R. G. Kropp 81,000 words

12180 York Street

Maple Ridge, BC

Canada V2X 5R9

Phone: 604-463-0634

email: rgkropp@gmail.com

Cariboo

by

R. G. Kropp

Chapter One

1932

Imagine that a debutante of Hungarian society should find herself on a horse – not any horse, simply, but a muscled maniac of a creature – lunging beside her husband through a forest of slashing pine prickles in pursuit of horned beasties more determined than Moses to find freedom in the wilderness. Picture this just following breakfast and now say a prayer for Amalia, bride of Lord Charles Stamford, overseer of his father’s colonial holdings in the wild hinterlands of Canada. A horrid distance from Europe. A horrid distance from anything.

*With such a man.*

“I hate you!” It wasn’t that her English was so profoundly limited – she was in fact marvellously schooled in three languages - it was simply that hating him was the feeling she absolutely exhaledat that moment.

All of which was lost on his lordship. “The brindle! Head off the brindle before the slough!”

*What on earth was a brindle?* She charged for the nearest cow – it might be a brindle, could possibly be if a person were to consider one cow being different from any other. It certainly wasn’t a chicken. She knew of chickens. They were birdlike.

“Quickly!” His lordship’s eyes bulged like despotic plums.

She whipped her riding crop on steaming haunches. Almost at the cow, a nimble beast on narrow muscled legs like no plodding milk producer from the lush meadows of Europe and…THUMP! Her horse pounded its shoulder into the animal as if it was barely there, bullying it toward the muddy slough. Then…*dear heaven…*the saddle beneath her whipped sideways with a demented will of its own.

Which she couldn’t in fact manage. But sailed in a sprawling flap of arms and legs, Italian leather boots barely grazing the sides of her stirrups. Shrieking through the air. Until her powdered morning face plunged into duckweed and mud, a horrid distance from her steed. Which cared not a whit about her, but continued on its mindless chase after her nemesis, the brindle.

Lord Charles bellowed, “Jolly well done!” And galloped behind his pets, waving and whistling them toward the gate.

At last he returned, leading her treacherous mount. She slithered upright, dripping with what feeble dignity a lady of stature might muster…*drip, drip..*.no small feat in the foul smelling ooze. He peered from under his hat, that preposterous prop of cowboy romance that lately seemed sewn to the top of his head, and did what he no doubt considered profoundly charming and witty – touched the brim and in a ridiculous dusty drawl said, “Howdy, ma’am…rat fan day.”

She raised her riding crop in stiff fingers to scrape scum from her face, then bared her perfect teeth and muttered a phrase in Hungarian her grandfather had taught her when a rattling motorcar had once interfered with the passage of his carriage: *“May the devil roast pears in your ass...Charlie.”*

“Quite right, and I believe it should continue the entire week. Shall we ride back for a spot of tea?”

She switched to the language of her trifling tormentor, “You do know with all my heart that I absolutely loathe you at this moment?”

“And yet your loveliness shines through…your hair in the sparkle off the water.”

*Drip…drip…*

“And your eyes, positively radiant.”

“I can shoot a gun, you know. I was taught by my father, a huntsman of fame in my country. You wouldn’t get far if the feeling took me.”

He wheeled his mount and leaned toward her saddle. “Yes, I know. That’s why I’m removing the rifle from your scabbard.”

She scraped more scum. “Charlie…”

“Yes, dear?”

“Who is that?”

“I’m sorry…did you say ‘who’?” He peered over a shoulder, the Winchester rifle dangling from his grasp. “Ah, that fellow…I have no idea.”

A gaunt figure approached on a grey horse more raw and rib worn than the hat on its rider’s head. At fifty yards, the man called out with a voice like wind rattling through winter corn stalks, “No need for that. Ain’t here to rob nobody.”

Charlie glanced down at his bride’s rifle, then settled it across his lap and called back, “A very good thing, sir, because my wife descends from a line of renowned Hungarian huntsmen. You wouldn’t get far.”

The stranger gave an idle glance toward the slough. “Appears she must shoot better than she rides.”

Amalia called, “I beg your pardon, I happen to be highly skilled at both.”

“You say so, ma’am.”

Charlie peered from under his hat. “Is there something I might do for you?”

“Depends. Are you Lord Charles Stamford, Markus of Buckley?”

An amused little chuckle. “Well, I won’t actually be a Marquess until my father passes on, but I am properly Lord Charles, yes.”

The voice under the tattered hat drawled, “Then I reckon you just got a promotion.” The man produced a crumpled envelope. “This is for you.”

Charlie had blue eyes that favoured most situations with a tolerant twinkle, but at sight of the envelope, the light inside them faded. He leaned silently and reached. Moments later, with a voice straining from deep in his throat: “You…bloody well read this…didn’t you?”

“Apologies, your honour, I’m the new telegraph operator. No way to take the message without knowing what it says.” The man removed his hat from an oily balding head. “Figured I should ride straight out and deliver it in person. My consolations, I lost my Pa once too.”

Charlie’s lips quivered. “Well, I should think no person could lose their father more than once, you…you…”

The man blinked. He had a thick wad of something bulging behind his bottom lip.

Charlie looked away. After a few moments, when the visitor hadn’t moved, he rasped out the corner of his mouth, “Is there something else?”

“Well, your honour…folks generally give a tip.”

“A tip…” Staring blankly now into the trees. “…a tip for this…”

“That’s generally what’s done, yeah.”

The regal shoulders under the broad hat collapsed suddenly with a gush of breath and Charlie – the new Marquess of Buckley - swayed forward, catching himself with a hand on the saddle horn. “I…of course…you came all this way.” He fumbled in the pocket of his trousers and the Winchester slipped from his lap. It clattered to the ground, causing him to stare with eyes confused by the sudden noise. “I’m afraid…all I have is this snuff box. It’s silver, a gift from the men on my ship…The Blenheim…I was a lieutenant in the war.”

The man ran his tongue over dry lips.

Charlie blinked at him. “Well…?”

“Aw…y’know, your honour…it’s okay.”

Charlie mumbled, “…but it’s silver…”

The man pulled his rumpled hat down on his head and wheeled his horse. “Anyone fought in that dirty war deserves to keep his stuff. I was Royal Canadian Regiment, myself, fought at Vimy Ridge. You take care, Markus.”

When he was gone, Amalia picked her way out of the mud toward her husband, still clutching his envelope and the reins of her horse. She looked up at the eyes under the hat and whispered, “What is it, Charlie?”

“Amalia, dear, you’re now the Marchioness of Buckley…one hundred and ten room house…servants…land…horses…”

She pushed dripping hair from her forehead and said, “Oh, Charlie…I’m so sorry.

\* \* \*

She hadn’t always thought him trifling. In fact, that bright afternoon in springtime while lunching under a patio umbrella with a girlfriend in Ravenna, Italy, the British naval officer sitting two tables over with his comrades had possessed even from afar a certain…how do the French say it, *je ne sais quoi…*his sandy hair, patrician nose and those endlessly searching blue eyes. Which fell upon her midway through her *pasta al forno* and then presumptuously, mischievously, almost pornographically refused to leave her alone. At first she dismissed his attentiveness as the ill-conceived triflings of a sailor too long on the water amidst men, cannonballs and rats. She was in her third year of studies at the *Università di Bologna,* pursuing a degree in literature and modern culture - not exclusively her parents’ idea when considering her enormous rush to escape Hungarian family life and expand into the world. Which was now suddenly at war, dubbing her a citizen-in-exile of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, enemy of England and France. She stabbed a fork into her *pasta al forno* and delivered a withering glare at the uniformed English toad.

It was a mistake.

Lieutenant Stamford hadn’t always been in the navy. Much of his later youth had been spent, perhaps too vigorously, on the preoccupations of the English landed gentry: pursuing foxes with hounds, dressing for dinner and, of course, chatting up the help. Particularly their daughters. The look Miss Amalia Huszar received in answer to her anti-Anglo broadside was anything but a declaration of war. His eyes seemed almost to radiate the blueness of the Mediterranean beyond their patio. *They delivered their own light.* She had to shake her head and look away. Then, *dear God,* he got up to approach their table. She should have been warned by the fact his companions barely registered his disappearance – they obviously encountered this behavior at every port of call.

His Italian was deplorable: *“Buongiorno, signorina...l’italia meraviglioso, no?”*

She stared. “You speak Italian like a Visigoth.”

He peered back. “I’m sorry?”

“The Visigoths were wandering thugs who sacked Rome in 410. They were barbarians and enemies of Italy.”

She was confident of her history, but had underestimated a trained officer’s cleverness in battle; not only did he refuse to retreat to his table, but offered a wry smile. “The Kingdom of Italy only came into being in 1861. The Visigoths may have been enemies of Rome, but they’re very probably the ancestors of your people.”

With one clear shot, she was dismasted, dead in the water. “I…”

He pressed on, “You’re not actually Italian, are you?”

She sputtered, “How assumptuous…what business is that of yours?”

“You have an eastern European accent…alluringly exotic, I must say…and intoxicating eyes. The creaminess of your skin. Your nose and cheekbones appear almost royal – Hungarian, I’d wager.”

She swallowed and stared down into her food. “Words like feathers…me, royal.”

“Oh, I know a thing or two about royalty, *signorina.* You see, my father is an English Marquess.”

*Oh, indeed…whatever that was.*

It was at this point her raven haired lunch mate, Dani, kicked her under the table. Amalia stammered, “Well, that makes no impression. I am a student of modern culture, not patrician entitlement.” *Take that, English toad*. But she’d looked again to those eyes, her second terrible mistake.

He leaned against a chair. “And I, *signorina,* am a student of alluring European beauty. May I join you at your table?” Before she could respond, he twisted the chair and dropped into it.

Another kicked shin and Dani was batting eyelashes at their visitor, lips twisted upward in an accommodating smile. Amalia felt her cheeks gathering heat. “You don’t care a thing of what I say, do you? I could be expectorating Turkish swear words, so long as I have on a skirt.”

“I should think you’d be flattered, radiating such charm with effortless grace.”

“That is not…” She shook her head and tore her eyes away. “…what I am saying. It is clear you are an invader of this country come hunting for girl prizes.”

He leaned back in his chair. “When I learned our ship was to be deployed to the Mediterranean, I’ll admit I entertained certain visions of immersing myself in the pleasures of European culture.” He paused to smirk at Dani, who practically imploded with five-year-old ridiculousness. “But just past Gibraltar when we encountered our first German gunboat, I was reminded abruptly that we’re at war and my role here is to spare the world from Prussian slavery.”

She sniffed, “You mean English slavery.”

“Might I remind you, *signorina,* we’re in Italy, and Italy is an ally of Britain and France. In fact, if you are as I suspect, Hungarian, it is you who are on enemy soil.”

“Huh…these people switch sides without warning. No doubt blinded with American wealth.”

Another kick arrived from Dani, this one sharp enough to rattle the glasses on the table, accompanied by a toxic glare. For the first time since the outbreak of the war, Amalia felt outnumbered by a hostile presence. She was forced to back down, albeit with a mutter to her lunch mate, “It is true…your government caught my people with their pants falling down. And me trapped on strange soil.”

In English, Dani spoke at last, “Then it is time you go back. I will ask my father to be driving you to the border.”

“A waste of time. He will change his mind and turn around in the middle.”

*“Sei una puttana!”* Eyes spitting venom.

“Ladies…ladies!” Their guest stretched a uniformed arm across the table. “I certainly didn’t intend my presence to touch off a second war. Might I suggest a more amicable alternative?”

Dani whumped back in a cherry faced huff, drawing fingers through her lustrous black mane. “I would be happy to join you at dinner, Admiral.”

Amused smile. “Lieutenant, actually…but you can call me Charlie.”

Dani sniffed, “Must we be bringing this one? I do not want knifes in my back.”

Lieutenant Charlie turned his eyes on the simmering enemy of state. “Well, without her there won’t be a chance for truce. And without truce there’s no end to war. We don’t want to be fighting forever, do we? And besides, my fellow officers would then have no one to spend their money on – they’re all of excellent lineage with attached fortunes, I might add, and quite accommodating of beautiful women.”

Amalia almost hadn’t accepted, such was his choking air of self-assurance. But the way Dani was drooling and making stupid cow eyes across the table, it would be criminal to let her have her wishes and get filled with the semen of English sailors like a bowlegged whore of Naples. It was positively important someone ruin her plans. And besides, it was not the drooling slut he wanted, it was she, the Hungarian debutante with perfect skin. How fateful that if she hadn’t gone along that evening she would never have found the lover who would return for her after the war. Never have followed him to England to become his bride and then travel the incredible distance to this frontier in the wilderness of British Columbia, Canada. A horrid distance from Europe. A horrid distance from anywhere.

*With such a man.*

And never would she have become a Marchioness.

Chapter Two

She had autumn coloured hair, the same rich shade of russet as an oak leaf the instant before it drops to the ground. And eyes with living flecks of green in the sunlight, even though they were blue. Their children would have such eyes to match their mother’s and hair hopefully not as ignorant of gravity as his. Sometimes they played a game guessing about such things; it was a game they’d been playing for seven years. Charlie knew to her it was a dream of first steps and baby talk, birthday kisses and stuffed bears. For him, though, there was the more pressing issue of lineage – he needed an heir.

As the eldest son of a noble, it was Charlie’s lot in life to execute two duties: provide a successor and then die to clear the way for the coddled sprat. So far, he’d managed neither. What he had in fact achieved to this point was something akin to aristocratic mutiny. He’d argued with his father over his desire to enlist in the armed forces and fight the Kaiser. By tradition, an heir was to train for politics, not get his breeding parts shot off in wars – that was the lot of younger sons. They’d eventually compromised on a naval commission, less perilous, his father felt, than those pistol waving martyrs at the front of infantry charges. That Charlie survived his maritime adventure, acquiring two medals along the way, had resulted upon his return in little more than a compulsory brandy toast from the old man and something perilously close to a hug from his mother. Then came the decision to marry a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but a child of the treacherous Austro-Hungarian Empire, something the old man equated with ‘the mating of a unicorn to a hyena’. The point of question there, Charlie wondered later, was who his father had imagined to be the hyena, as the old rogue’s subsequent fascination with his young bride frequently left everyone else staring. One would expect the sin to be forgiven, but the aging aristocratic mind works in unpredictable ways. Or perhaps trapped alone somewhere on the sprawling Buckley Estate, Amalia had chosen to spurn her father-in-law’s ridiculous paedophilic attentions and wounded his spiteful pride. Or maybe it was Charlie’s continued indifference to politics. At any rate, a sudden decision was reached to punish their union with exile to the colonies – Canada, in fact, a cold bitter frontier populated by fur bearing animals and primitives. If the young lord wished to exercise his rebellious bent, then let him rebel against something which might very well leave bite marks.

Charlie, though, had been to war. As a serving officer in His Majesty’s fleet, he’d learned the best method of defence against a tyrant (senior officer or parent) is to ignore the tyranny and try to have a good time. He made every effort in the New World to celebrate this latest adventure. Well, he was having an adventure. There were Amalia moments - the plunge into duckweed, the rodents of unusual boldness infesting their prehistoric roadhouse, last week’s smelly striped cat incident on the pathway to the loo – but she never bemoaned her plight. Indeed, her profound sense of drama and a fondness for riding crops made her a dashing figure around the property. Sideways hopping cow ponies aside, she could ride with best, stare down the worst and communicate with a rabble of ethnically diverse travellers with a near-Italian flair for sign language. She had even on occasion cooked a bird, and once a fish, when worthwhile guests were attending and it befit her to appear a goddess of domestic aplomb. Indeed, about the only thing in this frantic frontier she hadn’t yet learned to wrestle to the ground with both hands was a succinct grasp of the language. Although her grammar was vastly improved, she still punctuated ordinary conversation with obscure Hungarian proverbs: “From a silly hole, a silly wind blows.” What on earth was that? Never mind, he didn’t need to understand every sentence, only that her heart beat to the same rhythm as his.

“They will have lovely eyes, Charlie.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And they will call you ‘Papa’.”

“My father insisted on ‘sir’.”

“Then his title in absence will be ‘Sir Grandpapa’.”

He squeezed her hand. “Shall we retire inside and see if the wireless has decided to function?”

“Oh, Charlie, let’s just sit and watch the sunset awhile. It’s so quiet and clean smelling out here. And there’s no rats.”

Indeed, of all the assets on the twelve thousand acre Bear Creek Estate, the stopping house was a curse. A crumbling, rodent infested legacy of the old Cariboo Trail to the goldfields, it was a drain on their combined physical resources and the only item of his father’s holdings that Charlie sometimes daydreamed of soaking with coal oil and razing to the ground. “A terrible loss of life that would be,” he once muttered to his bride, “but none of it human.” It had been built during the former century as a single story log structure with barroom and kitchen on the ground floor and sleeping quarters in the attic. The travellers of the era, gamblers, gold seekers and rogues, hadn’t been terribly discriminating, but by 1932 a sizable portion of the traffic through town was, if anything, even less so. With the completion of the Pacific Great Eastern Railway to Quesnel and this despicable depression happening, a resurgence of hollow eyed hopefuls had begun arriving by boxcar, ‘riding the rods’ toward their final desperate stand in the worked out claims of the Cariboo. None had any money. All were hungry. When the train pulled into Exeter Station, anywhere from fifty to a hundred hobos would be attached by various means. A pair of railway cops would dutifully hop from the baggage car and set about clearing off the rabble. But when the engineer blew his whistle, fully half would climb onboard again and rumble away to the next stop. The other half would be left to hoist their belongings and trudge toward the stopping house, bent on begging for breakfast.

“Train’s in.”

“Yes, I know. Where is that useless dog?”

“Here they come with their warbags.”

“Dear Lord, there must be half the population of Kansas. If you ever see that dog again, inform the lazy beast it’s fired.”

Charlie was not a mean man; he was simply overrun. The estate was meant to operate for profit, not charity to an endless stream of vagabonds. When his pigtailed Chinese cook, Ah Joe, was set upon through the kitchen window each morning by outstretched hands and sorrowful faces, the situation provided a quandary. What was a charitable person to do? Make them work for it; that was Charlie’s answer. Ah Joe, with a sorrowful face of his own, was instructed to produce breakfast for everyone at his twenty foot table and those who couldn’t pay would be put to work afterward chopping wood, mucking horse stalls at the livery, anything to the benefit of Bear Creek Ranch or the stopping house. It offered full bellies and clear consciences, but provided little hope for the future. At fifty cents a meal, it would take more than the trickle of semi-affluent road travellers diverting to his third rate establishment in order to turn a profit. Indeed, his father’s final telegram before his death had been emphatic: NO FURTHER FUNDS AVAILABLE – STOP – ESTATE TO HENCEFORTH BE SELF-SUSTAINING – FULL STOP

Thus at their private dining table, when Amalia asked what they were to do with the place after his father’s death, there arose a silence like an icy winter fog around a discussion he’d been trying to avoid. He finished chewing the venison Ah Joe had produced, a grim casualty of the Mandarin love for overheated frying pans, wiggled a disturbed tooth and said, “I beg your pardon?”

“Will we sell it?”

“Sell?”

“Yes, offer it for money.”

He said, “I know what the word means, dear, but there’s a global depression happening. I doubt we’d get much, if in fact we could find a buyer at all. Better to simply wait out the storm and reap the rewards of a better wind.”

She gave her lovely, russet coloured head a shake. “You do that all the time, Charlie, speak in queer sailor talk. You make more sense when you’re a cowboy.”

“My dear, it’s hardly queer at all. Queer are those sayings you produce about donkeys and pigs. Storms and wind ordinary people understand.”

“Well, I don’t - are we selling or not? And when shall we leave for England?”

He gave up on the venison and put down his knife. “So you’d prefer to leave?”

“Dear, a person cannot sit on two horses with one bum.”

“I’m sorry…I rather missed that.”

She sighed. “I thought we must go to England, must we not?”

Charlie laid his fork beside the knife; there was more here than the venison which was going to prove tough. “Amalia, do you know the meaning of ‘death duties’?”

“Yes, of course I know that. It means for a man of importance such as yourself, your duty is to die so youngsters can carry on. I’d rather you don’t do that just now, Charlie, even if I agree with Socrates that death is the greatest of human blessings.”

That produced several moments of silent blinking before Charlie shook his head and carried on, “Actually, it’s much worse than that, I’m afraid. What it means is upon my father’s death, the family estate is required to hand over to the British government sixty percent of its value. It’s part of their grand plan, you see, to eviscerate the peerage.”

*And here indeed was the uncomfortable silence.* It was a long time before: “Charlie…”

“Yes, dear?”

“Does that mean we won’t be moving to the house in England with servants, land and horses?”

*It was terrible, the look in her eyes, like his little sister’s the day the Corgi got bludgeoned by a toppled champagne crate.* He said, “By the time the British government gets through with us, dear, I should be very much surprised if we’ll be allowed clothes to wear.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed…’oh’, very much.”

“Sixty percent…that has the same meaning in England as other countries?”

He stretched his lips across dry teeth. “Not really. In England it means squeezing the carcass of the living through a press to extract blood and unnecessary organs, forty percent of which the victim is allowed to swallow again when they’re finished. What falls outside their bucket isn’t deemed an allowable remittance.”

“Oh, Charlie, there you go talking like a sailor again.”

He sniffed, “When I die, they’ll probably want to squeeze you too.”

“Oh, they mustn’t do that, dear. It would be improper.”

“Amalia, I can assure you the carrion sniffing vultures at The Board of Inland Revenue don’t give a damn about proper, so long as they get every dripping penny they’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve.”

“Still, it wouldn’t be right in the circumstances.”

“And what circumstances would those be, dear?”

Huge blossoming rosy cheeked smile. “Why, Charlie, I’m going to have a baby.”

He sent off a telegram immediately: WIFE PREGNANT – STOP – LORD CHARLES ABDICATING AND ANDREW TO ASSUME TITLE OF MARQUESS – STOP – BEAR CREEK ESTATE ISSUING DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE – STOP – ALSO WOULD APPRECIATE POSSIBLE LEFTOVER FUNDS FROM DEATH DUTIES – FULL STOP

He didn’t have to wait long. The next day he received a telegram back from his younger brother, Andrew: GENEROUS OFFER TO ABDICATE BOTH ILLEGAL AND UNNECESSARY – STOP – BUCKLEY HOUSE UNABLE TO SURVIVE INLAND REVENUE ROBBERY – STOP - AMERICAN HOLLYWOOD COMPANY OFFERING TO BURN HOUSE FOR SCENE IN MOVIE – STOP – WILL INFORM IF OFFER ACCEPTABLE – FULL STOP.

Curiously, it was Amalia who was most mortified. “But Charlie, it’s been in your family for ages.”

“Since 1587, actually. My forefather, William Stamford, built the house. He was Lord High Treasurer to the Queen, but then, of what importance is history when compared to satisfying the snouts at the socialist trough?”

“But you’re a Marquess! Have you no say?”

Charlie waved it off with a tired sigh. “My dear, since the sacrifice of young peers to the war effort, there really aren’t that many of us left. Also, with the current epidemic of marrying flamboyant American party wives and taxes of ever more larcenous ilk, I’m afraid the socialists have finally realized their dream – Dukes, Earls and Marquesses are quite as dead as the dinosaurs.”

“But…the beautiful house.”

“My dear, Andrew loves that house almost as much as he loathes Americans. He’s also terrified of fire. I assure you it was a tease, he’d never allow Hollywood to burn it. Anyway, it would require my signature.”

“And our baby?”

A reassuring pat on the hand. “It will be a fine strong child of the frontier, my dear, a Canadian.”

“Not…a Marquess?”

He shrugged. “When I die eventually, but only in title and only if it’s a boy.” He stabbed his fork in the dead venison and raised it high. “Hip, hip, hoorah for the gentry.”

She reached across the table. “Oh, Charlie, hold my hand. I need to feel your strength.”

He plopped the meat back and wrapped her willowy fingers in his increasingly calloused paw. “As for your first question: I believe what we shall do with this place is transform it into a thriving free enterprise establishment. We are, after all, in the land of opportunity, where one is free to possess as much acreage and money as one pleases, so long as the Royal Canadian Mounties don’t fancy it paid for with prostitution or gambling.”

“But how might we transform anything, now that we’ve become poor?”

“The same way everyone in The New World does it, dear, with willing horses and one of those Ford pickup trucks – they’re quite economical, I’m told.”

Her eyes misted. “And someday might we have faucets with running water?” Then even more wistfully: “And a toilet inside the house that wild animals can’t reach?”

“I promise, my love, you shall have all those things, including a brand new electrical refrigerator.”

“Electricity? You can produce electricity?”

He waved broadly. “You shall have it all.”

Of course, the fact that electric refrigerators cost more than Ford pickup trucks was hardly an issue. As Amalia had indicated, there was no money for either. What Charlie needed was a plan – a plan of action. He went to his ranch foreman, Frank, to issue instructions.

“Gather the men and knock down the bloody house.”

Franklin Cardinal was a Métis cowboy from Saskatchewan with a fondness for dirty black hats, hand rolled cigarettes and saddling untested rough stock in the round pen after a few beers. “Shit…you’re kidding, eh?”

Charlie imagined Frank’s unvarnished speech patterns to be reminiscent of old time cowboys sitting around a campfire and often tried to imitate them. “Nope.”

“Then you hit your head and knocked something loose, huh?”

“Frank, I’m preparing to build a new house. The old one’s in the way.”

The top hand wiggled his grimy hat down on his head. “Missus okay with that?”

“She’s taken the motorcar to Lone Butte for an afternoon without rats and beggars. It’ll be a surprise, so we should make an effort to hurry before she gets back.”

“Surprise is right – surprises the shit outta me.” The tobacco coloured eyes under the dusty hat blinked with seriousness. “Most people build a new house before they knock down the old one. Women make you crazy sleeping on dirt.”

“I have a tent.”

“Furniture?”

“It’s a small tent, there’s no room.”

Frank reached in his shirt pocket for the ever present tobacco pouch. “Not for inside the tent, boss. You wanna save the furniture for the new house?”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “We’ll salvage the stove and liquor stores. Most of the rest is infested with parasitic creatures. I’ve imagined we’ll gather an enormous pile, set fire to it and listen while it screams.”

Frank nodded. “Ah Joe?”

“Indeed, what do you think, shall we keep him?”

“Aw, he cooks okay. Maybe yeah.”

“Fine, give him ten minutes warning and knock it down.”

“Okay, boss. So you know about building houses, do you?”

It was true Charlie knew nothing of houses other than the fact he’d been raised in one, a structure quite different than the one he imagined they’d be erecting here. He said, “I’d rather hoped you might be able to help in that regard.”

The cigarette rolling finished with a lumpy ‘Zig-Zag’ encased product dangling from Frank’s lip. “Don’t know shit about houses, I’m a cowhand. Morley Caruthers knows, though, built half a dozen around here. Course, the first one fell down, but then he got better.” The cigarette end disappeared in a plume of Zippo lighter flame.

Charlie nodded. “Well, practice makes perfect. Morley, that’s the fellow with one eye incapable of looking at you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, better not let him frame the doors or nothing’s gonna swing right.”

Charlie gave his foreman a dusty pat on the shoulder. “I have complete faith that together we shall build a structure of lasting beauty. Now, do you know anything of Ford pickup trucks?”

Frank’s true specialty turned out not to be trucks, but dragging cooks away from their stove, twisting, kicking, and singing furiously in Mandarin.

Which reverted quickly to English: “You stupid idiot! You get no food! I tell boss Charlie!”

Frank had a lariat around Ah Joe’s chest, tossed from behind to trap the struggling arms. He was urging his horse at the other end of the rope to back up by waving through the doorway at its head. He yelled, “You gotta get out! We’re knocking the house down, y’dang fool! Stop yelling or old Dusty’s gonna take off with you twenty miles into the bush.”

The rescue attempt, if it could be properly termed a rescue, finished at last in a flurry of flapping arms and ancient curses with the cautious release of the rope. Ah Joe panted, leaning on his knees and staring back toward the building with its sagging roof. “Boss Charlie say knock down? What I do for job – I cook.”

“Calm down, we’re hauling the stove out next. The boss is building a new place. He says it’s gonna have electricity and running water from fancy faucets.”

Rising eyebrows. “Running water?”

“And an electrical refrigerator.”

“What that?”

“Like an icebox, only no ice.”

Ah Joe sniffed, “How you get icebox when no ice? You stupid - boss laugh at you. Stupid cowboy.”

“Yeah, well…you don’t know nothing about science, you’ll see.”

“Huh, China invent science. You people invent cows.” Ah Joe turned and started trudging toward the road.

Frank called, “Where you going?”

“See if Hundred Five Mile Ranch want cook. Tired working for crazy people.”

\* \* \*

The clump of buildings at the edge of Bear Creek Estate, including a general store, post office and telegraph, barely qualified as a speck on the provincial map. Most traffic along the Cariboo Road on any given day devoted itself to moving through as quickly as possible and on to the next, hopefully more interesting, place. Not much generally happened. So the morning the team of draught horses, Frenchy and Boomer, began dragging down the stopping house, all twelve permanent inhabitants of the whistle-stop came out to watch. Six thought Lord Charlie crazy, five voted in favour of ‘about damn time’ and one, the new telegraph operator, Earl, went with ‘should of took that snuff box’. What the hands-in-pocket dozen didn’t know was they were witnessing the beginning of not only a new era for the ranch, but their tiny almost-a-town, as well. Because His Lordship from England was a visionary. The new lodge he would erect, the land he would donate for a park and bird sanctuary, as well as the plots he would lease to new residents would not only substantially increase the size of their collective spot on the map but encourage such growth in an organized British fashion.

It was an exhilarating start, to which Amalia’s initial reaction was unclear (open mouthed, gasping) upon arriving home to the pile of salvaged logs and nearby heap of blazing chairs, mattresses and bed linen which had been her former house. Her husband stood, sooty faced, in jeans and cowboy hat, poking at the fire with a smouldering stick.

He waved and called out, “I have a surprise!”

She called back, “Does it have anything to do with the house?”

“What house?” At which point he slapped his knee and produced a sound remarkably similar to a donkey trapped in a well.

She knew nothing sensible could come from further inquiries, so calmly went about the business of instructing Frank to unload the bolts of curtain material she’d purchased at Lone Butte.

Frank peered from under his grimy hat. “Sure, where you want me to put them, missus?”

She glanced toward her husband and his bonfire, then back to their top hand. “Never mind, just watch he doesn’t set himself ablaze doing anything foolish – well, more foolish. Did anyone check first to see if we had guests sleeping upstairs?”

“No problem, they’d of woke up when the roof came off.”

“And Ah Joe?”

“Headed north, last I saw.”

“I see. Well, thank you, Frank. Tell my husband I’ll be in the motorcar if he needs me.” She sat in the car.

Frank closed the door for her and chose a spot on the log pile beside the four other ranch hands, staring toward the fire and drinking warm beer donated by their boss.

Following the initial excitement, the remainder of the summer proceeded in as orderly a fashion as Charlie’s inventive mind would allow. He set up his tent. Every morning he and Amalia crawled out to a fresh pot of coffee brewed on the open air stove by Ah Joe, who had eventually come shuffling back, still in need of his job. Charlie remarked it was just like a safari trip to Africa. Amalia’s reaction was less committal (open mouthed, yawning).

There were construction details to be worked out.

Charlie struck a deal with Whitt Newton, owner of the sawmill at nearby Forest Grove, to rework the logs from the old house into lumber while he went about organizing a saw of his own, powered by the water of nearby Bear Creek. Whitt accepted the job on consideration of a future foal from Charlie’s coveted Arabian mare, Trixie, and also two bottles of HP sauce imported at great expense from Britain. Whitt’s son, Hank, who delivered the mail, would do the hauling in his one-ton Chevrolet truck. Hank had to get the mail out anyway and agreed to be paid in future meals at the new guest lodge.

There were other occurrences of note:

Charlie enrolled in a correspondence course in architecture and bought manuals on plumbing and electrical wiring, which he studied at night by candlelight in his tent.

A porcupine fell in love with the exotic wooden floor boards under the aging Dodgemotorcar*.* The creature’s nightly dining habits were only curtailed when a concoction of motor oil and cayenne pepper was applied by brush from beneath.

Twenty-five new chicks were hatched in the ranch coop.

The dog returned, pregnant. As it wasn’t a particularly attractive dog and had been missing several weeks, Charlie judged it had probably been out carousing with a pack of wolves, which had their way with it, then grew bored and sent it packing.

Also pregnant, Amalia’s belly began to swell, a concern for Charlie because Morley Caruthers and his divergent eye seemed to be having difficulty focussing on the greater picture and things were proceeding at a slower pace than he’d hoped. The suspender wearing logger/carpenter was accustomed to building small square structures, but this was to be an expansive double storey lodge with nine upstairs bedrooms, an ambitious vision arising from Charlie’s architectural course. There was to be a main lounge area with brick fireplace and an adjoining private apartment for himself and Amalia. Two dining rooms, one for guests, one for ranch crew. Plumbing, electrical wiring. Beds and mattresses, without bugs. The most pressing problem now, as Charlie saw it, was the lack of funds for materials he couldn’t acquire by barter, something he’d have to deal with quickly or all the toil in the world could never bring the project together.

“Amalia, dear, how do you feel about the possibility of manufacturing whiskey?”

The mother-to-be was sitting in the orange glow of their campfire on one of the chairs Charlie had spared from the inferno. She looked across. “Why is that, dear, are we running out?”

“In fact we are, with all the deals I’ve had to broker lately, but I was rather thinking of exporting it. Possibly to the United States.”

“But aren’t Americans banned from drinking whiskey, Charlie? It’s that prohibition thing, you know.”

“Yes, um…I believe you may be right. But do you remember that fascinating gentleman who passed through last fall on his way to a hunting trip in the mountains? His name was George…George Reifel from Vancouver.”

Amalia sat forward. “I *do* remember him. He was mannered and obviously wealthy, not the sort of rifle toting ruffian we usually have stopping to carouse all night.”

Charlie nodded. “That’s him. We got on famously, he and I. Anyway, he runs an…export*…*business out of Vancouver. They sail down the coast to America by ship. That’s how he earns his money, you see.”

“I see, Charlie, he owns a shipping business.”

“Yes, but the thing of it is, dear, what he ships is whiskey.”

“But aren’t Americans forbidden to drink it?”

Charlie drew a hand slowly down his chin and avoided her innocently questioning eyes. “I imagine the government must be storing it for later, dear, when this prohibition thing ends.”

“Oh, that’s quite clever.”

“Indeed, yes, it is.”

Amalia sat back, peering at the fire. “Isn’t it a wonderful evening, dear? I can almost feel our child growing inside me. This safari idea is much more pleasant than I’d imagined. Perhaps we’ll do it again sometime after the house is built.”

“Yes…so about the whiskey, what do you think?”

“Oh, whatever you feel is best, dear. I just don’t want to drink it. It wouldn’t do for our baby to get drunk.”

“Fine, whiskey it is.”

Next morning, Charlie went straight to his foreman. “So Frank, how exactly does one go about manufacturing this Canadian whiskey of yours?”

The dusty black hat got shoved back. “Shit, boss, you gotta quit sleeping on the ground. It’s messing with more than your hair.”

“I’m quite serious. Now don’t go spreading it around to the others, but the ranch is coming dangerously close to running out of money.”

“How close?”

“We’re broke.”

The coffee colored eyes narrowed. “Y’mean I ain’t gonna get paid?”

Charlie laid a hand on Frank’s shoulder. “Calm yourself, my good fellow, of course you’ll get paid. Just as soon as we sell our first shipment of whiskey.”

“Shit, boss, that’s bootlegging! You’ll go to jail!”

The hand on the shoulder pressed more firmly. “Frank…perhaps not quite so loud. You see, my wife isn’t aware of that extremely remote possibility, and to maintain peace of mind I’d rather we don’t bring it up around her.”

“Peace of mind for who, her?”

“For all of us, my good man, for all of us.”

The top hand squashed his hat back down. “If you need money, sell some cattle. Hell, you got lots of them.”

Charlie shook his head. “A penny and a half a pound, that’s what beef on the hoof is going for in these miserable times. I’d be foolish to sell at that price, not to mention even more broke after paying for the shipping.”

Frank stared into the ground. “Look, ask me about pickup trucks, that’s okay. Building a house, less okay. But whiskey…dammit, boss, I ain’t no moonshiner.”

Charlie said, “Well, who around here is?”

“I suppose…Gunnar Erickson, the Swede. Never mind the stuff he makes smells like moose piss.”

“I see, and how does it taste?”

Frank shook his head. “Naw, you don’t wanna ask that.”

“Well, has anyone ever died from drinking it?”

“Tough to say…tough to say.”

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

“Well, folks get sick and die all the time. Who can say if it’s from Gunnar’s home brew or maybe they ate something off the road been laying there too long.”

Charlie’s head popped back. “People around here do that?”

“Hell, yeah, Gunnar’s been making the stuff for years.”

“Not that - eating things off the road.”

Frank shrugged. “Gotta say it depends mostly on what it looks like. You don’t wanna drag something home all flat and got its tongue sticking out.”

Charlie made a noise like a tire leaking air. His brow furrowed. “I imagine I could drive over and speak with Gunnar. How’s his English?”

“Not bad. Got a bit of a stutter, but that’s probably the hooch.”

“I must say, this colonial life becomes rather a challenge at times.” Charlie turned away.

Frank said, “Say ‘hi’ to Gunnar for me. And look out for his old lady. She don’t come outta the house much, but when she does, you gotta keep an eye out for that hind leg of hers.”

Charlie carried on toward the car, shaking his head and trying to imagine what that meant.

\* \* \*

People who live in the bush and do illegal things are inclined toward paranoia. Swedish people can seem unusual even in Sweden. Gunnar, apart from the rumour he was married to a hermaphrodite cave monster, lived like a hermit, was heavily armed and ran a still hidden somewhere on his property (or possibly his neighbour’s property) that even the British Columbia Provincial Police couldn’t locate. He sold his illicit concoction only to customers he’d known for years or new customers introduced to him by old ones who knew never to approach from behind while he had an axe or rifle in his hands. Frank hadn’t told Charlie that. But Charlie had a way with neighbours…well, normal reasonable neighbours.

“What damn thing you want?” If there was a stutter, Charlie couldn’t detect it.

Gunnar also had dogs. They were the sort of silent, circling, yellow eyed menace that probably supplemented their diet by surrounding a victim in his Dodge motorcar, then waiting until he either blinked or looked away, to be lunged at and savaged into gulp sized chunks.

Charlie turned with slow purposeful moves and a huge disarming smile. “I say there, good fellow, my name is Charles Stamford. I’m your neighbour. Um…might we call these animals away?”

No answer.

He pushed his aristocratic smile to the limits of his straining face. “I’m told by my foreman, Frank, that you’re a distiller of excellent spirits. I’d rather hoped we might sit and - ”

The rangy figure in plaid jacket and cork boots exploded into life. Gunnar’s long legs jerked, spiderlike, toward a rough hewn table before his pigpen. In another second, he was brandishing a double barrel shotgun, pointed with dismaying accuracy at his visitor.

Charlie’s eyes bulged.

The gun barrel didn’t waver. Neither did the icy Nordic glare behind it. “One time more I say, who are you?”

“Uh…as I indicated…Charles Stamford…your neighbour.”

“This is not name I have heard. You g-go now.”

Charlie said, “Indeed…I believe I will.” Then with an awkward clearing of his throat, “Um…unfortunately I seem to have shut down my motorcar. The starter is broken and it requires cranking…your dogs…”

Cold eyes blinked. Gunnar regarded his slathering pets, then with an upward thrust of the weapon, fired one barrel of buckshot into the air. The creatures bolted for cover.

Charlie’s head also took cover between his shoulder blades. He inched back up, knuckles white on the steering wheel. “I say, I was in a war. That’s a frightful bit of noise.”

“You c-crank car now. Then go before I shoot next b-barrel at you.”

It seemed a sensible suggestion. But it also seemed a terrible waste to stir all this excitement and then return home with nothing to show for it. Charlie squared his shoulders. “Look…I’ve only come for advice. Your reputation for distilling quality spirits is quite legendary. So legendary, I’ve been inspired to try manufacturing some of my own…not to compete for your clientele, of course. What I plan to do is export it.” He struggled to contain a troublesome quiver in his right eyelid.

A voice startled him - something in Swedish from the cabin.

At last the glare behind the shotgun wavered. Gunnar snapped his whiskered head sideways and called back in Swedish.

More from the cabin.

Without adjusting his aim, he said, “She asks if you like tea.”

“Tea…” Charlie let his breath out with a whoosh, the first he’d been aware he was holding it. “Well, I…that would be famous, thank you.”

Gunnar shouted again and the cabin door creaked. He said, “Tea soon. Who send you?” The shotgun remained pointed.

“Oh…Frank Cardinal, my top hand. He’s a swarthy fellow with a dirty hat.”

The icy eyes registered nothing.

Charlie added, “Dogs seem unnaturally fond of him.”

“Oh…” At last the threat of imminent death receded as the weapon lowered. “Him, he crazy, that one. Always he makes looking at my wife. I think sometime he not stop, maybe I shoot him.”

Charlie took the mention of shooting someone other than himself to be a sign of acceptance. He opened the door of the Dodge and stepped out. Behind him, the cabin door creaked amid a tinkle of cups on a tray – the hostess. Beaming his most aristocratic smile, he turned.

*Dear God.*

There was a moment of primal terror. Swedish women were reputed to be among the loveliest in the world, clear skinned with an earthy radiance. This was a *hermaphrodite cave monster.* What to do…what to do? *Don’t stare. Whatever else, must not stand and stare at it…um, her.* With his eyelid quiver now afflicting fully half his face, Charlie summoned the courage to stammer, “Ah, the lady of the house…*gulp…*how lovely to meet you, ah…”

Twisted brown teeth. “Freja.”

“Frieda?” He nodded politely.

“Fray-ya.”

“Ah, of course…” A quick check on the status of the shotgun. “Such a lovely name for a lovely lady. What does it mean?”

“Mean?” The cup rattling stopped as large, lumpy, tangle haired Freja paused to peer at him.

Charlie swallowed. He had a disconcerting vision of a stray leg appearing from behind the frayed dress hem and rising up to kick him in the face. “I meant, of course, what…does your name in fact, um…mean…” The final word trailed off like the last puff of steam from a wet campfire.

“Don’t know…just name.” Freja began lurching again toward the table in front of the pigpen where her husband awaited. When the pigs saw her coming, they burst into a frenzy of squeals, jamming their snouts into the gap under the bottom rail. Freja’s dragon teeth appeared again. “They think is slop time. I feed them.”

*It was very nearly impossible not to stare at her.*

With the certain knowledge that his life depended on it, Charlie gathered resolve from the very creases of his skin and tore his eyes away to smile at his host while following the tea tray to the table. In fact, it was the first time he’d actually looked at the table. There were ears on it, pig’s ears, and something resembling a horse penis – of course, a pig snout. The tea tray went beside that.

