I recognize your wagon," she said. "What good is it without animals to ferry the load? It looks like Brown and his friends

abandoned you, just like y'all turned on the man who saved you from the attack of renegades. I reckon you got what you deserved."

He gave the rope an angry yank, and it pulled her forward onto her belly. Weary beyond her comprehension, she lay still, unable to regain her feet. Claus jumped from his steed, placed a big boot on her backside and applied pressure. She howled in pain because her bladder was about to burst.

"*Fräulein*, I love. No more fight, or I tie to yonder tree. What say you?" Claus said and shifted more weight to his right boot.

She squealed in agony and finally said, "I'll behave, *värdelös gris!*"

He applied more pressure and added, "And curb thy tongue or me gag?"

"Yes, sir!" she screamed. It felt as if her hips were going to be crushed beneath the weight of the mountainous man. "I'll do whatever you want. Get off of me!"

He did and flashed a small smile of satisfaction. Then, he yanked her to her feet. Immediately he noticed she had soiled herself and shook his head in feigned dissatisfaction.

"What a pity. You had accident, dearest," he observed with lascivious eyes. "You remove garment. We soak in a water pale, aye?"

"Never! And since when do you speak such English?" she scowled.

The big German laughed heartily and said, "Sometimes it better if Americans think we immigrants are ignorant and no speak language. Hrumph!!! I fool all, even you, dearest."

"Stop calling me that, you buffoon," she shouted. "Untie me so I can go clean myself up."

"As you wish," he said and marched to the wagon. He tied the loose end of the rope to the tongue, filled a bucket with water and escorted her to the tall grass beyond. "Clean yourself. I make cooking

fire,” he added.

“Are you going to untie me,” she pleaded.

He laughed and walked away

Marta took advantage of the privacy and tried her best to clean the urine from her gown. Next, she splashed water on her face and rejoiced in the feeling of being free of the prairie dust his horse had kicked up throughout the course of the day.

Marta gathered the long length of rope into a coil as she returned to the other side of the wagon. The smell of beans and bacon Claus had cooking over a small campfire was heavenly. She was starving.

“Sit!” he said. “We eat soon!”

She did and glowered at him. Marta remained silent throughout their meal, but constantly looked to the East with hopes of spotting Henry in the distance.

Claus noticed and laughed loudly.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“It not easy for cowboy to find you,” he said. “He inferior. Unworthy of you. Tall grass like maze. He get lost.”

“He will come!” she promised.

“Then, he die,” the German said and pulled the pistol from his waistband. “Like me, German gun superior.”

He tossed it back and forth between his hands, chortled and said, “Two hands better than one, too.”

She spit into the fire angrily and wondered if she had the strength to loop the rope around his neck and strangle him. She vowed to seize the opportunity if it presented itself.

CHAPTER 16

Walker awoke before sunup with a revelation. He realized he might never find Marta's trail in the confusing prairie grass. So, he decided to try and catch up with the Brown wagon train. If he threw himself on the mercy of Jeremiah, perhaps he could secure some help. He mounted Bullet and reined him northwest with fresh hope.

It was then, he began seeing the odd knots tied in the prairie grass. It was too unnatural to be coincidence. It wasn't long after he spotted the first sign, he came upon another. He smiled for the second time since the ordeal began, and whispered, "That's my gal, Marta. I'm coming!"

His excitement was tempered by the realization she now was traveling on foot. His concern deepened. The sign meant she no longer was mounted. Only an Indian would treat a female captive in such a way. He had to quicken his pace.

So, he climbed into the saddle, patted Bullet on the neck and said, "Come on, boy. Marta needs us."

At an easy canter, he resumed the pursuit, a little more confident he was heading in the right direction. By midday, he came upon the German's prairie schooner and the remnants of a cooking fire. His spirits were buoyed, but he still was uncertain who might have taken his partner.

Would the German be that stupid?

Experience told him most Indian ponies were unshod. Marta's captor had to be white, either the crazy German or a lone trapper heading back to the mountains for winter. A new southwest track indicated they were heading to the mountain pass and possibly California instead of Santa Fe.

Whoever held Marta captive had raided the German's wagon for additional gear. They now were pulling a travois of some sort, most likely laden with supplies for their journey.

Walker was puzzled by the findings. Why would Claus abandon his wagon? Had he, too, worn out his welcome on the wagon train? He didn't think the huge German was capable of sneaking up on Marta and taking her without her calling for help.

Whomever her captor was, Hank knew he was getting close, and he picked up the pace.

He traveled all day and into the afternoon. As the sun began to fade into the western landscape, Walker saw a small campfire pop up in the distance. He prayed it was Marta and her captor, but he had to restrain the urge to gallop ahead recklessly. The last thing he wanted was for her to be injured. So, he dismounted and advanced cautiously.

When he finally laid eyes on the Swedish beauty, she was curled in a fetal position next to the fire. Clearly, she had been through an ordeal. Her once-white nightgown was a dingy shade of reddish-brown and hung off of one shoulder. It was tattered and torn.

His blood boiled when he spotted the big German dragging a rope and securing it to a nearby tree. The other end was tied around Marta's waist, giving her some freedom of movement but preventing her from running away. Her hands and feet appeared to be loosely bound — much like a slave would be shackled — so she had some use of them with restriction.

Again, Walker wanted to charge into the camp with his pistol blazing and kill the boastful bully, but he resisted. First he had to secure Marta's freedom. Then, he would deal with Claus.

So, he left Bullet hobbled and crept closer so he could better analyze what had to be done to free his woman. Again, he was infuriated when he was close enough to hear the German's loud voice.

"I am sorry. You force me to tie at tree like animal," he said. "I cannot let you run off in the night. Agree to share bedroll, I untie, and we enjoy much time together."

"Over my dead body," she replied in a soft, hoarse voice.

"As you wish. Soon, you come willingly. Nights getting colder.

You will need more than thin garment to keep you warm. Claus help. You will come.”

“Go to hell!” she replied.

“Again, I ask respect,” Claus grunted. “Your words offend. Perhaps crippled cowboy find charming; I do not.” He walked back to the campfire, shaking his head in frustration and mumbling in German.

Hank circled around to the tree to which she was tethered and waved his arm to get her attention while Claus’ back was turned. She didn’t see him. So, he yanked sharply on the rope. Marta grunted, clearly distressed.

Marta sat up immediately, pulled the rope from his hands and released a string of Swedish expletives Walker neither understood nor cared to. He was simply happy she still had some fight left in her. His hatred of the German became enflamed.

Instead of lying back down, Marta pulled her knees to her chest and curled into a ball. He could tell, she was trying to stay warm as the nighttime temperature dropped.

From the opposite side of the fire, where he was safe from any attack she might consider, Sassmanhausen made one last offer for her to join him in his bedroll for the night. She unleashed another verbal flurry and spit into the hot coals. Her captor laughed., curled up in his blanket and proceeded to retire for the evening.

Walker smiled and prayed he could get Marta’s attention while the big man slept. He stepped in front of the tree when he heard the Germans snoring. He jerked the rope again.

Marta didn’t move. He assumed she had fallen asleep from exhaustion.

He tugged harder.

That’s when she turned angrily and yanked back on the rope.

Damn it, woman! It’s me! Who else would be trying to get your attention?

When she felt the resistance Marta looked his way. She gasped and the sheer joy in her eyes hardened his resolve. He placed a forefinger to his lips in a signal for her to remain quiet. Then, he motioned for her to walk toward him.

Her eyes sparkled in recognition. Walker was unsure if he had ever seen a more beautiful sight.

In the blink of an eye, she was on her feet and sneaking quietly toward him. He quickly reached for her and hugged her for a brief moment as she trembled in his arms.

“I knew you’d come!” she said as he sliced the rope that bound her hands together. Then, he began to fumble with the knots at her wrists. It was difficult work with one hand, but his fingers were strong and nimble. She tried to help but was too cold and weak.

As he freed one hand, he heard the familiar sound of metal click nearby. He looked up to find the giant German looking down at them and smiling.

“I knew cripple would come,” he said as he pointed the single-shot revolver at them. “You know better, cowboy. Silly Americans cannot outsmart Claus. I man of great power and intelligence. You fool!”

Then, he calmly pulled the trigger.

Walker pulled Marta behind him to shield her from the blast but there was no explosion.

Claus pulled the hammer back and fired again but the gun misfired a second time. His mouth dropped open as a six-shooter suddenly appeared in his adversary’s hand. Fire leaped from Walker’s Colt and the cool, night air filled with the smoke and the smell of cordite.

As the calvary pistol slipped from the German’s hand, a tiny hole appeared in his forehead. Gray matter exploded from the back of his head, killing him instantly. Blood trickled across the German’s nose, but the giant did not topple over. He stood frozen, staring in shock at

the couple.

That's when the fiery Swede pushed Walker aside. She screamed more expletives and stepped toward her captor with a hateful heart. She stopped directly in front of him and kicked him between the legs with such force Walker swore he saw Claus' feet lift off the ground. That's when he fell backward like a tall oak tree succumbing to a lumberman's axe.

Marta spat on his dead body, kicked him in the ribs and said, "Cripple? My arse!"

Walker pulled her away as kick after kick pounded away at the dead man's rib cage.

"That's enough!" Henry ordered as he wrapped his arm around her. "It's over!"

He led her back to the campfire and wrapped her in a blanket. He held her until the trembling stopped and warmed her cheek with kisses.

"I love you," she said.

"And I love you, my Swedish terror," he said.

"What's that mean?"

"It means I've never seen a woman kick a man so hard. Remind me never to anger you," Henry replied.

"I wanted to do much worse," she replied.

"I know! Did he hurt you in any way?"

"*Nej!* Just my pride. I can't believe I let him sneak up on me like that. He was on top of me before I knew it. Then, he hit me with that damned pistol and I saw stars."

"It's over now, sweetheart."

"Thanks to you, my love," she said and wrapped him in her arms and kissed him passionately.

Hank didn't know if he had ever felt anything more gratifying

than her body pressed against to his. They sat, silently comforting each other, for maybe a half-hour. Then, Henry pulled her to her feet and said, “How about I take you back to your girls? I know they must be worried.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said with a smile and kissed him again. “Wait, though,” she added. “What are we going to do about him?”

“What do you mean?” Walker asked.

“Are we just going to leave him there for the varmints?”

“I think so. I’m too tired to care, and I hear, in these parts, the wolves crave German food.” His eyes sparkled as he looked from Marta to the dead body and back.

“You are a cold-hearted one,” she said and kissed his cheek. “But I love you no less.”

He tipped his hat and said, “Bon Appetit, kind hungry friends!”

She hugged him and giggled.

They rode the German’s stallion back to where Bullet was hobbled, and then set off to find the Andersons and their family.

CHAPTER 17

Marta and Hank resumed their journey west but traveled in a southerly direction with hopes of meeting up with the Andersons, Jake and the girls. Worn out from two nights of very little sleep, they stopped at midday to rest. Henry had bagged a pheasant during their trek, and they roasted it over a small campfire, ate and promptly fell asleep in each other's grasp.

At dusk, they were awakened by the sounds of wagons and horses. When they stirred, Marta's girls were sprinting to greet her open arms, and the Andersons were waving from their wagon.

"Fancy meeting two old friends along this long and dusty trail," Clay called out loud enough for Hank and Marta to hear. When Marta allowed the blanket to slip from her shoulders, Elyssa gasped. The tattered and soiled nightgown barely covered her voluptuous body and told the tale of her trying ordeal.

"Stop the wagon!" she ordered, jumped from her perch and raced to Marta's side with a blanket in hand. She wrapped it around her friend's shoulders and asked, "My Lord, woman, are you all right?"

The Swede laughed and stated, "Better than I look, obviously, and thanks to Henry. He showed up just in time. I was about at the end of my line." She laughed at her own joke and winked at Walker.

"Well, I'm glad you find it amusing," Elyssa said with surprise. "You'll have to tell us all about it once we get you cleaned up. Come with me. I'll help you get out of this nasty garment and cleaned up. Girls, fetch you mother some fresh clothing. Clay, you and Jake get two campfires going. We'll need one for cooking and one for hot water."

"Mind if we join your night camp?" Clay asked of Walker. "It looks like my woman has decided we're stopping here."

"You're a sight for poor eyes," Hank said as he walked toward the Anderson wagon. "We were hoping to run into you but expected

it to be tomorrow. Let me help you with the horses.”

By the time they got the Anderson team unhitched, Jake and the girls had two campfires blazing and was unhitching the Nielsen team. Hank stepped up to help and Jake confessed, “I took real good care of your horses, Mr. Walker. Fed and watered them last night and brushed them down good. They are good animals, sir.”

“Yes, they are, Jake,” he replied. “The girls didn’t give you any trouble, did they?”

“Little Krissy was a bit scared for her mother, but Lizzy and I assured her you’d bring her back safely,” he replied. “Did you shoot the men who ran off with Mrs. Nielsen?”

“It was that big German from the Brown wagon train, boy” Hank said. “And yes, he got his just reward.”

The revelation surprised the young boy. As with most wagon trains, everybody knew everybody because they had to work together for a common cause. It was the first time someone Jake knew had met a violent death. It was troubling for the young man.

“Is it hard to kill somebody you once considered a friend, Mr. Walker?” he asked.

“It’s never easy to kill a man, son,” he replied, “but sometimes a fella has no choice. Sassmanhausen had it coming. I believe the Good Book says, ‘He who afflicts shall be justly afflicted.’”

“You mean like ‘an eye for an eye?’”

“Absolutely!” Walker said.

“But he didn’t kill, Mrs. Nielsen,” the boy said, questioning Walker’s justification.