Gunnar pushed the penis thing away and grunted something to his wife, already plunking flower patterned cups and saucers around the tray.

Freja grunted back.

At last she turned to her guest, flowered teapot in hand. “You are handsome man. You are Deutschland?”

“Ah…English, actually. From Northamptonshire, Lord Charles Stamford at your service, Marquess of Bucksworth.”

She turned to her husband…grunt.

Return grunt.

She turned to Charlie. “So, Lord…you are married?” She handed him a cup and saucer.

Charlie pushed a rubbery ear aside and leaned against the table. “Actually, I believe you misunderstand. You see, ‘Lord’ isn’t my first name, it’s a title. My first name is…is…yes, in fact I am married. My wife’s name is Amalia. We own the stopping house, or former stopping house, at Bear Creek.”

Huge smile. “Lord, you are neighbour. I see when you come, have nice motorcar and handsome face.” She poured tea in his cup, then lifted hers and slurped. “You have cows?”

“Yes.”

“Pigs?”

“No…we’ve been thinking of acquiring some though. I rather fancy this Canadian style of smoked bacon.”

She looked across her teacup. “Smoked?”

“…soon we shall get some pigs...”

Then Freja did something Charlie at first attributed to a side effect of Gunnar’s brew – she suffered a small seizure on the right side of her face. As a gentleman, he of course ignored it and smiled politely across his teacup. Then it happened again and with an icy jolt, he realized it was a wink. The hair at the back of his scalp prickled. A glance toward Gunnar pushing the penis-thing around and sucking on his cup made him realize there was only one thing to do.

“Oh, dear, look at the time!” Of course, he hadn’t brought his pocket watch - a finger pointed to the sun would have to do. “I really must be running, we’re herding the chickens to their new coop today. And ducks. Thank you so much for the lovely tea.” He nodded with such enthusiasm his hat almost sprang loose. “Cheery-oh!”

Freja’s face fell, or more accurately slithered downward to hang around her enormous nose.

Gunnar shrugged.

Several dogs had returned. Their jungle eyes peered from beneath articles of rusting farm equipment, bellies flattened to earth. Charlie hurried to the Dodge. He gripped the crank with the uncomfortable sensation of evil lurking behind him; it might’ve been Gunnar or even Freja, but it felt much more primal than that. Mercifully, after a couple of desperate twists, the engine went *chunka-chunka*, and with a smile that could split firewood he dove inside, waved and set off bouncing and backfiring across the yard.

Somebody shouted something behind him. He waved and was gone.

Back in the company of his sweet, lovely, reassuringly female wife, Charlie did something he hadn’t done since the war, cast his eyes toward heaven and breathed a heartfelt ‘thank you’. It was gratitude for the blessing of a bride not afflicted with livestock frightening ugliness, and of course for not being born with the kind of carelessness which would allow such accidents to occur.

Amalia glowed with the new life swelling inside her. She looked up from the tiny pair of blue booties she was knitting and said, “I was thinking about your idea, Charlie – you know, the whiskey – and I believe it might be easier instead to produce vodka.”

He brought his eyes back from heaven and said, “…eh…?

“Well, whiskey is so finickety, isn’t it, and for vodka all you really need is potatoes and some water.”

“I’m sorry…what?”

She beamed. “’Finickety’, it’s a new word I learned from Wanda at the hotel. It means fussy. Isn’t it grand how my English is progressing?”

“No, I mean that thing about vodka from potatoes.”

“Oh, yes…well vodka is quite easy, you see. One simply needs some potatoes to ferment in a tub or something – our gardener used buckets – and then, of course, a still…I believe that’s the English word for it…yes, *still.”*

“Dear Lord, you sent me to that depraved Swedish cave dweller’s home, when all along you knew how to produce spirits right here?”

Eyelid batting bafflement. “Whatever do you mean, ‘Swedish cave dweller’, Charlie? I sent you there?”

“Oh, never mind. So you actually know the process for distilling vodka?”

“Why, of course, dear. It’s quite simple.”

Charlie gazed one more time toward heaven. “…thank you…”

Chapter Three

There were many things on the wild Cariboo Plateau which could dispense with your life in quick gruesome fashion. Anywhere a person chose to live, even in recognized towns like Lone Butte, Lac la Hache or Lillooet on the highway, the door to every dwelling was no further than a street or two away from the fangs and claws of the wilderness. On a farm or ranch, there was no such pretence at all. Humans controlled nothing they couldn’t corral, fence or ride herd on. It required a daring and sometimes desperate frame of mind to imagine challenging such perils, but in the ‘dirty thirties’ that’s exactly what newcomers were arriving with. The British Columbia government, in a bid to encourage settlement of underpopulated areas, was offering pre-emptions of land to poverty stricken hopefuls caught in the jaws of the Great Depression. In many cases, this meant leaving the streets and sidewalks of Vancouver, Victoria or Nanaimo and plunging into the hinterland with relief check in hand, distressed spouse and children, and a whole lot of tremulous faith. That was the watchword of the time – faith. It was all anyone had to go on. In Germany, a little man with enormous ambition was offering it to the disheartened by thumping copies of *Mein Kampf.* In America, John Steinbeck was gathering seeds for his masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath.* In British Columbia, Canada, the best a victim of the times could hope for lay in the rugged road up the Fraser Valley to the raw interior of the Cariboo.

Very few knew what to expect, guided only by what they may have read in dime novels or seen in movie houses depicting the romance of cowboy life in The West. It wasn’t, of course, anything like that. It was more like…

“Are we almost there yet?”

Children of the hopeful, depending on age, were either in a state of continuous excitement for the Promised Land or in a perpetual mope over lost friends and familiar haunts left behind. Whichever the case, no family since prehistoric times ever travelled quietly with children. Especially on a train.

“Hush, Winnie, play with your doll.”

“But, Mum-my…you said just a little while. And that was a long time ago.”

“Karin, will you keep her quiet?”

“I don’t need you issuing commands, Duncan. Look, you’ve woke little Colin.”

Many fingered baby gathering breath for a cry.

Sniffly four-year-old whimpering, “But you said we were almost there.”

Father’s voice booming, “Winnie! Play with your doll!”

Ear piercing wail.

Bum trembling smack.

Paint peeling, window rattling, eyelid quivering skreel like bagpipes strangled in a bathtub.

*Thirty pairs of eyes staring.*

“Dear Lord, when will we ever be there?”

In this case, ‘there’ was Lone Butte station, gateway to the land of moose and beavers, twelve miles before the next stop at Exeter Station. The trio-and-a-half of family members stood in the still afternoon on the platform, humbled by the absence of any movement at all. Dry Cariboo heat twisted off the walls of the stationhouse like a fever dream, train whistle crying in the distance. They were the only travellers in sight. A lone, mud coloured dog watched, panting.

“Duncan, are you sure we got off at the right place?”

Big, square shouldered Duncan Sinclair blinked first at the dog, then at the sign nailed to the stationhouse – a moment of unmanly doubt. Then with seventeen hours of train track through the Fraser Canyon blessedly behind him and jaw aimed toward the future, he bent over the heap of family luggage. “Of course, it’s right. Look, there’s the hotel.”

His bride, twenty-one year old Karin, seemed unconvinced. “Dear, I don’t mean to sound ungrateful to the government, but are you sure this is better than starving?” She stood motionless under her fashionably angled Florentine hat, baby in arms. Four year old Winnie clutched her mother’s dress, eyes transfixed on the dog.

Duncan said, “We’ll ask there about the best place to buy a horse.”

Karin peered through the shimmering heat off the road. “It’s late, dear, perhaps we should get a room for the night before doing anything else.” And then under her breath. “…maybe think about going back…”

“We haven’t got money for hotels, Karin. Don’t you want to see the property?”

“I think I’ve seen enough already.” Everywhere she looked, what little there was had been piled up out of logs. The rest was still pointing straight to the sky with branches on it.

Duncan marched down the steps with their luggage.

Karin didn’t move. “I swear I can feel my skin cracking.” She turned with her daughter to stare at the dog. It looked homeless, like her. *Was it watching to see which way they went?*

From the roadway, her husband called, “Come on, honey, we’ve got a lot to do.”

Daughter of a Nanaimo coal miner and married at sixteen to the tallest boy on her street, Karin had agreed to this desperate experiment. She couldn’t blame him; there was simply no other choice. The big mines were closing – Duncan’s, the Canadian Collieries Extensions, had announced after an explosion killed thirty-two workers last year, that they were abandoning all interests in the area. That had put nine hundred men abruptly out of work, with no other jobs anywhere. Her mother had cried when they left, but it was clear they couldn’t stay. Karin breathed a desolate sigh, then set off with little Winnie trudging at the edge of her dress. The doll’s head bumped down the steps. The mud coloured dog followed.

At Horns Hotel, finally someone seemed happy to see them. The lady at the desk was a grandmotherly bushel of energy, stuffing steel grey hair into her bun and delivering the most earnest of welcomes while pushing the register across to be signed. “My name’s Wanda. My husband George and I run the hotel, been going thirty years now. Wasn’t barely any town when we came, you know, not like it is now. You’ll find anything you want at the store – sign here.” The worn but shiny counter still had the marks of the saw that created it.

Duncan peered down at the top of the woman’s head. “Actually, we haven’t come for a room. I was hoping to get advice on the best place to buy a horse.”

“Horse?”

“That’s all we’ll be needing today, Mrs. Horne, a horse to take us to our land. We’ve pre-empted a parcel by Balfour Lake.”

“Oh, I’m not Mrs. Horne. It’s Horns Hotel because of the antlers over the front. Only they fell down eight years ago. I’m Wanda Stiles. My husband’s George and you’ll meet him at dinner if you stay. You won’t be staying?”

Karin stepped up beside her husband. She aimed her words across the counter, but clearly they were meant for his lofty benefit, “I’ve just spent seventeen hours on a train with a four-year-old and a baby. Nobody’s eaten since breakfast, I have no recollection what a bed feels like and I don’t care at all about horses. Is there running water?”

Grandmotherly Wanda cleared her throat. “Well, no, but we’ll heat up a bath for you anytime you want. And supper’s at six. Roast pork, greens and potatoes with gravy.”

“Do you know if Balfour Lake is a nice place?”

Huge warm smile. “Why, every place around Lone Butte is a nice place, dear. There simply isn’t anywhere you can go without lovely scenery and wonderful friendly neighbours.”

“Have you ever heard of it?”

“Well, there’s a lot of lakes. But I’m sure it’s a nice place.”

“So you don’t know it. A man on the train was quite rude and laughing at us. He said Balfour Lake is out in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’ and we’d be perfectly miserable there.”

“Oh…the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’. Well, there’s a few people out that way, it’s not that bad.”

“Have you ever been to this ‘Ish-ka-bibble’?”

“Well…no.”

“Why not?”

Uncomfortable wiggling inside the grandmotherly dress. “I suppose…they’re mostly bachelors and I don’t care for the way they look at me. But otherwise they’re…fine.”

Karin turned to her husband. “I’d like a room, please. And supper and a bath.”

Duncan reached for the register. “We’ll take a room for the night.”

Karin said, “Does the train come back this way tomorrow?”

“No, every two days.”

“Thank you, we may speak again then.”

Besides the hotel, Lone Butte boasted a store, schoolhouse and community hall, which doubled as the church whenever a travelling preacher passed through town. The store, as Wanda promised, had everything except a horse. What it lacked in horses, though, it made up for with tins and jars of canned goods, flour, rice, beans, coffee, sugar, potatoes, Swede saws, axes…almost anything a person could find on a shelf in civilization plus a bevy of wilderness necessities besides, like traps and ammunition.

Or meat.

Karin eyed the sides of beef hanging in the back room. “Duncan, we should buy a roast for our first supper at our new home.”

“We won’t be needing that, dear. I’ll shoot a moose.”

“I’m sure you will. But it may take awhile to do that and a small roast would be a treat. We haven’t had one in months.”

“That’s because there’s no moose around Nanaimo. Out here, beef’s a waste of money – cheaper to buy bullets.”

“But you’ve never actually shot anything, dear. And you haven’t been practicing. What if it’s harder than you think?”

Duncan shook his head the way he often did when explaining some manly concept beyond the grasp of women. “Moose are big, honey.”

Karin allowed a last lingering glance at the backroom beef and turned away with a sigh. She approached the storekeeper behind his counter. “Sir, what’s something to eat up here that you would say is best value for money?”

With an understanding smile, the man said, “CPR strawberries, ma’am.”

“Oh, my…you have strawberries?”

“The CPR kind.”

Karin’s eyebrows went up. “Why do they call them that? Do they grow alongside the railway line?”

The storekeeper chuckled, “No, ma’am, they grow on trees. Then they get shipped here by train, that’s the CPR part.”

Strawberries on trees, this was a curiosity. She scanned the bins. “Where do you keep them?”

He pointed to the prunes - another chuckle. “They’re called that because prunes make good healthy fruit for breakfast, lunch or supper. You can boil them, chop them up with milk or cream on porridge, or just plain eat them the way they are – fine all year round. And they don’t cost much.”

“I see…I suppose I’ll take some, then.”

“Yes, ma’am. And another thing people buy that don’t cost much is spuds.”

Duncan wandered over. “I’ll want a box of .303 cartridges.”

“Hunting for your supper, are you?”

Manly nod. “I believe we may never have to buy another piece of meat as long as we live.”

The storekeeper said, “Well, just make sure you get your animals in before late fall. That’s when all the game leaves the plateau country for the river valleys.”

Another nod. “I’ll be sure to do that, fella.”

Karin gazed up at her puffy chested husband…*fella?*

Another customer came in, a wild haired woman draped in a plain dress much like the one Wanda had been wearing at the hotel, only this woman was twenty years younger and there was the clear outline of an apron across the front of the dress. She studied the family a little too long, then headed for a shelf. “Baking powder.” she called.

“Third row, middle shelf.” The storekeeper shook his head, then added quietly, “…just like it’s been for the past twelve years…”

The woman came back with a tin of red labelled Royal Baking Powder. “That your dog outside?”

Karin blinked at her. “Us? Oh, no, we don’t have a dog.”

“Too bad, dogs belong with kids. How much, Cecil?”

“Twelve cents.”

“TWELVE CENTS? Last month it was ten! Did the factory blow up?”

The storekeeper dipped his head and breathed out tiredly. “It’s been twelve cents a tin for the past five years, Pauline. That’s the same price as Vancouver, I don’t even charge for shipping.”

“Twelve cents…twelve cents…” The woman rummaged in a change purse. She snapped it shut and looked up. “I don’t have twelve cents.” Then she looked at Karin. “You wouldn’t have twelve cents you could borrow me, would you?”

Karin’s eyebrows went up. “Oh, well…I…”

Duncan said, “We need all our money for a horse and supplies, ma’am. We’re pre-empting a property at Balfour Lake.”

The woman craned her head upward to eye him. “Balfour Lake…why, that’s out in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’.”

Duncan pursed his lips. “So what exactly is this ‘Ish-ka-bibble’, anyway?”

“Son, that is the land of Indians and moose skinners. It’s danger and worry behind every tree. And it is a lot of work. I suggest you do not buy a horse from any weasel eyed trader around this place or you’ll never get that work done.”

Staring downward now, curious, “Well, where do you suggest I buy one?”

“Why, from me, of course. I’m your neighbour, Pauline.”

“Oh, you live out in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’?”

The storekeeper, Cecil, grunted, “She *is* the “Ish-ka-bibble’.”

Pauline nodded proudly. “And for twelve cents I’ll give you a ride out to your property.” Then she added, “While you’re at it, throw in a quarter and I’ll owe you some sugar.”

They chose their CPR strawberries, axe, kerosene and foodstuffs, then paid for everything including their new neighbour’s baking powder and sugar. They loaded supplies and children into the waiting buckboard wagon, with wild haired Pauline explaining everything from which way the clouds come in a thunderstorm to how to grow turnips in sandy soil. The last thing she threw in was the dog. “Kids gotta have a dog.” she said, and got her horse moving.

What the newcomers hadn’t expected was the tireless tornado of talk swirling around their ears as the wagon bumped toward their future home.

“I’m all alone, y’know, have been eight years since that mutt of a husband gave up on the dream and snuck off back to pussy willow Ontario. Came out here twelve years ago. You gotta believe is what you gotta do – people see you believing, there ain’t a thing they won’t do to help you. I don’t like pants. But I believe in them – a good pair of pants on the right person makes all the sense in the world. Just don’t happen to like them. Best thing that man did was get outta here. Didn’t know cattle from crab apples and thought he was gonna be a rancher. Well, you can put a pair of pants on a man like that, but it don’t make him worth a damn around hard work. Don’t miss his whimpering one bit. Can’t beat a good horse. You wanna buy a car, well, you better have lots of food stocked up for winter, because you’re not going nowhere with that smoky contraption. I’d offer to give you a ride, but you’re gonna buy a horse and start believing. I’ll spread the word around and we’ll get that cabin up in no time. You know how to whipsaw?”

As threatened, their neighbour put out the word and just like that, they came. Out of the bush from places in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’ called English Lake, French Lake, Needa Lake - there were more lakes in this place than people, it seemed. They wore half-cured moose hide and shredded jeans. They cut their own hair or didn’t cut it at all. Shaved with scissors or a big knife. Nobody owned soap. But they loved to work and while they were working they talked. Or more accurately, shouted at each other while sawing and notching logs for the walls. They all loved Pauline.

“She’s gonna marry me, y’know. Never mind she scared that husband off, I like a woman what’s got hair on her ass. And damn, can she cook.”

Pauline was behind her apron, standing with Karin at the iron pot over the fire, tossing carrots and random roots into the moose mulligan. “They want me, but they can’t have me.” she said to her diminutive assistant. “I need another man like I need twelve toes. You sure got a big one there. Looks like he’s just busting to work – been awhile, has it?”

Karin pushed a feathery curl of dark hair out of her face. “Since they closed the mine it’s been hard. My parents helped however they could, but they don’t have much either.”

“Yeah…” An uncustomary moment of reflection. “I know it’s bad out there. Gave up trying to be a cattle baron, can’t get nothing for them. I’m just eating them as I need them now, keep a few heifers for breeding stock if the market ever gets turned around. Say, you want in on the beef ring?”

“My, whatever is that?”

“Just like it sounds, honey. Somebody butchers an animal, carcass gets passed around the ring before it goes rotten. Same for moose. Deer hardly need passing, what with the size of them.”

“Duncan wants to hunt.”

Pauline nodded her springy mop of hair and peered toward the shirtless young man hoisting one end of a log. “That’s the spirit you want out here. Gotta be willing to do what needs getting done. I believe he just might hang around for you.”

Little Winnie arrived with the dog’s ear gripped in her dusty hand. Karin pulled her daughter’s fingers loose with a disapproving shake of the head. “Duncan will be just fine. He’s strong and proud and probably wouldn’t give up if it half killed him. It’s me I’m afraid of. I’ve never slept anywhere but in a house all my life.”

Huge Cariboo country smile, “Why, honey, we are right now building you a house fit for a queen. A little moss and mud in the chinks, and you won’t feel so much as a breeze all winter.”

Karin wasn’t sure how comforting that actually felt. She was in the midst of envisioning wind lashed snowstorms outside her little cabin, when something by the lake made her stiffen. A tall figure in a black cowboy hat stood watching, two large fish dangling from one hand. “Pauline, who’s that?”

The Ish-ka-bibble veteran turned. “Oh, yeah…Indians. Don’t see them much, but they show up when you least expect it and usually want something. I know that one by his hat - English Deka, chief from Canim Lake. Ain’t figured out yet he’s supposed to be on the reservation, not wandering around fishing and trapping wherever he pleases.”

“Are they…dangerous?”

”Honey, everybody’s gonna tell you the snakes up here ain’t poisonous, but I’m not about to let one bite me. Way I see it, the further they stay away, the better I like it –that goes for grizzlies too.”

Karin turned with a small shiver to check on the figure by the lake, but as magically as he’d appeared, he was now nowhere to be seen. It was only when she ventured a half hour later to fetch a pot from their tiny cache of supplies that she found the two huge lake trout laid on spruce boughs beside it.

The whipsaw was a true test of a pioneer’s mettle. In the days before the first sawmills like Whitt Newton’s, the long two-man blade was the only method available for ripping a log end to end. The log was placed over a pit or between a pair of trestles, so one sawyer could work above and one below, pushing and pulling the giant contraption up and down for hours. It was a particularly nasty undertaking for the man on the bottom, who had to contend not only with a choking shower of sawdust in the eyes and nostrils, but also the danger of being crushed by a falling log. If a person wanted flat lumber, though, there was no other way.

“So, you’re sure the missus has gotta have a wood floor, huh?”

Duncan gave furry Arnold, the misplaced Missourian, a shrug. “Is there any other kind?”

“Dirt.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t want that. She’s a city girl.”

“Hell, ain’t they all? So if you absolutely gotta go that way, I got one more important question.”

Duncan nodded. “Okay.”

“You’re sure you got no money for mill cut lumber?”

Shake of the sweaty head. “I still have a horse to buy…cow…maybe some chickens.”

“Alright then, whipsaw it is - you can be on the bottom. You’re younger than me and I got this beard, see. Takes half a day to get the sap out, all full of wood.”

Arnold wasn’t kidding about giving serious thought to buying lumber. Swinging a pick at a coal face was nothing compared to whipsawing logs. Compounding matters was the heat, which in the middle of the day drew black flies from the bush to mix with the sweat and sawdust in the most eye stinging, blood sucking, muscle burning torment ever cursed upon a man in the devil’s most cherished daydreams.

“Wait…wait! I need to do something to keep these flies off…dammit…are they always like this?”

“Well, you’re all wet and smell like a tree, their two most favorite things.”

“What about kerosene, do they like the smell of kerosene?”

Witless shrug.

“I’m going to try it. Maybe soak some in a shirt and wrap it around my head.” Duncan set off toward the family cache of supplies. Moments later: “Owww…oh…omigod!”

“Yeah, maybe you shouldn’t of put it on your head. Don’t go near the fire now. Are we gonna get this finished anytime soon?”

“Ow…oh!”

A small man approached, Rueben the Dutchman in his moose skin britches. “Yah, Arnold, I was thinking mebbe don’t cut whole log in boards. Mebbe go faster just one time cut middle, yah.”

“Huh?”

“You see, log cut in middle got two flat sides – like so.” Rueben split a twig with his knife. “See, don’t matter one side round. Got two flat sides, yah?”

Arnold blinked at the split twig.

“All a time, you cut two sides, only get one board. This time put flat side up for floor, just make one cut, got two boards, see?”

Arnold was still staring at the split twig. “But the bottom’s round…”

“Sure, mebbe notch end what sit on cross log. More easy, yah, than all time making boards flat two sides.”

Arnold’s eyes began to glimmer. “Shit, Rueben, you a lumberjack or what?”

“Naw…just farmer. I grow tulips, old country. Here beets, I like beets.”

Arnold went striding over to Duncan pouring water over his head and rubbing furiously at his face. He threw an arm over the young man’s shoulder. “Say, boy, I got a great idea. Listen to this…”

They built the house in five days, walls up, door swinging from moose hide hinges until real ones could be bought. The floor was flat as could be hoped for, considering nobody was a whipsaw expert. They even built a ‘little house’ out back for private business, with its own door in deference to the ladies. There was a bed with a swamp hay mattress over a web of stretched rope. Even a bunk for four year old Winnie. The Dutch genius, Rueben, built a stove from a five gallon pail and an old plough disc out of Pauline’s buckboard. They lit it and the house filled with smoke.

“Yah, better you get drum for last longer. Mebbe them gasoline ones best, you know.”

“The house is full of smoke!”

“Smoke?”

“Good Lord, man, we can’t live like this all winter.”

“Mebbe cut hole in roof, yah.”

Rueben, who lived alone with a pet mink, had many ideas, like the revolving clothesline made from a birch pole and fishing line. Besides being a wonderful mink exerciser, the device could be used to dry washing, provided the air wasn’t swarming with soot.

“Yah, mebbe put clothesline next to window for fresh air.”

Of course, there weren’t any windows yet either, until Duncan could afford framed glass from the store. He also needed a washtub, pail, spade for digging a garden and a Swede saw for making clean cuts on his own. And he needed something else.

Karin’s sour eyes peered at him. “If you think I’m cooking on a bucket the rest of my life, you’re out of your mind.”

“Shush, honey, he’s right outside the door.”

“I want…*a stove.”*

Duncan hung his head and nodded.

“With a chimney pipe.”

“Sure…chimney pipe.”

What Duncan needed, and what he simply didn’t have, was money. He went out into the sunshine and sat next to furry Arnold picking sawdust from his beard on the porch log.

“She wants everything.” he said.

Arnold flicked something with legs into the dirt and sucked through his teeth. “See, that’s why I’m gonna marry Pauline. She don’t want nothing but what she’s already got. Woman like that is rare as wings on a pig.”

Duncan said, “We didn’t move out here because we’re rich.”

“Hell, you’re rich, son. You got a wife, kids and a damn fine house. Got a lake full of trout right on your doorstep. Won’t never go hungry.”

“She wants a stove.”

“Oh…well, don’t go saying nothing to Rueben. He can get a tad sensitive sometimes. Don’t want him going off in a mope.”

Duncan swung to Arnold. “Where am I supposed to get all this money, huh? I thought we came here to hunt moose and live off the land. Nobody said anything about stoves.”

“Well, most women like nice stuff, that’s how women are. You want her happy, better get what she likes.”

Duncan hung his head. “…huh…”

“You should take a job. House is up now, you could work around awhile before you start building fences and chicken coops.”

“Huh?”

“A job, son, you need a job.”

“You mean there’s jobs around here?”

“Hell, you ain’t in the city no more, there’s always work to be done. Just gotta convince somebody with money they need help doing it.”

Duncan patted his kerosene reddened face. “So who around here has money?”

“Son, it just so happens I know where a lordship lives and he is right now building himself a house.”

\* \* \*

When Duncan arrived at the lodge bareback on his fat bellied chestnut mare, Frank Cardinal took one look from the door frame he’d been pounding and said through a fog of cigarette smoke, “That guy better get down before he busts his neck. Good thing the horse is smart enough to know how to keep underneath him.”

Morley Caruthers committed one of his eyes to study the approaching visitor. “Maybe he’s drunk.”

Charlie said, “He does appear a bit awkward, doesn’t he?”

“Like a frog on a fart bubble.” said Frank.

The visitor waved. “Hello, how are you all today?”

Charlie nodded. “Quite fine, thank you. If it’s livery you need, the barn’s open. But I’m afraid the lodge isn’t quite ready for business yet.”

Duncan swabbed his face with his hand. “That’s exactly why I’ve come, sir. Are you Lord Charles Stamford?”

“In truth, I’ve become a bit frightened of answering that question lately. But until something happens to make me wish otherwise, so far today I am.”

Broad neighbourly smile. “Well, I’m Duncan Sinclair, sir, and I’m here to say that with my help building your house, we’ll get that project finished in no time.”

“Ah, a carpenter.”

Frank sniffed, “Sure ain’t no cowhand.”

Duncan said, “Um…not exactly a carpenter either.”

“I see.” said Charlie. “Then do you have any experience building houses?”

“Absolutely, just finished one two days ago.”

“Excellent. You’re hired, so long as you don’t expect to be paid right away.”

“Um…actually, I was sort of hoping for a small advance.”

Frank snorted smoke through his nostrils.

Charlie peered from under his hat. “Am I to assume you rode in here looking for a pay advance on a job you hadn’t even asked for yet?”

Duncan squirmed on his round horse.

Frank said, “Something the matter with your ass, carpenter?”

“Ah…it’s my family, actually. We just moved here with a new baby and there’s a few…expenses…we hadn’t thought of.”

Charlie’s shoulders sagged and he leaned against the door frame. He pointed to his knees. “Do you see these patches?”

Duncan nodded.

“Dear fellow, it’s not that I haven’t compassion for you and your family, but I honestly have no income either until the lodge is open for business. Cattle are next to worthless, the rain seems to be ignoring us and the only train travellers these days appear to be hobos. I have one other venture, but it too is a work in progress, which may or may not prove, um…drinkable.”

Duncan scratched his head. “You say the barn’s open for livery?”

“If you’re working for me, there’s no charge for a stall. But it’s summer and your horse is welcome to pasture with the other mares.”

“Well, I, uh…was thinking more for myself, sir. You see, I live out east of Lone Butte and wouldn’t be able to ride back every day.”

Frank sputtered, “Ha! You live in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’?”

Charlie turned to his top hand. “I’ve heard that before. What the devil is this ‘Ish-ka…thing’?”

“Oh, hell, boss, that’s the back end of nowhere. There ain’t nothing but grizzly bears and renegades. Why I heard a bunch of Sioux Indians took off to hide there after they shot ol’ Custer to pieces. Then they mated with the Sasquatches and what come out of that are still prowling around there now.”

Duncan’s eyes widened. “Is that true?”

Charlie said, “Your wife and baby are there all alone?”

“And daughter. I’ve got a four year old daughter.”

“Look…what’s your name again?”

“Duncan, sir.”

“Well, Duncan, Lord knows I’ve got plenty of use for another pair of strong arms. But I urge you to consider the safety of your family alone with grizzly bears and whatever those things are my foreman just described.” Charlie looked again to Frank. “You’re quite convinced of that, are you?”

Frank wobbled his abused hat. “That’s what I heard, yup.”

Charlie turned back to Duncan, “Frank, here, is part Red Indian himself, some tribe from the prairies.”

“Cree, that’s what I am.”

“He’s part Cree and that means he knows about the dangers of the wild country.”

Frank leaned against the door frame. “Shit, I’m just dangerous as hell, myself, so I oughtta know.”

Duncan’s head drooped. “I don’t have any choice.”

“Alright, pay is a dollar-fifty a day plus board, but I insist you ride home every Saturday night and stay there until Monday morning. I won’t be depriving a family of their father, even to provide them with a living.”

Duncan looked across hopefully. “You said, ‘board’?”

“That’s right, there’s a bunkhouse and a cook with a remarkably sour disposition. Even if he poisons you, I suggest you just swallow and keep quiet. Now I’d urge you down from that mount before she becomes agitated - you clearly don’t belong there. Have you no saddle or proper bridle?”

Duncan shook his head.

Charlie sighed. “Of course not, you barely have a horse. I suppose we could consider loaning you some tack until you work it off.”

“Well, that’s generous, sir - thank, you. Um…is it about lunchtime?”

“Right after we get this wall up. Let’s see how those impressive arms work.”

Duncan’s arms outworked every other pair of arms on the site and apart from drawing some toxic sideways stares from Frank, earned the respect of everyone toiling beside him. He wasn’t much of an artisan, but he could swing a hammer with infinitely more ease than a pick in a coal mine and hoist timber all day long, albeit with his shirt off. The sweaty torso in the sunshine was a coastal son’s concession to the dry Cariboo heat that spread quickly among the crew - off came the flannel shirts. Even Lord Charlie gave in to the wisdom and offered his reddening biceps to the breeze. The most noticeable thing, though, wasn’t the sweaty newcomer’s size; it was how nothing disturbed his attitude, not lumber dropped on his foot or Frank’s bruising comments about the girth of his horse’s belly. He either laughed it off or turned it backward by offering to perform some helpful service for the offender. By the time the crew reached the outdoor lunch table under its canvas tarp, the genial ex-miner was already the target of chummy slaps on the back and a barrage of good natured jibes.

“You gonna leave some for the rest of us there, hoss?”

Mournful yowl, “If he eats as fast as he hauls lumber, we’re gonna get awful hungry.”

“Hell, any man wants to do half my work gets half my spuds. You can sit beside me, bud.”

“Why, thank you, sir. Is that real butter?”

At first sitting, Duncan dispatched a mound of beef and potatoes so impressive it caught the attention of Ah Joe. Despite the cook’s outward veil of grumpiness, the happy chewing and swallowing sounds coming from this eating machine in boots inspired a meal that evening of such baked, boiled and deep-fried goodness as hadn’t been seen since Chinese New Year. Everyone benefitted, but none with quite such gusto as Duncan.

By the second day, the freshened pace at the worksite drew the attention of Amalia. Proud of belly and demure beneath a broad summer hat, she had Frank carry over her chair in order to avail herself of the fine weather and bustle around her rising lodge. After an hour or so, it became suspiciously clear what she was watching. Charlie strolled from the front steps, wiping his brow and smiling at their exalted spectator.

“Quite an impressive sight, isn’t it, dear?”

Amalia smiled back. “I had no idea it would come along so quickly. You’re an impressive leader. All that training in the war, I’m sure.”

“With the right crew, anything’s possible…anything at all.”

“Then I’d say you’ve gathered the right crew.”

“His name’s Duncan.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Charlie turned to his project. “The big one there with the shiny muscles.”

Amalia pursed her lips. “Oh…that one.” She raised the brim of her hat. “I don’t recall seeing him before…is he new?”

“Rode in yesterday, bareback.”

“Oh, dear…bareback.”

“Yes, no shirt on the horse either.”

A moment of contrived pause, “Why, whatever is that supposed to mean?”

“I suppose it means he’s just as raw as the country he came from. A young buck positively bursting with vigor and potential.”

Amalia’s creamy complexion was gathering tone. “Well…I hope he works out for you, dear.”

Charlie popped his lips and said again, “…bursting…”

“Yes, I heard you, Charlie. Might we discuss something else now?”

“I could move your chair closer.”

“That’s quite enough!”

Charlie shook his head, grinning. “Never mind, dear, I’m quite impressed with him myself. Today’s Saturday, isn’t it?”

She flew at the change of subject. “Yes, I believe it is…why?”

“Well, we’ve had a good productive week. I rather fancy a sample of that new vodka with dinner. Will you be joining us?”

“Us?”

“Yes, I think it would be healthy for morale if we all ate together at the crew table, rather like the olden days of knights and their noble leaders. I thought you might play the queen, quite fitting as you’re certainly the loveliest.”

“Oh…well, I suppose I could.”

“I’ll inform Ah Joe. Do we have any wine left?”

“I believe there’s several bottles of Bordeaux.”

Charlie bowed. “Smashing, should go wonderfully with beef and vodka.”

What went wonderfully with beef and vodka was conversation. Precisely at six o’clock, supper was presented at the twenty foot table under the tarp and the crew arrived to a culinary event described only in books…for those who could read. The rest were left to their shuffling shambling wits as to how they were meant to behave. Amid fluttering candles, linen napkins and a jackpine scented breeze wafting the aroma of hard work and hair oil away, there was nothing quite like a Canadian born ranch hand offering a Marchioness a compliment on her taffeta blouse.

“That’s a real pretty shirt, ma’am. Want some of this red stuff here?”

“Thank you, but I believe Ah Joe is meant to - ”

“Maybe hang onto your glass in case I spill it. Say when…”

“Lovely, thank you, that’s enough.”

“Huh?”

“Enough, *stop now,* thank you.”

“Oh, sure. Looks kinda funny - okay if I taste it first?” Lips around bottle neck, sucking. Face twisting. “Yughh…what is that?”

“Vintage Bordeaux…try the vodka.”

Huge slurp, then eyelids snapping shut and Adams apple lunging under chin.

Amalia stared. “Oh, dear…are you…”

Paralytic choking sound followed by a dry stuttering hiss.

Amalia waved toward her husband at the far end of the table. “Charlie…oh, Charlie, I believe young Eldon may be in distress.”

Charlie saw his wife’s wave, but with the circus of guffawing and table slapping gaining momentum between them, couldn’t make out what she was saying.

Eldon toppled sideways off his chair, clutching his throat.

Amalia peered at the body. It wasn’t the first body she’d seen; once when she was seven, the gardener’s helper had been found dead in the tool shed, apparently perished from precisely the same concoction as dribbling from Eldon’s chin right now. She poked the toe of her shoe at him and called again, “Charlie…Charlie…”

At last her husband appeared. “Dear, what on earth?”

“There.” She pointed.

“Oh, I say…”

“Is he…you know?”

Charlie knelt beside the victim. “I’m afraid that’s rather difficult to say. The only dead men I’ve seen had holes in them. This one’s quite different…was there anything he did before assuming this behavior?”

By this time big Duncan was finished with his first slab of beef and looking around for the meat plate. He noticed the man on the ground. “Holy cow, what happened to Eldon?”

Charlie did what his wife had done and poked the toe of his boot into a fleshy part. “I would imagine something quite troubling. Choked on a bone or spoon perhaps.”

Amalia said, “He drank the vodka.”

Charlie’s eyebrows rose. “Oh…that’s not good.”

Duncan said, “This stuff?” He held his glass to his nose.

Charlie said, “Um…perhaps don’t sample that. There’s your family to consider and we haven’t finished the lodge yet.”

“Smells a bit like paint.”

“Well, this is only our first try.”

Duncan put the glass down and pushed from the table. He stood. “One time when I was little, me and my brother climbed up a tree with a bunch of rocks in our pockets to chuck at the neighbour kids. But being my stupid brother, he decided to stick some in his mouth because it was faster getting them out than digging in your pocket. Then he swallowed one.” Duncan loomed over the victim. “All of a sudden he’s looking at me with eyes sticking out of his head and starts turning purple. Next thing I knew, he fell out of the tree. I thought he was dead, but when he hit the ground the rock blew clear across the road.” He kicked Eldon in the stomach.

The young man coughed.

“Uh, huh…that’s what my brother did. He’ll be just fine.”

Amalia leaned from her chair. “He certainly has a bright colour.”

Charlie stared. “His scalp is glowing through his hair.”

“That’s a good sign.” Duncan said. “I think I’ll have one more plateful, folks, then I better get going home.”

Amalia’s face fell. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes, ma’am, tomorrow’s Sunday, have to get back to my family. Is there a church around here?”

“I’m afraid that’s difficult to answer. Sometimes there is and mostly there isn’t – in the community hall at Lone Butte. It all depends on whether a minister’s passing through.”

“That’s fine by me.” Duncan said. “Karin’s partial to church, but my soul’s just fine sleeping Sunday morning.”

Amalia sighed. “I’ll sleep well again when I can lie back without this baby pressing on my stomach. A mattress would be wonderful too. This wild Canadian life can be terribly challenging at times.”

Duncan reached for the meat plate. “I’ve gotta say it’s already twice as good as what I left behind. Can’t remember the last time my belly felt this full.”

“Well, you are a wonderfully large man.”

Amalia’s wonderfully large guest plopped another slab of beef on his plate. “Yes, ma’am, pass the spuds please.”

Charlie was still watching. “Is there some secret compartment hidden inside your leg?”

“No, sir. What are those?” He pointed his fork.

“Potstickers, they look rather like animal droppings, but they taste quite extraordinary. Try one.”

A mound of potstickers plopped next to the beef.

Charlie said, “Aren’t you going to taste one first?”

“Well, sir, you haven’t lied to me yet.” The mound began disappearing.

“Remarkable…quite remarkable.”

Late afternoon sunshine speckled the tarp and performed its magic on spirits united by common toil - nobody other than Duncan seemed in a hurry to go anywhere. Apparently the vodka wasn’t as poisonous to every constitution as it was to Eldon’s. In fact, the young ranch hand soon recovered sufficiently to rise onto his elbows and peer up again at the table. He clutched the chair he’d been sitting on and pulled upward. Then he reached for Duncan’s vodka glass, threw his head back and swallowed the contents in a single courageous gulp. The result, quite naturally, was similar to the first attempt and with the momentum of hurling his head back, the young man toppled from his chair. Charlie stared at the figure by his feet, once again apparently lifeless.

“I’ve seen that sort of thing a surprising number of times at different ports in the navy.” he said. “It’s rather like jumping overboard twice – you’d think after the first time, one would have more sense. Where exactly did you kick him?”

Duncan pointed. “The stomach.”

“Ah, yes…” Charlie kicked Eldon. “Now cough, there’s a good fellow.”

…*cough…*

Duncan said, “He’ll be fine, it’s not like he fell out of a tree.”

Amalia said, “You will be coming back, won’t you?”

“Oh, yeah, Monday…what’re those?” Another point of the fork.

“Pork spring rolls, try one.”

“Thanks.”

Charlie said, “We’ll be raising the rafters soon, I’d like you up top. How are you with heights?”

“Better than my brother.”

Amalia said, “Oh, that sounds wonderfully dangerous and exciting. I’d like to watch.”

Charlie said, “Of course you would.”

Amalia batted her eyes. “Take care not to fall, Duncan. Make sure you have proper footwear.”

“And take off your shirt.” Charlie said.

Amalia swung a flat stare at her husband. “Whatever you do, don’t drop anything on Charlie’s head. He’s got a terrible soft spot between the ears.”

Duncan pushed a spring roll into his mouth and peered at his boss. With a spray of shredded pork and sprouts, he said, “Oh, yeah, I see it now. Probably sticky when it gets wet.”

Charlie smiled. “Amalia likes everything wet and sticky.”

Dainty chin on hands and eyelids fluttering at her husband: “How sad about the terrible dry spell approaching.”

Duncan swallowed the last of his food and gazed from under the tarp at the sky. “You’re probably right, ma’am. Looks like it might not rain all summer.”

Amalia purred, “Or even longer, depending on my mood.”

“Oh, the rain’s got nothing to do with your mood.”

Charlie said, “That’s fortunate, because her moods can be rather endless.”

“December.” Amalia said.

Charlie wisely steered the conversation to another tack and turned to Duncan. “Is there anything we might offer as a housewarming gift on your triumphant return home?”

The young man gazed around the yard. “I see you’ve got a car.”

“Um…I was rather imagining something less necessary to barter for a pickup truck. Anyway, it’s very old and not entirely reliable.”

“No, I meant you use gasoline. Got any old drums around?”

“Oh, of course. Would you like one?”

“Thank you, sir, Karin wants a stove.”

Charlie blinked. “You’re planning to light a fire in it?”

“Better than the bucket she’s got now.”

“Well, that’s certainly inventive. I’d suggest, however, you stand back a good few feet before tossing the first match.”

“No problem. And could I get someone to show me how to tie a saddle onto my horse? Never had to do that before. And the gas drum too.”

“I’ll show you.” Amalia jumped up so quickly her belly hit the table, wobbling the glasses.

Charlie said to Duncan, “Please see she doesn’t do anything to injure her bump. There’s a good chance the heir I need is inside it.”

Amalia leaned on the table. “If it wasn’t for my bump, would you worry about me at all?”

“My dear, I can truthfully say I’ve been worried about you from the moment we met.”

“How sweet…I think.”

“Yes, quite.”