“Taking a woman against her will, is worse than death, son. Marta was fighting him tooth and nail. I’m sure, sooner or later, he would have killed her because she would not submit to his crazed obsession.”

“You love Mrs. Nielsen, don’t you?” Jake asked.

“Damn straight, son, and I couldn’t let any man steal her away from me,” Henry said.

“Can I tell you a secret, Mr. Walker?”

“Sure!”

“I’m in love with Elizabeth!” he revealed.

“That’s not a secret; we’ve all seen that, Jake.”

“Really? Then, you’ll better understand my next request.”

Hank looked at the young man, and realized he was no longer the boy who rounded up the horses left behind by the Ruffians. He stood above six feet, had wide shoulders and could pass for a man in many quarters. The peach fuzz on his lip made him look youthful, but he wasn’t. He stood on the brink of manhood. Walker knew what he was about to slip from his lips.

“If you plan on asking for her hand, son, I’m not the one...”

“No, sir! That ain’t it!”

“Oh, what is it then?”

“Can you teach me to shoot like you do so I can defend her?” Jake asked.

“It takes a heap of practice son,” Walker replied.

“I know. That’s why I’m asking. Before I ask for her hand, I want you and her mother to know I can protect her.”

“That’s honorable, and I’d be glad to show you what little I know,” he said. “First, you have to train your fingers to move as if you was one of those fancy piano players.”

“What do you mean?”

Walker reached into his saddleback and retrieved a fifty-cent piece and flipped it to the kid. He snatched it from the air cleanly

and asked, “What’s this for?”

“I’ll show ya!” Walker said and stretched his palm out to the boy.

When he returned the coin to his hand, Hank let it roll between his fingers, just as he did when he first lost his arm. Jake was amazed by his dexterity.

“When you master that little trick, ask me again. Only then will you be ready to learn what I can teach you,” Walker replied with a smile.

When the Anderson boy tried it, the coin dropped to the ground. He looked up at his wise friend and said, “I guess I have some practicing to do.”

CHAPTER 18

That night around the campfire, Marta revealed the grim details of her capture and rescue. The Andersons found it hard to believe the German could have become so obsessed that he would take her against her will.

“I think he lost his mind,” Marta said.

“He always was a braggart and bully of sorts,” Clay aid. “People on the wagon train really didn’t like him; they put up with him because there was no other choice.”

“This country is full of men who want to force their will on others,” Hank said. “This whole issue about slavery is tearing the nation apart. That’s one of the reasons I decided to head west. I want nothing to do with it. I’ve never owned a slave nor have I ever wanted to own one.

“I was raised to believe in the Golden Rule: ‘Do unto others what you would want them to do unto you.’ So, slavery ain’t necessarily my cup of tea. Chains are the tool of a working man; not a tool to make a man work.”

“Ya mean to say, ya couldn’t stand to be bound hand and foot and tied to a tree, Henry?” Mara said with a big smile.

Walker laughed and said, “Absolutely! When I saw you mistreated so, the fire inside me burned hotter than Hades itself.”

Marta kissed his cheek and said, “I can’t tell you the joy I felt when you tugged the rope and I saw you had come to rescue me. You won my heart for sure.”

“Hell, I would have done the same for any woman,” Henry said.

“I ain’t any woman!” she proclaimed.

“I know that!” Walker replied.

“And when we get to wherever we are going, we’re going to make it legal and all,” the blonde Swede added.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re going to propose to me proper, and I’m going to be your wife,” she said and kissed his cheek again.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Walker said.

Clay laughed and said, “I guess you’ve got your marching orders, partner.”

“Since when do women do the proposing?” Walker asked.

“I came to this land for freedom. Despite the hardship I have suffered since arriving, I do believe we’ve found happiness together, Henry. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Are you expecting an answer tonight?” Henry asked.

“A simple ‘I do’ might do the trick,” Elyssa interjected and snuggled up to her husband.

Walker looked at Marta for a long moment and willingly replied, “I do!”

She leaped onto his lap and smothered him with kisses.

* * *

IT WASN’T LONG before the two couples stoked the fire and retired to their wagons for the night. The plan was to move out, as usual, at dawn. When Marta was securely curled around Hank, he asked, “What makes you so extraordinarily strong, woman?”

“I reckon that’s a long story,” she said.

“If I’m going to be your husband, it’s time I hear it,” he replied.

And so she began:

“My people survived as farmers for generations in Sweden,” Marta said. “We lived a wholesome and bountiful life. That ended when news of the New World flooded Europe.

“As you know, the West India Company was one of the first to settle in the Colony of Delaware more than one hundred years ago. The immigrants they brought with them immediately began to farm the rich soil. The crops they exported were superior in every way to what we could grow in our homeland.

“In time, the monarchy became enchanted by the superior goods shipped from overseas and greatly reduced the goods they purchased from local farmers. So did most of the aristocratic and wealthy families in the cities. Family farms, which struggled from season to season to feed their own, became the poorest of poor because their crops no longer were favored in the homeland.”

“It sounds like Old King George and why the early colonists overthrew British rule,” Hank said.

“It was kind of like that, but different,” she added. “The monarchy was right. After centuries of growing, Swedish soil had become unfertile. Much of the nutrients were gone.

“Instead of helping the farmers, the Swedish government — like your King George — levied more taxes so they could import more crops from the New World. My father cursed the monarchy for not helping us. When the Plague struck our potato crop, we fled the homeland and sought the promise of this new land.

“Twas I who demanded we leave. Carl, my husband, wanted to stay and fight. I didn’t want to see him arrested and imprisoned. We spent our life savings to cross the Atlantic to this great land.”

“Why did you settle in the Carolinas instead of Delaware or Pennsylvania, where so many of your countrymen have thrived?” Walker asked.

“My husband wanted nothing to do with Sweden. He came here to be an American. He was very proud man.”

“Jeremiah said you lost him to sickness,” Hank said softly. “I’m sorry. I am familiar with the pain of losing a spouse.”

“Each day I watched him fight the consumption, it drove a knife into my heart,” she said. “His final wish was for me to take the girls west and start anew.”

“Where are you heading?” Hank asked.

“West is all I can say. We spent a winter in Independence, but it was too crowded. I worked as a baker but could barely make enough to feed my girls. So, as soon as spring came, we struck out for our destiny and a new home.

“We traveled alone for one week before we met up with the Brown wagon train. The smell of my sour dough biscuits one night attracted Jeremiah to our night camp. I welcomed him and invited him to eat with us. I smothered that biscuit with the finest rabbit stew he had ever tasted. It won him over, and he invited us to join his train. How could we refuse? We were looking for some place to stop and plant roots when you came along.”

“Isn’t it strange how fate seems to work,” Walker said. “As you know, I was wandering aimlessly when I came upon the wagon train, too. It has turned out to be a blessing.”

“The Andersons are heading to New Mexico. That nincompoop, Sassmanclutter, thought California was the promised land. Where do you want to spend the rest of your life?” Marta asked.

“I plan to spend it with you, Mrs. Nielsen,” he said, “and hopefully out from beneath this wagon. The girls deserve a solid home to grow up in. They say Colorado is nice,” Hank offered.

“I will know ‘home’ when my eyes set upon it!” she said and looked sleepily into his eyes.

“Wherever we go, this land will be hard!” Hank added.

“Don’t I know it. Feel these hands,” she said and placed her calloused palms on his cheeks. “I am not what you Americans call ‘a

daisy.' You should know that by now."

"I know you are the breath of fresh air I needed," he said, "and I plan to settle wherever your heart desires, Mrs. Nielsen. You're stuck with me now."

"Wherever we land, there has to be a preacher nearby," she said and snuggled closer.

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm tired of being Mrs. Nielsen and..."

She never finished the sentence. Instead, she fell helplessly asleep next to the man who promised to be her husband.

CHAPTER 19

Two weeks later, the Kansas terrain changed as the ruts of the well-traveled Santa Fe Trail led them to a path adjacent to the Arkansas River. The landscape became greener and more beautiful. Groves of stunning trees grew along the riverbank and the Rocky Mountains came into view far off in the distance. It was the most magnificent sight any of them had seen. Under an azure sky, the summits first appeared as tiny hills in the distance. But as the settlers got closer, they rose majestically and took their breath away.

“My, oh my!” Marta said. “We had mountains in the Carolinas, but nothing like these. Do we have to cross over them to get to our destination?”

“That is a good question,” replied Henry. “We haven’t discussed where exactly we plan to settle. What are your thoughts?”

Henry and Marta were walking between the two wagons that ambled slowly westward. Clay and Elyssa sat atop the Anderson wagon, while Jake drove the Nielsen rig. The seventeen-year-old had barely left Elizabeth’s side since the adults had returned.

“Do ya still have your sights set on the New Mexico Territory?” Walker called out to his counterparts.

“Aye!” Clay replied. “That’s why we chose this godforsaken trail that likes to jar every bone in our bodies. What are you thinking?”

“We haven’t decided just yet, but it’s time we do. Somewhere up ahead we have to cross this river and head south if we are going to join you in New Mexico.”

“We’d welcome the company,” Elyssa called out. “What say you, Marta?”

“When we got to Independence, our only thought was to head west,” she replied. “The Brown wagon train was the first to come along and offer us guidance through this wild country. They were

heading to California, as you well know. Since we separated, I haven't given it much thought."

"There are plenty of wide-open spaces where a man can start anew out here," Henry said. "We've traveled a good piece already; I reckon somewhere around six hundred or seven hundred miles.

"When I first came west some years ago, my late wife and I had our sights set on the Colorado Territory. There has to be some fertile land along this river as long as it's out of Kansas. I've had my fill of this bloody place."

"Mama, can't we go to New Mexico with the Andersons," Lizzy asked. "Jake and me don't want to be separated."

"What?"

"We love each other," she declared as Jake looked at his parents with worried eyes.

"Since when?" Marta asked.

"Since forever, Mama!" she replied.

"I don't think so," Marta said, shocked by the declaration.

"Well, I declare! Jake Anderson, what's this all about?" Elyssa called out.

"Aw, shucks, Ma!" he replied. "It just sort of happened. I was gonna tell ya sooner or later."

"The boy's almost full grown, woman," Clay said with a chuckle. "Have you forgotten how it is when a body is smitten?"

His wife elbowed him and said, "What's that got to do with it?"

"You'd have to be blind not to see the two of them was gettin' tangled up," Clay added.

Walker chuckled, too, but didn't say a word.

"And exactly what do you think is so funny?" Marta asked. "Jake might be able to do man's chores, but my Lizzy is just a child."

“I am not!” she hollered.

“You are fifteen years old. What do you know about love?”
Marta barked.

“I’m almost sixteen, and I know you and Mr. Walker have been doing more than just sleeping under our wagon every night,” Lizzy responded sharply.

“I’ll not have you talking back to me, girl.” Stop that damn wagon right now, Jake.”

The men pulled back on their teams to bring the wagons to a halt. The fur was about to fly.

As Marta charged toward her daughter, Hank grabbed her by the arm and said, “Take a breath, darling. They are old enough to have a say. Jake confided in me some time ago that he had feelings for Lizzy.”

“And you didn’t think to share that information with me? I’m her mother!” Marta shouted.

“Well, you sort of got kidnapped, and I got distracted,” he said.

“Likely excuse,” she said and smiled. She was still thankful for his quick response and rescue. It was impossible for her to stay angry for too long.

With her temper calmed, she changed direction and walked to the Anderson wagon. She reached a hand up to Elyssa and said, “I reckon you and me best talk about this, girl, being our men already have made up their minds.”

“Do we get a say in this discussion,” Elizabeth asked.

“No!” the women replied simultaneously.

“If you don’t mind, while you two talk we’re going to continue along,” Clay said. “We’re losing daylight. Westward, ho, Jake. You young’uns never thee mind. You’ll get your say later when we make our night camp. In the meantime, let’s see if we can make another

mile.”

“I’ll climb aboard Bullet and go see if I can scrounge up some supper for us,” Walker said and disappeared.

“Can I come along, Mr. Walker?” Jake asked, always eager to join in on hunting trips.

“It’s fine with me, if it’s fine with your pa,” Henry said.

“Go ahead, son. Bring home something tasty. I’m hungry,” his father said.

As Jake jumped down from the wagon, Elizabeth looked at him longingly. Marta looked at Walker with surprise in her face and said, “Well, isn’t that a fine howdy do?”

“We won’t be gone long. I’m just going to see if I can scare up something for that bean pot tonight. A nice fat hare or bird will do just fine.”

“I guess I’ll have to drive the team then. Come, Elyssa, we’ll talk up there,” and motioned for her friend to join her atop their wagon. As she climbed up, Lizzy stepped down and said, “I think I’m ready to walk a bit.”

“Suit yourself,” her mother responded.

* * *

UP AHEAD, HENRY saw a stand of trees along the river. He suspected it would be a good place to find meat for their evening meal. He pointed and told Clay, “We’ll meet you a mile or so down the trail and have a campfire going by the time you arrive.”

“With some luck, we’ll have something cooking on it too,” Jake added.

“You’d better,” Clay said in jest. “These women get cranky on empty stomachs.”

“Oh hush, Clay Anderson,” Elyssa shouted.

When Jake and Henry approached the grove of trees, they

noticed birds circling overhead.

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

“It’s usually a sign something is amiss, dead or dying,” Walker said. “Keep that rifle of yours handy, boy.”

They moved along, parallel to the river, thinking they might find animals coming there to drink as dusk approached. The grove was deadly quiet; the water lapping against the shoreline was the only sound they could hear.

Jake was the first to hear a groaning sound and asked, “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” Walker said.

Instantly, Jake pointed and said, “Over there! It looks like something has washed up on shore. It looks like a body.”