Chapter Four

That first morning after Duncan had gone riding off to ask about the job at Bear Creek Ranch, Karin shuffled the kids inside, walked in to calmly close the door, then turned and faced the truth of her situation with the coldest shudder she’d ever felt in her life. There was no one within a mile who could even hear her scream. Two small children, a scruffy stray dog and a woman who’d never been out of town for anything but a picnic – *she was* *alone.* On her frail female shoulders fell the staggering responsibility of defending this wilderness household from everything that slithered, crawled or clawed its terrible way around them looking for something to prey on. Rip to pieces with razor sharp fangs while howling at the moon. Then eat it. *Sweet merciful God.*

It must have showed on her face. “Mummy, are you okay?”

She swallowed the smothering fear crawling up her throat. “Of course, honey…I was just trying to think of something to have for supper when Daddy comes back.”

“Oh, I know! Raspberries!”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Winnie.” *She had to keep this normal.* “We’ll go out sometime and pick raspberries for Daddy.”

“And me, I like them too. Can we have them with milk?”

“We don’t have any milk. Not till we get a cow.”

“Then can we get a cow? Because I really like milk. Can we get one, please, Mummy?”

“We will if Daddy gets the job.” Karin’s eyes wandered to Duncan’s .303 rifle set across a pair of nails on the wall. Colin was crawling below it. It was like a message, the baby and the rifle - she had to be able to defend him. But she’d never fired a gun in her life. They were cold horrible things, meant for only one purpose. She couldn’t take her eyes off it. “Winnie, we haven’t brushed your hair yet. Go get the brush.”

Winnie came back with the brush, then said, “After we do my hair, then can we go pick raspberries?”

“Oh, we don’t have to do that today. Daddy might not be back for awhile.” It was true; she had no idea when Duncan would be home again. She pulled the brush through her daughter’s hair, the only thing she could think to do that didn’t involve going outside. It was already painfully obvious she was terrified at the thought of even covering the few hundred feet to the raspberry patch.

“Ouch, Mummy!”

“Oh, Winnie…I’m sorry. Mummy wasn’t paying attention.” Nor was she paying attention now. Colin had crawled over by the stove, or more accurately, the bucket with a fire in it. Another message from her baby: animals were afraid of fire. She could move it outside onto the porch where it would guard their door from wilderness invaders. *Marvellous idea…that’s what she’d do as soon as she worked up the courage to open the door.*

She couldn’t avoid it forever. An hour later after cleaning and dusting everything she could think of, she took down the rifle, went to the door and peeked outside. Nothing…at least nothing she could see. She stationed Winnie on the porch with orders to watch that Colin didn’t try to follow her, then went down the steps and tossed a piece of firewood into the yard. The rifle was huge and heavy, little wonder as it was more than half as long as she was. She opened the box of cartridges and pulled one out, lethal looking, shiny and built for business. *The handle that opened the rifle, how did it work?* She tugged, twisted, yanked - at last it moved and the bolt clunked open. She pushed the cartridge down. Closed the bolt. But trying to see through the sights was nearly impossible with the long awkward barrel wiggling and waving everywhere.  *However do soldiers do it?*

BOOM!

The fearsome weapon slammed her shoulder and almost flew from her hands. Worse, the spray of dirt from the bullet was nowhere near her wood block.

Winnie squealed, “Mummy! That scared me!”

Colin rolled on his back, howling.

She dropped the rifle and ran to the porch. She picked up her baby and rocked him, soothing and murmuring sweetly.

Winnie said, “Mummy, I hate that gun.”

“It scared me too, honey. But Mummy needs to learn to shoot it.”

“Howcome, what do you need it for?”

“It’s this forest we live in, honey. There’s wild animals and I might have to hurt one to make it go away.”

Winnie shook her head. “Mummy, when that gun shoots it’s going to scare everything away anyhow. It scared me terrible.”

Karin gazed at her daughter’s matter-of-fact little face. It was true, of course – she didn’t have to hit anything; she just needed to pull the trigger. “Oh, Winnie, you’re so smart.”

“I am?”

“Yes, go get the pail and we’ll pick some raspberries.”

“Oboy, oboy…raspberries.” Winnie hopped inside for the pail.

The uncanny thing was how Winnie had been right. It took a four-year-old to instinctively know that when they nearly bumped noses with the black bear in the raspberry patch a half hour later, the panic stricken blast from the rifle was all the terrified mother would need to scare the animal away. Of course, that’s not the way it felt to Karin. It felt like nearly getting killed.

The rest of that week the little family barely moved off the porch. The .303 stayed loaded, never more than a few steps away on all the nails Karin drove into the log walls while she went about the business of moving the fire pail outside and keeping her family alive in the fang and claw infested wilderness.

Visits to the outhouse were delayed as long as possible and dispensed with quickly, but the most dangerous times were when she had to go to the lake for water. Her mind began playing tricks; every moment she spent outside left her with the inexplicable sensation they were being watched. She knew it was ludicrous, knew there was nothing there, but on the fifth day she was on her way back from the lake when something much more terrifying than a bear appeared in a grove of spruce trees…watching.

After that it was full lockdown and sleeping with the rifle.

\* \* \*

Like most of the tough, black faced men spilling from holes in the ground at the sound of a shift whistle, Duncan hadn’t set out in life to be a coal miner. His enthusiasm for schoolwork, though, had never matched his drive to catch balls, build forts on a sunny day or chase his dog down to the river for fishing expeditions. He was also the neighbourhood marble champ. In short, almost everything he excelled at ensured someday he’d find himself swinging a pick at a coal face. Especially after he found the courage on his eighteenth birthday to ask neighbourhood beauty, Karin Jakubic, to marry him. Thinking back, he hadn’t seen that coming either, but her habit of aiming that paralyzing smile his direction every time she caught him peeking past a garden rake made the outcome about as inevitable as Sunday morning eggs. She wasn’t the only girl who looked his way, but she was the only one who made him blush back as if somehow he was seeing a part of her she kept in a private place just for him. Up to the night she finally let him do that unbelievable thing to her on their wedding bed, the thing he’d wanted so badly for so long he practically exploded at first sight of her heavenly secret, he just couldn’t picture a bigger event in his life. Then came the baby. Then the little house on Kennedy Street and another baby. That’s the way it went for almost four perfect years, right up until the two things nobody anywhere saw coming, the accident in the mine and the world suddenly going crazy and turning its back on coal. The double dirty punch, it didn’t just happen to him; his father worked for the same company. Karin’s father was a miner as well, already out of work two years. With the railroads stretching from coast to coast and towns full of furnaces and factories springing up at every stop along the way, it seemed impossible that all that driven spirit would suddenly puff to a halt and lose its love for the black gold that came from the ground. Or that another kind of black gold would suddenly become more precious.

Oil.

Nanaimo didn’t have oil, only coal. It was that final.

A four year old and a baby out in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’ – even Duncan had to secretly admit what they were doing seemed crazy, but what choice does a man have with so many mouths counting on him for supper? At least in the bush there were moose to shoot…someday. As if to reinforce that promise, a grouse burst from the roadside to hurtle into the grey dusk in front of him. Rosie, his horse, didn’t flick an ear. The borrowed saddle creaked under him, a comfortable change from the broad back and bony spine on the trip up. He felt his face twist into a grin. The conquering hero, he was coming home with a job and a housewarming gift from his boss. Boy, wouldn’t Karin be surprised when she saw her new stove. The boss’s wife had seemed excited too, helping him lash it behind the saddle and telling him all about springtime on the banks of the Danube River and other stuff that must’ve been really important to her because she didn’t seem to want to stop. He had no idea where the Danube River was, but he had to admit she was very helpful. He was so happy in his thoughts he didn’t feel the trees watching as he passed. But then, he was from the city and in the strange grey world of disappearing daylight in the forest, only creatures that lived here could see beyond the shadows. The thing he should’ve noticed was Rosie’s ears flatten. That was the thing he should’ve seen.

One more mile home.

\* \* \*

She was crouched at the end of the mattress with the rifle in her hands, listening to strange sounds outside, when the door pushed against its locking plank and the dog jumped in front of her, barking.

She stabbed the weapon toward the door and yelled. “Go away! I’ve got a rifle!”

“Honey, it’s me, let me in!”

“Duncan…oh, thank God you’re here!” She jumped off the bed and ran to open the door. At last her husband stood before her, huge, protective and comforting, shoulders blocking the last of the twilight behind him.

He said, “Why have you got that out, what’s wrong?”

The rifle clattered to the floor and she crumpled into his arms. “Duncan, I’ve been so terrified…it’s out there…oh God…”

“Something’s out there?”

A storm of tears burst down her cheeks, glistening in the glow of the lamp. “In the forest…” She looked up suddenly, eyes bulging. “Close the door!”

He did as his hysterical wife said, then turned. “Honey, it was probably a bear. Pauline said if you leave them alone they won’t hurt you.”

“Duncan, you have no idea! We met a bear in the berry patch and that was just the beginning. This was no bear - it was hairy and huge and…”

“…like a bear...”

“And it was staring at me.”

“Oh….” He hugged her one more time, then held her at arm’s length. “Don’t worry, I’m here now.” He was getting ready to tell her about the new stove when a tree limb cracked outside in the bush. A sharp bawling sound dribbled off into plaintive mewls, then more branches cracked, followed by a soft thud. The horse neighed and the walls quivered with the tug of reins against the porch rail.

He grabbed the rifle off the floor. “I’ll see what that is.”

The instant he poked his head outside a dark shape burst from the trees to hump for the corner of the house. The horse lunged and the gasoline barrel broke free to go bonking across the yard. It was a miracle the reins didn’t break. It was a miracle, too, he didn’t shoot the creature, because in that moment he realized it was a bear cub. The dog shot past him to the edge of the porch, barking furiously. He called over his shoulder, “Honey, it’s a bear, a little one. I just saw it run behind the house.” He grabbed the dog and dragged it inside with him. He said, “Why is the stove out there? Have you been cooking on the porch?”

“Well, of course I’ve been cooking on the porch.” Her voice wasn’t so querulous now, gathering that familiar tone of, *‘You have no idea.’* She went on, “If I cooked inside, I’d smother the whole family.”

“Look, if you cook on the porch, they come to the smell. Heck, they probably come right up and lick the grease off the stove. Remember what Pauline said - you’re not in the city anymore, you have to be careful.”

“Duncan, I’m not a five-year-old, you don’t need to talk to me like that.”

“Karin, I’m not talking to you like that. All I’m saying is you shouldn’t…I mean, maybe *we* should think about cooking on the new surprise I brought home for you.”

Happier now, “…surprise…?”

“Uh, huh…and I got a job.”

“Well, I know you got the job, you haven’t been home for a week. But you brought me a surprise? A surprise I can cook on?”

He handed her the rifle and went out to unhitch Rosie. “Just let me get the saddle off, the bear’s got her spooked.”

“Duncan, we don’t have a saddle.”

“We do now, the boss lent me one. And a bridle.” He went to Rosie, fumbled with the cinch, got the saddle and blanket off, then unhitched the reins to pull off the bridle. A moist snort came from the dark behind him and the reins ripped from his hand. Rosie was gone, hooves pounding back to Pauline’s place. The dog was back in the door, barking.

He slowly…slowly…turned. *Something cold and wet touched his hand.* He yelled and lunged backward.

Karin hollered, “Duncan!”

The dog went crazy. Karin grabbed it and shoved it behind her.

He yelled, “Don’t come out! Shut the door!”

No rifle, family trapped. He was trapped too…and now what? *It had to be the little bear.* Pauline had warned them about bears with cubs…how was he supposed to get past it? And more importantly, where was the mother?

He backed along the porch rail – mustn’t run, that much he knew. A dark shape came snuffling toward him. He backed away faster, stumbled over the toe of his boot and toppled backward like a drunk. *Dammit, how stupid was he?* The creature found his hand, licked his fingers. He yanked them back. “Go! Go away, shoo!”

From the door, “Duncan, what are you doing?”

“Karin, stay in the house! It’s the baby bear, the mother’s out here somewhere!”

“Well, come inside before you get killed.”

He shouted at it again, “Shoo…go on…BEAT IT!”

Then his daughter’s tiny voice, “Daddy?”

And his wife’s, “Duncan!”

“I’m coming!”

A branch cracked in the bush, a very large, dangerous sounding branch. He shoved the cub away hard. Jumped to his feet and bolted past it. He lunged inside, grabbed the door and slammed it shut, panting. “There…that’s it…we’re safe.”

Little Winnie was in her nightshirt, yellow lantern light dancing off her shiny dark curls. “Mummy said you found a baby bear. Is that right, Daddy?”

Breathless, but with relief flooding every muscle, he scooped up his daughter and cuddled her. “There’s nothing to be scared of, muffin. You can go back to sleep now.” He kissed her small, sweet smelling head.

“I want a bear.”

“Of course you do…of course.” He stared at his wife’s red eyes.

Karin said, “I can’t live like this.”

“Honey, there’s bears everywhere. There’s bears on the island, it’s no different.”

“I have never…had a bear…on my doorstep in Nanaimo.”

He offered a lame nod. “But we can’t live in Nanaimo anymore. There’s nothing there to go back to.”

“Well, Duncan, going back to nothing is better than getting eaten by wild animals.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Oh, really, it’s not?”

“…not really…”

She started storming around the cabin, picking up this or that and putting it on the bed, pulling it off the bed, thumping it on the table, the knotted, wobbly table. “I will not have my children eaten by bears. And I will not sit here all alone with that…thing in the forest staring at us, wondering for all the world what a woman and two babies tastes like.”

He clutched Winnie tight and shook his head. “Honey, lots of people live out here with bears and don’t get eaten.”

“Duncan, I’ve seen it! And it is not a bear!”

“Well, that’s certainly what sucked my fingers, a little tiny bear.”

Winnie squeaked, “It sucked your fingers?”

Karin stopped pacing so suddenly her bare feet skidded on the floor. “Duncan, the thing I saw stood on two legs. It had a flat face with hungry black eyes. It stinks, and it is *ugly.”*

He blinked, remembering suddenly what Frank had said about the inhabitants of the Ish-ka-bibble. “Two legs?”

“Yes, dear, two legs.”

“You could smell it?”

“Like it was right in front of me.”

He looked down at the floor. “I…” Then he closed his mouth and looked away.

She stared. “You what…you know something?”

He looked back up. “I got you a stove.”

Her shoulders collapsed. She crumpled back onto the bed and wiped a palm across her wet cheeks. “A stove…of course, thank you. And you got a job…that’s wonderful news…welcome home.”

He went with Winnie to wrap his free arm around his wife. “You can see it in the morning. Now, let’s go to bed.”

“Yes…bed.”

Winnie chirped, “I get to sleep in the middle.”

Duncan said, “Not tonight, muffin, there’s not enough room.”

Karin said, “We’ve been sleeping together since you left, Duncan. And I’m tired.”

“Karin, I’ve been gone nearly a week.”

“If you’d been listening, you’d know that’s why I’m tired.”

He gave up and let Winnie crawl from his arms under their quilt.

Karin set little Colin in his bassinet, blew out the lantern and climbed in with the others. The darkness pressed down on their home so thick it seemed almost a sin to breathe. Then they heard it again, something outside the door. And it wasn’t a baby bear.

Karin’s voice was a breathless plea, “Don’t go, Duncan…don’t go. It’ll leave. It can’t get in.”

He was almost ready to accept that when something began bonking the empty barrel around the yard. “What the heck…it’s playing out there.”

“Let…it…play.”

But the next sound solved the puzzle: a horse whickered.

“Oboy…it’s just the horse. It came back.”

Karin breathed, “Fine, you can get it in the morning.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He fumbled to relight the lantern and unlatch the door. Sure enough, there was Rosie, right back where he’d left her at the edge of the porch. Pauline hadn’t lied - what a terrific horse, more than he could’ve hoped for. Then he saw something that left him scratching his head.

The reins were hitched to the railing.

The next morning Duncan took a bath in the lake, shaved his week of whiskers off and went around hugging his family to assure them, including little Colin sitting on his blanket and sucking a stick in the sunshine, that things were going to be fine even with bears around. If there was a problem at all, it was with the new stove, or at least with his wife’s unfair opinion of it.

“It’s no different than that ridiculous bucket on the porch. How are you even going to cut it open?”

“With the axe.”

“It’s steel, Duncan, not a piece of tin. You could hurt yourself.”

Puffy snort, “I’m a miner, Karin. I know how to swing big tools.”

A half hour later, with a bandage across his forehead where the bouncing axe had notched it, his wife led him down the steps to sit in the sunshine next to his son.

Karin said, “Keep an eye on Colin for me. I’m going to the lake for water.”

He still had pearls of moisture in the corners of his eyes. “I’ve got to work tomorrow. I can hardly see.”

She patted the sandy tuft of hair sticking out the top of the bandage and cooed, “You’ll be fine, it didn’t hit anything important.”

“It hit me on the head!”

“Yes, dear.” More petting and cooing. “Don’t let Colin suck stones. They’re dirty and he might swallow one.”

“…nobody cares about me…”

“I mean it, Duncan. He can get away fast if you’re not paying attention. And he likes anything shiny.”

The dog came over to sit beside them. It stared up at Duncan’s bandage and cocked its head. Karin said, “He hit himself with an axe. Just make sure he doesn’t fall over on the baby.”

The dusty animal padded over to lick Colin’s face. The baby let out a happy squeal and flapped his arms like a bird.

Karin said, “I’ll only be a few minutes. Try not to hurt yourself while I’m gone.” She left with her bucket and rifle, little Winnie hanging onto her dress.

Duncan found a stick to toss for the dog. Wherever the creature had lived before being chucked into Pauline’s wagon, it knew about barking and running after sticks.

Colin saw something shiny.

Pauline arrived in her buckboard, wheels bouncing, dust curling around the back like a thick brown fog. She halted her horse, set the brake and climbed down. “How’re my favorite neighbours this morning?”

Duncan strode toward the wagon.

Pauline planted her hands each side of the apron shadow, tossed her spring loaded mop of hair to shake out the dust and said, “What’s the head towel for? Bath day?”

“It’s not a towel, it’s a bandage. I had an accident.”

“Well, you’re luckier than Morley Caruthers, your eyes are still straight. I heard you got the job. Find out where his lordship hides his money yet?”

“He hasn’t got any money, Pauline. He’s broke as you and me.”

She winked. “Oh, I ain’t broke, honey. I got a pot of pirate loot hid right were nobody’d look for it, down the hole of my biffy. Anybody wants to go down there deserves exactly what they get, my backside winking at them.”

Duncan stared at his feet and swallowed. “Pauline…you need to stop talking like that.”

“Sissy.”

He said, “I want to thank you for bringing the horse back.”

“Huh?”

“The horse, after it ran off to your place last night. Thanks for bringing it back.”

“Honey, I never saw your horse. Came back though, huh? See, it’s like I said, good horse.”

He reached to scratch his head, then remembered the bandage. “But it was hitched to my porch. It didn’t do that itself.”

She shrugged. “Well, now, maybe I want that horse back. Must be smarter than I thought.”

Karin arrived with Winnie toddling beside her and stirring a stick in the bucket. “Morning, Pauline, on your way to town?”

“Out of whiskey. If there’s two things drive me crazy, one of them’s running out of whiskey.” She paused to spit at the dusty ground. “Not gonna say the other one, but it rhymes with ‘lazy husband’.”

Karin said, “It’s Sunday. They won’t sell you whiskey on Sunday.”

“What? I thought that damn prohibition baloney was over. Ain’t the government done enough damage already by giving men the vote?”

“Um…I’d offer you some, but we don’t have any whiskey either.”

“Of course not, you probably voted for prohibition.”

“It’s only one day, Pauline. Tomorrow you can buy all the liquor you want.”

Before the wild haired woman could set off on another rant, Duncan said, “I can’t help with whiskey, but I know where you might get vodka, probably on Sunday too.”

Thirsty stare, “Vodka? Don’t tease me, son, I’m the sort who shoots first and laughs about it later.”

“No lie, Pauline. Lord Charles makes it himself and from what I’ve seen, it’s not for beginners.”

Eyebrows rising, “Dangerous stuff, huh?”

“Nearly killed a man right in front of my eyes…twice.”

Pauline’s lips writhed like snakes mating. She asked in a breathless whisper, “…what’s he charge…?”

“Couldn’t say, but he’s a fair man.”

“Anything’s better than that moose piss Gunnar sells.” She set off in a windblown flap for her wagon.

Karin said to her husband, “Honey, where’s Colin?”

He looked around. “Right over…uh, I don’t…”

“Duncan! You were supposed to watch him!”

“Well, Pauline came, and uh…”

Karin yelled, “Pauline, don’t go! We’ve lost our baby!”

The swirl of dusty skirts slowed, then swung back. “The little guy? He’s crawled off somewhere?”

“Help us find him. Please, you’ve lived in the bush longer than we have.”

It was true. If there was one place on earth Pauline knew her way around, it was in the pine and poplar woodlands of the Ish-ka-bibble. She’d hunted moose, cleared land with an axe and shovel, trapped marten, mink, beaver and she could track a spider over a rock. The only thing she couldn’t do was take too long about it, because the fact remained she was out of whiskey. “Where was he last? Show me.”

Karin said, “On the blanket, he was right there on the blanket.”

Pauline marched over. “Where’s the dog?”

Duncan spotted it gnawing on its stick by the corner of the house.

Pauline said, “Well, I wouldn’t worry too much. He ain’t been gone long and if the dog ain’t excited, there’s no bears or cougars around to snatch him.”

Karin’s head snapped back. “Cougars?”

“Like I said, the dog would know straight off. That’s the little guy’s crawl marks, right there…uh-oh.” The trail was headed straight for a patch of ragged brush between them and the lake, the warm, gummy bottomed lake.

For those built inches off the ground the world is a fascinating place. Get right down close to it and all creation stretches away forever, filled with shiny suckable stuff everywhere. There’s not just the thrill of excellent discoveries against your gums, but shapes of alluring roundness, or flatness, or unbelievable colours sparkling in warm yellow sunlight off tiny flecks inside them, drawing the explorer ever deeper into a playground of such endless curiosity there simply isn’t anything seen already which could approach the joy of the next wonderful thing. And if you bravely follow it forward, even the way the world changes is fascinating, from hot flat and dusty, to cool green and straight up in your face. All over the place. Never the same thing twice.

There’s stuff that buzzes, stuff that wiggles.

Stinky surprises of different shapes, rough on the tongue, but tasty.

Things small and quick that run away in front of you – already forgotten.

Pointy in your eye things.

Poky on your fingers.

Always more ahead; just keep on moving your knees.

Then wiggle out again into sunshine and stare over endless beautiful sparkling foreverness…cool, splashy…perfect around your scraped skin, your hot itchy diaper…further and onward into it. Better than anything yet.

Pauline pushed through the tangled brush, Karin and Duncan half a heartbeat behind her. They burst into the morning sunlight with the lake shooting diamonds so bright they had to shield their eyes.

Karin begged, “He’s here, isn’t he? I can’t see…Pauline, where?”

“…I don’t know...” The big voice was unnaturally hushed.

The frantic mother waded out, shoes sinking in the spongy verge. “He’s here…he has to be…”

Duncan splashed out up to his chest. He stared at the glittering surface – nothing.

Pauline pointed. “There!”

A tiny floating object - he plunged and splashed toward it. Grabbed, yanked it from the water. A diaper, a sodden cloth diaper, that was all.

Karin collapsed to her knees. “Oh, God…please…it can’t be…”

Pauline pressed a hand on her neighbour’s quivering shoulder and yelled to Duncan, “If the diaper’s there, then he is! Keep looking!”

He thrashed this way, that. Swam out, dove. But each time he came spluttering back to the surface his hands were empty and the hope inside them shrank.

Karin rocked back and forth. “…dear Lord, please…”

It went on like that a long, long time.

By the time they started back toward the house, the shadows were short, the morning gone, disappeared as the traces of their last desperate prayers. It wasn’t until they reached the edge of the clearing they remembered the one thing forgotten in their frenzied rush to the lake, Winnie, the other child. Karin seemed barely aware, lost somewhere inside her mind. Duncan sprinted ahead to the cabin. He dashed around the corner of the wall and, thank the Lord, there was his daughter, sitting on the porch with her doll.

She looked up and her eyes lit. “Daddy, can we get a baby bear? I really want a bear.”

He could barely bring himself to face her. “Winnie…there’s been…an accident.”

“I know, Daddy, I hope your head gets better.”

“No, not that. Colin, your brother…he’s gone.”

Green eyes looking past the top of her doll’s head, “No, he’s not. He’s not gone.”

“Oh, Winnie…I don’t know how to say it any different. Colin’s not…coming back.” It took everything he had inside him to say the words.

Small head shaking side to side, “Why do you say that, Daddy?”

“Because it’s true, muffin. I’m so, so…sorry.”

“I want a bear.”

He knelt in front of her, could barely see through his blurred eyes. “You don’t understand, I know…but…” He reached to smooth her shiny curls.

She said, “The big man has a bear. I don’t know why we can’t have one if he does. I think they’re cute.”

Duncan drew back. “Big man?”

“Yes, Daddy, the man who brought Colin back.”

“What?”

“Colin.” A matter-of-fact shake of the head. “You said he’s gone, but he’s not gone at all.”

”Colin…is here? Where?”

“In the house Daddy. He was sleepy so the big man put him in bed.”

Duncan jumped to his feet, ran to the door. There was Colin in his bassinet, under a blanket. “Dear God…”

Winnie said, “I want a bear.”

Karin never stopped for a second to ponder the miracle of her baby delivered back to her arms. She held him at the edge of the bed and rocked him, murmuring into his tiny ear. If the trauma of his disappearance had pushed her somewhere inside her mind, his recovery sent her swimming even further away. She sang and rocked with moist red eyes, not seeing anything else around her.

Duncan said to Pauline, “Winnie said there was a man.”

“That a fact?”

“A big man with a bear.”

That sent the bushy eyebrows up. “…really…”

“She’s little, but she doesn’t seem to be making it up – a man with a bear, that’s what she said.”

Pauline spun and headed out the door.

Duncan called, “Where are you going?”

“The baby was down at the lake. I followed his trail and saw the diaper. Somehow he made it back here and got put to bed. He didn’t do that by himself.” She headed down the steps and stared at the ground. “Uh, huh…well, she ain’t lying.”

Duncan said, “We had a bear snooping around last night with a cub. That’s probably what you’re seeing.”

She squatted, peered more closely. “No sow here, just the cub. And some big scuff marks, but no claws. Weren’t made by anybody from this house.”

Duncan came down the steps. “So you’re saying there really was a man?”

She looked up. “Could be I got an idea who it is. I’ve seen him. Only thing is, I ain’t so sure it’s a man.”

“Oh, come on…”

She shook her head. “Look, I’m just saying the bush is a big place and lots of stuff lives in it.” She pointed at the ground. “What I can tell you for sure is sometime after sunrise a bear cub passed here and something with real big feet – two of them.”

Duncan rubbed his bandaged head. “That’s what Karin said: two legs, black eyes and ugly.”

Pauline peered around the yard, then strode to the steps. Several long strands of brown fur had been trapped between the post and railing. She tugged them out, sniffed. “Maybe a man, maybe not. The time I saw him, about scared the bejezus out of me. And he smelled just like this.”

Duncan leaned to sniff. “Stinks, that’s what Karin said too.”

She shook her head. “Look, something brought your horse back and something saved your baby. About all we know for sure is whatever’s out there seems to be on your side. I wouldn’t worry if I was you, just be glad for the way it went.”

“I just wish I’d seen it, maybe got a chance to say thank you.”

“Careful what you wish for, big boy. Now I gotta go see a man about a drink. Been way too interesting a day.”

Chapter Five

Pauline’s appearance at Bear Creek Ranch brought about two things. On the positive side, it gave Charlie confidence his experiment had produced a viable commercial product, at least on Sundays when the law prohibited liquor sales everywhere in the province and not merely his front yard. More unfortunately, it also awakened Amalia to the fact her husband’s hobby was at least as illegal as stealing horses, this due to the odd dusty woman from the wagon braying about it loud enough to be heard all the way back to the main road.

As the first sample swallows took effect, a not-so-feminine arm draped across Charlie’s shoulder. “Why, I barely can believe my good fortune. Not only have I found a moonshiner open on Sundays, but he’s damn handsome too. And this stuff’d put a mule on his ass.”

“Quite nice of you to say so, madam. Might I interest you in a second jar?”

“Hell, yeah…wait’ll Gunnar hears about this stuff. He’s gonna shit hisself with jealousy.”

Charlie’s face went rigid. “Uh…I’d rather it remain our little secret. You see, I was hoping to export the bulk of it to the United States where they’re not terribly fussy about flavour or foreign particles.”

Pauline stared into her Mason jar. “Huh?”

“Oh, not that jar, of course. I meant the others.”

“Hell, I’ll take another one.” She gave up staring and went back to sucking from the big round rim. “Tell you what, lordship, I’ll make you a deal. You give me this jar for free and I’ll spread a few samples around my neighbours to drum up business…whaddya say?”

Charlie shook his head. “Madam, my intent was to be a manufacturer, never a distributor.”

Big floppy smile, “Shitsake, I’ll do the distributing. Load me up.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“But I wanna help you out.” The hand at the end of the draped arm flapped at Charlie’s face.

“I don’t require any help and please stop waving at my face.”

“You might be good to look at, lordship, but you ain’t a hell of a lot of fun.” She burped across his ear.

He pressed the hand away and stared at Frank, who was leaning against a post, rolling a cigarette. “Frank!”

Frank looked up from his lumpy creation. “What?”

“Get over here and assist this…lady…into her wagon. Oh, I almost forgot, that will be fifty cents, madam.”

“You gotta be kidding, who’s got that kinda cash? There’s a depression on. How about if I work it off, handsome?”

Charlie swerved away from the fumes. “Never mind, making your delightful acquaintance has been payment enough. And you can keep the jar.” He escorted Pauline, now wobbling dangerously, toward her buckboard, where he met Frank. He uncoiled the arm from his shoulder like a decomposing python and shoved it at his top hand. “See that she’s pointed the right direction. I don’t want her reappearing on the second pass.”

Pauline aimed a bleary stare under Frank’s mystery hat. “Hey…what’s yourname there, fella?”

Like his boss’s, the cowboy’s head also recoiled. “Holy crap, good thing I never lit that cigarette. You sure she’s gonna find her way home? She looks pretty legless already.”

Charlie sniffed, “By her appearance, I’d say all the forest is her friend. I’m quite certain whichever creature finds her will nurture her back to health.”

“It’d have to be damn hungry to eat her.”

With the buckboard safely on its way down the road and bumping, hopefully, in the right direction, Amalia approached the pair of males, grinning under their hats and sniggering like six-year-olds at the kitchen cookie jar.

She said, “I should have known you can’t trust a goat with a cabbage.”

They turned together. Charlie said, “Another folksy proverb from the old country, dear?”

“You knew all along what you were doing is wrong.”

He blinked, “Whatever do you mean? I haven’t touched a cabbage all day.”

“Don’t try to be funny with me, Charlie.”

Frank’s face disappeared behind his hat brim.

Charlie cleared his throat. “My dear - ”

“No, I’m not your dear if you’re going to lie to me.”

He’d been married long enough to know he wasn’t going to grin and tickle his way out of this one. He pushed back his hat. “Amalia, I’m quite certain I never lied to you. In fact, I distinctly recall asking your permission, to which you replied, ‘whatever you think is best, dear’. Well, I firmly feel what’s best is to continue to erect the new lodge and pay our employees for their labour.”

At this, Frank’s hat wobbled vigorously. “That’s a good plan. I like that plan a lot.”

Amalia snapped, “This is not your business, Frank. This is a quarrel between managements.”

Charlie said, “Frank and the others are simply concerned they may have to take the ranch to court in order to recover their wages.”

“Don’t be silly, of course we’ll be paying their wages.”

“No, my dear, I’m afraid we won’t, not without the vodka.”

Amalia glanced toward Frank, now wobbling his hat more sadly. She said, “Court?”

Charlie drew a sorrowful breath. “We may be sentenced to debtor’s prison, where we’ll be forced to wear striped clothing. Or confined to one of those disturbing relief camps like the one at eighty-three mile where they fashion shovels and wheelbarrows for the road teams.”

“Wheelbarrows?”

“Oh, they’re fine wheelbarrows, with all the labour that goes into building them. Wouldn’t you say they’re fine wheelbarrows, Frank?”

“Oh, absolutely, boss. The very best I ever seen.”

“I’m told it takes more than a full day to make just one. They’re terribly difficult, especially in winter when it’s difficult to hold the metal with frozen fingers.”

Frank was leaning toward her now, nodding with concern. “It’s them little spokes on the wheel that’s hardest. Gotta get ‘em tight as a fiddle string - one springs loose, it’ll stab you right through the eye.”

Amalia’s head drew back.

Charlie gritted his teeth and shot Frank a warning glare.

Frank, though, was gathering steam; this was almost as much fun as rubbing a work sock in Eldon’s sleeping face. “I hear the gang boss there wears a necklace of old dried eyes.”

Amalia said, “Well…I’m sure that’s just a story to frighten people into paying their debts.”

Charlie jumped in, “Absolutely, that’s what it is dear, nothing more than a frightening story. I’m quite certain they’ll treat us with the utmost respect, especially after they learn of our aristocratic background. It’s nothing at all like English work camps, where they absolutely loathe the peerage.” He finished with an icy shudder.

“Charlie…”

“Yes, dear?”

“What if they are like the English?”

“Don’t worry, my love. I’m told the bosses there are all Irish.”

Eyes widening. “Dear heaven…Irish?”

Nodding and drawing a thin breath. “Um-hum…Irish.”

“Alright, Charlie, you can make your vodka. But I don’t want anything to do with the sale of it - is that clear? I’m quite final on that.”

Charlie shrugged. “As you wish, dear. I’ve already contacted George Reifel and he replied he’d be delighted to receive a sample crate of our product. If only I had something more attractive to bottle it in, other than those hillbilly Mason jars.”

Amalia said, “It’s not about the bottles, Charlie, it’s the quality of the spirits inside. I’m sure Mr. Reifel understands that and he’ll be able to bottle it far more attractively. If I were you, I’d use some of those empty cleaning fluid pails behind the barn for shipping. Not only are there no bugs living in them, but the police aren’t likely to open one to taste it.”

Charlie stood staring, then snuck a glance toward Frank, who was gazing back with something like silent amazement. He mumbled, “I’ll consider your idea, dear…now don’t you have anything to do in preparation for the baby?”

The distraction worked; she coddled her proud tummy in both hands. “Absolutely, there’s so much you can’t imagine. And he’s starting to kick.”

“My dear, there you did it again - you said ‘he’.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you did. And kicking already, that’s wonderful.”

“Isn’t it, Charlie…isn’t it absolutely? Everything’s going to turn out just fabulous.”

He smiled. “Of course it will. What could possibly go wrong?”

\* \* \*

Charlie and Frank were mistaken on one point: even though Pauline was a true friend of the forest, there were many things in it which might cause her harm, not all of them even animate. Given her unfortunate decision to mix drinking with wagon driving, it seemed destiny that she topple from her bench to the side of the road, frightening birds with her snores, while her trusty horse continued for home and the turnip it always received after a long day’s work. Flat on her back, the sun was directly in her face. The spilled Mason jar lay in the dry yellow grass beside her, its evaporating hi-octane alcohol more flammable than gasoline. It was now mid-August; it hadn’t rained since June.

Nothing in the bush likes fire. True, it has many benefits, like opening the forest to sunshine and allowing ground hugging plants and seedlings into areas long ruled by light stealing older growth. Some seeds, like the cone of the jackpine, crack open in the inferno of nature’s furnace to release new life. It’s a time of renewal. It’s also a time of terror, primal and inescapable for the small, the slow…or the unconscious.

It was Karin who first smelled smoke. She looked southwest into the breeze and saw the thick grey chimney of it rising into the sky, already staining the sun behind it orange. She might’ve been from the city, but she knew what that meant.

“Fire! Duncan, fire!”

He’d just returned from a ride with Winnie, the two of them still on Rosie’s back after their trip around the lake. “Uh-oh, I think you’re right.”

Karin said, “You should go see where it is.”

“Karin, it’s a fire. You don’t go running toward a fire.” Duncan had known many of the men on the shift before his who’d died in the explosion that closed the mine, most of them burned in the inferno afterward.

“Duncan, if a fire comes through here we’ll lose everything. It must’ve just started, maybe there’s time.”

He paused, juggling the weight of her words, then decided, “Alright, but get the kids down to the lake. If it makes it here, that’s the only hope you’ve got.”

He passed Winnie into her arms, then urged Rosie toward the road. The last thing he heard her say sounded silly after the rest. With the horse pointed toward the most lethal thing in the forest, she called after him, “Be careful.”

Pauline’s empty buckboard appeared just after he met the road.Now there were two problems; he also had to keep watch for his vanished neighbour, probably lying somewhere injured.

Next was his horse. The closer they got to the smoke, not only was Rosie reluctant, but he wasn’t an accomplished rider. Her first jittery swerve nearly tossed him from the saddle. Only a desperate swipe at the horn saved him from pitching to the hard earth. Every step of the way now she fought the reins. He tried everything he could think of, but realized it was hopeless; there was no way to convince a sensible animal that an out of control wildfire wasn’t going to kill it. He turned the twitching creature aside and hitched her to a tree. Her dancing and twisting wasn’t much better there, but he didn’t want to set her loose and be caught trying to escape on foot if the fire proved more than a match for a man with no water, shovel or the good sense to stay away in the first place. What did he expect to do anyway? Truly, he had no idea, but he left his horse and ran toward the danger.

He’d never faced a fire before. He expected fear – and he was certainly feeling the hot flutter of that in his chest - but nothing could’ve prepared him for what he saw when he got there.

With the wind pressing toward the road, the flames were still confined to the sun scorched grass of the verge. Heat twisted at him in waves, poisoning his eyes and nostrils with biting smoke and ash, but that wasn’t what made his neck hair jump. It was the creature on the forest side of the blaze, stalking back and forth jumping on flaring bits of fuel. Impossible - the thing looked seven feet tall with a thick body wrapped in a mat of brown fur. Its jutting brow was visible through the blur of smoke. Then it looked up and saw him. Black eyes. Exactly as Karin had said, here it was staring directly at him, but in that instant Duncan knew whatever lived behind those eyes was here for the same reason he was – to fight the fire and save their homes, both their homes, from destruction. That’s when the fear left him. He peeled off his shirt and ran to outflank the flame. Arm hair and eyebrows curling in the searing heat, he lunged at their common enemy, slapped his shirt on a flaring clump, then driven back, jumped clear. He coughed, acid smoke in his nostrils, could barely breathe. The bandage on his head unravelled across his eyes; he yanked it off and tossed it. Taking cover behind his forearm, he lunged again - slap. But this time when he jumped back, something bit his leg. He stared; the flame had worked behind him. He hopped and danced around it.

A voice shouted from the roadway, “Like this! Swing your shirt like this – you’re scooping embers behind you!” It was Cecil from the store swinging a sack and showing him how to slap it down, then lift straight up again without dragging sparks back with it.

He lunged again, slapped. Lifted straight up this time. And again.

Cecil, George Stiles and other faces he knew spread out around the perimeter with sacks, shovels and axes, battling side-by-side to save the one thing around them they all loved, but lived in quiet fear of throughout every Cariboo summer – the hot, dry, turpentine impregnated forest.

It was a battle in which they were hopelessly outnumbered. The fire had legions of trees for miles in every direction; they had garden tools and bare human resolve. There was no luxury of a fire truck, no water anywhere nearby. The only thing in their favour was the wind, still pressing toward the barrier of the road. If not halting it, at least it wasn’t speeding the enemy’s march toward a fuel source they could never contain. The problem was sparks. Firebrands of shrivelled grass sailed up with the heat to drift overhead and every minute someone had to race back to smother another flare-up, sometimes across the road. Still, there was no question of giving in, no matter how their arms began to dangle like dead shrivelled branches. No matter how scorched their nostrils, eyes, lungs. On and on went the war until their minds stopped measuring each foot of progress in the superhuman effort called upon to gain it. Just carry on, that’s all. Shut out the pain and do it.

When at last only a few skinny swirls of smoke remained twisting upward and the beating, stomping and digging marched to a halt, it was as if the world had suddenly stopped turning. Muscles let go and arms crumpled onto knees. Down came a comforting quiet to cover their souls like an old soft blanket. The grasshoppers and blackflies were gone. There wasn’t a bird anywhere. Only the living sun was left to fill the sky and smile on their blackened heads.

Someone laughed.

Someone else.

Then a dozen exhausted warriors beside a blackened patch of roadside fell into a fit of howling and giggling that would’ve embarrassed a six-year-old at a puppy derby.

Until someone spotted a dress lying next to a scorched Mason jar…or what was left of a dress. Duncan knew it at a glance; he scrambled through the ash and embers.

“Pauline…” he said. They stared with dumb faces and he said it again, “Pauline, I met her buckboard on the way here, empty.”

George Stiles said, “That’s hers?”

“She was at our place this morning. She went out to Bear Creek to get…something.”

“Well, what the hell, where is she?”

Duncan remembered. *The creature.* His mouth opened; he closed it again, then without looking at them, mumbled, “I don’t know.” But he just couldn’t leave it at that. He cleared his throat and said, “There was, um…something else here before you came. A big furry…thing. It was stomping out the fire.”

Cecil said, “Thing?”

“Like a bear, but not a bear at all – standing straight up on two legs. Flat snout and eyes like lumps of coal.”

Another laugh, but this one more like a harsh snort.

Cecil stared past the end of his nose. “You been into a little of the sauce on your day off, son?”

“Look…I saw what I saw. Maybe it carried off Pauline. It was fighting the fire even before I got here.”

After several moments of quiet stares, Cecil said, “Well, we all know what you’re talking about. We’ve heard the stories. I never been a big believer, myself, but you’re standing right in front of me and I don’t see any reason to make something like that up at a time like this. All I can say is, heaven help the monster that takes a shine to Pauline. That husband of hers wasn’t much, but he had the good sense to get away when he could.”

Someone said, “Amen.”

Someone else said, “I dunno, she’s pretty popular out in the ‘Ish-ka-bibble.”

“So is moose hide underwear.”

Duncan said, “Folks, it’s been more of a day than I can possibly tell you. I’m going home.”

George Stiles said, “Sorry, son, I forgot your name.”

“Duncan…Duncan Sinclair.”

“Well, Duncan, there’s two things tell the measure of a man out here. One of them’s how much heart he puts behind his handshake. The other one you just stared straight in the face and fought alongside your neighbours. Welcome to the Cariboo, Duncan. You and the family ever want a dinner away from the farm, drop by the hotel, next one’s on me.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Stiles.”

“Call me George.” The hotel keeper stuck out his hand.

Duncan smiled, white teeth in a charcoal smeared face, and gripped the sooty fingers. “Thank you, George.”

They all came around after that, slapping his back, shaking his hand and inviting him to drop by sometime for a drink, meet the family, take home a puppy.

“Oh, I already got a dog.”

“Don’t we all, son, don’t we all…what happened to the middle of your forehead?”

“Little accident with a gas barrel.”

Nodding, but obviously confused. “Alright then…you want a ride home?”

“Thanks, but my horse is just over the hill.”

“Well, you let us know if that monster ever tosses Pauline out of its cave. I got four puppies it could have, a whole lot cuter and probably eat less.”

“I’ll do that, sir. Bye now.” He set off down the road.

“Nice boy.” George said. “Wish my girl had met the likes of him before she ran off to Smithers with that lump head worm farmer.”

Cecil said, “You’re lucky, mine moved off to Ottawa with a politician.”

\* \* \*

Pauline wasn’t dead. Nor was she the unwilling bride of a seven foot tall, cave dwelling monster. She was home in bed, snoring and hiccupping alcohol fumes, her horse chomping a turnip outside her cabin door. It had been unhitched and turned loose to graze around the yard - no danger of it running off because it never showed a desire to go anywhere else, anyway. It was as happy with life as the romping bear cub that disappeared into the forest behind the looming creature in thick brown fur.

When Duncan arrived to check on the driverless rig, the compounding mystery of the ‘Ish-ka-bibble’ howled at him loud as the snores from the cabin. *Just what kind of place had his family moved to, anyway?*

Chapter Six

Charlie watched Duncan in the rafters over the second storey of the lodge wiping sweat from the purple knob on his forehead and shucking off the pot swinging wife jokes with that perpetual grin and another board hammered into place. He worked like he ate, with both hands and a commitment to getting the job done. Never so much as a grunt in a disparaging direction. As with rural communities everywhere, news travels faster than a rifle shot and everyone already knew about the fire yesterday in the lake country east of Lone Butte. Yet Duncan hadn’t mentioned it. Whoever raised him had probably done so with the same unspoken commitment their son showed to every situation he approached in life now. Here was a living example of the modest pioneer pride Charlie had learned to admire in people who made their home in such a place. It was the old trusted shovel that dug the hole, not the man. The acres of divinely situated swamp hay that kept cattle fed through winter, not the arms that dug the drainage ditch or mowed, stacked and hauled feed through nature’s bitter adversity to get it there. The good horse. The smart dog. Strong rope and a well made saddle.

When he’d first arrived, this quiet Canadian work ethic had frankly thrown him back on the heels of his Crockett & Jones Oxfords. He hadn’t anticipated such maturity from the sons and daughters of leather skinned peasants. It resembled the code of nobility among the privileged classes at home. Himself notwithstanding, peers didn’t normally abandon their station in order to cross oceans, mountains and rivers to pit themselves against the sort of wilderness as hadn’t been seen in England or Europe for over half a millennium. Desperate, tough minded doers, that’s who came to this place. Doers and don’ters. Don’t moan, don’t shy from a challenge and don’t break a deal sealed with a handshake. After it’s done, don’t boast about it. There was as much honour here among commoners as he’d seen in the officer class of His Majesty’s Royal Navy, possibly even more, given its proud roots in gritty human hardship. And that’s why even if there wasn’t money to buy a new bed for himself and Amalia, Charlie would see his men paid. He would work alongside them and wear his patched jeans with pride. And the code wouldn’t be broken.

“Duncan!”

“Yeah, boss?”

He didn’t mind being called ‘boss’ by this young man, instead of ‘lordship’ – it had a comfortable Canadianness about it. “What did your wife think of her new stove?”

“Not a lot. Couldn’t cut the barrel open.”

Charlie pushed back his hat in order to see better into the rafters. “Did you know I’ve been thinking of putting a brick hearth in the lounge?”

“Well, I can help you with that. Me and my dad built a chimney for a neighbour a couple of years back.”

“Splendid, because I don’t trust Morley’s vagabond eye to get it straight.”

Morley, on a ladder, aimed his other eye down with a contemptuous grunt.

Duncan said, “You’ll need a plumb bob to do that.”

“Yes, I’ll have you show me. But the point I wanted to make is if I put in the hearth, I won’t be needing the old pot bellied stove for heat anymore. Would your family like it?”

“The one with the railing to stick your feet on?”

“Yes, there’s room on top for cooking, as well. And we won’t be wanting the stovepipe either.”

Even from two storeys up, it was clear what Duncan thought of the idea; he wiggled like a puppy and nearly slipped off his perch.

Charlie went on, “I’ll talk to Hank Newton about hauling it over in his truck. I wouldn’t expect that horse of yours to get it there on her - great Scott, what the devil was that noise?”

There was a laboured groan from the fresh sawn lumber surrounding them. Then a crack like a rifle shot. Charlie rushed to where he thought it had come from and stared upward. “Bloody oath, the walls are bending at the middle! The whole building’s bulging!”

He was still inspecting the problem when a louder groan echoed from the other side, followed by a second crack.

Duncan yelled from the roof, “The rafters are spreading! They’re twisting apart at the top!”

Charlie yelled back, “Get down! The roof is too heavy, the walls can’t support the weight!”

Duncan scrambled down his ladder.

Morley Caruthers said, “I seen what was happening, but I didn’t believe my eyes.”

Frank said, “I ain’t never believed your eyes either. But mine are fine and something just don’t look right.”

Charlie pulled his hands down his face. “This wasn’t in the book. What the devil am I supposed to do now?”

Frank said, “Sit down and have a beer. Whenever I got a problem that always makes things look better.”

Charlie moaned, “There must be some way to fix it.”

Frank looked on with disappointment as the boss not only didn’t produce beer, but went striding off toward the barn. A few minutes later he reappeared with a block and tackle. “Frank, take a couple of men and go fetch the haying cable.”

“Sure, boss. Getting near lunchtime, want me to check if it’s ready?”

“And send Eldon out to help me. I’ve got an idea.”

“…yes, boss…”

Charlie’s idea consisted of a cable attached to one wall, then through a block and tackle secured to the other wall, with the loose end running back out the door to the Dodge. To the men standing afterward staring, it had all the appearances of a desperate measure, even to Duncan, the newcomer. They all drifted outside to wait.

Duncan tried not to sound nervous. “Uh…what if it busts loose?”

Frank blew a jet of smoke out his nostrils. “Then you don’t wanna be standing under it, pup.”

“Do you guys do this a lot?”

“Hell, yeah, every time we build a wonky house.”

Duncan backed away from the door as the car engine revved with a smoky clatter and the tires began biting into dirt.

Charlie yelled out the window of the Dodge, “I’ll need a man inside on each wall telling me when it’s straight, and one of them can’t be Morley.”

Frank said, “Pup, you get in there. It’s your turn.”

“My turn? You can’t fool me, nobody’s ever done this before.” Duncan appeared justifiably reluctant.

Frank tossed his cigarette to the dirt. “Shit, I gotta do everything around here. You can have the wall closest the door. Don’t be such a dang chicken.” He strode up the steps.

Duncan stared sheepishly and followed.

When they were inside, Frank turned with an evil grin and said, “If I yell ‘run’ don’t pay no attention. That roof comes down on our heads, we’re both dead before our eyes start watering anyhow.” Then his boots clunked across the floor to his wall.

Outside the door, the Dodge engine clattered to a roar. The cable strained. The walls groaned and creaked, Duncan forcing his head as close to the distressed timber as he dared, while trying to see upward and not think of getting crushed to death by the big roof or whipping steel cable. He didn’t want to be first to yell ‘stop’, not if his wall wasn’t straight; that would only give Frank another reason to call him chicken. But there was no way he wanted to wait too long and get killed either.

“Stop!”

The engine sound died.

Frank yelled, “You sure, pup?”

“Uh…yeah, it looks good to me.”

“Aw, hell, you probably just got scared. I better look.”

Frank strode across, pushed back his hat and eyeballed upward. “You call this straight?”

“Well…isn’t it?”

“Shit, I suppose it’s close enough.” The top hand marched to the door and yelled, “Yeah, okay, boss. What’s next?”

Charlie shut down the puttering Dodge. “Now we cut some straight jackpines and nail them across as joists. Then we say a prayer and let the cable go, or perhaps the other way around in the event the Lord wasn’t watching.”

Frank said, “I reckon the Lord didn’t want to miss this one. Probably up there eating pie and having a good old laugh at the pup, here.”

Morley squinted. “Eating pie?”

“Hell, yeah, I reckon the Lord loves pie. Don’t everybody?”

Morley shook his head.

They were nailing the last of the joists in place when Charlie called the hammering to a stop and said, “Now what the devil is that racket?”

There was indeed a terrible noise, this time not from inside the house, but coming from the direction of the railway station, a little like the huffing and blowing of a bull with a serious sinus condition. It couldn’t be the train; that had gone through over an hour ago.

He called up to Duncan back on his roof perch, “Can you see from up there? What appears to be the commotion?”

“Uh…looks kinda like a tractor. Only I think it’s on fire.”

“Fire?” That wasn’t a popular word in this part of the bush either. Charlie hurtled down the steps toward the Dodge. “Quickly, everyone in the motorcar!”

Even with cranking the reluctant engine and everyone else shoving and elbowing onto the two bench seats, Duncan barely got down from the rafters in time. He stopped before jumping on the running board and pointed. “What about the cable?”

Charlie peered out the window. “Great Scott, could you unhitch it please? There’s a good fellow.” Then he turned to make a face at Frank beside him. “You’re the foreman, that’s your job. If it wasn’t for young Duncan, we could’ve pulled the house down.”

Frank scowled and muttered, “…young Duncan, young Duncan...”

A few moments later, the overburdened automobile lurched out of the yard toward an already enormous plume billowing into the sky from the direction of the train station.

They needn’t have rushed. Not only were Whitt Newton and his son, Hank, in no imminent danger of dying, they weren’t in any hurry to escape the problem either. In fact, the word ‘hurry’ had no business anywhere near the situation. Duncan had been right; it was indeed a tractor, a big hissing puffing pile of iron wheels and rusting doo-dahs that seemed as reluctant to move as any dead horse. Whitt was perched on the steel seat yelling at his son, who was yelling back at his father, who looked ready to shoot the thing and leave it beside the track in a puddle of whatever muck oozed through its ancient pipes.

Hank yelled at his dad, “Shove the lever forward!”

“What dang lever?”

“The big one that lets steam into the engine. It ain’t going nowhere without steam. That’s what runs it.”

Morley Caruthers was first out of the Dodge beside Duncan, neither rushing to approach the angry looking contraption. He called to Hank on the ground, “Steam tractor?”

“I think so. Leastwise that’s what Dad thinks he bought.”

“Well, I’ll be…sure makes a devil of a racket.”

Hank yelled again at his father, “The lever! Shove the lever!”

There was a fierce hissing sound, like a dragon preparing to spit. Then the enormous creature puffed a blinding cloud of vapour and lurched a half foot forward.

Hank yelled, “Hooray!”

Whitt yelled, “It’s moving!” And started waving at the spectators from his steel saddle.

Moving it was, straight toward Exeter station. Hank interrupted his celebrating to jump up and down and yell at his father, “Shut it off!”

“What?”

“Yank the lever or crank the wheel, Dad! You’re heading for the station!”

Whitt stared past the enormous boiler in front of him toward the recently constructed pride of railway property growing slowly…ever so slowly…larger in his path. He squared his shoulders and leaned, fists welded to the rusty steering wheel. It turned a little, but the tractor didn’t. Whitt’s shoulders tipped more urgently.

*HUFFA…HUFFA…PUFFA…*for a creature so reluctant to get started, it seemed now to be embracing the excitement of motion with enormous sooty pride.

Shiny new station.

Rusty brown tractor.

Whitt heaving on his steering wheel to avert costly public disaster.

“The lever! Yank the lever!”

“Dang stupid machine!”

*PUU-UUFF…fizzle…pff-fff…*

The crowd stared. Whitt gazed into the prehistoric technology in front of him. He took off his hat, scratched.

Hank asked, “You yanked the lever?”

“Nope.”

“Y’mean it just quit?”

“Yup, must be outta gas.”

“Steam, Dad, the thing runs on steam.”

Whitt squashed his hat back on his head and clambered down from his perch. “Hell, that didn’t get very far. How much water did you pour in it?”

“I dunno…five, six buckets.”

Whitt stared back to his starting point, barely a hundred feet behind him. “The thing’s a dang glutton for water. It’ll take a small lake to get it home. No wonder I got it cheap.”

“Well, it’s forty years old, Dad. They make better engines these days. But no darn way you’d think to buy one of them, would you?”

The crowd pressed in. Everyone wanted to know how it worked, where it came from and what Whitt planned to do with it, as a horse appeared far less complicated to operate and generally more willing to get started – prettier too. It turned out the relic had been bought to power the sawmill, shipping paid for with ties cut for the railroad.

“When the creek gets low my water wheel don’t turn anymore.” Whitt said. “I need something more reliable.”

Morley said, “And that contraption’s reliable?”

“It ran, didn’t it?”

Morley shrugged and spat. “Sort of. You’re gonna need two men to keep it going, one to run back and forth for water.”

“No problem, it’s not going anywhere after I get it home, just sitting in one place to power the mill. I can pipe water from the creek.”

“So all you gotta do now is get it there.”

Whitt scratched the back of his coveralls and stared down the road. “…fourteen miles...”

“Better get started,” said Morley, “summer’s almost over.”

Whitt squashed his hat down further around his ears and said to Hank. “C’mon, son, we got some tractor driving to do.”

“Dad, I got mail to deliver and all sorts of stuff.”

“Just as soon as we get home.”

“That’ll take half a week! Mom’s gonna think we’re dead!”

“Go get more water. And don’t be so slow about it this time.”

“This’s crazy.” But Hank grabbed his bucket and headed for the water barrel in the back of his truck, muttering, “I’m a grownup man now. I got my own stuff to do.”

Charlie approached Whitt. “I’m glad for this opportunity to speak with you. About that foal we agreed on for the lumber you cut, is there any chance I could interest you instead in a Dodge motorcar?”

Whitt said, “I hear you’re making vodka.”

Charlie flinched like a man stung by a bee. He peered at the surrounding clump of town spectators. “Where did you hear that?”

“Just point any direction, Lord Charles, they’re all talking about it.”

“It was meant to be a secret.”

“A secret’s not something you tell Pauline Rempel. Tell you what, I’ll take a case and you can keep the foal.”

Charlie stuck out his hand. “Done, but not a word anymore to anyone – and let’s keep it just plain Charlie, shall we?”

Whitt winked. “Don’t worry, nobody listens to what I say, anyway. Is your stuff as good as Pauline says it is?”

“I didn’t even know you drank.”

“I don’t. But I used to be a policeman, did you know that?”

Charlie’s bootlegger face froze. “So…the vodka, why exactly do you want it?”

“Not a chance I’d tell you that, Charlie. Not with the way you keep a secret.”

\* \* \*

Amalia could still recall the soft lumps of the cushions under her back that sticky afternoon when Baldo discovered her exploring the curiosity of her body on the patio facing the river. She was stretched on her mother’s wicker chaise lounge, the one with wheels at the back for following the whims of the spring sunshine about the yard. There were no riverboats at that hour in the slow heat, only a pair of robins under the deep shady oak and bees buzzing in the flowers. Baldo had been their gardener and her friend for longer than she could remember. He had stories of her coming to his shed with hoppy and crawly things for him to name, and no clothes on – events she mostly couldn’t remember, but he could with a laugh. In that swollen moment, of course, there was no laughter. She’d felt very grown up indeed under those fingers and Baldo’s eyes had confirmed the radical truth of her condition. *So that’s how men look when you turn into a woman.* It was she who laughed. She was, after all, quite accustomed to the sight of her girl body, which wasn’t naked now, only the bottom half where she’d tugged her skirt around her knobby thirteen-year-old knees. She wiggled it back up

“Baldo, do you have flowers for me today?” It was cruel, she knew, but this strange power under her skin rippled the surface of a daring new world which cried out to be explored in all its forbidden glory.

His great Croatian moustache had always been a thing of enormous presence. It was the only part of him now which appeared not to be squirming. “I…there is rabbit.” He’d lived in Hungary most of his adult life, but still spoke it like an eight-year-old.

“Rabbit?” She wasn’t wearing any underwear.

He turned to stare at the stone wall of the house. “Rabbit under rose bushes…is coming, I think, from river.”

“Rabbits don’t swim rivers, Baldo. Have you seen my underwear?” She stretched a hand down to poke around the chair.

The hole under his moustache made a noise like wind through an open window. He said, “No.”

“Oh, maybe I didn’t bring any.”

“Where is *anya?”*

“Mother and Grandmamma aren’t home, Baldo. We’re alone until tonight.”

More wind from the moustache hole. “I think…I go find rabbit.”

Never before had anything male shown such bedevilment in her presence. His mouth said he was leaving, but that would be too easy - he was the butterfly in her net. He was prey.

She drew up her knees to open the cavern of her skirt. “Why are you afraid? It’s only me, your little *kunic*.”

“I…you must not show - ”

“Would you like to sit beside me?”

The quivering reached his moustache. “I go now.” He turned, started walking away with wooden steps.

She giggled. “Oh, Baldo, I was only teasing. You’re welcome to stay and tell me a story.”

His shoulders straightened. He turned toward her, but his dark Slavic eyes offered none of the paternal warmth so lavish throughout her childhood. “You are making fun. You are not funny. I say this, little *kunic:* when the child becomes a woman, she must not ask to dance with the devil, or the devil will twist her fingers and make soup from her tears.” He paused, stared very hard and said, “When *anya* comes, tell her I would talk.”

The smile dissolved from her lips. “You…you’re not going to tell mother about this, are you?”

“I will tell her of rabbit. That is why I came.”

For all the grownup posturing mere seconds ago, she was abruptly six years old again and filled with panic. She tucked her skirt around her legs. “Oh, Baldo, I didn’t mean any harm…thank you. You’re always my friend.”

His proud black moustache swung away. “You are lucky I am friend. Or today you would learn how the devil likes his dance.”

It had unsettled her enough to resurrect the underwear, and her sudden aversion to sunbathing was even noted by her mother – thank God for the distraction of Baldo’s rabbit. But it had also taught her the power of a woman’s body. She’d had a profound and surprising effect. True, it wasn’t the effect she’d anticipated, if in fact she would’ve thought far enough into it to know what exactly that was, but even hulking Baldo had been forced to defend himself. Which meant he’d felt threatened. Threatened, intrigued and intimidated, all by the little fur lined hole between her legs.

Not just a woman, but a Hungarian woman. She’d had no idea at the time quite how intuitively female that made her, but living over a year among the sandwich nibbling tea sippers of her husband’s homeland had taught her one other worldly truth – she was bloody glad she hadn’t been born an English woman, with the hole sewn shut at puberty. Therefore, even with her belly and breasts swelling to obscure the presence of her toes, Amalia felt confident she had what it takes to move men. And it was more than a little unsettling that the big shirtless Canadian seemed immune to this natural talent. Of course, she didn’t know much about him, other than how he looked in the sunshine, glistening with sweat. Whenever they’d chanced together, she was always too busy talking to worry about how he thought, but he certainly seemed a healthy, bulging, fully functional male. The only explanation she could muster was perhaps he was stupid. How challenging.

Duncan turned to her and said, “Can I have some more spuds, please?”

*If there was one thing he knew with great accuracy, it was where his mouth was located.* Amalia passed the big white bowl. “I’d like to meet your wife someday, Duncan. Is it long that you have been married?”

“Five years…and the beets too, please?”

She produced beets. “I’m told you have a four-year-old daughter?”

“Uh, huh.” He was shovelling and swallowing like a machine, but without the apparent need of his teeth.

*The child, then, had been conceived well within wedlock, but having taken great pains herself not to create an accident before marriage, this was not conclusive proof of tedious moral character.* She said, “I’m thinking she was your childhood sweetheart?”

“My daughter?”

*How awful, it was as she’d feared…stupid.* “No, silly man, your wife.”

“We lived on the same street.”

“And you had love at first sight?”

Shy grin. “We saw each other around, yeah.”

“How sweet.” *How appallingly boring.* Amalia leaned far enough forward to present the swell of her pregnancy enhanced bosoms behind her wrap top, one of the few items in her dwindling wardrobe which still allowed for such expansion. It also offered a daring glimpse of cleavage. “I understand we’re to have a dance this Saturday at the Lone Butte community hall.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes, I believe the Herriot family will be playing. Have you heard of them?”

“I just got here, ma’am, I never heard of anyone.”

Frank leaned toward them. “Old man Herriot can about saw a fiddle right in half. He’s a fire pickle, that one.”

“That’s very interesting, Frank.” Amalia tugged her top up to obscure that side of her chest. “Duncan, do you and your wife dance?”

“Karin likes to. But we haven’t done that sort of thing since I lost my job, just all the time worrying about money.”

“Well, isn’t it wonderful that now you have a job?”

The beets were already gone from his plate. He was a man who enjoyed his vegetables, not like Charlie.Ah Joe plopped a second bowl on the table directly in front of his appreciative diner, who produced a healthy grin. She could hardly compete, but leaned the underside of her bosoms on the table anyway with a tiny cough. They wiggled appropriately.

“What’s that, ma’am?”

“I said, you have a job now.” *Perhaps if she strapped meat to her forehead.*

“Oh, yeah, guess I do.”

“You should come to the dance.”

“Aw, y’know, there’s the kids. They’re just little.”

Frank stuck his face toward them again. “You gotta hear old man Herriot do *Wabash Cannonball.* I heard the Carter Family sing it on the radio last week. Damn, they’re good, you ever hear them?”

Amalia turned to their top hand. “Frank, do you think it would be possible for Duncan to bring his children to the dance?”

“Saws out *Old Grey Mule* too, like he wrote it himself.”

“The mule song sounds wonderful, Frank. The children?”

Frank had been taking advantage of Charlie’s free vodka. He said, “I got a radio.”

Amalia rolled her eyes.

Duncan said, “We couldn’t get the whole family on the horse, anyway. And the baby’s a crawler, got away yesterday and everybody thought he’d drowned in the lake.”

Amalia sat back with suitable horror, hunching to deflate her chest. “Oh, that’s terrible…is he alright?”

Nodding and swallowing. “Oh, yeah, but I’m not letting him out of my sight anymore.”

Frank leaned over his plate and clunked his empty glass on the table. “You wanna bring your kids, pup, there’s Wanda’s granddaughter babysits them at the hotel. Only charges ten cents a head.”

Amalia’s eyebrows went up. She blinked. “My, who would ever dream you could be so useful? Thank you, Frank.”

Floppy nod. “Aw, hell…don’t mention it.” The rheumy eyed cowboy tipped back his chair. “Think I’ll go catch that green colt, toss a saddle on him in the round pen. Anybody wanna bet I can’t ride that cayuse down?”

Amalia said, “Duncan, if you and your wife want to go, Charlie and I would be happy to pick up your family in our motorcar. We could all come to the dance together. Wouldn’t that be the most fabulous thing?”

Frank lurched to his feet and hollered, “Five bucks…I got five bucks says I can break that colt!”

Someone yelled, “Siddown, Frank, before you fall down!”

“Five big fat bucks!”

Duncan said, “Thank you, ma’am. Boy, you and the boss are just the best people I ever worked for. All the time friendly and giving, about the finest Christian folks around anywhere.”

A stiff Roman Catholic shudder surprised Amalia’s spine. “Oh…we’re not that perfect.”

“Well, I think you are. And so is Karin going to when she meets you.”

Amalia smiled. But for some reason, the memory of Baldo’s big black moustache swooped like the wings of a raven across the back of her mind. She had a sudden urge to cross herself.

\* \* \*

When Duncan arrived home Saturday night on Rosie and burst into the house announcing the family would be leaving in an hour for the dance at Lone Butte, Karin nearly dropped the bowl of boiled rice and prunes she was about to place on the table.

She stared at him and spluttered, “What?”

“A dance, c’mon, the boss and his wife are coming to pick us up.”

“Duncan, pick us up…how?”

“In their car. They’ve got a car and they want us to go to the dance with them.”

She might as well have been told the Angel of Death was arriving to rip out her soul with black fingernails. Her neck stiffened and the blood drained from her face. “Duncan, you can’t just fly in here after a week gone and announce a thing like that. What’s the matter with you?”

“Sure I can. Isn’t it great?” He swooped across the room to grab her hand and twirl her.

Not a butterfly’s chance in a hailstorm she was in any mood to be twirled. She ripped her hand free and squared her untied shoes on the floor. “I’m a disaster! I wanted to bathe for you and do my hair, but the dog caught a porcupine and Winnie got quills in her hand trying to doctor it and Colin stuck one in his mouth. I haven’t had two minutes to sit down since I got up this morning. The kids are hungry, supper’s on the table and now you want me to go to a dance?” She grabbed her face with both hands and collapsed in her wobbly chair, gasping.

Duncan said, “I already ate.”

She mumbled, “…they’re royalty, aren’t they…?”

“That’s the best part, honey. He’s a Markus and she’s a Marionette - they’re like the next best thing to the king.”

“…oh, dear God…”

“C’mon, change your dress. Let’s go.”

She ripped her hands from her face, eyes pleading. “Can you please stop for one second to think what you’re asking? You want me to go to a social event with *royalty*, who I’ve never met, in their car…looking like this?”

He shrugged. “You look great, honey.”

Winnie, sitting on a bucket atop a chair at the other end of the table said, “Can we eat now, Mummy?”

Duncan said, “Sure, go ahead and eat.”

Karin said, “I simply can’t do this…simply can’t.”

“Aw, sure you can. The kids all stay at the hotel with Wanda’s granddaughter. It only costs ten cents each. Amalia wants to meet you in the worst way. She says being on the ranch without another woman to talk to is like living with a pack of wild dogs. She’s going to have a baby.”

Winnie’s whining grew louder, “I’m hungry.”

Duncan grabbed the bowl and started spooning rice and prunes onto his daughter’s plate.

Karin stared at the floor, pulling her fingers through unwashed hair. “She’s pregnant, isn’t she?”

“She really, really wants to meet you. You’re all she ever asks about. She’s a Hungarian princess or something.”

A small moan leaked from his wife’s lips. Duncan spooned food onto her plate. “C’mon, eat, then get changed.”

“I still have to feed the baby.”

“Sure, then change.”

“My hair is filthy.”

“Wear your hat. Did you wash my other shirt?” He yanked off the shirt he’d been working in all week and headed for the shelf beside the bed.

She was still staring at the floor. “You smell like a horse.”

“Aw, c’mon…”

“No, you do. And so do I, Duncan. We smell like farmers.”

He went to the pantry shelves, found a bottle and started slapping the contents on his bare chest and arms.

Karin looked up. “What’s that?”

“Vanilla.”

She stared. Finally she sighed and said, “Pour some on the kids too, then pass it over here. I’ll put my hair up and keep my hat on. And I will try, really try, not to hate you for the rest of my life.”

He shot her a face full of happy. “There you go, I knew you’d like it when you got used to the idea.” He started sprinkling vanilla on his giggling children.

An hour later, Charlie and Amalia arrived in their car, the dog ran barking onto the porch, and the baby crawled to a corner, hands over its face, crying. Duncan strolled out to greet their visitors.

Charlie eased his head out the window to call, “I say, is the dog friendly?”

“Oh, sure, but it caught a porcupine today, so be careful where you pet it.”

Amalia said, “Are you ready?”

“Almost…want to come in?” From the cabin behind him, a muffled female squeak and racing footsteps told him that might not be a good idea. He said, “Uh…can I get you something - water?”

Charlie pushed his door open a crack and the dog gave every appearance of barking itself inside-out. He eased it closed again. “No, thank you, unless Amalia wants some. Would you care for anything, darling?”

The dog got a cuff on an ear and fell silent, then slunk off the porch to go prowling to the other side of the car. Amalia eyed the dusty creature and pulled her hand back from the window ledge. “…nothing, thank you…”

Duncan said, “I’ll go get Karin. She can’t wait to meet you.” He called through the doorway, “Dear, they’re here.”

“I know very well they’re here, Duncan. What do you want me to do, go without shoes? The door! Colin’s heading out the door!”

Duncan lunged to scoop up his son.

Little Winnie’s green eyes glittered up at her father. “Can we take Digger?”

“Who’s Digger?”

“I named our puppy ‘Digger’, Daddy, because he’s always digging holes.”

Duncan stared at the dog, creeping, belly flattened, toward the car. “Boss! Watch out for the dog, it’s acting strange! Is there something under your car?”

Charlie called back, “There was a porcupine chewing the floorboards. Maybe he smells that.”

Winnie said, “When the big man comes back, can we ask him where he got his bear?”

Duncan’s eyebrows dipped. “About this big man, Winnie, did he have brown - ”

“I’m ready!” Karin appeared under her Florentine hat, rosy cheeked and poised as any woman given an hour’s notice to prepare two children and herself for the most challenging social event of her life could hope for. She smoothed her navy and white Railene dress – it didn’t have the puffed shoulders she knew were the current rage, but the scooped neckline and quarter sleeves were everything the Vancouver Island fashion scene had drooled over five years ago when she’d bought it, pre-children. Thanks to their current diet of rice and prunes, it still fit better than she’d dared hope. She’d almost composed herself when a troubling thought crossed her mind. She whispered out the corner of her mouth, “Duncan, what do I call them? ‘Boss’ doesn’t work and he’s not actually the king.”

“I don’t know. What’s wrong with Charlie and Amalia?”

“You can’t call royalty by their first names, Duncan. It’s not proper.”

“It’s not?” He shrugged and the baby burped. “I don’t know their last name. Just make it ‘sir’ and she can be ‘ma’am’.”

“Thank you, dear, you’re a world of help.” She clutched Winnie’s hand and smiled toward the car. Then she muttered under her breath, “We’re right behind you. Please try to remember your children’s names.”

With the family approaching, Amalia gazed past her husband’s shoulders and declared with a hint of disappointment, “Oh…she’s lovely.”

Charlie nodded. “Yes, she is. Perhaps we should’ve brought a bottle of wine and some flowers as a housewarming gift.”

“Oh, dear, I hadn’t thought. Is it a custom of Canada to expect this?”

“I’m not certain. Nothing for it, I suppose, but to rave like a lunatic about every little thing and hope they won’t notice.” He beamed out the window. “I say, what a wonderful home you have here, Duncan! And such a lovely young bride!”

It wasn’t an idle compliment. The August sun was a half hour off the horizon, threading across the porch and through the pine trees surrounding the cabin. Add to that the scent of fresh sawn lumber, and the little family was a postcard of frontier enchantment. Until they got close.

Amalia’s nostrils wiggled. “I smell cookies. Do you think they’ve been eating cookies?” And then, “Oh, dear…I smell a lot of cookies.”

Charlie said, “I don’t smell anything. Do you see that dog anywhere your side?”

“My goodness, they must be carrying cookies in every pocket.”

Charlie cracked the door open and offered the toe of his shoe to the treacherous breach, but nothing leapt up to bite it. He drew a confident breath and stepped out to greet his passengers. “Here, allow me to get that door.” He was wearing a grey Fedora hat, which he tipped to Karin. “My dear, you look positively radiant this evening. Might I introduce my wife, Amalia, and I’m Charlie.”

Karin blinked, then barely whispered, “It’s wonderful to meet you…Your Grace.”

“Oh, heavens, I’m not ‘Your Grace’, my actual title is…” He shook his head and smiled. “Charlie, please, just plain Charlie or anything but Bartholomew, mostly because I consider that the most dreadful name in the world.” His eyebrows went up. “Oh, dear, I hope your little boy’s name isn’t Bartholomew.”

“Oh, no…our son’s name is, uh…uh…”

“Colin.” Duncan held up the baby for all to see.

“Yes, it’s Colin, that’s our boy’s name.” Karin’s cheeks went a deeper shade of red than the rose she’d managed to pinch into them moments before. “I’m honoured to meet you, Charlie. I’m Karin.” She curtseyed.

Charlie gazed at the diminutive woman. He was easily a foot taller and also overcome at once by the cloying fragrance of cookies, a sweet powerful mystery. “Thank you, but there’s no need to curtsey. I’m not royalty, you know.” He offered a folksy chuckle and reached for her hand to help her into the motorcar.

“You’re not?”

“Oh, far from it. Please watch your step on the edge there, it’s rather twisted from an unfortunate encounter with a belligerent bull. I’ve been meaning to purchase one of those Ford pickup trucks, but I’m afraid there’s so many other necessities that take precedence these days.”

“Isn’t that so true?” Karin climbed inside.

Amalia pressed her hand back over the seat. “I’m Amalia, wonderful to finally meet you, Karin. You’re all Duncan ever talks about.”

“I am?”

Duncan climbed into the car and passed little Colin to his mother, with Winnie scrambling past him to the middle. “She’s not the only thing, Amalia. I talk a lot about coal mining. And fishing too.”

*Maybe that was why she could never remember anything he said.* Amalia smiled. “She’s even more beautiful than you described.”

“Oh…” Karin blushed again.

Charlie climbed behind the steering wheel with a groan. “My back, I’m afraid unloading those bricks has done something quite crippling to it. Thank heaven I kept the car running and don’t need to crank.”

Amalia said, “Oh, quit feeling sorry for yourself, dear. You should be carrying something like this everywhere you go.” She patted her stomach.

Karin gushed, “That’s right, you’re pregnant! How wonderful, your first baby?”

“First and quite the last. I had no idea how uncomfortable it might be.”

A sympathetic shake of the head. “That’s what I said, too, but then you forget and the next thing you know, you’re doing it all over again.”

Deep down between parents, Winnie asked, “What does preg-unt mean, Mummy?”

“It means having a baby, dear.”

The car lurched into motion, snapping everyone’s heads back.

Winnie said, “Can we have another baby?”

Another shake of the head, enhanced by the determined rocking of the vehicle. “Only if it happens without me.”

“Oh, I’ll do it, Mummy! I’ll have the baby!”

Duncan growled, “Not till you’re married.”

“Okay, I’ll get married!”

“No you won’t. Not till I say.”

“Mum-my…I want a baby!”

Karin sighed, “Do what your father says, Winnie.”

Amalia turned with a sympathetic smile. “She’s so darling…and she wants a baby.”

Karin smiled back. “Last week it was a bear.”

When the adults crossed the road from the hotel to the community hall, the sun was already gone, but the air behind it still thick with the memory of the glory that had chased it over the horizon. The town smelled of heat, dust and kerosene. Parked vehicles and hitched horses stretched into the darkness, but no people; everyone was at the hall. Climbing the steps into a pool of lantern light spilling out the door, a manic energy buffeted the little group like a hot wind in the face. Clive Herriot and The Herriot Family Band - wife Pearl, children Marlon and Marlene - were in full fiddle sawing, mandolin picking, banjo plucking glory. Karin actually reached to steady her hat.

Charlie said, “I must say, I find your North American music quite stirring. Not like the dreadful squall of the pipes it seems we in Britain have to endure at every parade, but rather more tuneful and - ” Something jumped to the front of his mind, the origins of the name ‘Sinclair’…oops. He stumbled over his tongue and tried to catch himself, “Of course, the only pipes I’ve ever heard were in the hands of bumbling amateurs and like any difficult instrument played poorly, a bit of a running catastrophe.”

Karin said, “I couldn’t agree more. They make my ears bleed, like somebody strangling a haggis. But Duncan loves them, you’d think he was born in Scotland.”

Duncan said, “Scotland’s in your veins, dear. It’s not just a place on the map.”

Charlie wanted to say, ‘So is malaria.’ but instead took his wife’s hand and offered, “Shall we press on and meet our neighbours?”

If he’d known what was waiting for him, he might not have asked with quite such enthusiasm.

Four feet inside the door came a cry of, “Your lordship!”

Charlie’s neck hairs bristled…bloody hell, he’d forgotten about her. In a swirl of freshly laundered dress, cream with a bright red sash and matching bosom bow, Pauline came chugga-chugging toward them. She had in her fist a glass cup, like something from a punchbowl. In fact, it was from a punchbowl, or more accurately a galvanized steel washtub atop a banquet table along one wall. The air was greasy with cigarette smoke and soot from the flaring kerosene lamps around the log walls. People swung past, two-stepping to Clive Herriot’s signature ‘Bear Creek Hop’. To Charlie’s surprise, the most animated of the dancers appeared to be his top hand, Frank, and some ambushed looking redhead with a pink ribbon in her sailing hair. Frank flew past, dancing with the same enthusiasm he applied to breaking horses, flat out with a lot of heel swinging. Charlie felt sorry for the girl, as any second now he half-expected a saddle to fly out of nowhere and land on her back.

“Lordship!” For him, though, there was the matter of that woman.

He placed his teeth together and stretched his lips. “Ah…my favorite surprise visitor. How are you this evening, madam?”

“Aw, hell, I ain’t had this good a time since…well, dammit, never.”

“That’s wonderful, and a recurring adventure to see you again. Now I really must find us a seat. My wife’s having a baby, did you know?”

Duncan said, “Hi, Pauline.”

“Yeah, hi, Duncan. So, lordship, got a dance set aside for me?”

Charlie did his best to squeeze out a final smile. “I’ll mark one on my card. Now I really must find Amalia a place to sit.” He pressed his wife’s arm with more than a little urgency.

But Pauline grabbed his other. And jammed her cup in his face. “You gotta taste this. Made outta prunes. Apples too and a bunch of junk I got sick of hearing about – better to just dip in and try it. Go on, whaddya got to lose?” The offer came with a pirate-like wink.

It was evident eyeball spasms were a frontier epidemic among bosomy bestial women; Charlie gazed helplessly at his wife. Amalia offered a resigned shrug. He clutched the cup in reluctant fingers, lifted it to his lips, sipped…then lowered his eyebrows and shot Pauline an accusing stare. “Just what exactly is in this?”

She snorted. “Recognize it?”

“I’m rather reluctant to admit I do. You’ve been quite busy around the punch bowl, haven’t you?” He produced a stern finger. “Now, madam, the spirits I so graciously gifted to you were for personal use. They weren’t meant to contaminate the communal…tub.”

Pauline’s lips wriggled like a butter fattened worm on a hook. “Ain’t my recipe, lordship. I had diddly to do with it.”

Charlie drew a breath. “You didn’t pour your vodka in the tub?”

“Hell, no, that’d be watering it down. And for the size of that punchbowl, it don’t taste all that watered, does it?”

“Well, no…I suppose it doesn’t.” His eyes narrowed. “Who provided the punch?”

Even bigger wink. “Why don’t you tell me, lordship?”

“…Whitt Newton…”

Pauline said, “Hell, foreigners ain’t so dumb as I figured.”

Charlie scanned the room and spotted Whitt leaning against a wall, grinning at him.

A puffy elbow dug him in the ribs, accompanied by a dry cackle. “Look at that old fart, tickled as a fly on a turd. For an ex-cop, he’s a devious critter, ain’t he?”

Amalia said, “What’s wrong, Charlie?”

“My dear, I’m afraid I may have been - what’s that prairie term Frank appears so attached to – hornswoggled.”

“You mean you’ve just fallen off the other side of your horse?”

He blinked. “If that means hornswoggled, then yes.”

“Oh, Charlie…forget sitting down, let’s dance.”

It was an insightful suggestion. With a soft hand on his hip and another in his palm, he immediately felt rescued. Off they went, Pauline disappearing behind them into a swirl of dancing bodies. Charlie wasn’t familiar with the local brand of animated step-shuffle-twirl, but after realizing it was nothing more than a variation of the two-step waltz, fell into the rhythm and soon had his beaming partner skipping along with him to Clive Herriot’s singing sawing plinking plunking family, accompanied by floor thumping feet. Amalia, in fact, appeared positively exuberant. Particularly when they swung by their new friends, Duncan and Karin, his wife picked up her chin and beamed as if all the world was watching and admiring, ready to hand her a dance trophy. *Huh…as the hep crowd in Vancouver would say, they were quite the gay hoofers, after all.* One person he made sure to swing past was Whitt Newton by the wall.

“Scoundrel!” he called and Amalia jumped in his arms.

“Whoever are you shouting at, Charlie?”

“A devious old rogue.” he said.

Whitt grinned and delivered a sporting salute to his English neighbour.

“Your little shenanigan has cost you an Arabian foal!”

Amalia’s eyebrows knitted together. “Are you and Mr. Newton fighting?”

“Not at all, dear. But I’ve discovered what he did with the vodka we traded.”

“Goodness, I hope he hasn’t drunk it already. He should be quite around the other side of himself if he has.”

“It’s in the punch.”

Eyebrows rising. “Oh…that would explain the crowd at the table.”

It was true. There were more people, mostly male, bunched before the washtub than there were on the dance floor or seated on chairs combined. Even in the short time since they’d arrived, not only had the number of refreshment connoisseurs doubled, but the volume of shouts and laughter was in danger of drowning out the band. Until Frank’s woozy voice called, “Spaghetti Rag! Let’s wake this place up with the Spaghetti Rag!”

Clive Herriot and his family obliged, picking up the tempo and soon most of the two-steppers were one-stepping, with the ambitious exception of Frank, who was mostly following his own fuzzy map around the floor and threatening to entangle his partner in a raggedy web of uncertain outcome. One thing was clear; the crowd was hopping. It was too much for Amalia.

“Charlie, I think I really must sit down now. I’m afraid one more spin might bring about a child.”

“Of course, dear. Over that way, there’s an empty spot at a table.”

He led her from the danger zone to the relative calm of a plank table by the wall. The chairs were mostly similar, rough hewn and assembled with varying degrees of skill, but with a little shuffling and twisting, they were soon seated in content, if rustic comfort.

“Shall we risk a sample of Whitt Newton’s witch’s brew, dear?”

“Only a half glass, Charlie. It wouldn’t do for me to become more wobbly than I already am.”

He set off through the dancers, a journey rife with peril. Some, the clear eyed ones, were navigating the nuances of ragtime with relative skill, but a great many more were becoming like Frank and sailing around the floor blinded by a woozy fog of dangerous overconfidence. No one worried about the next flying foot movement, let alone the consequences of where that might send their body. The syrupy stench of ethyl laced prune juice wafted everywhere. The next problem would be negotiating a path through the mob around the tub. He almost got there.

“Yah, you come my house saying make friends, when all time thinking to steal business, no?”

*Great Scott, it was Gunnar Erickson.* That was Charlie’s first thought; the next was considerably more morbid: *was he here with his wife?* He cast about, quaking with quiet dread. “Gunnar, good fellow, how wonderful to see you!” He stuck out his hand.

Icy eyeballs and freshly scarred face. *Had he cut himself shaving with an axe?*

Charlie withdrew the hand. “Now Gunnar, I believe I know what you’re referring to and let me assure you the spirits I’ve produced are not available locally. What my plan is, you see - ” He caught himself in mid-sentence standing five feet from a fourteen gallon tub of the stuff. “Well, generally I’ve been trying to discourage its distribution in…our…neighbourhood...” Gunnar had pulled something from a trouser pocket. It looked like a wood chisel. *Dear God, it was a wood chisel.* “Um…are you planning to do some carving?”