They quickly reined their horses to the spot where it appeared an Indian lay face down on the riverbank. Wet black hair was plastered to the back of a deerskin tunic. Leather leggings were still submerged in the water. There was no movement.

As Walker climbed from the saddle, he ordered Jake to stay back but be ready to shoot. “I’ll see if he is still alive!” he said.

He smelled the air and there was no scent of decaying flesh, telling him the body had not washed ashore for long.

His boots sunk into the soft riverbank as he walked toward the partially submerged figure. He nudged an arm with the toe of his boot and the Indian moaned.

“He’s still alive,” Walker called out and grabbed an arm and pulled the brave to dry land. When he rolled him over, he got the shock of his life. It wasn’t just an Indian brave; it was a woman.

And she was with child.

CHAPTER 20

Neither of the men could believe their eyes. The body Henry pulled to safety was not only a female and pregnant woman; she was white, too.

“What do we do now?” Jake asked

“We’ve got to get some of this river water out of her,” Walker said. “Get down here and help me.”

Jake raced to his side and said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Grab her arms and flail them up and down like a pump handle. I’ll do the same thing with her legs. Maybe it will force some of the water out of her abdomen. I’m afraid to push on it because she’s pregnant.

“If she starts spitting up water, make sure her head is turned to the side. I don’t want it going back down her throat.”

No sooner did they start pumping her appendages when water came gushing forth from her water-logged lungs. Jake turned her face to the side as she coughed and gagged. Then, Henry rolled her on her side and began pounding on her back. More water gushed out and the woman moaned.

“Now, go get us help, Jake. Bring one of the women back with you. I’ll get her over by that big tree once she’s gotten rid of all the water she swallowed.”

Wide-eyed, Jack ran like his pants were afire, jumped on his horse and sped off back to the wagons. He returned with Marta and Elizabeth.

Walker had the woman sitting next to a giant Aspen. He was rubbing one of her hands and talking softly to her. She was breathing rapidly and his efforts to calm her were having no effect.

“She might be having a fit!” he called out as the women approached.

“No, she ain’t, you idiot,” Marta proclaimed with surprise on her face. “She’s having a baby! Jake, you and Lizzy gather some wood and start a fire. Quick!”

“What do you want me to do?” Henry asked, befuddled.

“Get me a couple blankets and get out of the way,” she replied and pushed him aside.

Two hours later, after a painful labor, a dark-skinned male child was guided into the world by Marta’s sure hands. The mother, who had survived drowning and the birth of a hefty child, had said little between labor pains and pushing. She was fast asleep, most likely a product of exhaustion.

“That’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen, Mama,” Lizzy said as she handed her a cool cloth to swab across the woman’s head. “Why is childbirth so painful, though?”

“It’s the way of love,” her mother said. “The kissing and hugging part is wonderful, but the birthing part is a lot more difficult.”

“Did you scream like that when I was born, Mama,” she asked.

“No, I welcomed the pain, because I knew the life inside of me wanted to breathe joy into my world. You and your sister are blessed reminders the Almighty works in strange ways. Without you, my life would be empty,” she replied.

“Do you think she will feel the same way?”

“I hope so. She’s obviously been through an ordeal, but she and her child appear healthy. She looks to be young and strong. Why don’t you stay with her and see if you can find out what she is doing out here all alone.”

“Sure, Ma. I’d be happy to,” Lizzy said and knelt beside the sleeping woman and child. “What did she say her name was?”

“I’m not sure. It sounded like Annie, but she was kind of out of it. I’m not sure she speaks English.”

“I’ll find out when she wakes up,” Lizzy said. “You go get something to eat and rest. I’ll stay with them.”

* * *

WHEN THE NEW mother awoke, Lizzy was by her side, smiling and watching the baby suckle at her breast. She gave her some water and a piece of jerky she barely chewed before swallowing.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

The woman turned her head slightly and looked at her with questioning eyes.

“Do you speak English?”

Again, she turned her head as if she understood, but did not answer.

“What is your name?” Lizzy asked and then pointed to her chest and pronounced her name very slowly.

“Liz-zee,” the young mother said. Then, she point to herself and said, “*Anais!*”

Lizzy smiled and said, “*Anais*, your baby is beautiful.”

The woman shook her head emphatically and said, “N-N-o--o! Mary!”

“Is your name Mary, then?” Lizzy asked.

The woman nodded her head in agreement and waved her arm in a circular motion. “L-L-L-ong a-a-go!” she added and smiled again. She opened and closed her hand as if it was a bird’s beak and motioned for her to continue.

Lizzy understood immediately. She wanted her to talk more. So, she did.

“My last name is Nielson, and we have traveled a long way to get here, all the way from North Carolina. It has taken months.”

Mary smiled again and said as clear as day, “Months.”

“My mother’s name is Marta, she helped you deliver your baby. Her friend, Henry, and my boyfriend, Jake, found you. They said you almost drowned.”

“R-Run a-away!” Mary said. “R-River big!”

Lizzy clapped her hands and said, “You do know English.”

Mary nodded and said, “L-long time.”

“What were you running away from?” Lizzy asked.

“B-Bad m-man,” she replied.

“A bad man came after my mother, too. Hank hunt him down and killed him. He deserved it. He took my mother against her will.”

That got Mary excited. She jabbed her finger into her chest repeatedly and said, “Me! Me, t-too!”

“That’s awful!” Lizzy replied. “

“Don’t worry. You are safe here. Henry protects all of us.”

Mary’s eyes searched around the dark campsite and asked, “Where?”

“Don’t worry. “Everybody is sleeping now. I’ll introduce you in the morning. They all are going to be so excited to learn you can speak English. I’m sure Ma and Henry will have lots of questions.”

Mary nodded and said, “F-Food?”

“Forgive me. I should know better than to be flapping my jaws like this. You must be starved. Let me get you some of Elyssa’s stew. It might be a little cold, but it will taste good.”

When Lizzy returned with a bowl, Mary handed her the baby and dug into the meal. She finished it in a flurry, drank several ladles of water and reached for her baby back.

Lizzy handed the child to her and said, “Now you should rest. I’m going to stay here with you. If you need anything else, ask me.” She took a seat next to her, leaned against the tree. In minutes, all

three of them were sound asleep.

CHAPTER 21

Lizzy was awakened by Jake, who wrapped a blanket around her to keep her warm in the wet pre-dawn environment. A heavy dew spewed from the surface of the Arkansas River, and he feared Elizabeth would be cold. He rekindled the fire beside the two young women to ensure their warmth through the early hours of morning.

Lizzy fell quickly back to sleep, curling up next to the warm blaze. As he tucked the blanket tightly around her shoulders, her heard a sound and turned toward the new mother. The woman's dark eyes were watching him intently as the baby suckled at her breast.

With Lizzy settled, he knelt next to her and asked, "Is there anything I can get for you?"

She didn't reply but motioned for him to bring the water bucket closer so she could drink. He did and she drank heartily. He watched and was amazed how different she looked now that Marta had cleaned her up and she had delivered her child.

Her high cheekbones were rosy red, as was her small, pointed nose. Her coal black hair lay long across her shoulder, covering her left breast as the child fed from her right. She smiled at him warmly with dark, gratuitous eyes.

He found her beauty breathtaking. He hadn't noticed earlier, perhaps because she was in such a state of distress when he and Walker happened upon her. Without a doubt, watching her feed the child was one of the most amazing and beautiful visions of his young life.

"What else do you need?" he whispered softly, so as not to awaken Elizabeth.

She nodded, threw her blanket off to reveal her nakedness and smiled longingly at him. With her free hand, she motioned for him to lay with her.

“On, no! I couldn’t!” he said, immediately understanding her intent. Yet, he could not take his eyes off of her. She was the first woman he had seen without clothing, and her curves were beyond everything he had imagined.

She had strong shoulders and breasts that reminded him of soft, tiny pillows. Her long legs ended where a tuft of coal black pubic hair lay in contrast to her white skin. Her curvaceous hips were thin and enticing.

He felt his stomach churn and the hardening of sexual excitement. When she grabbed his hand and placed it on her breast, he stopped breathing. Jake tried to gulp air and to pull away but found both difficult.

Finally, he pulled his hand from hers and reached for the blanket to recover her. That’s when he heard Lizzy screech and cry out, “Jake! How dare you!”

“What?” he asked in shock.

Tears were teaming down Lizzy’s face, distorted in anger. “I hate you!” she proclaimed and stormed off to the wagons.

“You don’t understand,” he pleaded sorrowfully.

Elyssa and Marta were the first to respond. The menfolk followed with rifles in hand.

“What’s going on?” Marta demanded.

When Lizzy hysterically explained she saw her boyfriend touching the Indian girl’s breast, Marta comforted her. Both women looked questioningly at Jake.

“That’s not what happened!” Jake frantically explained. “Well, what happened is not what she thinks! I did nothing wrong!”

As Marta held her daughter in her arms, it was Hank who noticed the young woman looking on in terror. He rushed to her, rested his hand on her shoulder and asked, “Are you all right?”

She nodded but didn’t say a word. Her eyes never left the two

distraught young people.

“You’d better come with me and help sort this mess out,” he said. He made sure she was wrapped tightly in a blanket and guided her toward the wagons.

Clay restarted their campfire and everyone sat around it as Marta and Henry coaxed the story from Mary. It seems she invited Jake to lay with her because that is what she had been trained to do.

Mary’s story was not unlike those of many settlers who ventured into the untamed wilderness in the nineteenth century. Hundreds of thousands came for the promise of free land and a new start. Many never saw their dreams fulfilled. The native people who had lived on the land — sometimes for centuries — were not willing to give it up, and they fought against the white invasion.

Mary struggled to put the words together, but the more she spoke the easier it became.

Mary’s family hailed from Virginia and chose the west as European immigrants flooded into the Chesapeake Bay region where Max and Matilda Krasick managed a small farm. Max dreamed of raising hoes on the West’s vast acreage. So, he packed up everything they owned, including ten-year-old Mary and four-year-old Aaron, and began the long trek to New Mexico.

They made it across the great expanse to the Oklahoma Territories without mishap. Wagon master Buck Johnson didn’t realize they were trespassing on native lands when they crossed the Arkansas River en route for New Mexico. The small wagon train was attacked and overwhelmed by a large hunting party of Shoshone Indians. All but Mary were murdered and mutilated.

Mary fled the attack but was run down by a brave on horseback. She did not know why she, too, was not killed. She guessed it was because of her dark hair and that fact she could run so fast. She was named *Deheya* because she could run like a deer. She became the prized possession of *Weda* and his wife, *Bonai*.

Her time with the Shoshone was one of servitude. She labored for the family's every need, from cooking and planting of crops to caring for their children. Occasionally, *Weda* used her in games of chance. He would bet trinkets, knives and weapons that she could beat any Indian her size in a foot race.

She never lost until he took her to a rendezvous of trappers in the great high country. She had won dozens of races as a child, but now, at age thirteen, was approaching womanhood. She was resented by many of the Shoshone women because she was taller than most of them.

The trappers had many furs and shiny possessions. Many had yellow stones they had discovered in the mountain streams. *Weda* had to bet more than trinkets to entice the trappers to gamble their possessions on a foot race. She was matched against a young man who was older but short in stature, and he bet his prized pony.

Weda was infuriated when she lost by inches at the finish line. The man who had always treated her kindly beat her savagely and sold her to an old trapper for a few beaver pelts he turned around and traded for a new mount.

Pierre Leone owned a small trading post at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, where he catered to trappers' needs. His business blossomed when he gained possession of *Deheya*. He took her maidenhood for himself and then offered her body to anyone in exchange for a golden nugget. All of the trappers had them because the mountain streams in the spring glistened with them.

Leone changed her name to *Anaïs*, the French word for grace. When word spread that a young and supple, white woman was available at the Leone Trading Post, trappers came from far and wide. She was used, abused and trained to believe her sole purpose in life was to please the sexual desires of men.

She endured for four years, conversing only in French or Shoshone. English became a forgotten language until she was rescued from the river.

“What were you doing at the river,” Marta asked.

“P-Pierre sold m-me to dark-skinned man. H-He have many yellow stones. P-Pierre said he w-would c-care for me in his M-Mexico,” she explained.

“That’s just awful,” Elyssa said.

“His name J-Jose. S-Speak w-with strange t-tongue. No understand.”

“Did he mistreat you,” Marta asked.

“No, h-he l-like to lay with *Anais* until he give me baby. Then, he v-very m-mad. I run. R-River too wide. Almost d-die.”

She looked at Henry and said, “T-thank you for l-life.”

Marta leaned back and looked at her daughter, who was unphased by the tale Mary had related. “Clearly, we have a misunderstanding here,” Marta proclaimed.

“That’s what I was trying to explain, but nobody would listen,” explained Jake, who had sat through the entire story while rolling a quarter between the knuckles of both hands. Walker noticed and smiled.

Suddenly, his father grabbed Jake by the arm, pulled him away from the discussion and said, “This is one of those things we should let the women hash out. We’ve got work to do to get the teams ready for travel.”

“But...”

Hank grabbed his other arm and said, “I agree with your father, son. I’ve heard enough, too. There is work to be done.”

As soon as the horses were fed and watered, Elyssa brought each of them a biscuit and bacon while Marta and the girls got Mary dressed in one of Elyssa’s dresses. The two were about the same size. Marta, of course, was larger than all the women and Lizzy was skinny as a rail.

Regardless, Elizabeth still fumed. She no longer had any use for Jake, and Mary might as well have drowned. In Lizzy's eyes she was little more than a harlot who wooed her boyfriend.