*He hadn’t actually asked that, had he?*

The menacing Swede with the raw red scar halfway from his right eyeball to his chin produced an icy sneer. He held the chisel waist height, not up in the vicinity of unnecessary stares, but abundantly visible to the intended victim. The next few seconds were a graphic example of why Charlie’s father had wanted him to join the navy rather than infantry - there was less hand-to-hand combat. The lethal Swede lunged. But what Gunnar didn’t know was Cadet Stamford had been a gifted…well, adequate…member of the boxing squad at Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. With the chisel spearing for an apparently vulnerable gut, a stunning (as much to Charlie as Gunnar) jab streaked out with a resounding whack. If he hadn’t been so preoccupied with imminent disembowelment, Charlie might have given himself a congratulatory pat on the back. Unfortunately, another fact well known around the area, but not to Charlie, was Gunnar had once killed a small marauding bear with the exact chisel now flashing in the lamplight. The bear killer rattled his stinging head.

Charlie blinked and settled back in his stance.

This time the gleaming blade made no pretense of keeping low and inconspicuous. With a steely flash, it arced for the boxer’s head. Charlie barely got his face out of the way and in the process saw flesh part on the outside of his wrist. Blood sprayed and the predatory sneer widened.

*Bleeding to death…he was going to bleed to death right here in front of his neighbours and pregnant wife.*

Someone at the edge of the mob finally saw the blood and shouted, “Jumping Jehosephat, it’s a fight!”

Charlie shouted, “He’s got a chisel!”

It didn’t have the effect he’d hoped. Instead of rushing to contain his attacker and save his life, the crowd parted, forming a circle around the spectacle. If he’d wanted to get to the prune juice, the way was now clear. Gunnar lashed again with spittle lipped resolve, psychotic eyes gleaming.

Charlie ducked and circled into his jab, trying to think of anything but throwing another punch and exposing himself to evisceration. *What could he do…what could he do?*

As a determined psychopath, Gunnar suffered no such confusion. Anyone who’s ever wrestled a bear knows the first rule is never to let the dim creature get the upper hand. Manic eyes flashing and chisel swerving, the Swede charged into the fray.

Charlie forgot all about his Marquis of Queensbury stance and frantically threw out his arms to avoid a grisly, blood slathered death. He may even have screamed like a little girl, but in later recounts his friends and neighbours graciously omitted the mention of it. Somehow the waving arms tangled with the stabbing slashing one, Gunnar tripped over an English loafer and both combatants toppled backward in a grunting struggling heap.

Someone shouted, “They’re on the floor!”

And someone else, “The chisel!”

Indeed, the chisel was inches from Charlie’s face. *Was the spectacle of mortal combat so bloody gripping that nobody wanted to step in and save his life?* Afraid…they were just as terrified as he of this Swedish nut job. Clearly, it would be safer and more entertaining to guzzle prune punch and watch him die.

CLANG!

An enormous ringing sound filled Charlie’s ears. *So this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a clang.* He felt his muscles relax into the cosmic event. He felt dry breath rasping in his throat and the sour mustardy aftermath of terror on his tongue. He also felt the body on top of him stiffen, then go flaccid…*what?* The next event was possibly more traumatic than opening one’s eyes to the creaking gates of hell. Realizing the texture of the moment had nothing ethereal about it, Charlie wrestled the sweaty mass atop him to one side and came face to face with lumpy, snaggle toothed Freja. His relief at finding himself still among the living came to an abrupt halt.

Freja said, “Lord, is me come to save you.”

In her thick fingers was a shovel, the long handled variety, with a hank of greasy dripping hair swinging from the blade. Charlie turned a sideways glance to Gunnar, eyes rolled back, already producing more blood from a hideously rendered bald spot than most mid-sized animals leave on the road when thumped by a truck.

“He is crazy, Lord.” said Freja. “He is drunk, then wanting to come kill you. I try stop with pig knife, but he hit me with shovel.” She exhibited the shovel and the hair dropped off to fall on her mate’s chest with a sticky plop. “He give me terrible hurt.” She pointed at her face, but Charlie could detect no visible change. “Is worst husband in world. Freja stay with you now.”

*Great Scott…what?* This would never do. There appeared only two possible paths here, neither particularly appealing to a man who’d spent a great deal of his adult life avoiding the wrath of females. He could discuss with Amalia the feasibility of acquiring a second wife or he could inform Freja her intentions were as frightening to him as a tub of writhing cobras. But the huge woman still had the shovel, now hairless and free to strike again.

He looked up with pleading eyes and muttered, “If only I was a whole man.”

Freja had no footwear, only a thick layer of dried pig manure caked to her bare feet. Standing aromatically close to his head, she said, “Huh?”

“The war…the war, you see, a German shell exploded with terrible consequences quite near the middle of my legs.” He cast a despairing look along the length of his sprawled torso toward his lower parts. “I’m afraid it’s only the pity of my loving bride which binds us and the fact that she married me for my endearing charm. Without all my parts, you see, I could never properly execute my full husbandly duties.”

“What mean…*es-cute?”*

Amalia had appeared at the edge of the crowd. She looked down upon his sprawled body, looked at Gunnar, then toward Freja with her shovel. His wife appeared so lovely, and so obviously pregnant, it was clearly vital her identity be kept hidden from the barefooted pig butcher. While confusion still gripped everyone’s eyes, Charlie said, “If my loving bride were here, she’d share with you how difficult it is to love a man who has no…” He cast his gaze downward again.

Freja’s sloping brow furrowed. *“No snopp?”*

He cast a sideways glance in time to see Amalia’s mouth opening to say something. Desperately, he yelped, “Yes, absolutely, that’s it. If, um…*snopp* means…” He pointed.

Freja’s eyes shot wide. “Lord, it has been exploded off, the…*snopp?*

Amalia’s eyes were wider than Freja’s. He tried to wink at her, but feared it presented more like a brain damaged twitch. She appeared on the verge of stomping into the scene and revealing the truth of his elaborate hoax until: “That’s right, my *snopp* is gone, you see. So you couldn’t possibly want to come live with me, as I couldn’t bear the responsibility of having two beautiful women suffer the shortcoming of my, um…injury.” He shook his head sadly.

“But Lord…you are so pretty to have such terrible wound.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.” He sat up and shrugged. “But still, there you are. Quite the bad luck, I’m afraid.”

Amalia’s stare broke away to roll with disbelief.

Charlie pushed to his feet and dusted his trousers. *Unbelievable…he’d talked his way out of that beastly situation. What a razor wit, what a master of tactics, what –*

“But your wife’s about as ready to pop a calf as a spring heifer.” It was Frank, leaning against the punch tub, empty glass in hand.

Charlie blinked, outflanked by a surprise attack from a betraying, or exceptionally stupid, ally. At times like this in the war, there was only one thing to do. “Frank, you’re fired.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean, fired?”

“I mean you’re drunk in public, creating a spectacle of yourself on the dance floor and generally representing Bear Creek Ranch in an appalling manner.”

“That’s bullshit, boss! I ain’t even halfways drunk yet!”

Freja said, “What mean…wife is calf?”

Charlie waved. “Oh, don’t bother with him, he’s drunk.”

“I ain’t drunk! And I refuse to be fired for having a good time!”

Somebody else yelled, “Yeah, Frank’s just having a good time!”

And another, “You can’t fire him for that! He ain’t even at work!”

Charlie ran his tongue over his teeth and regarded the crowd. “Alright, he’s not fired. But someone should help this unfortunate woman recover her husband to the roadway. And mind no one slips in the blood.” He headed toward Amalia. On the way past the body, he gave it a sharp shoe in the ribs and muttered under his breath, “Next time we meet, you Neanderthal halfwit, I’ll see myself better prepared, hopefully with a gun.”

Amalia’s eyebrows dipped. “What on earth is going on? What happened to that man?”

Charlie blinked. “You didn’t see?”

“Why, no, I was waiting for you to come back with my drink when all the people went rushing this way.”

“Well, dear, that cretin on the floor is Gunnar Erickson, who tried to kill me with a chisel.” He held up his wrist to reveal the combat wound.

Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. “Oh, you’re injured!” She dove into her purse and produced a hanky. “Here, press tight on it and don’t let off until we’ve wrapped something around it.” Then she looked up again to his eyes. “He tried to kill you? And you fought him off?”

“Why, yes, my dear. He won’t be trying that again, and if he does I’ll see he doesn’t get off so lightly.”

She stared at the body on the floor. “Oh, Charlie…all that blood, he looks quite dead already. Who was that hideous woman with the shovel and why did you lie to her about your man parts?”

That took a moment of consideration: “Um…that Amazon is his wife, you see. She obviously brought the shovel along to bury him and it’s an ancient Swedish custom that if you kill a man, his wife becomes your responsibility.”

“But…he’s not actually dead, is he?”

“I tried to explain that, dear, but she hardly speaks English, so I resorted to the lie concerning my private parts. I reasoned even a stupid woman would understand that, regardless of private beliefs. I was quite desperate. It wouldn’t do to have her living in our house.”

Amalia gazed up at him, then pushed her small soft hand through the crook of his arm. “Oh, Charlie…that was very brave.”

“Well, I was in a war once.”

“Yes, and you were quite good at it, I can tell.”

“My love, let’s enjoy the rest of our evening without mention of wars or chisel waving madmen, shall we? Let’s go join our friends, Duncan and Karin.”

They did, but Amalia paid no more attention to tall boring Duncan. As with the rest of their neighbours crowding around and wanting to relive every detail, particularly the exploding private parts – which produced a giggle every time she heard it - her eyes were focused for the remainder of the night on her husband.

Chapter Seven

Duncan knew about hunting. He knew which end of the rifle the bullet came out of and how to pull the trigger. With the lodge in its finishing stages and the boss only needing him two days a week for work, he also had time to get out and do it. His wages so far had bought a flock of fifteen chickens, a Holstein milk cow to turn loose in the lush grass around the lake and a new axe and Swede saw to build a milking shed – they were ready for winter. He talked to Arnold, the misplaced Missourian, about when would be the best time to head out and shoot an animal. Arnold confirmed what Cecil had said at the store: most game, particularly deer and moose, headed off the plateau and into the river valleys in late fall. September and October were the best months to put in a supply of venison. He also suggested that if a man was born and raised in town, a compass might prove handy in the unpopulated bush country around the lakes, that or at least a basic understanding of where the sun hung in the sky. Duncan looked up; there was the sun, right where it ought to be, over his head. He wanted to ask how that would help, but thought it might sound stupid. Arnold then went on to explain the best way to dress out a mule deer and how to smoke the meat. “Oh, I won’t need to smoke it. Karin’s going to boil and can it.” Arnold looked at him and picked something out of his teeth. “What if you shoot a moose? You gonna boil that?” Duncan couldn’t see any reason why not and said so. Arnold pointed out that a moose was bigger than a horse and anyone ambitious enough to can a horse ought to win a prize for being the hardest working woman in creation. It was pretty obvious that was a compliment to Karin, so Duncan thanked him for it. Arnold ran a tongue over his freshly picked teeth and said, “Just stay off the reserve. Them Canim Lake boys don’t take nicely to folks shooting around their cabins.”

“Who’s the Canim Lake boys?”

“Indians, dummy. They can ride, rope and shoot better than Tom Mix, and you got nice hair.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind, just stay off their property.”

Duncan looked up again at the sky. “I’ll remember to keep my eyes on the sun.”

“You do that. And hang on tight to your horse. She’ll find the way back no matter how mixed up you get.”

“Thanks, Arnold, why don’t you come out with me? You could show me this stuff you’ve been talking about.”

“Naw, mostly I just wait for something to walk in front of the cabin. Not so far to cart it home that way.”

It was clear Arnold was a practical man. But Duncan wanted to go hunting, and sitting around waiting for something to wander in front of his porch didn’t sound very exciting. He had Karin pack him a lunch of baked potatoes cooked on their new pot bellied stove, some dried prunes for a snack, then threw the rifle over his shoulder.

“Don’t start supper till I get back.” he said. “We’ll have venison roast or chops - you decide while I’m gone.”

Colin picked up the dog’s bowl and waved it at him.

“Colin, you get first pick of the bones.” He hugged his wife and kids, then strode out the door.

Up on Rosy with the.303 across his lap, he set off in the direction of the morning sun. That’s what Arnold had said and it made sense: keep his eyes on the sun. He figured he could follow it out and then turn away from it coming home - straight out, straight back - just had to make sure he was in before dark or the last part would be tricky. Duncan wasn’t aware of it, but the beautiful simplicity of his navigation scheme meant never wasting time covering the same ground twice. The unfortunate part, of course, was never seeing the same place twice. Also, he quickly discovered that trying to find a straight line through the bush was next to impossible, especially on a horse. There were deadfalls, steep sided creek beds and timber too thick to press through. Then there were the lakes. He understood now why Arnold had told him to pay attention.

By midday he’d eaten the last of his baked potatoes and hadn’t spotted anything more than a few ducks on the water and something brown going over a hill. He was about to turn around when a plump mottled bird landed on a branch twenty feet away with a clapping sound. Rather than flying off to safety like any sensible bird, it sat blinking at him, then strutted along the branch for a better look. *Stupidest thing in the world.* He drew the .303 from across his lap, raised it and aimed – hard to miss at this range. He thought how this would be the first thing he’d ever shot with a rifle. He thought about picking its head off and not messing up the meat. He thought how proud Karin would be when he brought home their family supper, even it wasn’t a deer.

*BOOM.*

What he hadn’t thought about was where his horse would go after the rifle went off. Rosy shot out from under him like a chicken fired from a cannon. He ended up on his back, no breath in his lungs and listening to the sound of his trusty mount galloping for home with no one in the saddle. He saw his brother’s face the day he fell out of the tree and knew that’s how he looked now – paralyzed. The world swam in a bright red haze and he was sure he’d ever be able to breathe again.

When somehow he did manage to find air, it was with a thin squeaky wheeze that barely made it down to his lungs. His stomach lurched and the baked potatoes threatened to come up to meet his tonsils. It was a long time before he could wobble to his feet and longer still until he remembered the bird. Hunched, hobbling, he went to collect his prize. There were feathers all around the tree and sticky stuff, but no bird.

No horse, no bird, no nothing.

At least he knew his way home. It was in the direction opposite the sun. He started walking. An hour later he came to a lake, but it didn’t look like the same long stretch of water where he’d seen the ducks. In fact, nothing around him looked familiar. He was thirsty so stopped to drink, his water bottle gone with the horse. He sat on a tree trunk toppled over the water and ate the last of his prunes. Hot…the afternoon was hot and the hard bark of the trees had a scorched smell. The first colours of fall were already starting to stain the poplar groves on the far bank, probably brought on by the endless dry spell. Sun loving swarms of black flies zinged out of the bush to feast on the back of his neck and arms. He hadn’t brought a jacket. He flapped, swatted. Set off again away from the sun.

Four hours later, he was sure he must be getting near home, but still nothing looked right. He hadn’t had a drink of water since the lake and the dead weight of the rifle dragged on his arms, whichever one he hung it from. His feet hurt; he should’ve worn socks inside his boots, but of course he’d come out on a horse. *Darn horse.*

After another hour it was time to start thinking about the possibility he might’ve somehow wandered off course. The sun was still behind him where it should be, but already casting long shadows through the trees. Soon it would be going down. Good thing for the rifle, because if he had to walk through the dark there might be wild animals around, even if he hadn’t seen any all day long. What about Karin and the kids? He’d told her not to cook until he got back and now that wouldn’t happen until the middle of the night, if it happened today at all. Then he thought about the horse and whether it would carry on home without him. Karin would be mad, for sure. She didn’t like things not going the way they should and an empty horse showing up without husband or supper was just about as wrong as things could get. *Stupid, stupid horse.*

He’d never paid attention before to how dark the bush got after sundown. He tried pressing on, but it was pretty clear there was no point when he could barely see the trees, let alone a path through them. He sat down with his back against a rough trunk and tried to think. No matches to build a fire. No water either – darn, was he thirsty. And no idea which way to go until the sun came up again. *Wait, maybe that’s where he’d gone wrong.* The sun rose in the east, but set in the west – that much he knew. By turning around, he’d only pointed himself further and further from home. *Stupider than the horse.* Tomorrow he’d fix that and just knowing it helped him feel not quite so lost. But it was starting to get cold - no fire, no jacket.

Then something moved in the bush.

He jerked around, swinging the rifle, but couldn’t see so much as a smudge against the darkness. Couldn’t make out the sights anyway. Never mind, if something tried to eat him, like a bear or a wolf, he wouldn’t need sights to point the barrel and blast it.

Something else moved, a sharp rustle behind his tree. He jerked his head around the trunk, squinting into the dark.

Another to his left. Surrounded…whatever they were, they had him on all sides.

Something shot across his leg. *Damn!* He scrambled to his feet, scalp squirming. A wild animal had come right up to his leg. They were teasing him, playing like a cat does with a mouse under its paw. They knew he was blind in the darkness. And they knew now, after he’d jumped halfway out of his skin, that he was starting to get afraid.

When the next thing moved, he stabbed the rifle its direction and yanked the trigger. Broken - it wouldn’t fire.

*Wait…he’d forgotten to cock it after he shot the bird.* Frantically, he worked the bolt.

*BOOM.*

Like dynamite in the mine, everything in the silent sucking hole behind the explosion froze to wait. He waited with whatever was out there - the wolves, mountain lions, bears. Then he remembered the bolt. Getting smarter, he cocked the rifle…ready for whatever tried to come next.

Cold has a way of seeping inside your soul. It finds its way in from the outside, needle sharp and tireless, searching for cracks to worm its lethal barbs ever deeper. It doesn’t want your fingers. Fingers are small and meaningless, even if they turn black and need to be chopped away, leaving the rest of your hand a pointless purple lump. It hardly cares about your ears, nose or toes; they’re a snack. What it wants is the prize most guarded and precious of all, the glow of warmth around your heart. If it can get to that, cold has won. By the time the stars had settled on the tops of the trees, Duncan’s heart was suffering. It already knew too well the pain of shivering until his joints locked. It knew the despair of facing an impossibly long night all alone. He crumpled to the ground and curled into a ball, but with the temperature drop already and no fire or blanket to wrap in, couldn’t fool himself into thinking it would be enough. The frostbitten plateau breathed on him and the rustling started again. He waved and shouted into the dark, but it wouldn’t go away. A hunter more patient than him, it knew if it waited long enough he’d be unable to fight back. He drew the rifle closer and kept his hand by the trigger, eyes open, even if he couldn’t see. A long time ago he’d heard never to fall asleep when freezing or you wouldn’t wake up again. Sleep…who could possibly sleep like this?

A red glow through his eyelids pulled him toward it. The only thing he knew for certain was it felt warm. He let himself swim toward that tiny pleasure, gently at first, then with a growing desperate need like a bird being born. He cracked his eyelids open…and remembered. *Alive by some miracle, awake to see the morning.* He tried to straighten his arms, stiff as sticks. Still huddling over his knees, there was a knot in his spine the size of a football. With an effort that left him gasping, he uncoiled, tried to push to his feet. He needed the tree, dragged himself up the rough bark on legs a hundred years old. The first time he tried to swallow, his tongue almost cracked in half. *Water…must find water.* Away he stumbled, then remembered and turned away from the sun.

\* \* \*

Pauline was out digging turnips in the morning sunshine when Karin arrived on her fat mare, a red eyed mess, lurching forward in the saddle. Clearly something was wrong. She wiped her hands on her apron and hurried to meet her neighbour.

“It’s Duncan, he never came home last night!”

Pauline grabbed Rosie’s reigns. “Okay, okay…I hear you. Now tell me where he went.”

“Hunting. Pauline, he went hunting.”

“Don’t suppose he said whereabouts.”

“I have no idea. And he doesn’t either. Neither one of us know this country any better than a map of China. And the horse came home without him.”

“Oh…that’s not good.”

“Help me, Pauline. You must have some idea where people go to hunt.”

“Honey, that could be anywhere up here.”

Karin’s eyes swung away. “I’ve got to get back to the kids.”

“That little crawler, he’s there with nobody watching him?”

“Winnie’s home, but she’s hardly more than a baby herself. I closed them up in the cabin. I had to come get you.” She swung the horse.

Pauline said, “Hold on, I’m coming with you.” She reached up, grabbed the saddle and flipped onto Rosie’s back in a dusty swirl of skirts.

“Thank you,” Karin said, “I knew you’d help.”

“Tell you what we’ll do - you stay back with the kids in case he comes home. Me, I’ll take your horse and put out the alarm. We’ll mount up a search party and see what we can do. But it’d be a real big help if you could remember which direction he headed.”

“East…he started east toward the sun yesterday morning. He was going to shoot a deer.”

Pauline’s calloused hand reached around to pat hers. “That helps. East is Deka Lake; he’d of hit that pretty quick. Aiming at the sun, you say?”

“That was his plan, point straight at it.”

“What time did he start out?”

“First thing, maybe an hour after dawn.”

“Oh, now…he might’ve missed it north. Then he’d hit Bowers Lake. Trouble is, with all the water around, it’s hard to keep a direction. I’m just surprised a city boy’s got the smarts to tell his way by the sky.”

“He said Arnold taught him. Follow the sun, that’s what he said.”

Pauline’s hand squeezed more tightly. “Arnold told him that? Follow the sun – all day long?”

“That’s what Duncan said.”

“Hell, them ain’t Arnold’s words. He either heard wrong or just didn’t understand. Shit, this is more complicated than I thought. I’ll have to talk to Arnold.”

Arnold was digging a hole under his cabin for a root cellar. He leaned on the shovel and spit the twig he’d been chewing through his beard. “Frogs in a bucket, Pauline, you know I’d never tell him something like that. I said he should keep an eye on the sun, that’s all.”

“You see, that’s the trouble with Americans, nobody knows what the hell you’re on about half the time. We both know after that boy poured kerosene on his head, he’s not quite full to the top - you gotta be careful what you say to him.”

Mournful sigh. “I should of gone with him. That’s what he wanted me to do.”

“For all we know, that means you could both be out there right now, up to your necks in trouble.”

“Yeah, might be a bear or a cougar ate him. Maybe too late already.”

“Now what part of your miserable mind heard me say that? We gotta go find him, that’s what we gotta do.”

“Well, that’s a fine plan, but where you gonna start?”

She pointed. “We know he set out east, then followed the sun around. Way I see it, that’s what we need to do too.”

The Missourian gave her a flat stare. “Or we could chase some cats around in the bush and hope one of them climbs up his leg. Makes about as much sense.”

“I’m riding to fetch Rueben. Are you helping or not?”

Arnold pulled himself out of his hole. “Yeah, sure, I’ll round up Lester and Al. If by some miracle we find him, I get to slap his head for being so stupid.”

Pauline swung Rosie. “Right after I slap your head for telling him to do it.”

It was true what Pauline had said, there were plenty of lakes around. Not long after he set out, Duncan heard a loon’s clear haunting yodel and another answer. He trudged toward the sound, eventually falling to his knees at a grassy shoreline, gulping cold clear fluid. It was the sweetest water he’d ever drunk. He splashed it on his face and scooped it over his head. If only he had a way to carry some with him, but the best he could do was suck like a camel and fill his belly till next time. The sun was gathering strength quickly and pockets of mist still hugging the surface promised to burn off into another hot September day. Between them, ducks drifted in the shimmering open patches without a worry in the world over where that day might take them. He wished he was a duck. He sat on the slope of the shore and pulled off his boots – bad news. There were blisters the size of silver dollars on the back of his heels and his uncut toenails were threatening to carve holes out the front of his boots. Karin had been after him for weeks to trim them. It could be hard keeping up with all the stuff she wanted him to do, but boy, would it ever be nice to see her now. He’d even go for a big bowl of her boiled rice and prunes. Home, he couldn’t wait to get there. After the thirst he’d woke up to, though, he stared over the lake and thought what would happen if he didn’t find more water. Then he thought about the cold - better to keep moving. Another night like that one and it wouldn’t make any difference if he died of thirst or not. Next his belly made a sound like a vapour locked pump in the mine. That was the other thing - he’d never gone a whole day without food before, ever in his life. Nothing out here to eat…nothing but trees.

The next morning he didn’t swirl into consciousness until the sun was halfway up the sky. Couldn’t remember dreaming. He’d found the root cave of a toppled tree to huddle under, but without a jacket it didn’t help much. The bites on his face and arms had swollen the size of marbles, raw from all the scratching. He didn’t dare pull off his boots.

He wasn’t walking now, but stumbling, leaning on the rifle. Had to find more water. If only every muscle in his body wasn’t so tired. He stumbled all day, found a lake and two streams, but nothing to eat. He thought about shooting a duck on the water, but they were out so far he knew he could never swim there.

Another night, this time covered with swamp grass. He didn’t even care about the mosquitoes.

Next day, blessedly, the hunger went away. He spent a freezing night against a tree, propped up to face the sounds.

Day…night…day.

Barely able to move now. No strength and always cold, even in the sunshine.

Next morning, he woke only after the sun was in his face, high enough to thaw the icicles the night had left in his veins. Arms like fence posts. He drifted in and out of sleep.

The last morning he didn’t wake.

Pauline slept on the floor of the cabin to keep Karin company. Word had travelled by bush telegraph and every day now all the neighbours from Lone Butte to Hundred Eight Mile and Forest Grove were out searching, but it was getting hard to keep up the pretence of hope. The vast plateau was bigger than all the men in the province could cover in half a year and they were running out of time.

“We’ll find him tomorrow.” Pauline said to Karin. “Only a couple more places he could be. Want some of this chicken?”

Karin had hardly eaten in days, barely had milk for the baby. Her hair hung over the holes where her eyes had been and the skin of her face looked like wax. “No thanks.”

“Honey, you have to eat or you’re gonna disappear. You got two kids to think about, no matter if - ” She blinked and looked away. “I mean, it’s no good both of you suffering.” She gave her head a shake. “…didn’t mean that either…”

Karin’s shoulders hung. “I know what you mean, Pauline. And you’re right, I have to think of the kids.” She reached for the chicken. “But he’s alive out there, I know it, no matter what people are starting to whisper.”

“Honey, of course he is. He’s a big strong man and he ain’t about to give up till he gets back here to his family. I can tell he loves you more than anything else in the world.”

“He does…and dear God, we love him.”

Pauline reached to Karin’s matted hair. “I know you do. And He knows too. God will bring him home safe, you’ll see.”

They did that every night for a week and a half. But it was haying season and fall roundup. Even people without ranches to tend had vegetables to be brought in, logs to buck into firewood and a hundred other necessities to deal with before the first snows locked them down for winter. The last two nights had brought frost. It was becoming clear that no man sleeping without food, shelter or warm clothing could last that long in the wilderness. Especially a city boy.

Probably the most miserable of the searchers was Charlie. He needed to get back to work and he needed Frank and the boys to come with him. Charlie had buried men at sea. He’d made life and death decisions which didn’t feel good, no matter which choice he went with. But the toughest moment he’d ever had to face was turning his horse around with his men falling in behind him and riding back to the ranch. It felt like leaving a friend to die.

Chapter Eight

When a man departs this earth, he leaves in the hearts of his family a hole no words or gestures of kindness can hope to fill, not for a long, long time. But when most men depart this earth, there remains in their wake a cold husk of their former being over which to weep. Karin had no such husk. All she could cling to was the comfort of caring neighbours who checked in on the little family as often as they could. Between that were the daily questions from her little girl, ‘When’s Daddy coming home?’ and finally, a visit by a British Columbia Provincial Policeman on a tall black horse, an animal even in this land of horses, more magnificent than any she’d ever seen. He dismounted in the fall sunshine and climbed the steps to her porch in his tall riding boots. Before he could reach the door, she was out to meet him with eyes that must have dripped desperate hope.

He pulled off his uniform cap and seemed to have trouble looking at her. “Ma’am, sorry to bother you, but I’m here about your husband.”

Karin pushed hair out of her eyes and tried not to sound like a manic widow. “Have you found him?”

“Um, no…but that’s what I’m here to see about, if there’s anything we can do that hasn’t already been done.” He pulled a notebook and pencil from his pocket. “Now, when’s the last time you saw him?”

With little Winnie hanging off her dress in unbrushed morning hair and embarrassingly smudged face, the desperate woman blurted her ordeal. By the end, there were tears in her eyes and her voice was cracking.

The officer offered a warm look with kind brown eyes. “That must’ve been very difficult, all that time wondering what happened and worrying if he’d ever come home.”

Karin’s gummy eyelids blinked. “But he *will* come home. You don’t know he’s dead. Nobody knows if he’s dead, none of you!”

“No, of course we don’t, and that’s exactly why I’m here.”

“He strong, he’s brave…he loves us.” She clutched Winnie’s tiny shoulder and squeezed far too hard.

Winnie said, “Mummy…maybe this man can find Daddy.”

Karin dropped to her knees and stared into her daughter’s eyes. With a voice like branches vibrating in a winter wind, she said, “That’s it, darling, this policeman will find Daddy.” She looked up, pleading, “Isn’t that true…you’re going to find him?”

He slipped his notebook back in his pocket. “Ma’am, I’ll ride the area talking to people and see if I can spot anything. But I have to be honest, if all your neighbours spent over a week looking and didn’t turn up any sign, there’s probably not much I can do.”

“But…you’ll look?”

“I’ll try.”

“Thank you, officer, thank you.”

“Yes, ma’am…um, I know this is a difficult time, but there’s one other thing I’d like to ask, if I could.”

She blinked. “Of course…what?”

“Lord Charles Stamford, your husband worked for him?”

“That’s right, Duncan helped him build his new lodge.”

Official nod. “Now I want you to understand the next question in no way accuses your husband of any criminal activity. I’m just looking into a rumour I heard.”

Karin’s head drew back. “…criminal…?”

“Ma’am, did Charles Stamford ever provide your husband with alcohol?”

\* \* \*

After the constable left, the sky above the cabin grew fat with dark purple clouds bearing down so low the branches of the pine trees looked ready to snap under the weight. There was no question what would come next, and when it did, the full thundering force of it seemed more than the roof could bear. Lightning sent the dog under the bed and the wind howled so hard Karin expected any moment to find herself and the children huddled on their mattress between bare open walls with nothing but the storm above their heads. It was the first real rain since the cabin had been built and the shingles the men had split were turning out to be anything but perfect. Water streamed in everywhere. With it, each blazing track of white hot light across the heavens revealed another crack. She pulled the quilt around the kids and crept out through the lamplight for pots to trap the worst drips. Then back under the quilt with her children, she prayed, “Lord, protect us from this weather and guide my husband home.”

Winnie poked her head out. “Mummy, Digger wants up too.”

The dog had crawled from its hiding place, snout on the blanket, whimpering.

“Oh, why not?”She tapped the mattress. “Come on, boy. Come on up.”

Something hit the door. Digger spun and growled, hair spiking.

Karin pretended not to hear it, but Winnie said, “What was that, Mummy?”

“Nothing to worry about, honey. Probably the policeman, he wants to come in from the storm.” But she didn’t move.

Winnie waited a long time, then said, “You should let him in. It’s scary outside.”

The sound came again, more of a thump than a neighbourly knock to open the door. *She just…didn’t…want to leave the bed.* She called, “Who’s there?”

No answer.

Winnie said, “Mummy, maybe it’s Daddy.”

*Yes, what if it really was Duncan out there, too weak to answer?* Rainwater plunked in the pots. The wind howled. She crept off the bed, went to the door. Again, “Who’s out there?”

Again, no answer.

“Mummy, it’s Daddy…I know it is.”

She had to do it; she pressed a shoulder against the door and lifted the board that latched it shut. Drew it open a crack. Then screamed and lunged to slam it back – too late, it was coming inside.

Almost the size of the opening it pushed through, head mantled in dripping black fur, it shoved past. She stumbled against the wall, a doll in the path of this monster that had barged inside her home…with her husband’s body across its shoulders.

The dog shot to a corner, barking. Karin had her wall, wasn’t moving from it.

The giant creature bent to drop Duncan’s body on the bed and turned to stare with that face, the one she remembered from the forest, with predatory black eyes. Then the mouth opened and gapped yellow fangs sneered her way.

“He’s been steamed with medicine. He needs to sleep and dry off. Is this the best roof you could build?”

She stared. “…what…?”

“Your roof, the rain comes through it.”

“The roof…the men split the wood and…who are you?”

“My name is Henry. I’m happy to meet you, what’s your name?”

“Why, it’s…Karin…Karin Sinclair.” She pointed. “That’s my husband, Duncan.”

“I know.” His voice was like iron wheels on a train track. He had an enormous head, tobacco coloured skin and a thick brow that jutted further than his nose. The cabin swarmed with a thick smoky stench as if he’d been living in a cave.

Winnie said, “Hello, big man.”

He turned. “Hello, Winnie, have you been good?”

Huge nod. “I’ve been *very* good. Have you brought me a present?”

“I brought your daddy.”

“Thank you, big man.”

“I have a name.”

She pulled shiny curls across her face. “I know, Henry. It’s just that you’re so *big*.”

He hung his enormous head. “I have a condition. I’m a giant.”

Karin couldn’t stop staring. She stammered, “A condition…you have a medical ailment?”

He aimed his jutting jaw. “I’m not sick, it’s a condition – *acromegaly*.”

“Acro…mela…go…”

“I grew big.”

“I see, well…” *How to thank a giant who’s just brought home your missing husband?* She pointed to her homemade table and chairs. “Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

He reached to a rawhide belt around his midsection, unstrapped it and the fur fell loose. It was a coat. “I haven’t had tea in years. Thank you.”

She edged toward the bed. “I just…want to check on Duncan first…if it’s okay.”

“Of course, you’ll want to see your husband. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

Duncan was asleep. But for the condition of his clothes and the strong smoky odour wafting around him, he might’ve just laid down for a nap. He was covered in red welts, bug bites no doubt, and his lips had split in places, but were already on their way to healing. Karin stroked his damp hair and the dog slunk from its corner, daring at last to sniff the intruder. Henry let it lick his hand, then ruffled the ragged ears.

He rumbled, “I found him five days ago. Didn’t think he was still alive. Another night and he wouldn’t have been. Heard the wolves yelping and knew they’d sniffed something they were getting up the courage to go after.”

“Five days ago? Why didn’t you bring him back then?”

“Didn’t dare. He was so close to the other world he needed special healing. I took him to the reserve.”

Her breath checked. “The Indians? You took him to see the - ” She stopped, blinking. *He had tobacco coloured skin. His eyes were so dark as to be practically black.*

Henry said, “I’m Indian, Secwépemc - you call us Shuswap.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. So you took him to the reserve. We could’ve got him to a doctor.”

“You think a white doctor would know how to save a person lost in the forest? Our people have lived here for thousands of years and know more about breathing life back into an earth cursed body than all the book taught doctors in the world.”

She could hardly argue; here was Duncan home and alive on their bed. She swallowed. “Twenty men searching couldn’t find him. How did you?”

“I told you the wolves were up to something. I could hear they were scared of it. Had to be either a sick grizzly or a human.”

She had to say it, “I’ve seen you before.”

His eyes moved away. “I don’t see many…like you.”

“So you were looking at me?”

“The forest is a book and your family is a new story. I’m sorry, I know I scare people. I try to stay out of sight because I’m ugly.”

“Oh, no, Henry…you’re not - ” She stopped herself again. Despite the jutting brow and brutal caveman features, she knew he wasn’t stupid. It would be more insulting to lie. “You’re…different looking. But you’re not ugly. It’s just there was something staring at me from the bush. It made me nervous.”

The dark eyes swung back to her. “That’s why I hide.”

Winnie piped up, “I knew right away you were a real man, Henry. With a baby bear for a friend. Where’s your bear?”

His big mouth opened into the gapped yellow smile that moments before had seemed like a snarl. “She’s outside, I told her to wait on the porch.”

“She’s a she? Can I go play with her?”

The cracks in the roof flashed and thunder boomed again.

“…maybe I’ll stay in here...”

Karin gave Duncan’s forehead a final caress and stood up from the bed. “Henry, do you like sugar?”

“You have sugar?”

“Milk too, we have a cow.”

The big teeth showed again. “I’ll have everything, please, ma’am.”

She talked to him as she made the tea, a little stiffly at first, but beginning to relax with his unassuming manner. After a few minutes the timber of his voice didn’t seem as threatening, his head not quite so large. Or maybe it when she finally looked at his eyes in the lamplight and saw they weren’t black at all, but deep brown, flecked with yellow, or even gold. Colin crawled from the bed to play with the bottom of Henry’s big fur coat. He was still standing. She said, “Sit down. The way you loom over a person, it’s no wonder they get scared.”

He drank tea like an Englishman, sipping quietly with the mug clutched in a hand the size of a ploughshare. Despite the expanse of him, his movements were gentle; a bird could’ve landed on his head and not been frightened away. In fact, Colin wouldn’t leave him alone. The little explorer tugged on the bottom of the moose hide trousers until Henry’s big arms reached down to pick him up. Thank heaven the homemade chair he’d chosen was the good one, nailed together properly. Karin pushed more wood into the stove and joined him with her tea.

She remembered what Winnie had said. “You live with a bear cub?”

“Her mother died. It’s my job now to teach her the bear way.” The storm outside was blowing somewhere else and the leaks settling to a few persistent dribbles. He seemed to be listening to it.

Karin said, “Oh, that’s sad. Its mother died…how?”

“I killed her.”

Tea blew across the table. She coughed into her cup and sat back, wiping her mouth. “You killed the mother…a mother with a cub?”

“I had to. She was trying to protect her young.”

“You mean…the bear was trying to kill you.”

Sad nod. “Yes.”

She just had to ask, “You shot it with a gun?”

“No.”

“Oh…”

Winnie said, “If you have to kill another bear, Henry, can I have the cub?”

“I hope that never happens, Winnie. It’s a lot harder raising a bear cub than you think.”

A thought flashed across Karin’s mind. “That coat you wear…is it…”

“Yes.”

“It’s, um…a lovely fur.”

“Cinnamon, she was a pretty bear.”

Karin blinked across her cup.She could sense there was so much more, but Henry was becoming uncomfortable with all the questions and looking away, so it was a surprise when he turned back suddenly to stare straight at her.

“I live in a *kikule* dugout house that no one can see even if they walk on top of it. People are afraid of me, so I stay away from them. But the way people are, I don’t mind. Can I have more tea, please?”

“Oh, of course.” She poured and passed the sugar tin. “There’s two things we bought a pile of when Duncan found a job - tea and coffee. Nothing stronger, neither one of us drinks alcohol…well, Duncan will take a sociable sip on occasion, but only to be sociable.”

“Alcohol is bad. It makes people ugly.”

It seemed a strange word for him say. “Yes…yes it does. So you don’t drink?”

“I don’t drink alcohol, tea or coffee because I never go to the store. I only eat what I can trap or gather myself.”

“You don’t live on the reserve?”

“Some of my people called me the cannibal giant from legend, even though I was born among them. They were the ones who wanted me sent me away when I was a boy. When I started getting different.”

“I see. Somewhere to try and help you?”

“No…Kamloops.”

The way he said *Kamloops* sounded like spitting rotten food. It was time to let him drink his tea. It was time, also, to put Duncan properly to bed. She went to draw the quilt over his sleeping body and tucked a folded blanket under his head. There were no pillows, not yet until they killed some chickens for feathers. Winnie and Colin were at the table with Henry, both lavishing him with their inexhaustible attention, when the next knock came.

This time, though, there was no looming mountain of dread. Not only was Duncan home, but she had the biggest guest in the world sitting at her table, drinking tea. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, ma’am, Constable Davies.”

“Oh, Constable, you must be soaking wet out there.” She headed for the door.

Suddenly from outside: “What the devil!”

*BOOM*

Henry lunged to his feet.

The next moments were a blur of Henry hurtling past her to rip the door open, then stomping onto the porch to grab the startled constable in his huge angry hands. The man let out a muffled cry and went flying into the rain. Henry spun to his bear cub, huddled by the wall, bawling.

Karin hoisted her skirt in both hands and ran to them. “Henry, is she hurt?”

He didn’t answer, just bent over his pet, poking and pushing dark fur around.

Karin turned to the sound of boots dragging back up her steps. “You shot her? Why on earth would you shoot an innocent bear cub?”

“It came at me in the dark. I didn’t stop to ask how old it was.”

“It’s only a cub!”

The man stood in the lamplight from the door, gazing with a blank dripping face. His hat was gone; he didn’t appear to have a gun anymore. “I…I’m sorry.”

Another voice called from the doorway. “What’s going on out here? How long have I been home?” It was Duncan, awakened by the sound of gunfire on his porch.

Karin said, “The constable here shot Henry’s bear in cold blood. It only wanted to meet him, like the night it came to see you.” The cub had stopped bawling, lying quietly now at Henry’s feet and mournfully licking its fur.

Duncan yelled, “You shot his bear? That bear is all he’s got! That’s his family!”

It wasn’t a good night to be a policeman. The man offered another feeble ‘sorry’, then said, “Are you Duncan Sinclair? Are you the man who was missing?”

“I’m not missing anymore. I’m home now.” He pointed at Henry. “That man saved me. He took me to the reservation where they doctored me with their medicine.”

“So…you’re telling me that’s actually a man.”

Karin said, “Well, of course, he’s a man. Can’t you see that, or do you want to shoot him too?”

“Well, ma’am, when he came through that door, if I hadn’t been surprised right out of my boots, I sure as dickens would’ve.”

“You seem pretty quick to shoot everything. Is that what they teach you at police school?”

The constable hung his head. “Look…I didn’t know.”

Karin said again, “It’s just a little baby.”

Now Winnie’s whine went up from the doorway, “He shot the baby bear?”

Duncan said, “Careful, Winnie, or he might shoot you too.”

Henry stood with the dark bundle in his arms. In fact, it wasn’t quite the tiny baby everyone was calling it, more like a fat yearling cub. Still, it was a poignant moment and one dripping with sentimentality as its giant keeper said, “She’s scared. She wants to go home now.”

Karin said, “Heavens yes, you go look after her. Will she be okay?”

“She’s shot in the leg, but with lots of dried berries and fish, she’ll get better. Anyway, it’s almost time to hibernate.”

The constable’s mouth dropped open as the enormous man passed him on his way down the steps. “Holy crap…you really are a damn giant.”

Henry didn’t look at him.

Karin called, “Henry, you don’t just disappear again. We’ve got plenty to thank you for and I want you to come for supper next weekend. Are you listening?”

“When will it be next weekend?” He was fading into the dark.

“Five days! We’ll be expecting you in five days!”

“Is that man going to be here?”

“Which man?”

“The one with the gun.”

Karin turned to glare at the constable. “I’m sure he’ll be too busy shooting things somewhere else. You remember, five days!”

“Thank, you, Karin. I’ll be here.”

The constable waited for the big figure to be gone, then wiped his face and turned to Duncan. “It’s good to see you home safe, sir. While I was out there I think I found something of yours.”

Duncan said, “You did?”

He went down to untie something from the saddle strings of his tall black horse, then climbed the stairs clutching the .303. “Is this yours?”

“Why, how about that…thank you.”

“No problem at all, sir.” The rifle exchanged hands. “Before I go, though, there are a few questions, if I may.”

“I haven’t been around lately, but I’ll try.”

“Oh, it’s not about that, not at all.” Out came the pad and pencil. “Now, the man you’ve been working for, Lord Charles Stamford, in what way were you employed by him?”

Duncan shrugged. “I helped build his house.”

“I see, and did he pay you cash?”

“Oh, yeah. Not the first two weeks, though, because he didn’t have any money.”

The constable looked up with an accommodating smile. “Not many people have these days, do they?”

“You don’t have to tell me. It’s been hard, but with his help, it’s getting better.”

Karin said, “Charlie and Amalia are good people. Everyone likes them, except for that ruffian, Gunnar Erickson, who tried to kill Charlie at the dance with a chisel. I’ve heard he’s a moonshiner. You should look into that.”

Another smile. “I certainly will, ma’am. So you say this moonshiner attacked Lord Charles? Do you have any idea what they were fighting about?”

Karin said, “I heard Cecil from the store say how Gunnar thought Charlie wants to steal his business. I have no idea what that means. As near as I know the man only raises pigs, and of course that horrid moonshine. Charlie doesn’t even have any pigs, does he Duncan?”

Duncan shook his head. “No, but he’s been thinking of getting some. Maybe that’s it.”

“Yes, maybe.” Karin said. “You should write that down, Constable.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He scribbled in his book, then turned to Duncan. “So Lord Charles didn’t have any money when he hired you, but now he has cash on hand for wages and I’ve heard he just bought a new Ford pickup truck. He seems to be doing pretty well suddenly, wouldn’t you say?”

Another shrug. “I never thought about it. Maybe his family sent money from England. He’s royalty, you know, that’s why they call him Lord Charles.”

“Royalty?”

“Yeah, polo ponies, dueling with swords, stuff like that.”

The constable poked his tongue into a cheek. “Oh, that kind of royalty. On the whole, though, would you say you’ve noticed a substantial turnaround in his lordship’s circumstances?”

“Oh, absolutely. They were living in a tent when I met them and that old car never even had a starter. Now the lodge is pretty much finished and you say he’s just bought a Ford truck. I’d say things are going a lot better.”

The constable clapped his notebook closed. “Thank you, Mr. Sinclair, you’ve been a big help.”

Duncan leaned on his rifle. “Well, I like to support the police where I can. Say hi to Charlie if you’re going over there. I’d imagine he’ll be glad to hear I’m alive.”

“Sir, you won’t be alive long if you keep doing that.”

“Huh…what?”

“Leaning over the barrel of a rifle. It’s about the best way I know of to get shot.”

Duncan blinked and straightened, leaning the weapon away. “Oh, yeah…I knew that. Just forgot because I’m tired.”

“Uh, huh…you take care, folks. And tell the big fellow again I’m sorry about his bear.” He limped down the steps, located his hat and revolver in the dark, then swung up to the saddle with a groan.

Karin said, “Are you alright, Constable? You can stay the night if you’d like.”

“Thank you, ma’am, I’m fine. Got a room waiting at the hotel. Just not used to getting tossed forty feet by a sasquatch, is all.”

Karin snapped, “Henry is not a sasquatch!”

A goodbye wave, then the quiet squish of horse hooves plodding through mud. “No, but I’ll have a tough job convincing my ribs of that. Night, folks.”

Duncan listened to the horse disappear, then reached an arm around his wife. “So why do you think he’s interested in Charlie?”

Karin squeezed the arm around her shoulder. “My guess would be it’s that fight with Gunnar. Maybe they’re going to charge the ruffian with attempted murder.”

“Huh…I won’t miss him. Neither will Charlie, especially with all the vodka piled in the workshop. He’s got no need of Gunnar’s moonshine, I can tell you that.”

Chapter Nine

Two days later, a twelve hundred pound bull moose emerged from the forest to stroll in front of the cabin. Karin and Winnie ran to their new front window to stare, with Colin wobbling on newly discovered feet behind them. Duncan shot the accommodating beast from his porch, confirming the first lesson every hunter must learn, almost as important as finding his way back home – patience.

\* \* \*

Under less agreeable circumstances, Charlie was learning a very different lesson. The constable arrived at the lodge on his fine black horse, drawing the eye of Amalia out on her porch in the morning sunshine, sipping coffee and enjoying much too large a plate of Ah Joe’s steamed buns. The mount was not a breed she knew, but anyone with an eye for equestrian stock could recognize the carefully sculpted lineage in the high tail and long arched neck. In fact, it was such a peacock of an animal she didn’t at first recognize its rider as a BC Provincial Policeman. The man rode up to the porch and tipped his peaked cap.

“Good morning, ma’am, beautiful day after that storm last night. Scrubbed the air clean, I’d say.”

He had an agreeable air for a policeman. Amalia answered with a smile, “Good day, sir. Are you here for a room? I’m afraid you’ve missed breakfast by several hours.”

“Oh, I’ve already eaten at the hotel in Lone Butte, thank you. But I will be needing a room toward nightfall, providing I have to stay over.”

“You’re here on official work?”

“Yes, I am. Constable Davies of the BCPP, at your service.” He hadn’t dismounted, just sat on his tall horse, gazing eye to eye at her across the porch rail. He had a face that seemed too youthful for his eyes, which offered up a world of confidence without misplaced arrogance - it all added up to a manner difficult to dismiss.

She said, “I will confess that’s a most beautiful animal. Might I ask what breed?”

He leaned to pat the arched neck. “He’s an American Saddlebred, ma’am, brought up from Montana the hard way.”

“The hard way?”

“Rode him every inch of the trail. In winter through the Rockies.”

“My, that would be an adventure, quite the cowboy thing to do. Is that why you don’t drive a vehicle?”

Constable Davies seemed to like that. He produced an amused little smile. “That is exactly right. This country isn’t so tame yet that a car can go everywhere.”

“Well, the barn is open for livery, you can help yourself to bedding and feed. I’m afraid the men are all gone to make hay, but I’m sure anyone who can ride from Montana in winter knows how to look after his own horse.”

“Thank you, ma’am. As I said, if I have to stay over I’ll do that, but what I’d really like is to speak with your husband. Is he working nearby?”

“Might I ask what about?”

“No offence, but it would be best if I discussed that with him directly.”

“Then you might as well go choose a stall. I’m not at all certain where they are, but I do know they won’t be back until they run out light.”

The news didn’t seem to upset him. Quite the contrary, he pulled off his cap and swept his gaze over the corrals and outbuildings. He said, “Quite a pretty spread. Pretty country, in fact, not as baked and rocky as Ashcroft – that’s where I rode from.”

Amalia chose a bun from her plate. “You won’t mind if I carry on, will you, Corporal? I’m eating for two these days.”

“Constable.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s Constable, not Corporal, and I didn’t mean to keep you from your meal. Might as well get the saddle off my friend here, then with your permission I’d like to take a walk around. Had a bit of a rough fall yesterday, could use a stretch.”

Amalia smiled again, but not with her eyes. He was, after all, a policeman and it wouldn’t do to have him sniffing around just everything on the ranch. “You fell…that beautiful animal didn’t throw you, did he?”

“No, he’s a gentleman, not a troublemaker. This was more like jumping off a fast train into the path of moving truck.”

“Gracious, you really should come take a rest.” She pushed her swollen belly away from the table, straightening her back with a sigh. “The problem with having babies is they seem always to be making one hungry with no room anywhere to put it. I’ll have this cleaned away, then be meeting you at the barn. Walking is something I simply don’t do enough of these days.”

Constable Davies smiled. “That would be a pure pleasure, ma’am. I’m looking forward to it already.”

In spite of the mysterious business he had with Charlie, the young policeman with the calm eyes proved charming company as they strolled about the property. There were comments about birdlife, an anecdote concerning some smelly sheep and a bigoted Hereford bull, and as if he wasn’t disarming enough already, the most hilarious story Amalia had ever heard about sailing through the air after a surprise encounter with a sasquatch.

“Did you really fly, Constable?”

“Wasn’t my choice, ma’am. Picked me up and chucked me like a half empty sack of grain.”

She tittered, “You almost make me believe in such creatures.”

“Oh, they’re out there, I assure you.”

Amalia pointed to the shed before the workshop.

“That’s where we keep our new electricity generator. It’s gasoline powered, the very latest in mechanical devices.”

“Electricity way out here - the world’s changing so fast I can hardly keep up. Pretty soon I’ll have to sell my horse and buy an aeroplane to get places.”

She smiled. “I’m sure, Constable, there always will be a place for a horse like yours.”

“Walt.”

She looked at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Please, call me Walt. With such fine company as yours on a day like this, it doesn’t feel like I should be working.”

She shook her head. “Well, it would help if you’d take off that uniform, Walt, or a person has trouble - ” Her eyes went wide and she slapped stiff fingers to her mouth. “Oh, gracious me…I didn’t mean to be sounding that way.”

Constable Walt flashed such a big white grin she could feel it on the side of her face. “Why, ma’am, whatever way is that?”

“I mean…I…”

“Oh, I know exactly what you meant. And I won’t tell your husband you said it. Can we take a look at this electricity maker?”

The generator wasn’t running. In spite of Ah Joe’s lobbying to produce electric light all day long in his dim kitchen, Charlie had pointed out that whether there was one light on or twenty, the machine needed to be running and eating up petrol to make it work – it just wasn’t cost effective. But Ah Joe wasn’t convinced. “What about when you buy no-ice icebox? You make electric go then?” Charlie assured his cook that when an electric icebox appeared, the generator would become cost effective in daytime. Still muttering but in a more agreeable tone, Ah Joe had gone away apparently reassured that modern science was a thing to look forward to on the ranch.

Constable Walt was less impressed. “Good gravy, that’s what it takes to make a light bulb work?” The thing was almost the size of a cow - minus the legs, of course – with belts, pulleys and dials that made it incomprehensible as Latin literature to a man who had only known horses all his life. “Your husband figured all this out?”

Amalia smiled. “Charlie can be quite inventive when he puts his mind to it. You wouldn’t believe what he’s been able to create already in this primitive country. Oh, dear…” Her eyebrows plunged and she looked up with a frown. “I didn’t mean to call your country primitive.”

He shook his head. “No offence at all, ma’am. When I see something like this, it makes me feel like I just dropped out of a tree.”

“Amalia.”

He tore his eyes from the mechanical mystery. “I’m sorry…what?”

“You may call me Amalia. It wouldn’t do for me to be using your first name while you address me formally. It would make me appear imperious.”

He chuckled, “Oh, I’d never call you imperious, Amalia. No, definitely not.”

“Since Charlie’s father died, I am in fact a marchioness, but I’m a marchioness who tends to a guest lodge and sews patches on worn jeans.” She closed the door to the shed. “Shall we go back now?”

“What’s in that next building ahead of us?”

She blinked. “That…oh, that’s just Charlie’s workshop. There’s nothing inside but tools and machinery, quite boring.”

“Machinery like the electricity maker?”

“Oh, no…nothing so interesting. And a lot of spiders.”

But Constable Walt was already walking. “I don’t mind spiders. And I’d love to have a look at the place all this inventing happens.”

Amalia called behind him, “No, we can’t go in there! You see, it’s locked and I didn’t bring the key.”

He stopped, staring at the building. “I don’t see a lock.”

“Oh, yes, it’s locked. Charlie’s quite fussy about the ranch hands wandering off with his tools. He probably wouldn’t want us having our noses poked in there, either.”

Walt gave the building one last look, then turned back. “Well, we certainly don’t want to provoke a problem, do we? I’m interested in your new lodge. With money so tight in times like these, such a project must’ve been quite a challenge.” Then almost as an afterthought, “I hear there’s a new truck, too.”

Charlie wasn’t quite so hospitably inclined when he discovered a policeman was waiting for him in his lounge. He climbed out of his muddy pickup in front of the barn, beat a flurry of wild oat barbs from his shirt with his hat and glowered. “What?”

Frank had ridden back early to repair a broken harness strap for the draught team. He blew a jet of smoke through his nostrils. “Cop inside’s been waiting half the day. Want me to go set fire to the stuff?”

“Just because we burned the house, Frank, doesn’t mean we need to raze the entire ranch. Did he say what he wants?”

“Dunno, never talked to him.”

“Well, did anyone talk to him?”

“Missus did, showed him around. Says he’s a real nice guy. They’re the worst kind, you might have to shoot him.”

“Remind me not to come to you for legal advice, Frank. Go to the workshop and get a petrol can ready. If you see the policeman coming, start your fire and clear out the back.”

“Sure, boss. You gonna go talk to him?”

Charlie scraped mud from his boots against the running board of the truck. “I rather preferred this country when it seemed less punishing of inventive thought. I suppose I’ll have to go see what he wants.”

“He wants to stick you in jail, boss. I’d shoot him for you, but I don’t wanna go to jail either.”

“Nobody’s going anywhere. Just have your petrol ready.”

“Sure, what about supper?”

Charlie sighed. “I’ll have Ah Joe bring some out to you as soon as it’s ready.”

“…sure am hungry…”

“Frank.”

“Okay, boss…okay.”

When Charlie arrived at the lodge, Amalia was sitting in the lounge with the policeman, attempting to distract the man with ridiculous schoolgirl giggling and her patented winsome smile. Charlie gave her a knowing nod, but she was entertaining with such enthusiasm she didn’t see it. He tried again.

“Oh, Charlie, there you are. We’ve been waiting since morning. How was your gathering of hay?”

He hung his mud splattered hat on the rack by the door. “Not the best, I’m afraid. The storm made such a mess we couldn’t get started until afternoon. Then the draught team snapped a harness in the swamp hay by the lake. It’s good feed, but murderously difficult on equipment.”

“Oh, dear, let’s hope it goes better tomorrow.”

“We should’ve bought a tractor instead of a truck.”

Amalia turned to their guest. “Charlie, this is Walt…I mean, Constable Davies from the police. He’s come to speak with you about something so mysterious he won’t even hint what it’s about.”

Walt stood. “A pleasure to meet you, Lord Charles. The neighbours I’ve talked to hold you in the highest regard.”

“You’ve been inquiring about me with the neighbours?”

“You’re an interesting man. We don’t get many English lords running ranches and stopping houses in the wild interior. Oh, and before I go any further, I’m meant to pass on that your friend Duncan is back safe at home with his family.”

Charlie’s rigid features relaxed. “Really, that’s smashing news. I honestly thought he might be…well, you know.” He offered his hand. “Wonderful to hear it, truly.”

Walt shook the hand and said, “Now, I know you must be itching to clean up and get to your supper, so I’ll come right to it. I’ve got information there may be a still hidden somewhere on your property.”

Charlie stared. That’s all he did.

Amalia made a small gasping sound.

Constable Walt rubbed the top of the new leather backed chair he’d been sitting in. “Now, I realize it’s a devious old moonshiner trick to hide a still on a neighbour’s land. It is, of course, entirely possible there may be one out there without you even aware of its existence.”

Charlie’s adam’s apple bobbed. “I see…a still for, um…moonshine, is that what we’re talking about?”

“Illegal alcohol, yes.”

“Indeed…” Charlie turned to his wife. “Amalia, dear, have you heard anyone speaking of illegal alcohol stills in the area?”

“Why, no, Charlie, I don’t believe I have.”

“You’re quite certain, now? The constable has come a long way to see us.”

“I should think I’d remember such a thing. Oh…wait one moment, I believe I heard something about that Erickson man. Gunnar, yes, that’s his name – I’ve heard he might have one.”

Charlie turned with an accommodating smile. “It’s that Erickson fellow you should speak with. Quite the rough customer, you’ll want to keep your weapon handy.”

“I heard he tried to kill you with a chisel at the dance.” Walt didn’t blink.

But Charlie did. “Heavens…you’re quite right. I was going to mention that. At first I thought it might be why you’re here.”

“But you didn’t bring it up till now.” Walt rubbed the chair.

“Well, I’ve always been one to let bygones be bygones, haven’t I? If a man shows a desire to stop trying to kill me, I feel it’s quite the Christian thing to forgive and forget…you see.”

“Something convinced him to not try killing you anymore?”

“Yes, a rather large shovel.”

Walt tapped the chair. “Actually, we’ve known about Gunnar Erickson for quite some time. We know he keeps a still and we know he sells alcohol. But the one thing Gunnar has always been smart about is to keep his business small enough to not leave a trail of unexplained wealth. You see, nothing attracts the attention of the government faster than spending a whole lot of money you apparently don’t have.”

More bobbing of adam’s apple accompanied by the accursed twitching eyelid.

Walt went on, “The Department of National Revenue gets especially bloodthirsty when they think someone might be trying to trick them out of tax dollars. You come from England; you must know how governments love their taxes.”

Amalia jumped in, “Oh, Charlie knows all about that. He absolutely loathes how the pigs at the trough gobbled his family estate back home. For the longest time he was like a goat walking both ways across the road.”

Charlie looked more like a balloon stretched over a cheese grater, ready to pop with the effort of trying to unobtrusively encourage his wife to shut up.

Walt nodded pleasantly. “You probably heard last year the Americans finally caught up with Al Capone?”

Amalia said, “That Chicago gangster, yes, we heard - about time.”

“Did you know what they charged him with?”

“Probably murder or some such horrible mafia business.”

“Tax evasion.”

“Really?” She sat back, blinking.

Charlie also blinked. And twitched. “Not paying his taxes, that’s all?”

Walt offered a smile so rich and pleasant it was like throwing a warm hug across the room. “Spending more money than he apparently earned – governments really hate that. And they love to put people in prison who do it.”

Amalia breathed, “…dear me…”

Charlie had his mouth open to say something, when Ah Joe rushed into the room.

“Dog!”

All eyes fell on the cook.

“In kitchen! Dog make puppy!”

Amalia beamed and gushed, “Puppies? We’re having puppies? Oh, Charlie, you have to go help her.”

Charlie waved it off. “It’s a dog, dear. Dogs don’t need help producing puppies. Ah Joe, did you keep some dinner warm for myself and the men?”

Amalia’s eyes flooded with maternal hormones, venomous maternal hormones. “Charlie, go help her!”

He shot a glance toward the constable and then to Ah Joe, “Does the dog appear in some sort of distress?”

“It make cry noise…*aiii – aiii…*and not want come out from pantry. No good, maybe puppy stuck.”

“Charlie!”

“Yes, dear, alright…I’m going.”

Ah Joe said, “It dark in kitchen. Make electric go now, or not see dog.”

*Too many things.* Charlie said, “Amalia, if you’d be good enough to start the generator, I’ll see about pulling puppies out of the dog. Ah Joe, you get cooking, we’re hungry.”

Amalia said, “I’m not leaving at a time like this. Constable, instead of just standing there, please go start the generator. You know where it is.”

“But I don’t know anything about that contraption.”

“There’s a knob on the front marked ‘choke’, pull that out. Then crank it until it goes. Let it run two minutes and push the choke knob back in.”

Charlie said, “Yes, it’s brand new, quite simple.” His wife grabbed his arm and hauled him toward the doorway.

Minutes later, the lights came on, the first puppy appeared and Constable Walt came running into the far end of house shouting, “Fire! Your workshop’s on fire! Raise the alarm!”

Charlie was on his haunches in the pantry, leaning over the dog. “Dear God…I forgot.” He tipped past his knees until his forehead thumped the floor.

Amalia said, “The workshop, that’s where all the…dear me.”

Charlie groaned into the floorboards, “Let it burn. We can’t have him going in there.” Then he muttered, “Al Capone…I’m Al Capone of the Cariboo.”

“Will you be going to prison, Charlie?”

“Oh, why the bloody hell not?”

Chapter Ten

Given the uncommon activity around her household the past few weeks, it seemed odd that Henry’s simple invitation to dinner should have the effect it did on Karin. There was something other than his size which set the towering hermit apart, something that disturbed her soul and stirred her social instincts to produce a memorable event. Maybe it was the compassion in a caring woman’s heart for the way he’d chosen to live. Life was tough enough without being driven to exile in a dank musty hole because people didn’t like the way you looked. Strong, yet sad and gentle, that was the feeling she got from him. And wounded – he’d been hurt by people in his past and there was no way she was going to let that happen here.

The remainder of her family’s motives were less complicated. Winnie looked forward to the visit because she couldn’t wait to play with the bear. Duncan of course was grateful the man had saved his life. And Colin…well, Colin always found something fascinating about anything that wandered in front of his nose, like a size sixteen moccasin. For Karin, though, when the day arrived nothing was good enough, nothing was ready. The whipsawed floor the men had banged together was a natural trap for dirt, dog hair and squashed insects from the forest – it needed a deep scrubbing with a stiff brush. There were children to lather and scrape in the big galvanized washtub, hair to cut (especially Duncan’s summer mop), handmade curtains to be hung around the two new windows and of course, the menu - what to feed a giant? Fortunately, the answer was being carved into chunks on her front porch at that very moment, never mind the expanding circle of gore tracking toward her doorway. She was already two days into boiling and canning the small mountain of lean dark protein remaining after their donation to the neighbourhood beef ring. It was a world of toil, though she had to admit a diet containing meat appeared a godsend in the face of an otherwise endless winter of rice and CPR strawberries.

But how to prepare such bounty for her guest? She’d never served moose in Nanaimo, hadn’t seen one until now, as there were no such creatures on Vancouver Island. In stature it looked something like a horse, but if anyone had ever offered her or her mother a recipe for horsemeat, they’d probably discounted it as a terrible thing to do to a pretty animal. Also, her potbelly stove didn’t have an oven, only a top surface for cooking, so roasts were out. That wasn’t the biggest problem, though; the biggest problem was encouraging her husband, the earnest but novice butcher, to recall which part of the animal the meat had come from.

“What difference does that make?”

“Duncan, there’s prime cuts and not so prime cuts. The difference is obvious when you get it between your teeth.”

“Well, you should’ve told me that before. I don’t remember which is what.”

“But we have a visitor coming. You can’t serve visitors just any old hunk you hack off, willy-nilly.”

Duncan shrugged. “It’s Henry. Have you seen his teeth? I don’t think he cares what he gets so long as it’s quit moving.”

Karin went to the nails sticking out of her back wall and pulled down the biggest pot she had. If she seared the meat, then covered it to cook slowly with a little sauce, that should be like braising. Short ribs would be best. She called out the door, “Duncan, did you keep any ribs?”

“Naw, Arnold took them for his dogs.”

The ever expanding crease at the middle of her forehead deepened. “Arnold’s dogs are eating our short ribs? Do you have any idea which parts you kept?”

“The big ones with the most meat.”

She sighed, “So the legs?”

“They’re huge, honey. We’ll be able to eat them all winter.”

“You mean chew them all winter.”

He called back, “Isn’t hunting great? I can’t wait to see what comes out of the bush next.”

She grumbled, “With my luck, probably a dragon.”

“A dragon, what makes you say that, honey?”

“Never mind…just bring me something from as high up the leg as you can. I’ve got onions, garlic and Wooster sauce. I just wish I had some fresh mushrooms.”

Duncan said, “I can get you mushrooms. I saw some down by the lake.”

“No you don’t.”

“Huh…why not?”

“I can’t believe you just said that. No mushroom picking unless you’ve got Henry along…honestly, Duncan.”

He went back to carving meat accompanied by a toneless hiss from his lips, the Duncan version of a whistle. A ragged hunk came leading the way through the door, dripping. “Here you go. I squeezed everything for softness and this felt like the best.”

Karin thanked him, then plopped her mystery cut in the frying pan, seared it and set it aside. She made a broth out of crushed garlic and onions, with a generous swig of her precious Worcestershire Sauce, then let the fire in the stove cool and added her meat to the pot, covered to cook slowly. An apron wipe of the face, then she looked around the cabin. The children were scrubbed, the dog brushed with a curry comb - it almost looked domestic, even if it still sat and scratched for fifty minutes out of every hour. There was time to freshen up and do her hair. The last thing she needed was a dragon to come out of the bush.

Duncan recognized it immediately. Dragons are a lot like giraffes in that way; even people who’ve never seen one have a good working knowledge of their oddly put together bodies. He called inside, “Wow, honey, how’d you know that was going to happen?”

She’d unpinned her hair and was reaching for the brush. “Duncan, I’ve just started freshening up. What’s wrong now?”

“Come look for yourself. And fetch the rifle.”

At the mention of ‘rifle’, Karin’s neck stiffened. She hurried to the wall pegs and shoved the weapon under the bed. Winnie left her doll on the chair to jump down and join her mother heading for the door. Colin wasn’t far behind, fluffy blond head wobbling to his toddler gait.

Duncan said, “Look, honey, over by the birch trees.”

“Dear God…”

“So how’d you know there was a dragon coming?”

She stared. “How did I know…Duncan, it’s a camel!”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Now where on earth do you suppose that came from?”

“Who cares, just look at all the meat on the back of that thing. Did you bring the rifle?”

Karin delivered the sourest look in her arsenal. “You are not shooting it! We have no canning jars left - and that smell!”

Their visitor came plodding toward them, its exotic scent leading the way. At the porch it stretched a long curved neck and lippy whiskered face to the apprehensive audience. Karin backed up, but Duncan stood his ground, staring sideways with curled nostrils.

“That is the smelliest thing ever. Do you think it’s sick?”

Karin gathered Winnie against her leg in the doorway. “Duncan, make it go away, it’s horrible.”

He waved. “Shoo…go on, beat it!”

Big brown eyes flapped sultry camel lashes.

“I mean it, get moving or…I’ll think of something camels don’t like.” He mumbled over his shoulder, “You know about camels, honey. What is it they don’t like?”

“I’d say the most obvious thing is they don’t like to wash.”

Duncan said, “Go away or I’ll give you a bath!”

The fuzzy face stretched toward his waving hand with a mournful bawling sound. Duncan jerked it back.

Karin said, “I think it’s lonely. It wants you to pet it.”

Winnie said, “Can I pet it?”

“No, you certainly cannot! Get inside and take Colin with you.” She scooped her daughter behind her.

Duncan said, “The rifle would fix it up quick.”

“I told you there won’t be any shooting. If it was that wild, it wouldn’t have come straight toward us. Clearly someone’s turned it loose or let it escape into the bush.” She stepped out of her doorway. “I mean, just look at those big eyes.”

Duncan had already stared into the dangerous looking eyes. “I don’t trust it. It’s got ugly feet.”

But his wife was approaching the rail.

“Honey…” Duncan reached to the bench beside him for his butcher knife. “You don’t know where it’s been.”

She stretched a hand toward the homely, sand coloured head. It bawled again – she jerked away.

“See, I told you.”

Wrinkled brow. “Nonsense, that’s just the sound camels make when they’re lonely.”

“I’d be lonely too if I smelled like that.”

“Trust me, Duncan, you’re not much better after a week of work without a bath.” She reached again toward their visitor and this time the docile beast allowed her to pat its fluffy top. It wiggled rubbery lips and let out a deep gurgling burp, then began chewing. “See? That’s what they do when they’re happy.”

Duncan put down the butcher knife and joined his wife. “I guess it’s harmless enough. Maybe it came from a circus. Do you think it knows any tricks?” He began petting the camel.

Karin rubbed the fuzzy forehead. “Once you’re past the smell it’s kind of cute. See how he nuzzles my hand?”

“A minute ago you wanted me to chase the ugly thing away.”

“That’s before I saw how lonely it was.”

The next few seconds came faster than a sharp wind through an open winter door.

From around the corner of the cabin a black ball of unrestrained curiosity bounded toward the visitor and Henry’s deep voice boomed, “No, come back!”

A camel leg shot sideways to send the bear tumbling.

Karin yelped, “Ow!” and spun away holding her hand.

Henry charged toward the beast, shouting and waving, which sent it plodding at last toward the bush while the bear wiggled groggily to its feet.

Duncan had his wife’s hand. “What happened, honey? Are you hurt?”

“It bit me!”

“Oh…that looks bad.”

“It hurts, Duncan. It really hurts.”

“Okay, honey…wait here, I’ll get the mercurochrome.”

Karin whimpered. “That’ll hurt more. I don’t want mercurochrome.”

Little Winnie said, “But Mummy, you always put mar-co-mone on all our owies.”

Duncan said, “Yeah, honey, you do.”

Frosty scowl. “I don’t care, I don’t want it.”

Winnie whined, “Howcome Mummy doesn’t get mar-co-mone and we always have to?”

Duncan said, “Don’t worry, Mummy’s going to let us put it on her just like everybody else. Because Mummy’s brave and knows it’s the right thing to do.” He glowered at Karin.

Less belligerent now, but with plenty of blinking and swallowing, “I suppose…but if I say stop, then you stop. I mean that, Duncan, I’m not joking.”

He turned and patted his daughter’s curls. “See, I told you Mummy’s brave.”

Winnie’s little forehead bunched and her eyes gleamed. “I get to put it on Mummy.”

He drew his hand back from the small head. “Because you want to help her get better, right?”

“That’s right, Daddy, I want to help.”

Duncan gave his almost-five-year-old daughter the same look a farmer gives a stray dog snooping around his chicken coop. “Well…you can help by getting a bowl with some water and a washcloth. The mercurochrome doesn’t come till after.”

Winnie’s small white teeth showed and she turned to her mother. “It might sting a little bit, Mummy, but it’s for your own good.”

Karin tucked her hand behind her back. “Gracious…look who’s suddenly Florence Nightingale. And quit looking at me like that.”

Winnie spun and with a businesslike strut headed off to fetch the bowl.

Duncan said, “You did a good job teaching her, dear. I think she’ll make a fine nurse.”

“I’m sure she will, the kind that likes to give needles.”

Winnie reappeared with water, washcloth and a small brown bottle. “I brought the mar-co-mone, Daddy.”

“I see that, good girl.”

Karin backed away from the eager little helper. “I need to sit.” She plopped on the bench beside the moose bones.

Duncan cleaned the bite and swabbed on the scarlet antiseptic while Winnie stood staring at her mother’s face. When the flinch came, the little girl’s tongue poked past her lips. “It stings, doesn’t it, Mummy?”

“Winnie, go play with the bear!”

“But Daddy said I could help.”

“Well, licking your lips isn’t helping. And it doesn’t sting at all.”

“Yes it does. I know it does.”

Karin flinched again. “Duncan, not so hard!”

“See, Mummy…that means it’s working.”

“Winnie, if you don’t play with that bear, there won’t be any pudding!”

The little girl pulled her lips together and swung away. “I told you mar-co mone is awful…I told you.” The bear shambled up to nuzzle Winnie’s hand and the earnest look disappeared. She giggled. “I like bears, they’re cuter than camels and they don’t bite.”

Henry said, “That’s not true, bears bite harder than anything in the bush and they’ve got big claws.” He drew up a sleeve of the huge brown coat he wore, revealing three purple scars from wrist to elbow. “See?”

Winnie stared. “Oh, was that from a bear?”

“Claws, her mother’s.”

“Did you fix them with mar-co-mone?”

He tugged the sleeve back down. “No, I don’t like that stuff either, it hurts.”

Winnie pouted at her mom. “See?”

The bandaged bite was a handicap getting supper on the table, as it was Karin’s right hand, the only one capable of properly controlling a knife or pouring with any accuracy. She hadn’t even finished her hair. While Duncan buried moose bones and Henry and his bear entertained kids on the porch, she fumbled through chopping, sawing and yanking apart a fresh dandelion and wild green salad. Thank God she’d got the potatoes in the pot before the carnivorous camel appeared or she wouldn’t have been able to peel them. And if things weren’t difficult enough already, the potbellied stove was more of a heater and less of a cooker, rendering the cabin positively tropical. She wiped her forehead with the back of her good hand and called through the open door, “Henry, have you ever seen a camel before around these parts?”

“Not me, but when I was small there were stories of strange humped beasts packing freight on the road. I heard they scared the horses and made people complain, so a law was made against them and the owner had to turn them loose. For many years, people would see them in the bush. Suppose some made babies and that’s what you had today.”

“Well, I hope I never see another.”

She finished laying the table and called them in. Henry stooped through the door in his massive fur coat, then hunched his shoulders and gazed at the floor. “Thank you for asking me, Karin. No white person ever asked me into their home before.”

It was such a sad statement she had trouble looking at his face. “Oh, Henry, it’s a delight to have you. Please take off your coat and sit down.”

Still staring at the floor. “Can I keep it on? I never take it off.”

“But it’s positively baking in here.”

“I have no shirt.”

She straightened, blinking. “Oh, of course…it’s no problem. You can sit next to Winnie in the strong chair.” She grimaced. “I didn’t mean you might break the others…what I meant was it’s our best chair for special guests.”

He stooped toward the table. “Thank you.”

They sat and filled their plates. Karin mushed together a paste of potatoes, bread and milk in a bowl for Colin, then everyone bowed their heads and Karin made Duncan say grace. At the ‘Amen’, Henry’s deep voice joined in.

Karin held the spoon under Colin’s mouth. “You say grace, Henry? Are you Christian?”

The first forkful of meat was almost at his mouth; he lowered it to answer. “I learned about God at school.” He raised the fork.

Colin’s mouth wrapped around the spoon and he waved his arms with a happy squeal. Karin said, “You went to school?”

Henry finished chewing and swallowed before answering. “Yes, ma’am, Kamloops. I think I said last time.” He carefully sawed off another chunk of meat and raised it to his mouth.

Karin said, “I wish you’d teach Duncan some of those wonderful table manners. Is that where you learned them, at school?”

“Manners were very important. We all had to eat together in a big dining room with the nuns watching and they’d hit us if we ate like savages. That’s what they called us a lot, savages.”

“Goodness me…and is that why your English is so good?”

“Yes, ma’am, we weren’t allowed to talk our language.”

“Really, not at all?”

“No, only English.”

“And how old were you when you went there?”

Henry looked down at his plate. “Seven, I was seven.”

Duncan was almost halfway through his first heap of food. With a spray of semi-chewed meat and potatoes, he said, “Karin, let Henry eat. He’s supposed to be here for supper.”

She dipped her head and scooped from Colin’s mush bowl. “Of course, I was just trying to make conversation.”

Henry set his fork on his plate with a small clink. He filled his huge chest with a deep breath and said, “I was seven years old when I started to really look different. The priest who used to come to the reservation told my family I should go with him to the new Industrial School and they would look after me there. He said my family would not be able to look after me. My mother cried, but my father said she should listen to the priest. So I was sent. I could only speak *Secwépmctsien.*”

Karin glanced at Duncan, then with her chin stuck out, looked back to Henry. “That must have been very hard. Were there any other Indian children there to help you?”

“There were only Indian children, it’s an Indian school. But nobody was allowed to talk to me in *Secwépmctsien* or they’d be strapped.”

She sat back with huge eyes. “Strapped, you mean they hit you for speaking your own language?”

“They hit us for everything they didn’t like. And there was lots they didn’t like.”

The baby’s spoon was left in the bowl. Karin had her mouth open to continue, when Duncan interrupted again. “Henry needs to eat.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry…you enjoy your supper, Henry.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He picked up his knife and fork to concentrate on his supper, eating the same way he drank tea, like an Englishman with careful manners.

In the silence around the table, Duncan’s open mouthed gobbling of food was suddenly more than Karin could bear. “Duncan, close your mouth when you chew. You sound like a pack of wild animals.”

“Huh? But this is the way I always eat. How else are you supposed to do it?”

“Like Henry, so people don’t have to hear you. Especially around company.”

Duncan closed his mouth, but the sucking and blowing through his nostrils was probably worse and did little to disguise the frantic rhythm of chomping and gulping…chomping, gulping…chomping...

Karin’s tolerance stretched thinner and she pushed the spoon too hard into Colin’s tender mouth. The baby spat mush across the table, squawking like a scalded goose.

Winnie squealed, “Mummy, he spat food on me!”

Colin squawked again, waving wildly. Then Winnie whined with her shrill little voice until Duncan yelled, spraying more half-chewed food, “Both of you, stop it!”

Henry’s deep voice rumbled across the table. “This is a fine supper, the best I’ve ever had. At the school we used to get hunks of gristle and fat with hardly any meat on them. And beans with wasps and rocks in them. Everybody was always hungry, especially me.”

Abrupt silence - even the baby stopped to look at him.

Karin wiped her mush covered hand on her dress and said, “Why, thank you, Henry. It’s a pure pleasure to have people appreciate your cooking.” She swung a purposeful look to her husband.

Henry said, “It’s true. I’m not just saying it to make you happy.”

Duncan said, “And now I’m a hunter, there’ll be plenty more to cook.”

Henry aimed his wide face toward his host. “Maybe you should come out with me sometime and let me show you the land. Then I won’t have to wait for the wolves to tell me where you are next time.”

Duncan muttered into his plate, “That was an accident. I just didn’t understand Arnold’s directions.”

“Getting lost is never on purpose. Whoever Arnold is, he’s not *Secwépemc*, his people haven’t lived here for thousands of years. Come with me, my friend, and I can show you not just the land, but where to look for the animals. I’d be honoured to teach you.”

Duncan looked up with an uncommonly humble nod. “Thank you, that would be good.”

Karin said, “I suppose when you finally finished school, Henry, it must’ve been a wonderful relief.”

He shook his big head. “I never finished, I ran away and hid in the bush. I knew my people didn’t want me and the teachers hurt me at the school. They made me do all the hard work because of my size, but then called me Philistine Goliath and made the other children laugh at me. If I did what I was told, but wasn’t fast enough they’d still hit me. I hated it there.”

Like her husband, Karin aimed her eyes into her plate. She swallowed and looked up. “I’d be flattered if you had another helping.”

“Thank you, it’s the best I ever ate.”

Winnie stood suddenly on her chair and reached to wrap the big man’s head in a tippy-toe hug. Her tiny voice gushed sincerity. “Henry, if anyone ever hits you again, I’ll get my Daddy to hit him back.”

“Thank you, Winnie.”

“You’re welcome, Henry.”

Karin said, “Amen.”

The whole family followed Henry out to the porch as the last colours of daylight were fading from the sky. Karin tried to talk him into staying the night, as no one would be able find their way through the inky bush after sundown, but he just showed her his big teeth and pointed to the bear. “My child is sleepy. She wants to go home and hibernate. It’s probably the last time she’ll be out this year.”

Karin said, “Fine, but I want you to come for supper anytime. Just anytime at all, is that clear?”

“Yes, Karin, thank you.”

Duncan offered his hand. “If you teach me about the bush, I’ll be just like a real Indian, right?”

The giant paw gripped Duncan’s. “If you want to be Indian, first you have to go to the school. All Indian children have to go there now. Funny part is, when you get there they don’t want you to be Indian. Me, I think it’s better to be what you are, even if that’s not what other people want.”

Karin blinked. “You didn’t tell us all the children have to go.”

“When I went they didn’t, but now they made it law.”

“Why, I think that’s just terrible. Children living away from their families?”

“Their new family is the church. No more savages, just little red Christians all dressed up like whitemen. They don’t teach you much, but they make sure you learn that.”

She stared at him, blinking. “But why would you want to be a Christian now if that’s how you feel about the church?”

“Nothing we learn is bad unless we let it be that way. The nuns and priests taught me about God and how He loves us all. I learned Jesus taught us to say ‘Our Father who art in heaven’, not ‘My Father’. He said we’re all the children of God. He didn’t say we should all be the same. I don’t think He loves me less just because I’m different.”

“That’s true, Henry, there’s lots to love about you.”

He said, “But if they keep on with their school, soon there won’t be anyone left who knows how to be *Secwépemc*. And that will be a shame because once something is lost and nobody knows where to find it, that thing is lost forever.”

Winnie reached up to pull on his hand. “You should start another school, Henry. You could teach children how to be Indian. You could teach me first.”

He patted her little head, almost as high as his knees. “Thank you, Winnie, but it’s better to be what you are, and that way you’ll be happy. I think you’re right, though, there should be a different school.” He reached to rub his sleepy bear on the head and said goodbye to everyone, then the pair disappeared down the steps into the dark. In less time than it took Duncan to lift Winnie into his arms for a final wave, their quiet footfalls were gone.

Next morning the cabin felt like an ice cave when Duncan fumbled back the quilt to crawl out of bed and light the stove. He plopped one foot to the floor, searched for the courage to force the other behind it, then changed his mind and poked a toe in his wife’s back. “Honey, the fire’s out.”

She moaned, but didn’t answer.

Another poke, “Maybe you could make some breakfast.”

She just lay beside him, pretending to be asleep.

“C’mon, I’ll make you a deal - you start breakfast and I’ll get the kids dressed. You’ve got some washed diapers, right?” Then he thought about what he’d just said and went, “Naw…that’s no good, I’ll get the stove going.” He slithered out of bed.

The plank floor was like crossing a glacier in his bare feet. He’d gone to bed without splitting any kindling; now he wanted to kick himself for being so lazy. Five minutes later and with a lot of lipless muttering, the first crackling promise of warmth flickered at the heart of the stove. Colin wiggled in his bassinet with a sleepy squeak and Winnie asked, “Can we have eggs for breakfast, Daddy, instead of porridge?”

Duncan headed back to the bed. “Sure, if we can get your mom up.” He gave the shoulders under the quilt a shake.

Again, Karin moaned, but made no move to stir.

“C’mon, honey, the kids are hungry.” He yanked the quilt back. “Time to get up! Let’s go!”

When she still lay huddled in her thin nightdress, he leaned for a closer look. She was breathing fast with her eyes closed and when he reached to the pale forehead, her skin felt on fire. He muttered, “Uh-oh…I think something’s wrong with Mummy.”

Winnie sat up in her bed. “Is Mummy sick?”

“I think so, she’s really hot. Winnie, go fill the kettle with water, will you? Maybe coffee will get her going.” He gave Karin’s shoulder a shake. “C’mon, honey, wake up. Do you hear me? It’s morning.”

She let out a faint whimper, then whispered finally, “Duncan…I feel terrible…and I’m freezing.”

He tucked the quilt back up around her shoulders. “It’s that camel.” he said. “It gave you a disease or something.”

She huddled tighter, shivering. “My hand hurts…can you look?”

It didn’t take long. He unwound the bandage and right away wished he hadn’t. The back of the hand was shiny red, almost purple, and puffed up tight against the skin – it hurt even to look at. “Yeah, it’s the bite, alright. I think it got infected.”

Abruptly, Karin pitched toward the edge of the bed and vomited; her head never left the mattress. She lay quivering, then with a voice thin as tissue paper, whimpered, “I…I’m sorry…guess I’m sick. Does the hand look bad?”

Duncan stared toward the door, biting his bottom lip. “We need a doctor.”

“Duncan…I don’t think - ” She spasmed again and vomited.

Winnie was standing beside the stove with her doll clutched under her arm. “Mummy, are you going to die?”

Duncan snapped, “Is that what you said about me?”

Karin breathed, “Enough…that’s not helping. Duncan, go get Pauline. Winnie, bring Mummy the wash basin and a cloth…good girl.”