Due to the obvious friction, Marta suggested Mary ride in the Anderson wagon while she coped with Elizabeth's raging emotional state. Jake and the men stayed as far away as they could, while keeping a close eye on the landscape in case anyone might give chase to the newest members of their entourage.

CHAPTER 22

The wagons pulled out at around noon, late for the travelers. As always, the Anderson wage led the way, while Walker and Jake rode drag. They stayed within a short ride of the wagons in case trouble arose.

Jake was still agitated and sought the counsel of Henry.

“I can’t believe, Lizzy isn’t being more understanding,” he said. “It wasn’t my intention to lay with Mary, and it was she who pulled my hand to her breast. I pulled away, the minute it happened.”

“Women, no matter what their age, are hard to understand,” Hank explained. “I reckon it’s been that way since Eve offered Adam that nasty apple in the garden. You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. Give Lizzy time; she’ll get over this.”

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “I thought I knew her. I thought she loved me. Not after today, though. I saw hatred in her eyes.”

“She certainly has lost favor for Mary, but that’s the way women are sometimes. They don’t like other women wooing their men. You’ll understand more when you grow a little older.”

“I want to understand now, so I can fix this,” Jake said.

“It may not be fixable, son. What’s done is done. Neither of you intended for this to happen and it can’t be taken back. If Lizzy loves, she’ll forgive. If she won’t forgive, then she doesn’t love like you thought she did.”

Henry thought the boy was going to burst into tears. So, he changed the subject to one Jake would embrace.

“I noticed you’re getting pretty adept with that coin trick I showed you,” he said.

“Yeah, I practice every chance I get.”

“Well, I think it’s time I teach you to shoot, then,” Walker said.

“Do you mean it?” the teenager said, forgetting his heartache.

“Sure do.”

“When can we start?”

“How about right now?” Henry said.

“Sure!”

They dismounted, and Walker showed him how to disassemble his Colt. When it was in pieces, he had him put it back together again. He did it with uncanny quickness that impressed his teacher.

Jake was all smiles when Walker unbuckled his gun belt, passed it to him and ordered him to try it on.

“The first thing you have to do is get the holster in a spot where it is easily accessible to draw. You don’t want to have to reach for it; it should be one quick movement.” Walker said and helped him adjust it properly.

He instructed him to draw the pistol slowly several times.

“Now, do it as fast as you can,” he said. “We’ve taken the bullets out so you don’t shoot yourself in the leg. Just pull and aim a few times.”

They practiced for twenty minutes. Then, Jake asked, “When can I try it with bullets?”

“Not today. I don’t want to scare the women. They’ve had enough excitement for one day. Maybe tomorrow.”

“That would be swell,” Jake said as he removed the belt and handed it to his teacher.

“I want to get your father’s approval before we start shooting at targets. So, we can talk to him tonight after supper,” Henry suggested.”

“I know he won’t mind,” Jake said.

“We ask permission just the same,” Henry insisted. “Now, let’s go see if we can scare up some meat for supper.”

“You lead the way, Mr. Walker,” he said.

“We’ve been on the trail for months now, Jake. Together, the two of us saved a woman’s life. I think you can call me, Hank, like all the other adults.”

“I’d like that, Mr. Walker... er Hank!”

“There ya go.

* * *

JAKE GREW UP that day. It had nothing to do with Elizabeth or Mary or anybody in his family. It was more about the feel of the Colt Paterson hanging on his hip and Hank’s admission he was an adult. He felt trusted, older and somehow wiser.

A sense of worldliness fell over him. He no longer cared if Elizabeth was angry with him or that her love for him had waned. He ceased caring that Mary had drawn his hand to her naked breast and caused an uproar. He knew it was a natural response to the violent lifestyle forced upon her. He decided to show her friendship in an effort to prove not all men were lustful savages.

Therefore, anytime he was not hunting or doing chores, he sat on the seat of the wagon — his mother to his right and Mary to his left — and engaged her in conversation and friendly banter. Slowly, she emerged from her shell. Her English began to flow with ease and she accepted a functioning role in the daily lives of the travelers.

With her child — she named him Henry Walker Krasick after the man who saved her life — strapped to her back Indian-style, she showed them where to find edible food on the vast Kansas prairie. She introduced them to chokecherries, prairie onions and dried prairie potatoes that tasted very much like turnip. She showed them how bitter wild plums could be dried in the sun and stored for later use. They could be smashed into pulp and mixed with molasses to form a sweet sauce or jam.

Pemmican was a staple of the native people and the mountain trappers she lived with for so many years. It was a perfect way to preserve meat for long periods of time.

She collected wild pumpkin from the riverbank and showed them how to weave the outer shell into small mats that were easy to store. Pieces of the mats could be broken off to serve as flavoring for soups and other foods. Of course, she dried and saved the seeds for eating or planting when spring returned. She did the same with the many varieties of flowers that grew wild across the prairie.

Frankly, the more Mary became entrenched in the daily regimen, the more comfortable she became. As she blossomed into motherhood, her beauty — inside and out — became apparent to all but scorned Elizabeth. She shunned the twenty-year-old while Jake seemed to be drawn more and more to her as time passed. It wasn't long before the three — Jake, Mary and little Henry — were inseparable.

* * *

FORT ATKINSON MARKED a resting point along the Santa Fe Trail. It was where the river was shallow enough to cross at most times of the year. Settlers, merchants and cattlemen could choose to follow the wagon ruts northwesterly into Colorado or south to Santa Fe. The fort's approach forced the two families to decide which route to take. The bond between the two adult couples had become so strong, neither wanted to part ways. Hank had a longing for Colorado and the Andersons were set on planting roots in New Mexico.

As they debated their destinations around the campfire one evening, Elizabeth, who had withdrawn from group activities since Mary's arrival, threw a wrench into their discussions.

"What's going to happen to the whore and her bastard son?" she asked bitterly. The women gasped and the men looked at her in shock.

Krissy, her younger sister, said, "Lizzy, that's not nice!"

"Your sister's right," Marta barked at her oldest daughter. "Apologize this minute."

“I will not. I simply asked a question that is supported by fact. Why, she doesn’t even know the last name of the man who fathered her half-breed son.”

Mary hung her head but did not engage her adversary.

Jake didn’t let it pass, though.

“It is I who owes Elizabeth an apology, and I have not been wise enough to offer it until now,” he said. “I am sorry my actions or interactions with Mary have turned your once loving heart to stone. The Elizabeth I once loved was both generous and kind. The Elizabeth I see here tonight is bitter and hateful. It is not becoming, and I sincerely apologize for having a hand in your transformation. Please forgive me.”

“I will not! And I hate you!” she shouted and fled the gathering sobbing uncontrollably.

The adults looked on in shock. They couldn’t believe they had witnessed another blowup.

“I’d like to apologize for my daughter,” Marta said as she rose to comfort her. “I don’t know what’s gotten into her lately.”

As she went to march off, Walker grabbed her by the wrist and said, “Wait! Jake here just made a statement we’ve all been tiptoeing around. Lizzy’s heart is filled with hate, and there is no way you or anyone else can comfort hate. Let her be. She has to work her way through it in order to leave it behind. I know because hate once filled my heart.”

“But she’s my daughter,” Marta said.

“She’s always going to be your daughter, my love. The question is what kind of woman will she be? Will she be one who spews hatred or one who finds it in her heart to forgive?”

Elyssa jumped up and comforted Marta and said, “We’re all family after this grueling journey. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. Let Lizzy cry it out and maybe she will see the light. She’s a good

girl.”

Clay didn't say a word, but he nodded to his son to let him know he was proud of him.

It was then the seventeen-year-old stood, reached a hand to Mary and said, “Please excuse us. I think we need to stretch our legs. Would you mind joining me on a stroll along the river, Mary.”

She wiped tears from her eyes and took Jake's hand and they walked away. Before he disappeared into the darkness, he had a few last words to convey.

“Through this whole mess, I have come to realize I have taken far too much in our life for granted,” he said. “Mom and Dad, you have taught me the meaning of love through your example. Thank you.

“Marta and Hank, you have shared your knowledge in so many ways and opened your hearts to our family. Thank you, too.

“Young Krissy, your friendship is a blessing I will cherish for all my life.

“I have learned from Mary that God works in mysterious ways. After more than ten years of torture and depravity that was not of her choosing, she has discovered happiness among a bunch of strangers. I think that is by divine intervention.

“As you plan what's ahead for this righteous cross-country sojourn, I beg you not to cast Mary aside. I, for one, will not.”

Then, hand in hand, they walked away into the darkness.

CHAPTER 23

The next day, when Jake and Hank were out hunting for the day's supper, the boy was quiet and withdrawn. Walker could tell there was a lot on his mind.

"That was quite a speech you gave last night, son," he said.

"It came from the heart," he said.

"I know that. Now, tell me what you are planning?"

"I'm not sure yet. Pa said you and Marta decided to follow them to New Mexico. I think that's a great idea. We've all proven to be a good team."

"Will you and Mary be joining us?" he asked.

"Was it that obvious?" Jake asked with a smile.

"Yeah! You'd have to be blind not to see something has grown between the two of you. Your Ma and Pa are worried."

Jake sighed heavily and confessed, "I don't know what we are going to do yet. I couldn't wait to be a man, and now I hate the decisions and responsibility that comes with it."

"Just remember, it doesn't matter how old you are, your Ma and Pa always will love you. That goes for me and Marta, too. We're all very proud of you."

"I know. Thank you!" the young man said.

"Now, being you are thinking about striking out on your own, it's time we learn to shoot this here pistol. What do you say?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Jake said, smiling ear to ear.

"Well let's get at it, 'cause we're wasting daylight," Hank concluded and climbed off Bullet.

Young Anderson showed amazing ability. He hadn't forgotten a

thing when it came to dismantling the Paterson and reassembling it. He did it expertly and with amazing speed. He was fast on the draw and, after a few pointers, never missed a target, stationary or moving.

“I think you are natural, kid,” Hank said.

“Well, it feels comfortable in my hand, and I’ve always been a good shot with my rifle. The mechanics are a little different with a pistol. I think that’s why you had me learn that trick with the coin.”

“It worked for me, and I figured it would work for you, too,” Walker said.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen anyone take to it so easily. I think you’re ready to wear one of these,” Walker added “Just remember this: wearing one comes with more responsibility. So, keep a clear head about you. If you are forced to draw it, never hesitate to pull the trigger.”

“I understand,” Jake replied as he reassembled and loaded the pistol. He handed it back to his friend and added. “Thank you for teaching me. Maybe when we get to Fort Atkinson, there will be a trading post where I can purchase one of my own.”

“That’s what I was about to get to, son,” Hank said as he walked to where Bullet was hobbled and dug in a saddle bag. He pulled out a holstered pistol, wrapped in a gun belt. He handed it to young Anderson with a smile.

Jake’s eye’s sparkled as if he was looking at a cache of gold nuggets.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“It’s yours,” Hank said.

“Really?”

“Does the sun set in the west, boy?”

“Where did you get it?” Jake asked.

“Took it off that bunch that was thinking about attacking the wagon train months ago. Thought I might need a backup one day.

Reckon you could put it to better use,” Hank said, smiling.

“I don’t know what to say,” he replied as his hand wrapped around a walnut grip. His fingers traced a path from the cylinder to the barrel as if it was made of glass. “What’s this design on the cylinder?”

“I wondered that, too, but have no idea,” Walker replied. “It’s a Navy Colt. I assume the engraving honors some great sea battle. It’s one of Sam Colt’s newer models. You’ll have to figure out if it is as reliable as my Paterson.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Jake said.

“Just show it the respect it deserves and we’re square.”

Jake checked the cylinder to see if it was loaded and then strapped the holster to his waist and secured it to his thigh. He drew it a couple times and added, “It’s lighter than your Paterson. I like the balance. Thank you, Hank.”

“The only bullets I have for it are in that gun belt. So don’t waste any. You’ll probably be able to pick up some more at Fort Atkinson.”

“I hope so. A pistol is pretty useless without bullets.”

“Now, let’s go and find us some supper, Jake.”

“Lead the way.”

They climbed back into their saddles and rode toward the tall grass.

* * *

THE WHOLE WAY to Fort Atkinson, Elizabeth remained silent and withdrawn. She never said a word unless Marta talked to her directly. Then, she offered simple one- or two-word answers. Gone was the carefree joy she displayed before the men pulled Mary from the waters of the Arkansas River. The fire of dissent always was present in her eyes, especially when she cast them toward Jake and the new mother.

Everyone but Elizabeth was happy when Fort Atkinson came into view on the distant horizon. Traffic along the trail had increased, and Clay estimated they would arrive at the outpost and crossing by noon the next day.

“It means there’s a lot more trail behind us than in front,” Clay said happily as they gathered around the campfire.

“How far is it to Santa Fe?” Marta asked.

“Three or four hundred miles,” Clay replied.

“And I expect the trail won’t be as difficult.” Hank said.

“That’s good,” Jake said. “We certainly have had our bumps over the last few months. It will be nice to be around people again.”

Elizabeth sneered at him and said, “Best keep a close rein on that one. She’ll likely be spreading her legs for the first soldier boys she sees.”

Again, the two families were taken aback by Lizzy’s venomous words.

“Lizzy?” Marta said and shook her head in disgust.

This time Mary responded. She handed her baby to Jake and walked to where Elizabeth was seated. With hands on her hips, she ordered her to stand too.

“What? Do you want to fight me?” she said and laughed. “That’s not how we do things in civilization, whore.”

Mary grabbed her by the wrist, pulled her to her feet and said, “I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction. You are weak and immature. You’ve been coddled your entire life, and I doubt you have any idea how to defend yourself. “

Lizzy tried to pull away, but Mary’s grip was too tight.