Duncan said, “You’re right, Pauline might know what to do.” He pulled on his boots and jacket, then headed for the door as Colin’s puff of morning hair poked above the edge of his bassinet. Too bad, the little guy would have to stay in his night diaper until he got back.

It took far too long to get Rosie bridled and saddled. The stupid horse had developed a habit of lifting her head away from the bit whenever Duncan brought it to her mouth. He was going to ask someone about it, but hadn’t got around to it yet. Also, if he turned his back, the mare had a taste for a person’s shirt collar, chomping down to lift up hard as she could. Getting that horse ready to go was like trying to shove a pig into a party dress. Eventually, though, he was banging on Pauline’s door and yelling.

“Pauline! Pauline, are you in there?”

From around the back of the cabin, “I’m busy! What the hell’s the problem?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the biffy! Go inside and start a pot of coffee!”

“There’s no time, Karin’s sick! Her hand’s puffed up big and red, and we have to get her to a doctor!”

“Hang on…I’m coming.”

The dress was still billowing back down her legs as Pauline appeared around the corner of the cabin. “Alright, tell me about it.”

“A camel bit her.”

“Camel, huh?”

“Yeah, and it got infected.”

“Duncan, did this camel have big antlers and a hump?”

“It had a hump. But no antlers.”

Pauline stood gazing at him a few moments, then, “Alright, makes no never-mind. So the hand’s puffed up - we might be able to fix it with mercurochrome.”

“I already tried that, it didn’t work. Now she’s so sick she can’t get out of bed. Throwing up too.”

“C’mon, let’s go.”

The first thing Pauline did was check the veins running up Karin’s forearm. She pointed, “See that red line? Blood poisoning.”

Duncan stared. “That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“It is if we don’t stop it. So you tried mercurochrome, but before that you gotta wash it real good with lye soap - did you do that?”

Duncan sucked on his bottom lip. “She was real finicky about letting us touch it. Lye would’ve made her crazy.”

“Well, it’s too late now. Only thing is to cut out the infection.” Pauline looked down at the patient. “Karin, do you think you feel strong enough for a wagon ride?”

“…where…”

“The doctor, Williams Lake.”

“Pauline…I’m so sick…I don’t…” Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes.

Pauline straightened with a sigh. “You say this happened yesterday?”

Duncan nodded.

“Damn, that set in fast. By the time I get her to the doc he might have to take the whole hand. Didn’t I hear something about his lordship buying a new truck?”

“He did, but they drove it up to Quesnel after haying last week. They’re not home.”

Pauline shook her head. “I can’t do it here, son. I just ain’t a doctor and this means cutting. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Little Winnie had been standing beside Colin’s bassinet, listening and watching. “Is my mummy going to die?”

Duncan stiffened. He had his mouth open to scold her again, but Pauline cut in, “Your mummy needs you to ask God for help. Do you know how to say a prayer?”

“I can say ‘Now I lay me’.”

The pioneer woman’s weathered features transformed with a smile, “Well, you say your prayer and at the end of it ask God to make your mummy better. And I’ll pray too, that should help.”

Winnie said, “Do I have to get on my knees first?”

“It always helps when we get on our knees. God likes that.”

“Okay, Mrs. Rempel, I’ll say my prayer.”

Winnie went to the edge of her bed and began reciting, “Now I lay me down to sleep…”

Duncan said, “Is that all we’re going to do?”

“No, we’ll load Karin in the wagon and haul her to Williams Lake, that’s what we’re gonna do.”

Duncan’s normally carefree features darkened. “I can’t leave the kids, you’ll have to go alone. But just sitting here praying doesn’t sound like much help.”

“Son, go kneel beside your daughter. There’s nobody so big he can’t ask for help sometime. Heck, you came to me, didn’t you?”

Duncan blinked. “That’s different, you’ve got a wagon and a plan.”

“Well, part of my plan is to pray and you should too. But not right now, you can start after I’m gone. First, we gotta get Karin loaded up and comfortable as we can make her.”

They were halfway across the porch with the patient in Duncan’s arms when the deep voice of heaven spoke to them, “Where are you going? What’s wrong with Karin?”

Pauline let out a yelp and Duncan shouted, “Henry, don’t sneak up like that!”

Pauline said, “What the hell…that’s a man said that?”

Henry stepped around the corner of the cabin and her eyes bulged.

Duncan said, “That’s Henry, he’s a giant.”

“Jumping Jehoshaphat, he sure is.”

Henry said, “I was going to wait until she left. I’ve come for your first lesson about the bush.”

Duncan gazed over his wife’s lolling head. “I can’t, Henry. That camel bite’s got Karin sick and we have to take her to Williams Lake for a doctor.”

The dark eyes gazed at the still figure in Duncan’s arms. “She doesn’t look good and that’s a long way. Maybe you should take her to a doctor closer.”

Pauline had recovered enough to clear her throat and announce, “That is the closest doctor. There’s Ashcroft in the other direction, but that’s further.”

“My uncle’s a doctor. He’s not far.”

“You’ve got an uncle who’s a doctor…where does he live?”

Henry said nothing. His gaze moved to Duncan. “He’s the one who healed you.”

Pauline said, “Is this doctor the size of him? Because if he has to operate with those big hands, that hole might never heal. Are they some tribe of sasquatches?”

Duncan scowled. “He’s not a sasquatch, Pauline. He’s Shuswap and his uncle’s a healer from the reservation. I was mostly dead when Henry found me and took me there. Of course, I didn’t have blood poisoning.”

Henry said, “Poisoning? My uncle can fix that.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure, give me Karin.” He marched up the steps and before anyone had time to argue, scooped the frail figure in his massive arms. Then he cleared the steps in a single stride and set off at a lope toward the bush. His big voice called behind him, “You take the road. It’s faster through the trees, I’ll meet you there.”

Pauline stared. “Jumping Jehoshaphat…”

When the buckboard rattled down the muddy road through Canim Lake Indian Reservation carrying the Sinclair family, including baby Colin in a fresh diaper, the first problem was finding where Karin had been taken. Pauline brought the rig to a halt before a group of women standing in front of a log house.

“Hey there, where can I find your witchdoctor?”

The nearest in the group, a round faced girl under a bright headscarf, called back, “Why, you got a sick witch?”

Pauline stared down at the reins in her clenched fists and snarled, “If there’s one thing I cannot abide, it’s a smartass redskin.”

Duncan said, “You better let me talk. I know that girl, she helped look after me.” He waved and called, “Ida, where’s Blind Bob’s place? It’s me, Duncan.”

“Hallo, Duncan, darling. Did you miss Ida, come to see me again, pretty man?”

Pauline muttered, “…pretty man…?”

“That’s what she called me before she knew my name. She went to school, her English is real good.”

“Not like her eyesight.”

He called again, “I need to find Blind Bob. Where is he?”

“Darling, you don’t remember?”

“I was half dead, Ida, and flat on my back. I had no idea where I was.”

“Well, you’re right in front him, Duncan. That woman Big Henry brought here, she belongs to you?”

He straightened. “This is Blind Bob’s place, my wife’s here?”

“Of course, Duncan, Ida wouldn’t lie to you. Not when you got such nice eyes.” The group of women tittered.

Pauline mumbled, “She’s not very pretty.”

Duncan gave his neighbour a warning look and jumped down. “Think you can stay out here and watch the kids a couple of minutes without starting a fight?”

Pauline cast the round faced girl a threatening eyeball and said, “Maybe…if she keeps her mouth shut.”

“I’ll get Ida to take me inside. She’s Blind Bob’s granddaughter, she helps him with everything.”

Winnie’s curly head popped above the side of the wagon. “Do they have bears, Daddy?”

“Not all Indians have bears, honey. These are regular Indians with horses and dogs. You stay with Mrs. Rempel and do everything she says, okay?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He set off toward the women. They were dressed mostly in modern dresses and sweaters, but everything hung and bulged with little regard to fashion and did nothing to flatter the wearer. Except when it came to headscarves – there, each individual displayed a preference for one bright pattern or another, boldly indicating a personal statement of style. Ida’s was white with bright scarlet roses. Duncan went straight to her. “Can you ask Blind Bob if it’s okay for me to go in, please?” He was careful not to track in Pauline’s arrogant footsteps.

The girl batted shining eyes and purred, “It’s okay for you, Duncan. You’re special, my grandfather likes you. You can come in with Ida anytime.” She headed for the cabin.

The rest of the gaggle watched them go, then with eyes that could’ve melted a rock, turned as a single entity to stare at the wagon. Pauline leaned from her driver’s bench, hawked phlegm into the mud and looked back up, wiping her mouth. Not an eye in the group blinked.

Beyond the creaking cabin door, the air was dark and stifling hot, with a blue haze of wood smoke drifting next to the roof. A drum heater by the far wall glowed with good intention, but the chimney pipe leaked fumes at every joint, sending most of its eye watering residue back into the room. Furniture consisted of a table, two chairs and no bed. Two figures, large and small, stood over a sleeping mat near the drum heater. Ida said something in *Secwépmctsien* and they turned to the newcomers. The little figure spoke in their language, then the big one said in English, “My uncle wants to know what took us so long to get here.”

Duncan coughed in the smoky air, then answered, “Well, uh…it was just a bite. We washed it and, um….put mercurochrome on it. Didn’t know it was going to get infected.”

Henry translated and then stood in silence while the small figure weighed the words.

Duncan waited. *Had he done something wrong?*

Finally the little healer said, “Dun-can woman sick. Me wait for you come, make more hard.”

“You waited…you mean you knew we were on our way?”

Henry said, “My uncle saw us coming last night. He’d already prepared the things to make her better.”

“But she only got sick this morning. And we decided to bring her a little over an hour ago.”

Ida said, “My grandfather sees without eyes. That means he doesn’t always need people to tell him what happens, he knows most things before we do.”

“What…he sees the future?”

“No, just what’s happening now. And what’s going to happen after that.”

Duncan blinked. “But that’s what I…” He stopped and shook his head. “Can he fix the bite?”

Henry answered, “My uncle says the bite is swollen, but that’s normal. He says it’s not what’s making her sick. It was something she ate.”

By now Duncan could make out the grey eyes in Blind Bob’s shrivelled head. He stared into them and said, “But Karin’s got blood poisoning. I saw it, Pauline showed it to me.”

Henry said, “My uncle gave her medicine. Now he wants to know if we’ll drink tea with him. It’s to honour you. He doesn’t like most whiteman stuff, only their tea.”

The old man shuffled to his table, reached a chair and dropped into it with a dry sigh. He said something in *Secwépmctsien* to Ida, who then also asked, “Will you drink tea with my grandfather?”

Duncan wasn’t as tall as Henry; still, the blue layer of smoke curled about his head and watered his eyes. “But what about the blood poisoning? What about my wife?”

The old man sighed again. “Wife eat bad leafs, make sick. Better soon. You drink some with Alec?”

“Who’s Alec?”

Henry said, “My uncle’s real name is Alec Bob. People call him Blind Bob because he’s blind. I figured you already knew that.”

Duncan took a step forward. “Pauline showed me the red line. She showed me the poison.”

Henry said, “Something in that salad Karin made last night was the wrong plant. My uncle thinks it was the one you call milkweed. Did you eat any?”

“Well, no…I don’t like green stuff.”

“I only had a little and I don’t think Winnie ate any at all. I probably didn’t get the bad part. Now, it would be polite to drink tea.”

“I just can’t sit here while - ”

From the sleeping mat by the heater, “Duncan, drink the tea.”

“Karin…?”

“I’m feeling better, honey. You should drink with him and say thank you.”

“You’re better already? That’s impossible.”

Karin said, “Duncan, drink.”

A ruckus of shouting erupted outside. The voices grew louder until the door burst open with a blast of sunlight and a flurry of billowing skirts. “Get the hell away from me! You don’t tell me what to do, you pemmican chewing crows!” Pauline planted her fists each side of the apron shadow. “I got tired of waiting. What’s going on in here? Which one of you is the witchdoctor?”

Ida was first to answer, “Do you have no manners at all when you come in the home of an elder?”

“Listen girl, I’m dang near an elder myself. Is that the medicine you’re pouring?”

“It’s tea. You’re not welcome to have any. Only people with manners are invited to drink in the house of my grandfather.”

“I don’t want any tea. What about the blood poisoning, did the witchdoctor cure it?”

Duncan said, “There’s no blood poisoning, Pauline. Karin ate some bad salad.”

“Bullshit, I saw it!”

“What you saw was wrong. He gave her some medicine and she’s better already.”

“Impossible! Who are you gonna believe, Duncan, me or a bunch of hide chewing - ”

“Pauline, I’m better.” It was Karin. “I’ve stopped throwing up and I’m feeling stronger already. Thanks for bringing me here.”

There was a long silence, followed by, “I, uh…didn’t bring you. The sasquatch did.”

Karin said, “Henry?”

Duncan said, “Henry carried you, honey. He ran through the bush and had you here before we got anywhere close.” Then he shook his head and said, “Probably saved your life, just like he did mine.”

Ida said, “My grandfather saved your life. Now he asks that you drink tea with him. Do you like sugar?”

The old man in the chair pointed at the cups and said, “Give sugar, all.”

Ida’s round face smiled at her guests. “My grandfather likes sugar with everything. And tobacco, he likes tobacco too.”

Duncan said, “I hate tobacco. It’s awful.”

“That’s good, because there’s none left till I go to the store and get him some.”

Pauline muttered, “There’s no blood poisoning?”

A finger like a gnarled twig pointed to the woman in the doorway and Blind Bob spoke in *Secwépmctsien.* Ida’s face soured. She cast her grandfather a bitter look and said something back, but he cut her off, pointing again. She drew herself straight and said, “He wants you to have tea too. He says you have the spirit of the swan – pretty to look at, but too big and loud for your feathers.”

“…pretty…?”

“My grandfather is blind.”

“Oh…well, I guess I could have a quick cup with the old guy. Lots of sugar.”

Ida produced a cup from a bucket in the corner and poured more tea. Then she said, “Would you like pemmican with that?”

“Pemmican? I suppose, maybe just a little.”

Ida handed Pauline her cup and sneered, “Too bad, we don’t have any. The *Secwépemc* aren’t pemmican chewers. It’s a food of buffalo hunters from the prairies, greasy and makes them stink. But your people killed all the buffalo, so there’s probably no pemmican there, either.”

Pauline took the cup, blinking. For the first time since her arrival, very possibly ever, she appeared speechless. She lifted the cup to her lips and sucked a small sip. “…good tea…”

The old man lifted his mug and then in a voice brittle as gnat wings across a window pane said, “Cheers.”

Everyone turned to stare at him. “Cheers.” And they drank.

Only two things could disturb the sense of wellbeing rising up from the circle of bellies swimming with sweet hot tea. One of them was the sound of a child crying outside. Pauline went, “The kids!” And rushed for the door with everyone but Blind Bob jumping up to follow. Even Karin rose from her sleeping mat to wobble to the rescue. They needn’t have panicked; the cluster of Canim Lake ladies that had already surrounded the wagon dispensed more grins and tickles than Winnie and little Colin had wiggled under since leaving their grandparents behind in Nanaimo.

The second disturbance arrived a moment later from a path behind the cabin.

A man stormed toward them, pointing and shouting, “You not belong here! I tell go, not come back!” As he drew closer it appeared the object of his anger was the tall figure of Henry.

Henry looked away, didn’t answer.

More shouting, “Why come this place when nobody want you? You monster! You ugly! Nobody want look at you!”

No one moved, especially the women around the buckboard. They too stared, transfixed.

Henry’s deep voice rumbled, “I came to see my uncle, not you. You aren’t the chief here, you don’t tell the law to the people.”

The man stomped closer, finger waving. “You not people! You monster!”

Henry swung away from his tormentor, presenting his broad, fur covered back.

This clearly was too much. The man howled like a rabid animal and hurtled at the giant who’d chosen to ignore his words. It was like a rabbit challenging a bear. His fists thumped the huge brown coat. He kicked and stomped and jumped like a puppet to launch his blows higher. But Henry didn’t move, not swaying so much as an inch against the storm assaulting his body. The less responsive the victim, the more bizarre the attacker’s antics became. Finally in a frenzy of frustration, the man began climbing the mountain of fur, clawing his way upward in a fit of huffing grunting fury. Until almost at the gigantic shoulders, Henry’s heavy coat sloughed off and the rabbit fell from the bear’s back, wrapped in thick fur and landing with a thud by its feet.

There was a gasp from the tiny crowd.

The man panted and hurled the heavy coat into the weeds.

Remarkably it was Karin, weak and wobbling from her illness, who spoke first, “Henry…what’s wrong with your back?”

Henry’s shoulders slumped and he turned at last, his giant upper body bared to the autumn sunshine. “It’s why I never take off my coat. He’s right, I don’t belong with people, so where I live, nobody has to look at me. It was that way at the school and that’s why I had to leave.”

Karin barely whispered, “The school…they did that to you at the school?”

Henry’s bare back, stomach and chest were a spider web of raised scars and troughed skin which could only be the aftermath of painful burns and untreated cuts and bruises. Yet no trace of injury showed on any flesh which would not normally be covered by clothing. Whatever had been done to him had been done methodically and with careful thought to concealment.

Henry said, “This wasn’t from the school.”

“So, where then? Who did that?”

The dark eyes gazed down at the figure crouched in the weeds. “He did. This man is my father.”

\* \* \*

By the time the ladies of Canim Lake were finished dispensing their judgement upon the despicable vermin on the ground, slapping, thumping and twisting any bit he couldn’t shield while crawling up the path to barricade himself, hopefully forever, behind his lonely door, the world Henry had known most of his life ceased to exist. He tried to pick up his coat and cover himself, but the first woman to return, old Mrs. Sam who used to pop Huckleberries in his mouth when he was barely taller than a dog, put her wrinkled hand on his and said something. She moved her other hand to his chest, his terrible marked chest; she had to reach upward to do it. Henry gazed down at her wiry grey hair and leathery face. What he saw was something he hadn’t seen in years, not since running away from the school - he saw tears. He tried to politely remove the hand and once more comfortably disappear, but another woman came and then another. Soon, they were all around him, tracing his scars with their fingertips and silently absorbing the depravity of his youth, a suffering even they had never guessed at, except as a boy he’d been prone to crying more than most. The shouting from the cabin they’d put down to his father’s love of white man’s alcohol and legendary sour disposition.

“Henry, you come live Aunt Mary.”

“No, you come live Mona’s house. Maybe sleep by stove, keep warm. Got plenty berries and corn, plenty fish. Never hurt no more…maybe you come.”

“Henry…” Karin asked, “what about your mother, does he hurt her too?”

The eyes above her didn’t look down. “My mother died four years ago from the flu. But he hurt her too, especially after I got different. Now she doesn’t hurt no more.”

Karin said, “You should live with us. You can teach Duncan hunting. And the kids love you to death.”

Henry stood in the middle of all the strange affection and stared silently off to the trees. At last, with a face beginning to resemble those around him, he mumbled, “I have to go now….look after my bear.”

He pulled his coat over his shoulders, hiding once more from the hands, then set off with urgent steps toward the road.

When his huge frame had disappeared around the buckboard into the trees, Pauline said, “Any man does that to a kid oughtta be strung up and fixed so he can’t make kids for the next twelve lifetimes. I’ve a mind to go up there and do it myself.”

The women of Canim Lake nodded at the big white woman with moist solemn eyes. Then they looked toward the cabin up the hill.

Duncan said, “All Henry ever did was get born.”

Chapter Eleven

Henry’s wasn’t the only world which had changed. In the aftermath of Constable Davies’ visit, Charlie loaded the charred remains of his vodka manufacturing scheme into the pickup and buried it in a hole alongside the half-eaten carcass of a wolf killed heifer. He’d have liked to throw a few wolves in with it, but the villains had scattered at Frank’s first angry shot and been clever enough to stay out of range afterward, predatory yellow eyes scanning from the trees. Examination of the tracks around the kill indicated the healthy Hereford yearling had been run from a group clumped in a spruce grove sometime before daybreak, then hamstrung in typical wolf fashion and set upon, to be literally eaten alive. The pack, a huge sixteen member band of marauders, had probably moved in from the north to become the scourge of not only Charlie’s hoofed assets, but neighbouring ranchers’ as well. Wolves, though, weren’t the worst of his immediate worries, as the cattle they preyed upon still had practically no value on the open market. With the chill of fall slowing business at the lodge, he had no idea where the money for wages and upkeep would come from, a particular worry with Amalia’s belly swelling by what appeared to be inches daily. He knew he had a problem, but it was one to be kept from the expectant mother at all costs, if only to avert the recurring theme of, “Whatever made you buy a pickup truck, with so many other important things coming up?”

He couldn’t sleep anyway, so nights often found him staying up late to study plumbing diagrams, Amalia stretched beside him in bed, belly thrusting against the blankets, memorizing English nursery rhymes from a book presented to her by doting Wanda Stiles. It was wonderful how the local ladies had decided to shower her with baby gifts - knitted woollies, cuddly rabbit skins for the bassinet and then the book - but it presented something of a challenge to Charlie, reading by lamplight after shutting down the generator. Much of his difficulty lay in the fact he’d never been particularly drawn to the academic side of school, preferring to concentrate instead on more practical pursuits, like rugby and cricket, so serious study was a relatively new concept. Add to this his wife’s droning voice recounting old women living in shoes, and he could barely recall the last three words, let alone pages of diagrams and text.

“Charlie, did you know three blind mice once chased a farmer’s wife?”

“Dear, if you consider it, a blind mouse would have little chance in the real world, now wouldn’t it?”

She giggled, “I wouldn’t know. How could I see it, if it was blind?”

“No, Amalia, it’s not you who can’t see, it’s…oh, never mind.”

“Was Humpty-Dumpty a little boy?”

“He was an egg. Now, I’m trying to study here, pipes and faucets and the lot. It would do me a great service if you’d hush up.”

“…I beg your pardon…”

*Bloody oath, what was he thinking?* He put down the plumbing book and reached to caress her arm. “What I meant, dear, was I’m at a difficult section concerning the effect of reduced pipe diameter on water flow and I really must understand it or nothing’s going to work properly. You do want running water for the baby, don’t you?”

“Well, perhaps it would be better for your understanding to go sit outside in the lounge. Presumably far away from my disturbings.”

“Sweetheart…”

“I’d rather you don’t call me that just now, Charlie.”

“You look so lovely in the lamplight, I never can get enough. Your creamy complexion, quite alluring, and I believe I shall always - ”

“Charlie, hush up. I’m trying to mesmerise nursery rhymes.”

“Of course, dear.”

“But you may fetch me a drink of water, please.”

“Certainly, my love.”

“In a clean glass this time.”

“Back in a jiffy.” He slid out of bed.

She called after him. “I’ve changed my mind. A cup of tea would be nice, don’t you think?”

“But dear, it’s late and Ah Joe’s off. There’s no fire in the stove to boil water.”

“I thought you loved me, Charlie.”

“Certainly, my dear. Tea in a jiffy.”

“Thank you, Charlie. And if I’m asleep when you get back, don’t wake me.”

“…not in a thousand years…”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing, just need to find some matches, fresh cups, kindling…perhaps bake a small cake.”

He was gone less than five minutes when the sound of slippers came rushing back toward the bedroom and the door burst open. “Dear, what would you think about hosting parties of hunters from the city?”

“Where’s my tea?”

“Oh…brewing. What do you think?”

“If my tea is brewing already, how did you boil the water?”

“Still hot from dinner. Just imagine, we could charge fees for culling useless creatures like wolves.” He began pacing by the end of the bed. “Yes, I believe it could work, possibly throw in a bear if we can find one. Most city people don’t know a moose from a horse either. We could get rid of a few old troublemakers, like that dish faced mare with the nasty habit of stamping on your foot.”

Amalia aimed level eyes over her book. “I don’t want you shooting our horses, Charlie, that would never do. Find something else.”

“But dear, there is nothing else.”

“I heard at the store Duncan and Karin found a camel last week.”

His face lit. “Camel, are you quite serious?”

“Apparently, it bit Karin.”

“Yes, I had the great displeasure of encountering the smelly beasts in North Africa. They’re like that, you know, obnoxious and unpredictable. It would be quite pleasant to shoot one.”

Amalia gave her husband one final penetrating look. “Would it be illegal?”

“Illegal…what could possibly be illegal about shooting wild animals? The forest is crawling with them.”

“Well, in the civilized world, where I come from, it’s quite alright to produce a harmless bucket of vodka or two without being arrested. But we’re in Canada, I remind you, where practically everything appears to be against one sort of law or another.”

“Yes, it does feel sometimes as if they’re lurking behind trees just waiting for you to enjoy yourself, doesn’t it? Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if someday a policeman pops from the bushes to tell me I’m driving my Ford pickup truck too fast. Can’t you just see it, dear? Wouldn’t that be a sight?”

“You do drive too fast, Charlie.”

“I do not.”

“Dear, you barely had time to whizz around that unfortunate fellow on the bicycle the other day. And the words that come from your mouth, as if the man I married was raised by Australian prison guards or such.”

“Oh, tosh…I’m not that bad.”

Amalia disappeared behind her book. “As I said with the vodka - I don’t mind what you do, so long as our child isn’t required to be raised in shame. It wouldn’t do for him to be visiting his father in prison.”

“There, you did it again!”

The book plopped on her tummy. “Did what?”

“You said ‘him’ dear. You did it quite without thinking.”

Up came the book. “What you should be thinking about, Charlie, is that prison isn’t much different from the navy and you were quite happy to get out of there. Now I’m sure my tea’s getting cold.”

He’d already turned for the door when a small titter arose behind him and he spun. “I heard that! You have a feeling, don’t you? William…I rather fancy the sound of it, William John Stamford. Yes, it has a ring.”

“Charlie, the donkey will dance on ice only if its legs are strong.”

For a fleeting moment he was left with the uncomfortable sensation his wife might actually understand sometimes what she was saying. But only for a moment and then the sensation passed. “Tea…I’ll go fetch your tea.”

\* \* \*

Frank, in his smoky drawling way, was unimpressed. “Boss, if we can’t get close enough to shoot the damn things, how in blazes do you expect some greenhorn from the city to do it?”

Charlie said, “I have a plan. What we’ll do is let them shoot the horse first, then wait for the wolves to come sniffing around the carcass. Really, it’s so simple I’m surprised no one’s thought of it till now.”

“No offence, boss, but not everybody’s from England.”

“And just what do you mean by that?”

Frank reached in a jacket pocket for the ever present tobacco pouch. This probably wasn’t the time to point out his employer’s tendency toward not-so-common solutions to common ranch problems. “How much you planning to charge?”

“Well, certainly enough to make a ridiculous profit. How’s fifty dollars a wolf sound? And eighty per horse…er, moose. Then of course, there’s accommodation on top of that at our opulent frontier inn, with authentic Chinese cuisine.”

“I can’t believe anybody’d be that stupid. What if one of them knows what a moose looks like?”

“I’ve considered that as well. What we’ll do is hold a brief orientation session before each hunt. We’ll ask several key questions like, ‘Who can describe the difference between a moose, a horse and a camel?’ or ‘How long is the mane on a moose?’ Depending on their answers, we’ll decide whether they get to shoot one or not.”

“Y’mean a horse, right?

“Of course, a horse. Haven’t you been listening?”

The tip of another Zig-Zag disappeared in a volcanic plume of Zippo flame. “You’re not gonna start camel ranching are you? Because I ain’t bustin’ them things to the saddle, no way.” Blue smoke jetted from Frank’s nostrils

“Dear fellow, the mention of exotic animals is merely a trick designed to confuse our urban guests. There are no camels…well, perhaps out in the Ish-ka-bibble, but I’m told they have everything there including sasquatches.”

“I’m confused.”

Charlie reached to deliver a dusty pat on his top hand’s shoulder. “Of course you are. You see, it’s so devilishly clever that even an old tail chaser like yourself begins to ask, ‘Is that a camel, a moose or a horse, I wonder?’ The answer for our clients rests in the counsel of our professionally trained hunting guides – oh, perhaps let’s not include young Eldon in that elite group. Give him something distracting to do, like mucking stalls, where he won’t be able to do any damage with that dimwitted tongue of his.”

“I’m with you there, boss.”

Charlie offered another pat. “I believe once more we shall make - how do you prairie people say it again - a shitload of money.”

“I don’t see why we don’t just shoot old dish face now and take care of the wolves ourselves.”

“Because, Frank, this way you’ll get paid.”

“Oh, I see.” Frank nodded. “Good idea, boss.”

The first task was to lure a paying group of bloodthirsty urban neophytes into the diabolical scheme. Charlie put out a feeler with a telegram to his friend and ex-bootlegging partner, George Reifel in Vancouver, describing his plan to the avid hunter in candid detail. George, being something of a rascal himself, responded the same day: HAVE MANY SUITABLE IDIOTS AVAILABLE – STOP – WOULD ACCOMPANY ON ADVENTURE BUT LEAVING FOR KENYA TO HUNT ROGUE ELEPHANTS – STOP – PLEASE ADVISE IF REQUIRING ADDITIONAL REFRESHMENTS – FULL STOP

Charlie was in a positively effervescent mood. He swung into the lounge on gilded legs…or something. Certainly his energy bubbled from every pore. “Amalia, dear, the first of our sporting enthusiasts will be arriving Saturday. We’ll want to ensure they enjoy the full Cariboo experience: fresh trout, smoked jerky – can Ah Joe produce a duck *a l’orange*, do you think? I’ve advertised authentic Chinese cuisine.”

“I believe duck *a l’orange* is French, Charlie.”

“I’m quite aware of that, dear, but everyone knows the Chinese pop ducks in the oven like the English do meat pies. Get him to whip one together, will you?”

“Yes, dear. Did Mr. Reifel say anything about how fit his friends are? As they’re not really hunters I doubt they’ll be happy hiking long distances, especially carrying rifles.”

Charlie pulled on his jaw. “Indeed, it wouldn’t do to have them ride out there on horses either, or they might notice the similarity to our moose.”

“I thought I was clear about shooting horses, Charlie. I’m quite against it.”

“I can’t change the plan now, dear. Far too late and too many promises made.” He didn’t seem at all concerned with her objections. If anything now that his scheme was unfolding, he’d developed a rather disturbing manic gleam in his eyes. He said, “I suppose I could deliver them in the truck.”

She sighed. Whenever he got like this, it was best to simply let him have his lead and find some other way to head in the proper direction. She pushed back an auburn lock. “What about a wagon? The draft team are Percherons, they look quite a bit more like mythological beasts than horses.”

Charlie’s smile snapped back. “Perfect! We’ll run them out there in an authentic western wagon. In fact, if we bounce them around on their pink bottoms long enough, it’s unlikely they’d care if we trotted out a pig for them to shoot.”

“Charlie, that’s enough talk of destroying harmless animals. I find it quite unsettling with the new life arriving in our family.”

He grabbed her around her proud tummy. “Sorry, my only worry is we don’t run short of wolves. Never thought there’d come a day I’d be saying that.” He started swaying her in his arms and singing, *“Oh, you beautiful doll…you great big beautiful doll…”*

“And please don’t sing. It’s less tunesome than you imagine.”

*“Oh, oh…oh, you beautiful doll.”* He dipped her and squeezed till out popped a giggle.

It was wonderful that Charlie had quit brooding. The past weeks since his workshop burned down had been difficult not just for him, but Amalia too, as it fell on her to find ever more inventive ways to urge her man out of his funk. He could be a big moody child if things didn’t go his way, sulking and keeping everything to himself. Unfortunately on a twelve thousand acre wilderness ranch, one could hardly expect things to go one’s way very often. She of course knew this; Hungary was very agrarian and the people closely connected to their land. There were always blights or bugs or someone’s pig running down the road, even their lovely rural lane alongside the Danube. No matter how fine your family’s property, you were never very far from the nearest pig. Other than horses, though, Charlie had never dealt with livestock in the flyblown flesh until he’d arrived in Canada, leaving it up to his enterprising bride to provide distractions whenever the pitfalls of rural life blocked his path to complete happiness.

Breasts were always good. As a woman, it was difficult at times for Amalia to comprehend the male obsession with a pair of body parts which weren’t even connected to the reproductive organs, basically a food source for small sticky offspring. And then there was the tendency men had for pawing. They could get so wildly worked up with celebrating the female chest, they sometimes managed to forget it was attached to a living person, complete with nerve endings. Charlie wasn’t the worst she’d ever encountered; in fact he’d probably had his hand slapped often enough in stables and pantry cupboards to acquire a certain respect for the female anatomy, but he nonetheless groped with enthusiasm. He liked his breasts.

Amalia favoured her clitoris. Training him hadn’t been difficult. Indeed, he was one of those rare talents behind a penis which seemed gifted with the natural patience and perseverance it took to properly prepare a lady for full enjoyment. She knew he’d had practice; it told in his fingers. His lips, his tongue. His confident animal murmurs when snuffling around her heated opening. And most importantly, her clitoris.

With the baby coming, however, she felt frightened. Modern medical thought challenged the prehistoric notion that intercourse should be carried out whenever or wherever the male wanted it, bent over in a field of potatoes, belly bulging with baby and skirts above one’s head if the notion gripped his fancy. Particularly it warned of vigorous coupling in the later stages of pregnancy. Amalia didn’t wish to risk her unborn child’s health simply to satisfy her husband’s selfish impulses. Therefore, with Charlie’s recent moodiness, she’d been somewhat at a quandary - until the arrival of the puppies. No one, not even her highborn husband, was able to resist a wiggly woolly puppy plopped on his lap whenever he showed signs of rising to his own needs. Relocating the new family out of Ah Joe’s pantry and into a corner of their bedroom had been a flash of absolute genius which meant always having a fluffy little distraction on hand for such emergencies. There were drawbacks, of course - the wiggling, whimpering and squeaking could carry on half the night and they tended to widdle everywhere - but if Charlie fancied nipples, the dog was equipped with eight of them. That should keep him happy, as there were only four puppies.

Amalia confronted Frank. “I want Charlie’s idea to work, but I won’t have you shooting one of my horses.”

“But missus, we need the horse to bait the wolves.” Frank’s hat had just been knocked crooked by the dish faced mare, which he was trying to halter. “It’s the most important part of the plan.”

Amalia approached near enough for the drooping ash of the ever present cigarette to be in danger of cascading onto her tummy. “Frank, I want to tell you a story from my country of a shepherd who only listened to sheep and never the voices of people around him. Have you heard this story?”

“Uh…nope.”

“Well, it goes like this: the shepherd was told one day by his employer to do something, but he didn’t. So the employer fired him.”

Frank blinked under his crooked crumpled hat. “Uh…are you telling me I’m gonna get fired if I don’t do what you say? Because you’re not the boss, Charlie’s the boss.”

“There’s more to the story. The boss’s wife made up a terrible story about how the shepherd was particularly liking the girl sheep in his flock and doing things to them in the middle of the night. She let everyone know of this all around and the shepherd was driven from the valley, never to be working again.”

The front of Frank’s hat followed his forehead upward, rising to meet his hair. He stared. “You, uh…you wouldn’t do that, eh?”

“These are my horses, Frank, all of them. I won’t have them shot, any of them.”

“But missus…how else are we gonna get the wolves to come in?”

Amalia leaned closer to the drooping ash, then produced a devious smile. “In order not to become unemployed and still be keeping Charlie happy, this is what you will do…”

Six clients disembarked from the train into the crisp November air at Exeter Station equipped with enough bandoliers, Bowie knives and hollow point ammunition to wage war on the wildlife of the Central Interior for the next several decades. A particularly pink and portly pair, brothers, brandished .470 Nitro Express elephant guns, a display of exuberant firepower rarely seen north of Texas. To accessorize their weaponry, they’d decorated themselves each with wide brimmed safari hats and matching many-pocketed jackets. Everything was bulging, green and brand spanky new. Frank took one look, dug Charlie in the ribs and labelled them, ‘The Sausage Twins’. Then: “Hey, boss, you reckon there’s anything left after they shoot it? Or they just gonna run out there and suck down the skin?”

“Shut up, Frank.”

“We better keep them fed up or who knows what they’re liable to swallow. Maybe a couple of cows.”

“Frank, judging from the armament on this platform, I believe the focus of our attention should not be on what they eat, but on which way they point those cannons. I can’t imagine how large they think a wolf is.”

The train whistle sounded, a few frozen hobos reattached themselves to the cars and the mighty PGE locomotive lurched dutifully northward. Charlie approached his group of adventurers and extended his hand. “Gentlemen, a hearty welcome to Bear Creek Ranch and our opulent new hunting lodge. I want you to know you’ll be enjoying the finest accommodations in the Cariboo, with all the latest amenities. Except plumbing, we haven’t quite finished the plumbing yet, my apologies.”

The Sausage Twins exchanged uncomfortable glances, but offered fleshy fingers to the welcome.

Charlie carried on, “I’m quite certain, though, rugged outdoor enthusiasts such as yourselves scoff at flushing toilets and water delivered from faucets. You’re here for the real thing, are you not?” He waved broadly toward the trees, which of course were everywhere. “Why, at this very moment there may be twelve to twenty fierce northern timberwolves watching our every action and calculating when to make their move.” He aimed dangerous eyes from under his artfully angled hat.

Everyone’s attention swung to the surrounding trees. One of the Sausage Twins reached back to absently poke at his anus, possibly weighing the virtues of holding things in rather than negotiating the danger ridden route to the wilderness facilities.

Charlie nodded toward the truck. “Today, gentlemen, we shall ride the new-fangled cowboy way, seated in the back of a pickup truck. But tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn, we shall step back fifty years and embark on a rustic journey by wagon to our hunting grounds. Now, let’s get this kit loaded, shall we?”

There were backhanded mutters as Charlie and Frank waded in to help hoist the armaments of Armageddon toward the transport, but only one man under a Russian *Ushanka* hat with furry earflaps dared question him.

“We’re supposed to sit in the back of a truck? There’s no horses?”

Charlie had been anticipating every possible scenario since conceiving his grand scheme and was more than ready for this one. “Unfortunately, horses frighten wolves. They associate them with hunters and cattlemen who shoot at them. Tomorrow we’ll be employing a clever ruse where we arrive by harmless wagon, then disembark on foot to stalk their known haunts.”

“So what pulls the wagon, a tractor?”

The fellow under the *Ushanka* hat was becoming a tad too inquisitive; Charlie forced a smile. “Excellent question…Percherons will draw the wagon. They’re horses, but rather more like mythological beasts than anything a wolf might recognize as threatening.”

Another man said, “George promised this would get fun. He said you’d be showing us things we wouldn’t see anywhere else in the world. Got something interesting we might get a shot at besides wolves?”

“Well, if we’re very fortunate, we may spot a rogue moose not yet left for the river valleys.”

*Ushanka* said, “Rogue moose, what the devil is that?”

Their host produced a chilling smile. “That, dear fellow, is an old bull who’s been driven from his harem by a younger champion. He wanders the bush alone, seething in bitter juices and challenging anything that crosses his path. Why, they’ve even been known to pick a duel with a locomotive.”

“They must be completely out of their heads.”

Charlie nodded. “They’re quite like my father became in his old age, the most miserable of creatures. If we encounter one, we must shoot it quickly and end its suffering.”

“You mean before it kills us.”

“Unfortunately, that wasn’t allowed with my father, but indeed yes.” Charlie peered around hopefully. “Now then, are there any among you who aren’t entirely certain what a moose looks like?”

No one seemed in a hurry to appear ignorant before his peers until one of the Sausage Twins offered, “I’ve seen pictures. They’re sort of like an ugly horse with big antlers. But we’ve got guides to tell us what to shoot at, don’t we?”

A smile like dollars in the bank spread across Charlie’s face. “Exactly, you’ll have the very finest of our experienced hunting guides.”

The last thing into the pickup was a crate of George Reifel’s ten year old rye whiskey, a gift from the liquor magnate of Vancouver to his favorite English cowboy. ‘In the Spirits of the Hunt’, read the note that came with it. Charlie climbed into his mud caked truck beside his lean and dusty top hunting guide, Frank, and with a cowboy whoop out the window, set off.

Dinner was something Ah Joe, labouring over his hot, wood fired stove had created from the description Amalia provided of Parisian quality duck *a l’orange*. Apart from the fact there were no fresh oranges within three hundred miles of his kitchen or fancy spices like cumin and coriander, the ranch was also dangerously low on ducks - down to two, in fact, the exact number needed to reproduce more. Rather than contribute to the local extinction of a popular poultry, the main ingredient was altered to spruce grouse *a l’orange*, courtesy of six birds hanging in the cool shed since October. The orange came from two bottles of fizzy pop. There were prunes – in true Cariboo fashion, Ah Joe favoured prunes as a versatile substitution for anything fruit related – and lastly, of course, there was soy sauce. In light of the boss lady’s displeasure with overly-soyed dishes, the ubiquitous flavour enhancer had to be added carefully when she wasn’t looking. Initially, his creation emerged pale and dry looking, as grouse flesh wasn’t dark, but a pleasant tan colour and lacking any fat at all. Clearly there was more soy sauce required and a generous stirring of savory pork drippings - *voilà.*

In fact, it wasn’t terribly important what the inventive cook prepared, as after the fourth glass of George Reifel’s whiskey in front of a roaring fireplace, none of the sweaty, red faced guests appeared in any mood to turn down anything, feathered or furred, and to hell with the bullets that killed it. To no one’s surprise, they were all ambitious eaters who liked to talk, laugh and drink without interrupting the chewing. All but the Sausage Twins were cigar smokers. A thick blue pall of aromatic Cuban tobacco fumes writhed around the dining table as pseudo-duck got sawed, hunting stories got invented and more whiskey disappeared.

Amalia waved at an intruding tendril of smoke wafting up from the cigar on the side of the gentleman’s plate beside her, as he attacked yet another dripping forkful of food. Her eyes watered. “Excuse me, Mr. Zaleski, might I ask you to put out your cigar while we eat?”

At the end of the table, Charlie’s face froze. He glared at his wife as if she’d just cracked the jowly department store owner across the forehead with a spoon. It didn’t matter; she wasn’t going to risk suffocating her unborn child before it took its first breath.

“Mr. Zaleski…”

“Huh?”

“Your cigar smoke, it’s travelling straight to my face.”

The man had orange pop sauce leaking from the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, sorry…didn’t notice.” He stabbed the cigar into his water glass, which with all the whiskey travelling down his throat, wasn’t being used anyway. It floated there in its dead brown juices, mocking her prissiness with a flotilla of grimy bits drifting to the bottom.

She cast a plaintive glance to her husband, who seemed only to be heaving a sigh of relief. After a sip and difficult swallow from her own water glass, she grated out a hoarse, “Thank you…I’m having a baby, you see.”

This time the man didn’t look at her. “Congratulations.”