“You can’t run off and hide this time. I want you to look me in the eye so I am sure you hear what I have to say.?”

Lizzy crossed her arms and pouted.

“I’ve done nothing to incite the hatred you continue to harbor toward me. When my family crossed this prairie, they weren’t as lucky as yours. They’re all dead. I did what I had to do to survive in a world that is too horrible for you to even imagine. I’m just thankful the loving people who sit around this campfire found me and allowed me to shed so many of those horrible memories.

“For your information, I swam across that river to get away from Mexico and the man who enslaved me. I almost died in the process. So, I have no intention of returning. If I was you, I’d leave your hatred on this side of the river. Cross and have a good life. I will pray you find peace.”

Lizzy stared at her with blazing eyes. “If you are expecting an apology, you’re not getting one from me. Good riddance is what I say.”

Then, she stamped her foot and stormed off.

Jake stood and embraced Mary. He guided her back to their seat next to the fire and said, “Well now, that brings us to another subject. When y’all leave for New Mexico, Mary and I will be heading to Colorado.”

“No!” Elyssa cried out.

“Clay comforted her and said, “Let him have his say, honey.”

“As you all know, Mary and me have become close friends,” Jake said. “I cannot let her make that journey alone. The mountainous rout is a difficult one, and the wilderness of Colorado is much different than the prairies of Kansas, I presume.

“We’ll find a small town. I’ll see that she gets settled, and I’ll send message to you in Santa Fe with what my future plans are. There are a lot of wide-open spaces out there, and I want to see a few of them.”

The gathering went deadly silent.

It was little Krissy who broke the serenity by asking, “Can I go

with Mary, Jake and little Henry?”

Everybody laughed and the tension ebbed.

CHAPTER 24

Fort Atkinson was nothing like the small wagon train expected. It was manned by only a handful of soldiers and dubbed a key installation after hostiles overran and destroyed Fort Mann, located two miles to the east. Fort Atkinson, like its predecessor, served as a stopping point for wagons heading from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to Santa Fe.

Being it was a perfect place for wagons of merchants and settlers to rest and repair damaged schooners, the military supported it with a small garrison of men. It consisted of just a few buildings and a trading post that could resupply travelers with needed commodities for the final stretch of their journey.

The crossing was in the heart of Comancheria, and Santa Fe was only recently ceded to the United States following the Mexican-American War that ended in 1848. As newly acquired territory, New Mexico became a dream destination for merchants and settlers longing to restart lives and businesses in the bountiful West.

Walker, the Nielsens and the Andersons spent two days resting on the sandy shores of the Big Bend of the Arkansas River and refilled their stores for the next leg of their journey. To the shock of the closely-knit travelers, the quartermaster would not accept payment for any of the supplies they secured.

“If your name is Waler, Anderson or Nielsen, your supplies have been paid for in advance,” Quartermaster William Lowery said.

“Why? Who would do such a thing?” Clay asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say, but it is the damnedest thing that has happened around this post for as long as I can remember,” Lowery explained.

“But we know nobody in these parts, and we just decided to make the crossing a few days ago,” Anderson said. “Henry, do you know somebody in these parts?”

“Not me, this is as far west as I’ve ever been, Clay. You know that,” Hank replied.

“Then, I demand to know who the donor is,” Clay said emphatically and stared at the storekeeper.

“The donor demanded anonymity, sir,” Lowery said. “On my oath, I cannot divulge that bit of information. You can always refuse the goods, but it is a long way to Santa Fe, and I guarantee the trail is more desolate than any you have traveled so far. I suggest you accept this good fortune and be on your way. If I see the donor again, and I’m sure I will, I promise to pass along your kind words of appreciation.”

“What do you think,” Hank?” Clay asked. “I’ve never taken kindly to charity.”

Walker took off his hat and scratched his scalp while he thought about his answer. He harkened back to the days when he lay comatose after his family had been murdered. He was trying to remember a verse Ruth Parker read to him while he was recuperating.

“You know I’m not an overly religious man, Clay, but I’m trying to recall a verse from the Good Book Doc Parker’s wife read to me shortly after I lost my arm,” he said and raised his stump for emphasis.

“I goes something like this: ‘He who is generous will prosper.’ The Lord knows we’ve helped a good many folks along this journey, the least of which was Mary,” Walker said.

“Aye! That’s from the book of Proverbs,” Lowery offered. “It’s chapter 11, verse 25 — ‘A generous person shall prosper. He who refreshes others, so shall he be refreshed.’ You must be God fearing men. I think it would be sinful of you to refuse this blessing.

“I say take the goods and travel safely, my friends. When you get to Santa Fe, make sure you share your blessings with others. Lord knows it is a place that is deserving of some goodwill.”

Henry and Clay did exactly as suggested. They refilled their stores, purchased a few frills for the ladies and plenty of ammunition

for emergencies.

Before they departed, the quartermaster handed them a bundle wrapped in brown paper. It was bound by string and had the name LIZZY written across the top. He handed it to Walker and said, “One last thing, friend. Your benefactor said I was to give to a man with one arm. I reckon that’s you.”

“What is it?” Henry asked.

“Reckon the recipient will have to open it to find out,” the quartermaster said. “Maybe it’s an early Christmas gift. I have no idea. Y’all travel with Godspeed.”

Clay and Jake left with their goods packed atop mules. The two families ate supper without Jake and Mary. Elyssa was frantic. “Where do you think those two have wandered off to?” she asked. “Do you think they would up and leave for Colorado without saying goodbye?”

“Absolutely not,” Clay said. “They are both too responsible, and neither of them would worry us like that. They’ll be along soon. They probably gathering all the information they can about the mountain route.”

“I agree,” Hank said.

“Here they come now,” said Marta.

The pair rode into camp with a pack horse loaded high with gear.

“Where have you two been?” Elyssa shouted happily. “You scared me to death; I thought you left without saying goodbye.”

“Ma, you don’t really believe we would do that, do you?” Jake said. “We had a lot to do to prepare for our trip, just like you all did. We’re here now, though. Is there any food left?”

“Of course. There is something special for both of you. Henry caught a snapping turtle along the riverbank today, and Marta made a delicious stew.”

“You’ve got a lot of gear there, son,” Clay said. “Where did you get the money to pay for it?”

“Funny you should ask, Pa. It was all paid for by some anonymous donor. I couldn’t believe it. We were able to get everything we needed, and I won’t have to scrounge anything off you and Ma.”

“The same thing happened to us,” Clay replied. “Damnedest surprise I’ve ever gotten. Do you have any idea who might have done such a thing?”

“Um! No! But whoever it was, we owe them a huge debt,” Jake said.

“God works in mysterious ways,” Mary added with a big smile. “I’m starving. How about you, Jake?”

“Clay, you go enjoy your last night with these two, I’ll take care of the horses,” Walker said.

“Thanks, Henry,” Clay said and walked away, arm in arm with his son.

“You go ahead,” Mary said and reached in her pocket. “I’ll be right there. I brought this apple for Cisco. I want to give it to him and have a word with Mr. Walker.”

She trailed after him as the others gathered around the fire.

“This is a beautiful horse, Mary. He must have cost you a pretty sum. Did that donor’s reach stretch all the way to the livery?” Henry asked.

“Yes, sort of,” she said and fed the apple to the new stallion. “The donor wanted to make sure we all made it to our destinations safely.”

“Do you know who the donor is?” he asked.

“Sort of,” she said sheepishly.

Her answer shocked Henry. He squinted questioningly at her and asked, “Who was it?”

“I’ll tell you if you promise not to tell another soul. I owe you that for saving my life and the life of my child,” she said.

“Of course, the secret will be safe with me,” he said.

“The donor is a young woman who had no hope of happiness until she was pulled from the Arkansas River by a kind man and a gentle boy who were hoping to build new lives in the West. She had endured unthinkable acts of cruelty and decided she would rather die than bring her child into such an ugly world.”

“It is you?” he whispered, startled by the revelation. “How?”

“She ran away from her captors, and she took something of great value with her. She carried it in a backpack for many miles. She prayed she could cross the river into America and be free of those who oppressed her.

“She thought she was a good swimmer, but the backpack was too heavy. It kept pulling her down below the surface. Finally, she tried to drag it along the bottom with her foot. She was almost to the opposite shore when the bag pulled her under. She thought that was the end of her flight.

“Then, miraculously, you pumped life back into her. The next morning, when everyone was sleeping, she looked across the river to see if anyone had given chase, and she discovered another miracle. At low tide, she could see the heavy backpack just below the surface. She retrieved it and hid it. She assumed it would buy her freedom. Instead, she found love and friendship among strangers and now she is very grateful.”

“You took this from the man who bought you from the trading post in the high country?” Hank asked.

“Yes!”

“Won’t he come looking for it?”

“Of course, but this land is vast. Within its vastness, I believe one can easily disappear.”

“Do not be so sure, Mary. Do not underestimate the determination of ruthless men,” Walker said. “I am proof of that.”

“I will remain wary, and so will Jake,” she said. “You have taught him well and he has promised to see me safely to a new life. Then, he will return to you and his parents in New Mexico.”

“Where will you go?” he asked.

“To a beautiful valley surrounded by mountains, a place where even a whore can pass as a lady if she has a backpack filled with gold,” she said and smiled.

“I don’t like that word. You did what you had to in order to survive. You are a good soul, and I am happy to have met you. Do as the Good Book says: ‘Go and sin no more.’ All of us will be praying you find happiness in the high country.”

“I’ve already experienced a couple of miracles, Hank,” she said and giggled. “I think I’ve probably reached my quota. I want you and Marta to find happiness in New Mexico, though. So, take this and prosper.”

She slipped a small bag of nuggets into his hand and walked away.

“I can’t accept this,” he called out as she walked toward the campfire.

“Sure, you can!” she called back and joined the Andersons for a final supper before they divided and when their separate ways.

CHAPTER 25

Five days later, the two wagons were rolling through the barren landscape that led to Santa Fe. Gone was the tall, green grass of the Kansas prairie. The terrain south of the Arkansas River stood in stark contrast to what they had been used to over the last months. The lush greenery of Kansas was replaced by desert sage, cactus and scraggly, sunbaked mesquite. It was dry and dusty, drinkable water was hard to find and the trail was rife with Mexican outlaws and marauding Indians.

With Jake no longer part of their procession, Clay stayed close to the wagons, while Walker constantly patrolled their perimeter. Clay wondered where his one-armed friend was when a gang of vaqueros suddenly surrounded the wagons.

There were eight of them, and they quickly blocked the path of the wagons. Marta ordered her girls inside and grabbed a rifle. So did Clay. Elyssa trembled with fear.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Clay asked. “We have nothing of value.”

They wore large, floppy sombreros, dust-covered clothing and angry scowls. All were heavily armed. Their horses pranced and snorted, a sign they had been riding hard. Riders immediately went to the back of the wagons to inspect their contents. Krissy and Lizzy screamed when the flap of the Nielsen wagon was pulled back.

“*Hay dos mujeres en la parte trasera del vagón, jefe,*” the outlaw called out.

A short man, riding a black palomino, reined his horse between the two wagons and turned his attention to the Nielsen wagon, immediately recognizing Marta was alone. She did not like the way his eyes examined every inch of her voluptuous frame before he turned away.

It was obvious his black attire was tailored especially for him. His silk shirt revealed a muscular chest and shoulders. He had shiny revolvers and bullets jammed into belts that crisscrossed his chest. Silver medallions, sewed into the band of his sombrero, glistened in the sunlight. He wore a thin mustache and gold flashed from his smile before he spoke directly to Clay.

“My friend says there are two more women in the back of this wagon. You take a chance riding through this country with so many beautiful women, *amigo*,” he said. “My name is Jose Rodriguez. I own a large ranch south of here. These are some of my vaqueros.”

“If we have trespassed on your land, we are sorry,” Clay immediately stated. “We will gladly remove ourselves.”

“You have done nothing wrong, gringo. All of this land once belonged to my people, but we failed to defend it. Now, it belongs to your country, and wagons like yours travel this trail regularly.”

“Then, why do you block our path?” Clay asked and tightened the grip on his Winchester.

“We wanted to ask you if you have come across a woman, a gringo like yourself, wandering in the desert,” he said with a shiny smile.

Elyssa gasped ever so slightly, but the leader of the vaqueros noticed.

“We’ve seen nothing but cactus and mesquite,” Clay replied. “If we see her, though, we will offer her aid and escort her back to your ranch.”

“Ah, you are not a very good liar, *senior*,” he said and pulled his pistol and pointed it at Elyssa. “Am I not right, *seniora*?”

Tears began to flow down her cheeks and she managed to say, “He tells the truth.”

“I don’t think so,” he said with a sly smile. He pointed the pistol to the Nielsen wagon and added, “Bring the little ones from the back of that wagon. We will show them what happens to gringos who do

not speak the truth.”

“Don’t you dare!” Marta warned and aimed her rifle at Rodriquez. In a flash a lariat circled her body and yanked her from the wagon. Her rifle exploded in the air and flew from her hands as she landed with a thud, stunned and breathless. One of the mounted Mexicans kept tension on the rope so she could not move.

Two vaqueros dragged the young girls, kicking and screaming, to the front of the procession.

“Show them what will happen if they do not tell the truth,” Rodriquez said to his henchmen.

A large, surly Spaniard walked to the girls, whose arms were secured by two of his countrymen. He snarled and ripped the front of the girls dresses to the waist. He slapped them when they screamed, and growled, “They are young, but they will do, *jefe*.”

Clay had no idea what to do next. The situation was dire. Where was Hank? He needed him.

* * *

FROM AFAR, HANK spotted the wagons’ sudden stop. When he saw the vaqueros surround his friends and family, he pulled his sawed-off shotgun and its sheath from behind his saddle and secured it over his shoulder. He did not like what he saw. He kicked Bullet into a gallop and raced toward an outcropping of rocks, hoping he could get behind the outlaws and surprise them before anyone got hurt.

His heart raced and the blood in his veins boiled. He vowed not to lose another loved one to the heinous acts of outlaws who spread violence wherever they went.

When he heard two shots, he prayed Marta and the girls had not been injured.

* * *

CLAY DIDN’T THINK. He only reacted. When the mammoth

Mexican tore at the girls' clothing, Anderson stood and fired his Winchester at the fiend. The bullet entered just under his right armpit, tore through his lungs and heart and lodged in his left arm. He toppled over dead immediately.

The error in judgment was the worst mistake Clay could have made. He should have shot Rodriguez instead. It was a bullet from the ranch owner's pistol that took off half of the American's skull and splattered Elyssa and the horses with gray matter. Likeable Clay Anderson was dead before he landed on the dusty desert tundra.

Terror swept through the females, young and old. Elyssa jumped from the wagon to help her husband but the bullet had done far too much damage. She mourned and caressed his bloody body. Her dress quickly was saturated with his blood.. She rocked his body back and forth and sobbed uncontrollably.

* * *

THE SMELL OF cordite was still wafting skyward when Rodriguez walked to where the restrained Marta sobbed on the ground. He placed his pistol against her temple and said, "Now, do you understand the seriousness of my request, *seniora*? You will be the next to die if you do not tell the truth."

Her back stiffened and she quit sobbing immediately. She wondered where the hell Hank was and prayed he would hurry to their rescue. She looked across the way and saw Elyssa cradling the dead body of her husband and found new resolve.

"We've seen no woman along this trail," she replied. "Please do not hurt my girls."

"I do not believe you," Rodriguez said. He pulled back the hammer of his pistol and sneered angrily. Then, he added, "Why are you Americans so bullheaded? Tell me and you can save your life and that of your girls."

Filled with hatred and facing unthinkable terror for the first time in her life, Elizabeth called out, "Don't shoot! I'll tell you what you want to know."

“That is more like it,” Rodriquez said and let his pistol crash down against Marta’s head. The blow knocked her unconscious.

Again, the girls screamed.

* * *

HEARING THE SHOTS, Walker dismounted and sprinted to the scene. He was at least a quarter mile away. The outcropping of rocks, behind which the outlaws had hidden before surprising his fellow travelers, provided cover for his approach but blocked his view of what was happening. He heard screaming and soon was close enough to understand what was being asked of his friends.

“Of all these women, you, *seniorita*, are the smartest,” he heard a voice say as he got closer. “You will tell me where this whore has gone with my gold, no?”

“I’ll gladly tell you. I hate her as much as you do,” Lizzy said, “but you must promise not to hurt us anymore. We’ve done nothing wrong.”

“If you gave harbor to my whore, you have done something very wrong,” he said and placed the gun against Krissy’s forehead. “Now, you will speak the truth or your sister dies.”

That’s when Hank raised his arm above his head and stepped into the clearing. He still wore his pistol and the sawed-off was hidden behind his back and strapped to his left shoulder. “I can tell you exactly where your gold is,” he proclaimed loudly.

Rodriquez looked at him and smirked.

“At last, a man of reason arrives to save the day. *Amigo*, I am glad to see you and pray you arrive with no foolish ideas. You are greatly outnumbered. One of your friends already has died because of his poor judgment. I must ask, though. Why have you forgotten to bring your other arm to this party?” Jose said and laughed so hard he dropped his pistol to his side. So did his men. All thought their boss had made a great joke.

That's when Walker exploded with rage.

When he pulled the Paterson from his holster, everything around him seemed to slow down. It was as if his actions were five times faster than the evil men. The speed of his movements caught the laughing gang off guard. His first bullet found the forehead of Rodriquez. The next two exploded in the hearts of the men standing over Kate and Elizabeth.

Next, he dropped the pistol in the dirt, pulled the shotgun from its sheath and loosed both barrels without blinking an eye. Fire and lead detonated from the shortened barrels. The buckshot lifted three vaqueros off their feet, killing one instantly and leaving the other two howling in bloody destruction.

He tossed the shotgun aside in a reflex reaction and dove for the pistol he had discarded at the onset of the melee. Bullets from the last vaquero's gun kicked at the sand as he rolled and took aim. When he found his target, he was surprised to see Marta had her hand clenched in a vice-like grip on the Mexican's privates. The outlaw cried in pain and swung the pistol in her direction.

Hank fired again, and the last of the gang members was vanquished. Marta was still squeezing the man's cojones when his eyes rolled to the back of his head and he fell backward. He was dead where he landed, and she still screamed expletives and refused to release her grip.

Hank placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "I'm here, honey. You're safe now. Let go of him and go tend to your daughters."

Marta heard his voice, but thought it came from far away. When she looked up and saw his lips smiling beneath his brown mustache, she said, "Oh, Hank!" She jumped up and threw her arms round his neck and hugged him.

"Go to your girls, honey," he said. "I've got to finish this."

Her rifle lay on the ground next to her. Walker shoved his smoking pistol into his holster, grabbed the long gun and walked to where the two surviving vaqueros wailed. Both of their faces had

been ripped to shreds by the buckshot. He leveled the Paterson at them and said, “*Adios, pendejos!*” They were the only two words he knew in Spanish, but he wanted the sightless men to know the end was near. Then, he begrudgingly halted their anguish with single shots to their hearts.

CHAPTER 26

Not far from where he gave his life defending the Nielsen girls, Clay was buried by his wife and his grief-stricken friends. The only solace his wife could find in his senseless death, was the fact he finally was home in the New Mexico Territory he had so passionately sought.

With both her son and her husband gone, Elyssa's grief was compounded. Clay had made most of the decisions in their lives together, and she knew not what to do next.

"Do not worry, Elyssa," Marta said warmly. "We will stay at your side and see that your dream of settling in New Mexico is fulfilled. We will not abandon you."

"Thank you," she said. "Your kindness is appreciated. I know I can depend upon you. We have become family. You and Henry are like a brother and sister now. I do not know what to do next, though."

"If you are worried about making the trip, I will drive your team," Hank said. "Marta has become a regular teamster when it comes to handling our horses. I cannot promise you an easy trek, but I'll get us all there safely."

"I'm not sure I want to settle in New Mexico," she said. "That was my husband's dream."

"Oh, Elyssa, don't tell me you want to go back home," Marta said and pulled the grieving woman in her arms. "I don't think I'm up to crossing that damned prairie again."

"I think I want to go to Colorado," she said with a look of confidence. "Look at this barren, dry place. What promise Clay saw in this miserable desert, I have no idea?"

"Colorado?" Hank exclaimed with surprise.

"Well, didn't you say you preferred Colorado, Henry? I got the feeling you let Clay change your mind. That husband of mine could convince a body that pigs can dance when he put his mind to it. I think

he sold you on the idea.”

“That he did,” Henry replied.

“Well, what do you say? Do you think you could track my son and Mary through that mountain route?” she asked.

“I might, if they left a trail,” said Hank. He removed his hat and scratched his scalp and looked toward Marta for help.

“You must understand, Mary knew this Mexican outlaw was going to come after her and the gold she stole from him. They might be covering their tracks so nobody can follow,” Walker added.

“So, now the whore is a thief, too,” Elizabeth blurted out, her face distorted with hatred. “I don’t want to go to Colorado.”

Henry stood back as Elyssa’s face turned beet red and she stomped toward Marta’s oldest daughter. When she was in front of her, she slapped her face hard and said, “Despite a horrible start in life, Mary is a wonderful woman. You would agree if you had taken the time to know her. Shame on you! Who do you think paid for the new dress you are wearing?”

“What?” Lizzy asked as she rubbed the side of her cheek. “What are you talking about? Hank brought this back from the trading post. Mary had nothing to do with it.”

That’s when Marta walked up and slapped her daughter on the other cheek. “You spoiled brat! I, too, am tired of this shameful routine. You’re almost sixteen years old! Many girls your age are married and bearing children. Grow up and observe what’s happening around you instead of feeling sorry for yourself.

“After this long journey, do you think Hank had money to waste on a dress for you? We needed supplies and ammunition, food and extra barrels for water.”

“What’s she talking about,” Elizabeth asked, looking directly at Hank for an answer.

“Mary is the anonymous donor who paid for all the supplies we

collected at Fort Atkinson. She set the dress aside, especially for you. She made me promise not to tell anyone, but I guess the cat is out of the bag now,” Hank said.

“Why would she do that?” Lizzy asked.

“Maybe because she was aware of the pain she caused you when she was recovering from a near drowning and childbirth. She knew her reflex reaction toward Jake brought you great distress, and she wanted, in some small way, to make it up to you,” Elyssa said.

“Maybe it was because you befriended her that first night and she appreciated your kindness,” Marta said.

“She did?” Lizzy asked.

“Yes, Lizzy. You were much nicer before we came upon the Arkansas River. I miss laughing and playing with you,” Krissy chipped in.

“Hear! Hear!” Marta said. “We’d all like to see the real Elizabeth return. Let this go or it will destroy you.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said and ran off to the wagon.

“You do that, girl, because it’s a long ride to Colorado,” Walker called out.

“Does that mean we have a change of plans?” Elyssa said with a big smile and began hugging everyone.

“I reckon it does,” Hank said. “We leave first thing in the morning.”

THE END

(Turn the page to learn more about Bloody Kansas and the Santa Fe Trail.)

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

WHEN SETTLERS FIRST cast their eyes on the great Kansas prairie they called it a “prairie ocean,” because the green grass stretched for as far as the eye would see. It stood in contrast to the vast blue European settlers encountered when they crossed the massive Atlantic.

* * *

THE SANTA FE Trail was not the preferred trail out of Independence, Missouri for most immigrants. The trail was predominantly use by the military and merchants, especially following the Mexican-American War. It was 846 grueling miles long. The mountainous route was about one hundred miles longer than the southern route. In contrast, the Oregon Trail was 2,170 miles long. Because the California Trail split off and went in several directions, it spread over more than 5,000 miles of wilderness terrain in its entirety.

* * *

WILLIAM BECKNELL and a group of adventurers were the first to blaze the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. They followed the north side of the Arkansas River, which was the initial boundary between the fledgling United States and Mexico. After passing through Kansas and into Eastern Colorado, they traveled over the Raton Pass before making their way to Santa Fe. The route would become known as the “mountain route.”

Becknell returned home, by way of a southern route that crossed eastern New Mexico and into Oklahoma and then on the Kansas. The route became known as the Cimarron Route and passable by prairie schooner.

* * *

THE NEW MEXICO Territory became part of the United States in

1848, as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It marked the end of the Mexican War and added more than 1 million square miles, an area larger than the Louisiana Purchase, to the U.S. With the status of slavery still a major issue in Washington D.C., Senator Henry Clay authored a compromise that allowed California to enter the Union as a free state in 1850. The issue of slavery in the rest of the Mexican territories would be decided by the residents who lived there.

* * *

FOLLOWING THE Mexican-American War, the Santa Fe Trail became primarily a trade route to send goods back and forth from the newly acquired territories of California, New Mexico and Arizona. By 1860, it is estimated more than 16 million pounds of goods crossed the Kansas plains from Kansas City. It was carried aboard more than 3,000 wagons pulled by 27,000 oxen and 6,000 mules. Expansion in the burgeoning new lands was big business.

Settlers came by the thousands, too. They settled primarily in Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico.

* * *

IT IS SAID history has a way of repeating itself. During my research for this novel. I was somewhat surprised the balance of power in the United States Senate was as sacred in the 1850s as it is today. Prior to the Civil War slave states consisted of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas and North Carolina, all of which eventually seceded from the Union in 1862. Border states supported slavery but remained loyal to the Union. They were Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri.

“Bloody Kansas” evolved because Missourians didn’t want their neighbors in the Kansas Territory to gain statehood as a free state. The scales already had been tipped with the admission of Iowa (1846), Wisconsin (1848), California (1850) and Minnesota (1858), all free states. The foundation of descent would fester for only a few more years before war broke out between the North and South.

* * *

THE BORDER WAR between Kansas and Missouri waged for five years and hundreds of Americans were killed on both sides. Most of the fighting occurred on the western side of the border. “Bloody Kansas” finally entered the Union as a free state in January of 1861. It was only a few short months later, Confederate Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard fired the first salvo of the Civil War on April 12, 1861.

THE END

Thank you for spending time with the second entry in my Hostile Territory series. In the pages that follow, you will find a sneak peek at book #3 in this series and previews of a few more of my novels. Reviews help position this book in the vast marketplace. So, go to Amazon and give this manuscript a star rating. A review, whether one word or one hundred, would be appreciated. Follow this link:

[LEAVE A REVIEW](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gerald L. Guy is a retired newspaper editor who lives in Palm Coast, FL with his wife, Joanne. He was the recipient of numerous state, regional and national writing awards during his long journalism career. His pursuit of words began as a sportswriter in his hometown of Warren, Ohio. Guy eventually edited daily newspapers in Ohio, Georgia, and Wisconsin.

He retired in 2004 and moved to Florida the following year. When he's not writing or editing short stories and novels, he's walking the scenic trails and sunny beaches of Flagler County.

“Bloody & Afflicted” is the author’s fifth entry in the Historic/Western genre and his third published novel of 2021. It is Book #2 in his celebrated Hostile Territory series. The first book in the series, “Iroquois Awakening,” was published in July.

In January, he published “Altered Lives,” a cold case mystery set in a small Ohio town.

In all, the author has published 15 novels, including three trilogies.

The Wolf Pact Saga, a fantasy about a shapeshifting people who

live in secrecy in rural Wisconsin, began in 2011 with “The New Order” and was followed by “Escape from Captivity” and “Dream Catchers.”

His Coastal Capers series came next, and focuses on a mysteriously active, retirement home resident who thrives on helping others. The series includes “Act of Kindness,” “Act of Mercy” and “Act of Recall.”

The McIntyre Adventures include four titles and a fifth is in the works. “Run to Danger” and “Run Like the Wind” were the first two and re-packaged into “PAYBACK: Eye for an Eye” for marketing purposes. In them, an orphaned teen tries to find his way in the often-lawless West of the 1870s. “Chasing Gold,” a semifinalist in the prestigious Laramie Awards for western writing, and “Chasing the Past” complete the series.

An independent author, Guy published “Secrets of the Heart,” “Tree of Wonders” and “SARA: A Hero’s Story” as stand-alone titles. “SARA” is historical fiction that traces the exploits of the crew of the *U.S.S. Saratoga CV-3*, an aircraft carrier that helped win World War II. The author’s late father, Ralph G. Guy, served aboard the ship and remains his hero today.

As 2021 rolls to a close, he expects to publish “Derailed Dreams,” Book #3 in the Hostile Territory series in the fourth quarter. “New Paths,” the next entry in The McIntyre Adventures is scheduled for 2022..

PRIEVIEW

Derailed Dreams

It took months for Moses Conway to recover from the tragedies that turned his life upside down. A cross-country sojourn allowed him to re-invent himself and start over in newly independent Texas.

Chapter 1

Moses Conway felt no discomfort when his fingers slipped around the handle of the shiny, new Colt pistol that had been a favorite of customers in his Weldon, North Carolina mercantile. It felt balanced in his hand and he liked the way the folding trigger emerged from the housing when he cocked it.

Both his Colts were fully loaded, five .36-caliber bullets in each, as he slid them into the holsters that crisscrossed his abdomen. He strolled to the mercantile door, hung a CLOSED sign in the window and walked outside, where his saddled mare, Lucky, was hitched to the railing.

He climbed into the leather and reined the horse into the minimal traffic of the early morning. A breeze, ever so slight, greeted him as sunlight broke through the fleeting grayness of nighttime. Conway could smell bacon and biscuits cooking at Sally's Restaurant as he rode nonchalantly down the dusty roadway.

It was going to be another hot and humid day. He could feel the shirt sticking to his back as he rode four blocks to the edge of town, hitched his mare to the railing and walked into the P&R Railroad station. Like Conway, Manger Buford Brownleaf always arrived early to his office. This day was no different. He was shuffling dispatches and receipts at his desk when Conway entered the depot.

The newly constructed building smelled of paint and varnish. It was one of the few businesses in the tiny community that could afford electric lights, making the interior brighter than the dawn outside. It was hours before the train arrived. So, the depot was empty except for the manager. A tiny bell signaled Conway's entry.

Brownleaf stood when he saw the shop owner approach and immediately offered his condolences for the loss of his family and asked, "What can I do for you at this early hour, Moses?"

“I think you’ve done quite enough already, Buford,” said his stern-faced friend. When his right hand retrieved the Colt from its confinement, he saw the look of shock on Brownleaf’s face as he pulled back the hammer and the trigger emerged. The clicking of the metal in the empty depot seemed louder than normal, but it didn’t deter Conway.

Brownleaf recognized the danger of the moment, took a step back and tripped on the chair on which he had been seated. He fell backward onto the floor. When he looked up, Conway was standing over him. The Colt Paterson was three feet away and pointing directly at his forehead.

He felt his bladder release. Urine flowed beyond his control as fear paralyzed every other muscle in his body. He held his hands up and whispered, “It wasn’t my fault.”

“Easy for you to say, Buford,” Conway said, and he pulled the trigger.

The first bullet tore through the flesh of Brownleaf’s thigh. He screamed in pain. Blood mixed with his urine as the manager begged for his life.

“I had nothing to do with it, Moses!” he screamed.

The smell of gunsmoke covered the stench of the man’s bodily fluids and Conway said, “The first bullet is for Angela, my firstborn. She was Elizabeth’s favorite.”

The second shot tore out the man’s clavicle as it bored through his shoulder and buried in the wooden floor.

Brownleaf, riddled with pain, begged his tormentor to stop.

“It was an accident!” the manager pleaded painfully.

His pleas went unheeded.

“That bullet was for Betsy, the most lovable of my three girls,” Conway said.

Surrounded in a cloud of smoke, Conway pulled back the hammer one more time. As he waited for the cloud of gunsmoke to dissipate, he said, “This last one is for Carmine, my baby.”

Then, he pulled the trigger a final time.

The .36-calibre bullet took off the top of Brownleaf’s head. Blood and brain matter exploded from impact, splattering against Conway’s boots and pant legs. He paid no attention. He just slipped the smoking pistol back into his holster, turned and walked toward the exit.

He stopped and looked back at his carnage and said, “I reckon Satan will be smiling when he sees you approaching, Buford. When it is my time to enter that fiery hell, the two of you best be frowning again, because I plan on emptying this revolver on you next time.”

Emotionless, he walked outside, climbed aboard Lucky and rode out of town, leaving behind all of his worldly possessions.

* * *

MOSES CONWAY DIDN’T have a worry in the world. A single father and owner of a small but prosperous mercantile in the northern hill country, he was returning home after a two-day excursion to Portsmouth, Virginia. His three daughters were laughing and having fun in the train seat across from his, and he was going over account ledgers for July sales at Conway’s Mercantile & Dry Goods.

The family had traveled north on a sightseeing tour aboard the innovative Portsmouth & Roanoke Railroad, one of the true marvels of the nineteenth century. Initially, the low-pressure steam engines were used to move freight and commodities from one point to another. They were cumbersome, slow moving iron horses. With the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, engines were improved and trains attracted passengers because they moved at the break-neck speed of up to twenty-five miles per hour.

The Passenger train that connected North Carolina and Virginia pulled thirteen coach-style cars and cruised the 80-mile stretch of

track at about fifteen miles per hour, cutting the normal twelve-hour trip to four or five hours, depending upon how many stops it made between destinations.

Their trip to Portsmouth had been exhilarating, something the family needed after the sudden death of Stephanie Conway. It marked the end of mourning for the wife and mother who was killed by a team of runaway horses on the street in front of the mercantile fifteen months earlier.

Her passing was devastating. She was the glue that held everything Moses cherished together, family and business alike. Not yet forty years old, her beauty, intelligence and savvy business sense made her and Moses a perfect team.

When the family first arrived in Portsmouth, they booked passage on an excursion steamer that toured Fort Monroe and Norfolk. His girls had never seen such sights. It was the first trip outside of their tiny North Carolina home.

The Conway family shared a fine meal and stayed overnight in a hotel, another first for the girls. They were on their way home when disaster struck. Angela, his oldest, had just marveled at the fact they would return to Weldon in time for supper when a sudden crash catapulted everyone from their seats.

The sound of the impact was almost as bad as the collision itself because it came without warning. The brakes of neither of the doomed locomotives were applied before the collision. The girls were laughing and watching the scenery go by when they were jerked upward and over the top of the seat they were sitting in. All three landed awkwardly and suffered broken necks. Death was immediate.

Moses, of course, was catapulted forward. He twisted and landed against the seat on which his daughters had been seated. The bolts that held it to the floor were severed and the seat accorded into the seats ahead of it. Conway regained consciousness to the sounds of pain and agony of other passengers. By the time he sorted through the rubble and found his daughters, it was too late.

He was inconsolable.

The crash was the first of its kind on U.S. soil. An eastbound lumber train, racing down a grade at a high rate of speed, rounded a curve and slammed head-on into the passenger train. The first three of the thirteen passenger cars were smashed, killing the three Conway daughters and injuring dozens more. The train was loaded with more than two hundred passengers.

The victims of the horrific accident were transported to Suffolk, Virginia, where the grief-stricken father arranged for his daughters' bodies to be carted home. A small, private ceremony took place before the girls were laid to rest next to their mother. Most the townspeople attended to pay their respects to the grieving father and prominent businessman. Among the missing was good friend Buford Brownleaf, who had encouraged Conway to take his daughters to Portsmouth aboard the new, high-speed rail.

The sorrowful father took it harder than anyone imagined, which Brownleaf learned on a hot and humid August morning in 1838.

Chapter 2

Lucky ambled slowly out of Weldon. She could sense her owner's somber mood. They'd been partners for more than a dozen years and the mare could tell he was in no rush to reach his destination. Conway, of course, was wearing the same black business attire he wore each day when he attended customers at his mercantile.

He easily could have been mistaken for an undertaker in his black jacket and slacks. His white shirt, spattered with Buford's blood, was heavily starched and tightly buttoned to the top. A string tie was perfectly tied and a bowler hat sat atop his head.

Conway didn't know where he was going. He just wanted to get away from Weldon and the horrific accidents that had claimed every person he loved.

Lucky followed the road southwest out of town and padded along without a word of encouragement from her owner. He never booted her into a canter nor reined her to a stop. She endured the blistering heat of the day and the damp coolness of the night, never faltering.

She stopped once at a creek for an overdue drink of water. That was the first time Conway talked to her. "Drink all you want, old girl, but then we have to move on. We've got to get farther away from Weldon. There's too many graves, and I'm out of tears."

They traveled non-stop for three more days until Lucky finally gave out. She collapsed in the dirt unable to go on. Moses bid her farewell and put her out of her misery well past midnight of the fourth evening on the road. The natural sounds of the nighttime trail were silenced by the blast of his Paterson revolver. It echoed through the countryside.

There were eighty miles between Weldon and Raleigh. Conway covered the last ten on foot, carrying his saddle over his shoulder and sorrow bigger than the Roanoke River. When he happened upon a

small general store on the outskirts of the city, it was fifteen minutes past the noon hour and all Moses could taste was trail dust and self-pity. His eyes burned from sweat and lack of sleep. He had loosened his tie and shed his jacket. His feet were sore, and his disposition sour.

He threw his saddle across the hitching rail out front, walked to a pump and soaked his head in cool water from a deep well. It was invigorating and gave him the energy to charge through the front door of Darrow's General Store. He guessed it must have served the farmers and ranchers on the outskirts of the growing city.

With water dripping from his black hair, Conway looked more like a drifter down on his luck than a prosperous storeowner as he barged in. His nose was assaulted by the familiar smell of seed, tobacco, textiles and coffee.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! Mister, where'd you come from?" said shop owner Jack Darrow.

"I've come a ways!" Moses said, "Horse died on me a few miles back; I walked here and am plumb tuckered out."

"What can we do for you?" the storekeeper asked.

"I need a new set of clothes, a slicker, boots, a stake for my trip out of this miserable state and a horse. Do you sell horses or own one you'd be willing to part with?"

"We can fix you up with everything but the horse, mister. I've got an old mare out back, but she'd give out long before you got to wherever you're headed. What you need is one of them Appaloosas Robert Barley raises at the Rocking B. It's about five miles south of here."

"Well, that presents a problem. I don't think I've got another five miles in this tired old body," Moses said. "Do you think I might rent that old mare of yours so I can ride over to the Barley place and secure a proper ride?"

"I've never rented out Ole Bessie," Jack said.

“I’m a man of means and a man of my word. I promise to return her with your prized mare before nightfall.”

“I reckon you can have her for two bits for the afternoon, as long as you brush her down and feed her at the end of the day,” Darrow explained.

“Sounds like a deal, Mr. Darrow, one I promise you will not regret,” Moses said. “Now I’m going to grab me some new duds. While I do that would you kindly put together a sack of trail vittles — coffee, beans, a slab of bacon and some flour?”

“You should find all you need in the back corner, Mr...”

“Conway. Moses Conway’s the name. That’d be right fine of you, Mr. Darrow.”

When Conway got to the back of the store, he found everything he needed. He got two of everything except the boots and black Stetson that fit his head perfectly and would protect him from the sun. Boots and hats were expensive commodities, more so this close to Raleigh than they were in Weldon. He stripped out of his trail-soiled clothes and pulled on his new duds. He wore one set and carried another in his arms.”

He slapped the clothing on the counter and very slowly adjusted the holsters that hugged his hips. He pulled each of the Colts out to make sure they were in the right position and placed one of the pistols on the counter in front of Darrow.

“I’ll need some cartridges for these, too,” he added, not noticing the look of surprise on the storeowner’s face.

“Ain’t that one of them new Paterson pistols put out by the Colt Company,” Darrow asked.

“Best repeating pistol on the market today,” Conway confirmed. “Problem is they only hold five shots and you’ve got to dang near take the gun apart to reload. That’s why I carry two. You never want to run out of bullets on the trail.”

Darrow set a box of cartridges on the counter and asked, “Is that going to be all?”

“Yeah, what do I owe you, pardner?”

“That will be \$28.78, Mr. Conway, and I thank you for doing business with us this fine day.”

“Does that include the rental of your mare?” he asked.

“Sure enough.”

“Sounds like a fair price. Here in lies a problem, though, Mr. Darrow. You see, I do not have a penny on me, but I’m willing to make you a deal that will change your life.”

“I don’t know, sir. We barely make enough to get by out here. I don’t think I can make any deals,” Jack said, suddenly becoming nervous about losing the week’s biggest sale.

“Hear me out, sir.”

“I’m listening,” Darrow said.

“Have you ever had an occasion to stop in the fine town of Weldon, Mr. Darrow?”

“I most certainly have. It’s an appealing community with a great mercantile in a perfect location.”

“Do you recall the name of that mercantile, sir?”

Jack scratched his scalp and looked up to the ceiling before answering.

“I believe its Conner Mercantile & Dry Goods,” he said.

“Close, Darrow. You almost got it. The name on the marquee is Conway. Does that ring a bell for you?”

“Yes! Yes, I believe you a right.”

“I am Moses Conway, owner of the property in question. I assure you it is a profitable venture and worthy of your consideration.”

“What do you mean consideration?” Darrow asked, his eyes growing in wonderment.

“I’m willing to sign that property over to you — lock, stock and barrel — in trade for these goods and a one-hundred-dollar voucher I can hand to your Mr. Barley in exchange for one of his fine horses.”

“I don’t think so,” Darrow said flatly. “I’ve never seen you before and that would be a terrible risk for me to take. Why...”

Conway didn’t hesitate. He pulled the Colt from his holster, pointed it at the storeowner and said, “In that case, let me rephrase my proposal. Would you like to die a poor man, standing behind the counter of a store that provides you with so little profit the shirts you sell are better than the one you wear? Or would you prefer to own the most profitable mercantile south of Virginia?”

“Why? I’m not a gambling man, sir. Why would you make such a lopsided transaction?” Darrow asked as he backed against the wall and raised his hands over his head. “Please don’t shoot me, mister.”

Conway told him the woeful story of the graves he left behind and his desire to start a new life. When he finished, Moses pulled back the hammer of the Colt Paterson and Darrow watched warily as the trigger appeared and the customer placed his forefinger over it.

“I suggest you pull out two pieces of paper, Mr. Darrow. Now!”

The storeowner was shaking and did as he was told. Moses smiled and tried to calm his worry.

“Settle down, now, Jack. Nothing bad is going to happen today if you do as you are told. On that first piece of paper, write out the voucher I requested and sign it.”

Darrow complied and handed over the note. Moses folded it and stuck it in his shirt pocket.

“Now, on the second piece, write what I tell you.”

Jack licked the No.2 pencil and began writing as Moses dictated: “I, Moses Conway, willingly transfer ownership of the Conway Mercantile & Dry Goods to Jack Darrow of Raleigh, North Carolina.

With this transaction, he is to receive ownership of all assets and merchandise related to the business.”

Darrow scribbled as fast as he could and passed the note to the gun-toting customer. Moses signed the paper and handed it back to the storeowner.

“All you need to do is present this to Harry Bobco at the Weldon Savings & Loan Bank. He will verify my signature, and everything I worked fifteen years to build in Weldon will become yours. Believe me, Mr. Darrow, this is your lucky day.”

“I don’t know...”

“There is nothing to ponder, Darrow. It’s all here in black and white. You’d be a fool not to seize this opportunity. Let me add, you will be a dead fool if you don’t.”

“How... How could I refuse, then?” Darrow said with a forced smile.

“Now, if you will please take me to your mare, and our transaction will be complete.”

Darrow led him to a small barn at the back of the property. He tied the storeowner loosely to a post, packed his newly-purchased gear and saddled the horse.

Before riding off, he said, “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, Jack. You won’t be sorry. Hopefully, I will return in a couple of hours with your mare. Then, I will untie you and you can go on to a new and prosperous life, as long as you don’t mismanage your new enterprise.”

Moses tipped his new Stetson to the storeowner and rode off.

As promised, he returned with Bessie in tow just before nightfall. He loosened Darrow’s bonds enough so he would be able to wiggle free in an hour or so and galloped off for the South Carolina border.

REVIEWS

Reviews by readers are the fuel that sustains independent authors. The more reviews an author collects, the more prominence and promotion are awarded by most electronic bookstores.

So, reviews are the best way you can tell an author “Thank you!”

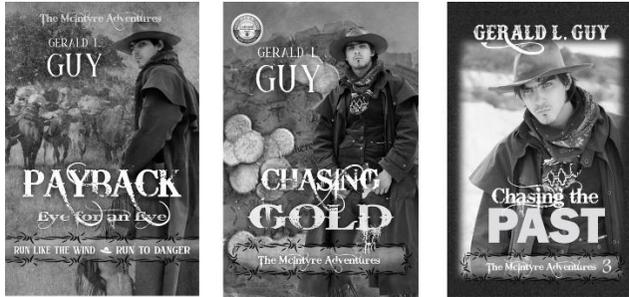
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The McIntyre Adventures



Run like the Wind -- Fourteen-year-old Eongus "Gus" McIntyre suddenly is orphaned and abandoned in the Black Hills, the wildest and most untamed territory in 1876 America. Luckily, he is befriended by a group of cattlemen who are driving 100 head of Texas Longhorns north to feed hungry gold miners in lawless Deadwood. An ornery trail cook, named Toots, and the boss' son, Junior Hamilton, take young McIntyre under their wing. With the help of irascible Calamity Jane, the youngster earns respect, avenges his father's murder, and starts a new life.

Run to Danger -- Rustlers and Mexican vaqueros threaten the livelihood of the Circle H Ranch in 1877, making young Gus McIntyre's job of rounding up stray Longhorns more than challenging. An aging Apache chief comes to Gus' rescue, and together they plot revenge and secure the Hamilton assets. In the process, long-standing animosities between their white and native cultures begin the healing process.

Chasing Gold – When a dying stranger slips a mysterious map into the hands of young Gus McIntyre, it sets he and his friends on an incredible journey to find the hidden wealth of

Mexican Emperor Ferdinand Maximilian. Government agents and ruthless vigilantes from the Ku Klux Klan want the gold, too. When his life and the lives of those he cares most for are threatened, where will Gus run to avoid danger? Will his race to find the treasure end in hardship or happiness?

Chasing the Past – Gus McIntyre’s great-great-great grandfather, James Oliver McIntyre, fled Scotland to find adventure and romance in the New World. He also found hardship and friendship while blazing trails west with none other than Daniel Boone. Gus tells his story as he searches for a new beginning in nineteenth century Texas.

PAYBACK: Eye for an Eye – A boxed set of the first two Gus McIntyre Adventures that was released in October of 2019 for Kindle and Kindle Unlimited readers.

Coastal Capers



Act of Kindness -- Nobody at Crater Lake Retirement Center could believe Jerome Browning was 92 years old. He looked and acted much younger. Still, he devoted his life to helping residents restart their lives. Fighting a dysfunctional director every step of the way, Jerome and a wealthy benefactor find innovative ways to bring joy to shattered lives. Browning had no idea how an ancient curse and a simple act of kindness would turn his own world upside down.

Act of Mercy – A simple act of kindness led Jerome Browning to prosperity he never imagined possible. When a root he finds washed up on the Atlantic shoreline grows into a modern day “beanstalk,” his world is turned upside down. Accompanied by a blind, one-armed teenager, Browning is required to travel through strange new lands, negotiate with otherworldly creatures and avoid disrupting history to outsmart a corporate behemoth and save the world’s oceans. It might be beyond one man’s capability.

Act of Recall – Who is John Doe VI? Can a pair of binoculars, his friendship with Jerome Browning and months of therapy unlock the past for the newcomer at Crater Lake Retirement Center? When his memory returns, he discovers a gruesome past and a family he had long forgotten. Will it bring horror or joy?

The Wolf Pact saga



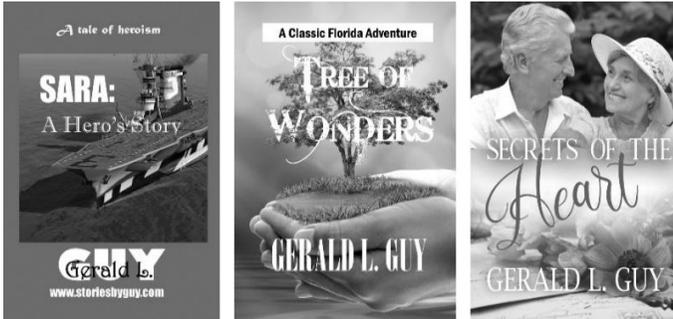
Wolf Pact: The New Order -- When W. Jefferson Prescott III is introduced to a species of wolf that can alter its genetic makeup in order to walk as humans, he discovers a magical world and a second chance at life. His predestined rise to power creates chaos and unity. While Jefferson must learn the ways of the four-legged Cossibye, his three companions — Aponi, Shideezhi and

Skilah — struggle to embrace life in Jefferson's human world. This cultural collision, combined with the discovery of amazing physical and sensual powers, takes readers on a journey of fantasy, romance, and mystery.

Wolf Pact: Escape from Captivity -- After rescuing abused siblings on a dark Wisconsin night, the Cossibye clan is catapulted into a search for the orphans' relatives and face off with a madman who is leaving dead bodies and shattered lives wherever he travels. With the help of the children's father -- Michael Mangus Walker -- Jefferson, Sebby, Sherry and Reeny must rely on cunning and all their special powers to preserve the children's safety and return peace to the plush Wisconsin countryside.

Wolf Pact: Dream Catchers -- A 600-year-old shaman of the Osage Nation is wreaking havoc in Wisconsin. As the body count grows, the press thinks a werewolf might be stalking students at Marquette University. The Cossibye have no other choice but to join the investigation and end the senseless murders before one of their own is harmed or killed? New friends, Carl Birdsong and Cheyenne Konti, help the blend ancient potions with modern technology to preserve peace.

Other Titles



SARA: A Hero's Story -- When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the men of the U.S.S. Saratoga CV-3 fought back. This work of historical fiction chronicles the role "The Mighty Lady" and her crew played in bringing about an end to Japanese terrorism and World War II. The historical tale is based on the memoirs of dozens of veterans who served valiantly aboard the venerable aircraft carrier. One of those brave men was the author's late father, Ralph G. Guy. Most of his shipmates have passed away or are in their twilight years. All remain heroes from a time too often forgotten.

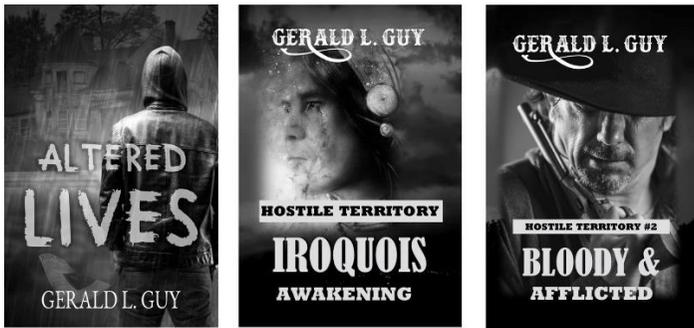
Tree of Wonders -- Have you ever looked at one of Florida's ancient and majestic Live Oak trees and wondered what they might reveal if they could talk? Young Willie Brown finds the Tree of Wonders on the banks of the Intracoastal Waterway, and it reveals tales of yesteryear.

Learn about the native tribes that inhabited Flagler County, how sugar turned sour for early plantation owners and how transportation played an important role in the region's depopulation and rebirth.

Secrets of the Heart -- When Annie Coldwater's daughters

discover their late mother had a secret love affair, they are shocked. They assumed she was too old and too gray for such shenanigans. But when a stranger shows up at the funeral home and spends a long moment at their mother's casket, questions arise.

Author Brian Warren met Annie at a book-signing, and they fell in love immediately. He denies her nothing, including the secretive nature of their romance. That all changes when Annie suddenly dies, and Brian decides some secrets are best revealed.



Altered Lives — On his twenty-fifth birthday, Georgian Matthew Brownlee is informed by his adoptive mother that he had been misled about the sudden death of his biological parents. They were murdered on Halloween in 1981. After being informed of a massive inheritance, Matt requests and is granted his discharge from the U.S. Army and heads to Ohio with sister Betsy to search of the killer or killers of a family he never knew. In 2006, newcomers to the tiny community of Kinkaid Ohio make tongues wag. When activity stirs around the home at 69 Oak Hill Drive — the site of the grisly murders — the sleeping community awakens. Can Matt use his Army Ranger training to breathe new life into the cold case? What secrets are neighbors hiding? How many more lives will be altered in his quest for justice?

Iroquois Awakening — Jamie Hawkins once strolled the rolling fields and woodlands of Northeastern Ohio without

thinking about who might have walked the land before him. When he mysteriously is transported in time to the Northwest Territory of 1788, he discovers a hostile wilderness where danger lurks at every turn. To survive, he must battle hostile Indians, greedy trappers and Mother Nature. Fortunately, he doesn't have to do it alone. Emily Laukhart, a woman alone in the wilderness, welcomes his companionship.

Back in the 20th century, Hawkins' business partner, Tyrone Stillwater, has no idea how to harvest the marijuana crop Jamie planted on his grandfather's farm. So, he solicits the help of a minor gang leader and former friend. The alliance triggers a drug war in the tiny town of Mahoning Rapids.

Surrounded by danger, Hawkins and Stillwater must lean on strong women to prevail. Flaming arrows, flash floods, ruthless gangs and automatic weapons will try to stop them as the past and present collide in Hostile Territory.

Bloody & Afflicted — Henry Walker was an everyday farmer, working his fields in the hotly-contested Kansas Territory of 1855, until he lost his family and his right arm in a vicious raid by Missouri Ruffians. The pro-slavery renegades used murder to instill fear among border inhabitants who sought statehood under an abolitionist flag.

After long days of mourning and rehabilitation, Walker vowed vengeance against the marauders who turned his life upside down. But whoever heard of a one-armed vigilante? He was afflicted but far from helpless. "He who afflicts shall be justly afflicted," became his motto until he found new perspective, heading west along the Santa Fe Trail. But could he trade his violent ways for family life?

Autographed copies of all the author's novels can be purchased at his website. Got to: www.storiesbyguy.com