The remainder of her main course was spent listening to her companion’s complaints about the difficulty of policing the hordes of penniless shoplifters drifting in from the streets these days, opinions about greedy damn trade unions and then the declining quality of linen from Ireland. By the time dessert arrived, she’d decided she vastly preferred the company of rascally rum runners to jowly department store owners with no respect for other people’s lungs or ears. And she didn’t care for those two round faced fellows who looked like Dutch twins, either. The way they went about digging at their teeth with sideways tilted heads while producing noises from both ends of their digestive systems made it positively challenging to remain seated in the same room.

Charlie announced the arrival of the Chinese dessert cake, *niangao*. He graciously gave credit to Ah Joe presenting it and made a flowery speech about the man’s indispensability to the lodge, ending with a small chuckle and, “…quite rightly we consider Ah Joe a most valued member of our family, as our bellies would never be full without him.”

Beside Amalia, Cezar Zaleski grunted, “Damn Chinks, if I had my way, I’d herd them all back on the boat they came in.”

She froze, then turned slowly. “I beg your pardon?”

Zaleski swished whiskey around his mouth, doing everything but gargling it on his tonsils, before swallowing and facing her. “Madam, I and my father are proud members of the Asiatic Exclusion League of Vancouver. It was our organization’s pressure which resulted in passage of the Chinese Immigration Act to stop the spread of the yellow cancer throughout our society. Have you heard of the Chinatown riot of 1907?”

Amalia’s mouth fell open. She rocked forward, gripped the tabletop and practically spat, “You will not speak that way at my table!”

He lurched back, ambushed, lips ringed by sticky sauce. “About Chinamen? Great Scott, you’re not going to defend that yellow horde, are you?”

“Sir, a member of that yellow horde has just prepared your dinner. Not only is he a brilliant chef, but I’m quite certain he’s never participated in a riot ever.”

Zaleski’s jowls wobbled with a coarse chuckle. “Oh, it wasn’t the Chinks rioting, madam. It was good white citizens battling the scourge.”

“Mr. Zaleski, I warned you!” Amalia grabbed the drowned cigar glass and hurled its contents in her guest’s face.

The dripping head shot backward, huffing and spluttering. It turned to stare at its host. “Your wife, sir, is quite out of control!”

Charlie’s eyebrows rose. “She is?”

“Did you not see that?” He hadn’t wiped his face…*drip…drip.*

Charlie gazed at his wife. “Amalia, dear, is it true what our guest says? Are you feeling out of control?”

She sat back and smoothed the dress around her bulging belly. “Why, no, Charlie, in fact I feel quite a bit better than I’ve felt in weeks.”

“Well, then, I suppose that’s that.” He picked up a knife and bent over the cake. “Now, who would care for some dessert? It’s quite delicious and prepared by a most important member of our family.”

Beside him, Ah Joe stared downward and muttered, “Okay, boss…I better go now.”

Charlie turned with a huge smile. “Nonsense, Ah Joe, you must have the first piece.” He cut a large square hunk and served it on a plate. “Please tell me if it’s as good as the one you made last New Year…last Chinese New Year, a very important date on our calendar here at Bear Creek Lodge.” The smile disappeared from Charlie’s face and he turned to glare at wet faced Cezar Zaleski.

Everyone else got cake.

Next morning after fried eggs, ham steak and a stack of pancakes no lumberjack would challenge without climbing spurs and belt, everyone including the murderously quiet department store owner hiked toward the waiting wagon, waddling under a load of ordnance Charlie doubted the Allies could’ve produced at Vimy Ridge. Frank stared from his driver’s bench, leering and making grunting sounds until the boss climbed up beside him to issue the kind of warning that goes a long way with a man whose favorite hobby is losing at cards in the bunkhouse, “I don’t care how ridiculous they look or how many silly questions they ask - let me remind you, no hunters, no payday.” Twin jets of smoke snorted from the top guide’s nostrils, but he swung to face the coal black rumps of his draft team, Frenchy and Boomer.

Charlie was anxious to get things moving and issued encouragement and a helping hand to each beefy body as it huffed and puffed its way up the side of the wagon. The expedition was just waiting for the last of the Sausage Twins to climb aboard, cherry cheeked and wheezing, when the rotund adventurer slipped and toppled backward. There was a lethal thump and whoosh of gas similar to a rotten dinosaur egg cracking open. In the morbid silence that followed, faces peered over the edge, mesmerized by the trembling mound of gelatinous flesh. Frank scowled at the paralyzed blob, then droned out the corner of his mouth, “Want me to hop down and give Humpty Dumpty a kick?”

The boss muttered under his breath, “…just one bloody thing after another…” He turned to the remaining twin sprawled red faced in the bed of his wagon. “Before I attend to this latest disaster, is there anything about your brother’s medical history I should be aware of?”

Careless shrug. “Well, when he was a kid he got mumps. And his doctor says he’d live longer if he got more exercise.”

“Well, that may depend on whether I can start him breathing again.” Charlie clambered down to the victim, who but for a telltale fluttering eyeball seemed already stricken with rigor mortis. He prodded his boot at a fleshy part. “I say, good fellow…I say, there…”

No response.

“Oh, what the devil…” He delivered the fix.

There was a second whoosh of breath, but this time in the opposite direction. The victim grabbed his belly where he’d been kicked, eyes bulging, chest stuttering with a string of strangled gasps.

Charlie’s eyebrows rose. “Quite amazing, I wonder if we’d tried that in the navy whether it might’ve cured shrapnel wounds.” Then he bent down, grabbed a handful of safari jacket and yanked with all his strength.

Eventually, with the entire team of guides and adventurers grunting, pushing and pulling on any part they could grasp, the victim toppled into the wagon. Charlie gazed to the sky, muttered something, and then snapped at Frank, “Get this thing moving. And be careful of bumps. If anything more sizable than that falls out, we’ll need a gantry crane to get it back aboard. Whose idea was it to use a bloody wagon anyway?”

Frank probably knew the answer to that, but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. He got Frenchy and Boomer going with the boss lurching beside him on the driver’s bench, grinding his teeth, muttering darkly and staring straight ahead.

In spite of the fractured start, Charlie could hardly remain frustrated for long. It was November in the sunshine, with the bite of early winter in the sparkling yellow grass and a lacy skim of ice around the edges of the beaver ponds and lakes. As the temperature no longer followed the sun up the sky, the ground was stiff with overnight frost, iron rimmed wagon wheels thumping over rocks and ruts with no quarter to the fleshy cargo jouncing in the back. Still, it seemed a trifle premature when after only fifteen minutes the first plaintive moan arose from behind.

“Are we almost there yet?”

Charlie allowed a demented smirk under his hat brim. “Very nearly, not much longer now. Try to enjoy the scenery.”

“I thought they made these things with rubber tires now.”

“Wolves hate the smell of rubber. Besides, this is more authentic.”

Frank leaned closer. “Should I run them through the west pasture again?”

“Yes, but up the far fence and then past the lake. We haven’t shown them that yet.” Charlie called to his passengers, “Soon we’ll be passing Big Lake. It’s known for its excellent rainbow trout and char, a true sportsman’s paradise. This evening’s meal came from such sparkling waters and I believe you’ll - ”

“Is that where we shoot the wolves?”

The wagon jounced over a particularly nasty root, producing a chorus of groans above the creak of wooden spokes and axles.

Charlie smirked again. “No, the wolves are a little further. Please let me know if there’s anything I can provide to make your experience more comfortable.”

“Can we get out and walk?”

“Oh, that’s quite amusing, Mr. Zaleski. Ho, ho…get out and walk.” Charlie gave Frank an elbow in the ribs.

Frank smirked at his boss. “This is more fun than pissing on your sister’s pillow.”

Eventually, though, the groans grew tiresome, the painful yelps with each sharp snap of the wagon into bruised spines, simply more of the same old stuff. Charlie nodded toward an open area of swamp grass around a shallow muddy slough. “I believe that should be enough, Frank. We can take them in now.”

“Right, boss.” The teamster guided his horses into the meadow and brought them to a halt.

Charlie called, “Gentlemen, we’re here. Please disembark carefully and mind your weapons aren’t cocked.”

The relief that welled from the back almost tipped Frank’s hat over his forehead. Nobody said a word, simply stumbled to the front, grabbed a handhold and teetered over the edge. Miraculously for all the wobbling legs, no one collapsed or fainted, not even the bruised Sausage Twin.

Charlie aimed serious eyes at his charges. “Men, I want you to keep a sharp watch for dangerous game. We’re in the realm of the great northern timberwolf, which can grow to eight feet long and weigh over a hundred and fifty pounds. The beast is entirely ruthless. It hunts and kills full grown moose and is said to have little fear of man. As well, the forest is reputed to be home to the fierce Sasquatch, a legendary creature, half human, half Alaskan grizzly bear. If you look to your left, you’ll see - ”

“Holy mackerel!”

Charlie’s eyebrows went up. “Eh…already?”

“What the hell’s that?” It was *Ushanka* hat, raising his rifle and wobbling it toward something beyond the slough.

Charlie turned. *Indeed, what the hell was that?*

Wandering placidly from the distant tree line was a creature roughly the size of a horse, but matted with shaggy brown clumps of fur and festooned with a single horn sprouting from its dish shaped forehead. It had twin fluffy humps along its spine and a pendulous dewlap dangling under its chin.

“Dear Lord,” Charlie whispered to Frank, “I’m sure I asked for a moose.”

*Ushanka* hat called to them, “Can I shoot it?”

“Um…well, I’m not entirely certain. It’s rather a queer beast even for these parts.” He grabbed Frank, pulled him aside and whispered, “Is that it…is that the mare?”

Frank pushed his hat to the back of his head. He closed one eye and squinted through the other. “I dunno, boss, that mare never looked so good.”

“Frank, I have a rifle. I can aim it at you.”

“Well, I could lie and say I never expected to see such a critter out here, but that’d be lying.”

“You mean you expected it after you and those halfwit cowhands pasted fur and a unicorn horn on the mare?”

“Boss, it ain’t my fault! The missus told me not to shoot the horse. She said she was gonna tell everybody I was molesting cows. I can’t get work with nobody if they think I’m gonna molest their cows. Maybe that’s no big deal over the Rockies, but there’s some around here who take their cows serious. So she told me what I gotta do.”

“And what you did is standing out there looking like a furry relic from the Hebrides?”

*Ushanka* called louder, “I think it’s one of those rogue mooses. It’s getting ready to charge.”

Charlie snapped, “I say, might we have a moment here? We’re discussing hunting strategy to try and bag you a trophy.”

“…but there’s one right here…”

“Quiet, you’ll scare it off!” He turned back to Frank. “You were saying…”

The grimy hat dipped, concealing guilty eyes. “She didn’t give me no choice, boss. She’s evil when she wants to be.”

Charlie sighed, nodding. “I suppose no sane man could argue with that.”

“Holy cow!” It was *Ushanka* again.

Charlie turned with everyone else.

Around the shaggy creature, four half-grown puppies were springing through the grass, yipping, yelping and trying desperately to play with the reluctant beast.

*Ushanka* yelled, “Wolves!” And blasted a round toward them.

Charlie yelled, “No! You idiot!”

But *Ushanka’s* face was bloated with excitement as his frantic fingers battled to work the bolt. A shiny casing flipped finally into the sunshine and another round got rammed forward, but not before the Sausage Twins had unleashed a simultaneous volley of lethal .470 Nitro Express ammunition. Following that a nearly continuous volley erupted, all six shooters producing such a lethal cacophony of noise that nothing for miles in any direction wouldn’t be ramming its tail between its legs and fleeing for the mountains.

Charlie shouted, “Are you out of your bloody minds? Those are puppies, dammit! Stop firing! Stop firing!”

It didn’t matter; everything was long gone.

He sputtered, “Did anyone hit anything?”

The clearing was a war zone, the cold morning air thick with the bite of cordite. Temples pulsed, eyes darted everywhere. *Ushanka* panted, “I think…no, they got away.”

Charlie breathed, “Thank the Lord.”

“You wanted us to miss?”

“Look, for some unknown reason, our dogs and the, um…Hebridean Oryx wandered out here. I tried to stop you from shooting, but no one was prepared to listen.”

“The what?”

Charlie blinked. “It’s a breeding experiment I’ve been attempting. The Hebridean Oryx is known for its single horn. I’ve been trying to cross the finicky creatures with a, um…camel.”

“…Hebridean Oryx…”

“Precisely, and a camel.”

Silent amazement.

“So, of course, it was a blessing your bullets found other marks. Would’ve set my breeding program back ten years. Well done, gentlemen. Very well done, indeed.”

*Ushanka* said, “You’re welcome…I suppose.”

Charlie rubbed his hands together. “Well now, is everyone ready for a hearty hot lunch? With whiskey?”

All eyes stared, but mostly with relief. “You mean we’re done? What about the wolves?”

Sad shake of the head. “I’m afraid with all the terrible racket, I’d be very much surprised if there was anything more than a deaf squirrel within ten miles of us at this moment.”

*Ushanka* peered at the silent surrounding bush. “I guess, yeah…that’s probably true.” He looked back again. “Do we have to ride in the wagon? How about if I walk?”

Charlie dropped a chummy arm over the man’s shoulder, knocking the furry hat askew. “My good fellow, you may proceed with any form of transportation you wish. Just don’t try riding my Oryx. I’m planning to bring in a stallion…er, buck, for her and get going on producing a foal. Or I suppose it might be a calf, we’ll see what emerges when the time comes. If we can ever locate where she’s hiding, that is.”

“I’m, uh…sorry we scared it off.”

Charlie squeezed the meaty shoulder. “Never fear, if that one disappears forever into the forest, I’ll simply have Frank, here, produce another. He’s something of an expert at exotic animal breeding, you see. And cows, as a dedicated livestock handler, I’ve recently learned he’s quite attached to cows.”

Frank jammed his hat down lower on his head and stalked to the wagon, muttering, “Someday I’m gonna get a job on a normal ranch.”

Charlie called after him, “Remember what my wife said, Frank. Remember now.”

\* \* \*

The hunt continued a further two days. No wolves were killed, no puppies, horses or moose. One unfortunate toe happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time as Cezar Zaleski’s Mannlicher Magnum went off by accident while wading an icy stream. As a consequence, the department store magnate went home with one of the most valued of hunting trophies, a battle wound to tell stories about whenever not in the company of anyone who was actually there. Charlie swore he would confirm it an authentic wild animal bite with anyone who cared to question him about it. The Sausage Twins didn’t care; they went away with the conviction that the best part of hunting happened afterward at a supper table. *Ushanka* fell in love with and took home a fluffy eared, wolf-like puppy, a memento of his adventure which in fact looked very much like his hat. The puppy had yellow eyes. And Amalia convinced Charlie a pair of pregnancy enhanced bosoms was infinitely preferable to arguing over who pasted fur on what. Perhaps if he behaved himself, he might even earn privileges to something more.

Chapter Twelve

The days were growing short and mercury columns on thermometers even shorter. Neither Duncan nor Karin had ever been exposed to the kind of winter predicted by Ish-ka-bibble veterans like Arnold.

“Why sixty below ain’t nothing, I tell you. We can get that up here by Christmas, cold enough to freeze the whiskers off a grizzly bear. That’s why they hole up, they ain’t stupid. Why if I had a hole to crawl into, sometimes I think I’d just do that, let the dogs wake me up come April.”

It was talk like that which had Karin wondering if the mud and moss chinked walls of the cabin were adequate, if the cow wouldn’t freeze to death in its tiny drafty shed with the roof Duncan couldn’t fit properly over the walls. Or if the feathers on a chicken still worked at sixty below zero. More importantly, there were Winnie and Colin to consider, helpless children depending on their parents to make all the right decisions. If only the parents weren’t so new at everything, those decisions might be more reliable. Duncan’s near fatal introduction to the raw frontier pointed out the consequences of making a mistake up here, and that hadn’t even been winter.

A letter from her mother arrived at the mailbox on the main road to Lone Butte. Ania Jakubic didn’t write very often, as Karin couldn’t read Polish and Mama’s written English was basic at best. Still, the message was clear enough: there was talk around Nanaimo that a group of money people was planning to re-open the Reserve Mine. The shafts were to be pumped out on the rich Douglas Seam and there should be work for many years. Also with the hard times, those troublemaker unions were good as gone, so that should mean no strikes. She’d already spoken with Tata (father) and they’d be happy to put up their little family until another place could be found with Duncan solidly at work. If there were any worries at all about the move to the Cariboo, don’t feel bad, just climb on a train and come home.

Karin knew Duncan would argue to stay with his horse and single cow herd, but in the end do whatever she asked him. Her parents’ offer to put them up back at the warm wet coast was something any sane person would have to take seriously. It was, in fact, the only alternative she could see to an unknown, unforgiving, endless stretch of months cold enough to freeze the whiskers off a grizzly bear. She didn’t care for unshaven Arnold most times, but she felt sure he wasn’t making that part up. So it was a little surprising when she found herself sitting down at the table without even sharing her news with Duncan, and answering ‘no thanks’.

“We’re very happy with our new pre-emption, Mama, and have wonderful neighbours we can count on through any hardship. Duncan has built a house, a barn and a fine coop for our chickens. He even shot a moose. You would not believe how much meat there is on a moose, Mama, and I think you and Tata would love the taste. With all the plenty around us, we are eating better now than we have in two years. Next spring we plan to plant a vegetable garden with tomatoes, peas and broccoli. I cannot wait to taste my own broccoli. Please do not worry about us and instead start saving money to come up next summer for a visit. Much love forever, Karin.”

“PS: I have even learned how to milk a cow.”

The funny thing was, as she added the words to paper, she began to realize she wasn’t making it up. It was all true and she was even beginning to feel proud of what they were doing. She was a pioneer woman in a place where success was up to you and not someone else’s decision to open a mine or close it, or go on strike, or kick you out of your home because you couldn’t pay the mortgage. The more she considered her options, the more she appreciated their new life in the Cariboo. Why trade the richness of the land around them for the daily struggle in town of just trying to get by? As she licked the envelope and sealed it, she had a sudden vision of her future. She and Duncan would be sitting together on their porch, watching the sunset at the far end of their lake and remembering these early times with a smile. ‘How very green we were, do you remember, dear? The cow, the fifteen chickens, the rickety little barn. How very, very green.’ And then the sun would set and they’d go inside to a warm bed in their house built of logs and stones – stones because she wanted a fireplace, but Duncan didn’t know about that yet. All in good time.

The other thing about their home was its popularity with the neighbours. Their little family was just that, a family with all its closeness and the sense of warmth which radiates from shared love and spending time with each other through life’s situations. Most of their neighbours were single and probably a bit lonely. Someone from the area, Pauline, Arnold, Henry, even Rueben the shy Dutchman, managed to fill a chair at their table at least once a week. There’d be gifts of root vegetables from cellars, something carved or shiny for the children, many times a fresh rabbit, grouse or even a fat Mallard duck. It was all welcome fare. The most fascinating thing to Karin, though, was news from the bush telegraph which wound its way around a mysterious web of communication she could never quite untangle.

Rueben arrived with a sack of beets. “Yah,” he said, “Snooker Alan, he break leg skidding logs last week. All time laying on cold ground till English Deka come find him. Carry out on back for drive to Williams Lake in wagon.”

“English Deka?”

“Yah, he be chief from Canim Lake.”

Karin said, “I know who he is. He brought us fish when we moved here, but then just disappeared before we could say thank you. Where did you hear all this?”

“Arnold tell me.”

“But Snooker Alan lives way up by Drewry Lake. You’re between him and Arnold. Why would Arnold know about it before you?”

“English Deka, he got trapline by Deka Lake. Maybe he tell Arnold on way to set traps. That Indian, I don’t care he be chief, better keep away from my mink. I gonna get some crazy if he catches in trap.”

Still baffled, Karin shook her head.

Then Rueben said, “New minister he gonna make preaching at hall. You want baby baptised, maybe go then.”

“A minister…there’s a minister coming? Who said that, Albert?”

“Don’t remember. Minister he got new horse, but old bible. He little bit scared I think, gotta come next week before snow.”

“There’s snow coming?”

“Yah, two weeks.”

Again Karin shook her head. “I don’t understand. What makes you think he’s coming next week?”

Rueben looked at her as if she’d just asked what makes the wind blow. “Yah, remember he don’t like ride in snow. So gonna snow in two weeks. He gotta come now.”

Maybe it was just the way everybody’s mind worked up here, separated from the rational world by trees, lakes and pet mink running around the cabin. Snow in two weeks, unknown minister coming before then - clearly, it was all perfectly obvious to Rueben. But to Karin, it was alchemy.

Then he said, “You got new stove.”

“I’m sorry, Rueben…the one you made was a wonderful summer stove, but Duncan got this for free and…well, it heats the house like a fury. And it came with a chimney pipe.”

Critical eyes studied the gift with its rail for comfortable thawing of boots. “Gotta chop wood all time. Pile outside too small, gonna run out. You know how ring trees for make firewood?”

“Ring trees? No, I don’t believe I do – what’s that?”

He pulled out his jackknife and ran a phantom circle around a finger. “Easy, just cut ring around trunk, pull off bark. Tree gonna die standing up, dry out real fast. Then all gotta do is cut down. You better show husband or use little stove.”

“I…thank you, Rueben, I will.”

The door flew open and Duncan stomped into the cabin, back from helping Pauline put up a new loafing shed for her horse. The old one had suffered a tree falling on it during a spring thunderstorm, something she blamed on her disappeared husband: ‘Dang fool built it too close to the bush.’ Out of contempt for his memory or sheer stubbornness, she hadn’t got to building a new one until the horse began standing and staring at the old one every time the wind blew an icy chill, which was happening now almost every day. The kids mobbed their frosty father, the dog barked and Rueben stood with a shy smile.

“Hullo, Duncan, I bring beets.” He pointed to the sack by the door.

Duncan strode over to shake the Dutchman’s hand. “Rueben, we haven’t seen you in awhile. What’s this I hear about you getting married?”

Karin’s head snapped back.

The bachelor in freshly patched moose skin pants stared at the floor. “Yah…I was thinking mebbe gonna ask her someday. But now just housekeeper. She good woman, but don’t like mink much.”

Karin stared. “You have a housekeeper?”

“Yah.”

“Now why on earth would a housekeeper want to come out here to live in a twelve foot cabin with a mink?” She probably didn’t mean it to sound harsh, but when the words echoed off the walls of their warm, twenty by thirty-five foot home, that’s the way it sounded.

Rueben blinked. “She good woman, but want move mink outside. English Deka, he got trapline close, maybe catch.”

Duncan grinned. “Bet your place is just spanking clean now, huh?”

“Mink think woman crazy. All time she pushing with broom. Sometime one of them gotta move out.”

Karin simply had to ask, “Do you…pay her?”

“No pay, she cousin. Write from home and ask come stay for look after house. I think, okay, we try for while. Trouble is mink not like her much, or she be good woman.”

This was precisely the kind of muddled frontier scenario that made Karin’s head wobble. She blinked at Rueben a few more confounded moments and then turned to her husband. “Duncan, we’re going to church.”

“Huh? There’s church?”

“Next week. Apparently we have a new minister coming who’s nervous about travelling. I want to show support. If we can get a good enough turnout, maybe we can talk him into opening up a full time church in town. You can help build it.”

“But I wanted to shoot coyotes Sunday. They’ve been poking around the chickens. And it’s too late to build a church now, it’s winter.”

“It’s not winter yet, dear. It won’t snow for two weeks. You and the neighbours got our house up in five days. That means there’s plenty of time to get the job done.”

“I…but…”

She turned to Rueben. “Listen to me: you’re going home right now and fetching your cousin. Then you’re both coming back for supper. I can’t imagine you’d come visiting and bring a sack of beets, but not your family.”

Rueben backed toward the door, hat in hand, stammering, “But she housekeeper. She not need come everywhere.”

Karin planted her hands on her hips. “And leave that wretched mink. Lord knows the poor woman probably feels like a keeper in a zoo. Does she speak English?”

“Uh…uh, not sure. Never ask, you know.”

“Rueben, you have a lot to learn about how to treat a lady. Now get going. We’re having moose stew with beets, carrots and potatoes. And prune pudding for dessert.” She swung toward her hanging pots. “Huh…poor woman.”

As the door clunked closed behind the Dutchman, Duncan whimpered, “…church…?”

“Dear, we live in a community, we’re not hermits. And the place to meet worthwhile folk in your community is at church. When I think about it, Henry should come with us.”

“But I still don’t know where he lives.”

“Well, someone around here does. The chief, English Deka, I’ll bet he’d know. After you mail my letter, you can ride over to Canim Lake and ask him.”

She turned to her table and began preparing supper for her guests. She was humming.

Of course, one thing nobody can control is the weather. Rueben’s prediction of coming snow proved correct, but his tin hat, or mink, or whatever he used to divine the future had been a week off its timing and threatened to trap the United Church minister, Reverend Thomas Giles, in his travels. It had also failed to mention what quantity of billowy blessing would tumble from the sky to turn roads into trackless humps and children into giddy windup toys cavorting through nature’s playground. It was, though, a happy opportunity for the folk of Lone Butte and surrounds to exert pressure on the good reverend to extend his stay in their town.

George Stiles cornered the nervous looking young man bidding farewell by the hall door following his sermon. “The Lord blesses us today, don’t you think, Reverend, with this bountiful snowfall?”

“The Lord blesses us every day, Mr. Stiles, but I’ve no great love of snow.”

“Still there’s a purpose in everything He does.” George smiled warmly, thrusting his belly out against his suit jacket and showing no intention of moving on. “Always when one door closes, another opens.”

“That’s true. Thank you for coming, Mr. Stiles, it was wonderful to meet you.”

“Mr. Stiles…goodness me, nobody’s called me that since the policeman came asking questions. George, please…just plain George.”

“Thank you, George, have a wonderful day.”

“Ours is a fine prosperous town, right on the main line to Quesnel. That’s why my hotel does so well, people interrupt their journey just to visit.”

Reverend Giles cast a look beyond the open door with its snowflakes swirling inside, to the log hotel across the street. “An impressive establishment you have. I’m sure visitors are highly pleased.”

“Oh, they are…they are. Did you know we’re thinking of building a proper church?”

“Now that would make my visits something to truly look forward to. When do you expect to start?”

“Soon as we can. A few of the more ambitious…well, women, you can imagine…actually expected us to drop everything and have it ready for this visit.”

The reverend shivered as a particularly nasty bit of winter invaded the community hall. “So springtime, I’d imagine.”

George pursed his lips and gazed upward. “Well, that depends on a few things, particularly on who’d be preaching in it.” The eyes came down from the roof. “I must say I was quite impressed with your sermon, all that stuff about Paul in prison and waiting to get his head chopped off, not the sort of fare we’re used to around here. Especially from someone so young.”

“Well, thank you. My point, I’m sure you realized, was how Paul needed his faith to - ”

“Normally we get a lot of mumbo-jumbo about slapping a lid on our desires and pious stuff like that. A beheading or two just livens up the - ” He stopped and shot a hand to the reverend’s arm. “Just a minute, here’s the man…Lord Charles! Come over here a minute, will you?”

Charlie and Amalia had been talking with Duncan, Karin, and a Dutch couple he’d never met before. He excused himself and approached the pair by the door. “I say, Reverend, smashing service. I was particularly moved by the beheading part. I believe it’s quite a bit more stirring than that tired casting of Christians to lions. Memorable…quite memorable.”

“Yes, what I was trying to emphasize was Paul’s need of faith to - ”

“So how long do you think to get a church built, Lord Charles?” George shot a businesslike look at Charlie.

Charlie blinked, first at the reverend, then at the uncomfortably sincere hotel owner with his round gut puffed out. “Eh…church?”

“Yes, I was just about to propose to the reverend that we build a church to turn over into his eager young hands.” George offered a generous smile to the youngster of God. “Lord willing, of course.”

Charlie was still blinking. “Well, I…church *every* Sunday? You mean we’d be required to listen to beheadings at the beginning of every week, all year long?”

George placed his fingers together like a steeple. “Yes, how long to get the job done, a few weeks, month at the most?”

Charlie squirmed in his oxfords. “But it’s snowing. Nobody builds churches while it’s snowing. What about next summer?”

“But then, you see, the reverend would be required to ride around all winter on his horse delivering The Word to frozen backwoods villages. If we were to build him a church with a nice rectory and warm stove, why he could remain right here and comfort us each week as much as we comfort him.”

Charlie appeared anything but comfortable. “Well, I suppose I could spare a man or two for a week. But it is in fact snowing, you’re aware of that, aren’t you?”

“Wonderful!” George swung to his mark. “What do you say, Reverend, will you stay?”

Reverend Thomas Giles blinked at both men standing before him, the happy one and the one wiggling in his expensive looking shoes. He said, “You’re offering me my own church?”

“Absolutely. And if you keep producing sermons like that last one, I’m sure people will come from miles around and the offerings should be generous. Don’t worry about food, we’ll see you get plenty of that. Now, what do you say?”

“Well…”

“Wonderful, absolutely wonderful!” George grabbed the soft white hand and started pumping as if trying to make water gush from the man’s mouth. Then he swung to Charlie. “Lord Charles, let’s get busy organizing a building party.”

“But, what about the reverend’s other commitments?”

George’s belly looked ready to pop his trouser button. “Their souls will still be there when the next man rides through. You know if we hurry, we may have a new church by Christmas. Oh, I can see it now…the candles, the carols, the generous collection plate.” He plopped an arm over the reverend’s shoulder. “Now I was thinking about stained glass behind the alter.”

Duncan had ridden to Canim Lake Reservation as Karin asked and located English Deka. The chief of the local Secwépemc band was called ‘English’ because he spoke the language. Although he was comfortable with that and almost everything about the land considered his ancestral home, he did not, however, know the whereabouts of Henry’s hidden lair.

“Some say he live like old ones, in *kikule*.”

“You mean a hole in the ground?”

“No, I mean *kikule*. It house, part in ground, part not. It warm in winter, better than house now. Sometime big for many family, but Henry make small maybe, hard to see.”

Duncan shook his head. “So even you don’t know where to find it?”

English Deka always wore a scarf around his thick hair and a signature black cowboy hat. As he was at home today with his family in their modest cabin with the traps hanging on the front wall, the hat stayed inside and he’d come out wearing only the red and white scarf. He had black eyes that saw straight through a person to the other side of the world. “You think you find Henry when he not like? What for you want him?”

“Oh, my wife wants him to come to church.”

The eyes stopped probing Duncan’s skull and the chief of all the people waved toward the trees. “Henry, he like coyote, he there all time. Maybe not see, but he all time there. If he want go church, he let you find. You tell wife this. All woman here they come to me, want Henry live more easy with them, but he not come. They all time thinking they know best. They only can wait, better you wait too.”

It was simple as that. Henry didn’t come to church.

But Rueben did. The morose Dutchman was towed into the community hall by his cousin in the long blonde braid and heavy winter coat. Elsa van Haas was a bright eyed woman who instantly charmed everyone who spoke with her, even though she couldn’t put together a full sentence in English. It was her eyes; they shone with infinitely accommodating grace, except when they looked at Rueben. Then they said, ‘this is how it will be’. And that’s the way it had been from the moment she was introduced to Duncan and Karin at the dinner he’d been instructed to bring her to. She immediately whipped off her coat, headed for the stove and lifted the pot lid. “Mmmmm…yah.” she murmured and smiled at her hostess. Karin melted. In another ten seconds the dog was under her hand, Winnie was offering her doll and Colin’s fluffy head was pointed straight for the fresh smelling newcomer’s dress. Even Duncan found himself glancing perhaps too frequently at the apple cheeks, perpetual smile and sparkling green eyes. She was, well…bursting with beautiful life.

Rueben, on the other hand, was paralysed by a clearly dominant force. Already it was obvious the reluctant hermit had been bunted ten feet off his rails by a situation he hadn’t thought far enough into. Housekeeper, indeed – there was no chance a spirit as vivacious as Elsa van Haas was going to be content sweeping mink shit from floors and spending the rest of her life cooped up like a slave in her cousin’s tiny cabin.

At the supper table, Karin said, “Your hair is so lovely and long, Elsa. Do you brush every day?” The question was accompanied by brushing motions.

“Yah, thank you, is good.” Huge sparkling smile.

Karin looked to Rueben. “Can you translate for me, Rueben? I’d like to know how Elsa cares for her hair.”

“Yah, she brushes morning. Then nighttime too, all that hair. It wear out brush I think soon.”

“Well, tell her I think it’s lovely.”

Rueben turned to Elsa and spoke in Dutch.

Elsa beamed at Karin. “Yah, thank you wonderful.”

Rueben said, “She try learn English, but all time not listen. I teach, she talk. How learn when all time talking, yah?”

Karin said, “Well, maybe if you took her out more, Rueben, she’d be able to meet people and have conversations with them. Normal conversations, not about sweeping floors and looking after weasels.”

“It mink, not weasel. Weasel white, you know, for winter. Mink all time stay black.”

Dry stare. “Elsa needs to talk about something stimulating with other people. She’s clearly bright and intuitive. Why, given half a chance, she’d be the centre of any social gathering.”

“Yah, maybe she come wrong place. Maybe better go home for be happy.”

Karin crossed her arms. *Not if another woman living up here among bears, bachelors and beavers had anything to say about it.* “The church meeting, Rueben, Elsa can talk to people there. Tell her I want her to come.”

Rueben’s face froze. He had stew on a spoon that stopped midway to his mouth.

Karin’s eyes didn’t waver. “I’d like you to ask her.”

“Yah…church, you know, she not understand. How gonna learn about God when not know what preacher say?”

“It’s the spirit of God that’s important, Rueben. We don’t have to understand every little thing that’s said. Why, I know Duncan usually has no idea what the sermon’s about. Do you, dear?”

Huge nod. “Nope.”

Rueben’s mouth opened to say something else, but Karin cut him off. “Now if you don’t give this lovely woman a chance to get out and meet her neighbours, I’ll tell everyone at church that you’re keeping your cousin as a house slave out in your wilderness cabin.”

“That not true! She write letter, not me! I think, okay, I gonna be nice and give chance make woman happy. I don’t know she gonna hate mink. We not married yet, not too late go home.”

“Rueben, I’m not even sure it’s legal to marry your cousin in Canada.”

For the first time since he’d arrived for supper, the Dutchman’s eyes brightened.

But Duncan said, “Oh, yeah, it is. I got an uncle who married his cousin and if that isn’t queer enough, he was a twin and his twin sister married the other cousin. So they had cousins marrying cousins both ways. How about that?” He looked around proudly.

Rueben’s face fell.

Karin said, “Church, we’ll be seeing you there Sunday, Rueben. And trust me, it won’t hurt you to get out a little yourself.”

That was how the pretty Dutch woman came to be the last bride married that year by the Reverend Thomas Giles while he awaited word from his Presbytery in Vancouver as to whether he might accept a pastoral charge at a proposed new church in the Cariboo. It was a remarkable wedding for two reasons. Firstly, there were some who attended from secluded cabins wondering whether marrying your cousin was, well…acceptable? After all, even the most isolated deep woods bachelor usually had relatives back where he came from. On this the good reverend was pointedly helpful.

“Oh, it’s fine with the church and not illegal at all. In fact, plenty of new immigrants marry their cousins, especially the Scots. They seem particularly attracted to cousins, perhaps because back in the days of feuding clans, there just wasn’t anybody else to choose from.”

Charlie overheard and muttered to George Stiles, “Or maybe no one else would have them.”

George said, “No, you’re thinking of the Irish.”

“Thank you, I’d rather not.”

The second thing which made the wedding remarkable was the groom insisted on bringing his mink to the service. No doubt if it had been possible to designate the serpent-like creature best man, it might very well have been entrusted with the ring and dressed up in a tiny suit. Certainly none of the hovering gaggle of neighbourhood matrons wanted the thing around. It got into everything, the homemade lace veil produced by Miranda Hollingsworth, the stylishly modified off-white gown donated by Wanda Stiles. There was an attempt to snuffle up the inside hem of the wedding dress in a quest after heaven knows what and it even, predictably, found its way to the groom’s foot during the exchange of vows, there to issue a piercing squeak, probably hungry for a moth treat. A quick kick from the bride’s shoe sent it rolling toward a wall. Following that, apart from a many toed scuttling back and forth along the east wall, the ceremony continued without further incident.

In view of the fact the reception was to be held in the same building as the ceremony, the couple and their guests (it was an open invitation) made their way across the street to the Horns Hotel for an informal get-together while a few stalwart volunteers set about turning the church into a reception hall.

Charlie approached the bride during a rare moment of aloneness, her golden mane untethered and cascading in a shimmering train down the back of her wedding dress. “I must say, that was a marvellous ceremony, my dear, and you look absolutely radiant. How sad only one member of your family could be on hand for the occasion.”

“Yah, thank you wonderful.”

“Does everyone in Holland marry their relatives?”

“Is good, thank you.” Beaming smile and glowing cheeks.

“I must say, though, if I had cousins as stunning as you, I rather think I might’ve considered marrying closer to home. Does that rumpled toad of a husband have any idea how lucky he is, do you think?”

Even brighter smile. She touched his hand. “You like meet husband?”

“Oh, I already have, my dear, and I must say I’m hardly impressed. Whatever, I wonder, made you desperate enough to resort to such a decision?”

Elsa stared past Charlie to the back of Rueben’s head. After a second, the groom inched around to find his bride’s eyes locked on him - a mouse trapped in a cobra’s glare. She waggled a finger at him. He shuffled across the floor.

Charlie thrust out his hand. “Ah, Rueben, the man of the hour. I must say I’ve rarely attended an event blessed with such entertaining pets. Was that your weasel scuttling up everyone’s dress and trouser leg?”

“Yah, it be mink. Weasel white for winter. Mink all time stay black.”

“Marvellous, and are you planning on travelling somewhere for a honeymoon?” He leaned to deliver the stiff looking fellow a chummy elbow in the ribs.

Rueben stared down at his chest, blinking. “I think…maybe better travel in summer. Best now woman keep house clean, I go Snooker Alan’s for skid logs. He got broke leg, you know.”

“Bloody hell, man, you’ve got to give your head a shake. No woman is going to endure long if you don’t get her out for a spot of occasional bliss away from the house. Especially a house with a weasel in it.”

“Yah, it be mink.”

Charlie said, “Tell you what, my good man, I simply can’t stand to see a couple so obviously in love forced to remain at home skidding logs and sweeping rodents around when they’re meant to be on honeymoon. As a wedding gift, I’d like to present the pair of you with a week in the finest suite at my lodge, three professionally prepared meals a day, evenings by a cozy fireplace, no work, no worries, no charge at all. Oh, and do you like to shoot, by any chance? Perhaps wolves?”

”I got army surplus rifle. It be .303.”

“Smashing, bring that along. You’ll have a fabulous time, I assure you. And you may remain married longer than everyone expects.”

Seated alongside the happy couple at the head table were their closest neighbours and friends: Karin, Duncan, Arnold and Pauline. Against the protests of the groom, the mink was trapped in a blanket and incarcerated in an old crate from the store, there to scuttle in captivity at least until the meal was over. Two turkeys, three hams and a haunch of young moose turned slow over a bed of alder coals provided the main fare at the buffet table, with sides of potatoes, beets and carrots. There were treats: Miranda Hollingsworth’s famed zesty pickles and a plethora of canned delicacies like German *sütze* (head cheese) and Swedish *surströmming* (fermented stinky herring), courtesy of Freja Erickson. Gunnar didn’t attend as he still regarded the majority of the human race his sworn enemies, but Freja was emerging from her cocoon, so to speak, and not only brushed her hair for the event, but engaged in frothy, snaggle toothed conversation with any unfortunate bachelor who wandered too close. At her seat beside the bride, Karin was determined to unearth more than the monosyllabic groom volunteered, who mostly sat staring toward the far wall, muttering about his mink.

“Elsa, do you have a future plan?” She wanted to say ‘because this man and his mink can’t surely be it’, but didn’t want to risk offending.

“Yes, wonderful, thank you.”

She tried again, “So you and Rueben…build farm?”

“Oh, farm, no thank you.”

“Really…” Broad hand gesture. “What, then?”

“Elsa, me...” She pointed to herself. “…teach moosik.” Slim beautiful fingers pantomimed playing the piano.

“Dear me, really? You want to teach music?”

Huge smile. “Yes.”

“Piano, you teach piano?”

“Yes.”

“But Elsa, there are no pianos here…at least I don’t think there are.”

“No piano?”

Karin covered her mouth. “Oh, my, I shouldn’t have said that. There must be a piano somewhere. Perhaps you should speak with Charlie and Amalia, they’re quite cultured. They may have one, or know of someone who has one…you should speak with them.”

“…no piano…” Elsa gave her husband an urgent poke.

Rueben jumped in his chair and swerved around clutching his side. There were several moments of muffled but animated conversation, then Elsa turned back to Karin with a cheerful nod. “Husband buy piano. Me teach.” More tinkling of imaginary keys.

Karin offered a reassuring smile, but when her eye caught Rueben’s and the silent terror lurking there, it was all she could do not to shout, ‘But these people are trappers and moose hunters! You’re going to be perfectly miserable!’

It turned out not to be necessary, as Rueben did it for her. He pushed to his feet behind the head table and before a packed house of thirty-two guests shouted, “How many people want be learning piano?”

The glowing bride must’ve caught the meaning of the question and pantomimed her finger work, swaying to the lovely tune in her head.

The people of Lone Butte stared.

Rueben called again, “Wife want teach piano! Come tell how many be wanting!”

Witless stares. It was the kind of question which surely must be lost in translation, for it simply didn’t make sense…piano?

Finally Charlie cleared his throat and said, “Dear fellow, it sounded as if you just asked if we want piano lessons.”

“Yah, you be wanting then?”

“Great Scott, no! My mother tried dragging me to a piano teacher. I’d sooner pull my own teeth with pliers than endure the ruler that woman used to swat out the time on my shoulder. Is that what your bride plans for her spare time, teaching music?”

“Yah, she want buy piano. How much piano cost anyway?”

Charlie shook his head. “Rather more than they’re worth, I should think. Look, I’ve already offered my wedding gift. Take it or leave it, no exchanges.”

“So nobody want piano learning?”

At the back of the room, the mink scuttled around its crate, a desolate empty sound.

Rueben turned to his bride and with a contemptuous wave at the guests sniffed, “Nobody want piano learning. Better you dig beets, more smart for eating.”

Elsa’s pretty green eyes drained of life and her shoulders sagged.

Karin couldn’t stand it. She rose to her feet and with a wave at them all said, “Well, I may not have a gift for instruments either, but I’ve always wanted to learn to sing. Maybe Elsa can teach us to sing.” She looked down at her disheartened new friend and asked, “Elsa, teach singing? You know…tra-la-la?”

“…tra-la-la…?”

“Yes, um…Twinkle, twinkle, little star,r,r. How I wonder what you ar,r,r. Up above the world so hi,i,i. Like a diamond in the *- ”*

“Stop!” The pretty bride slapped hands over her ears. “Oh, is hurt terrible! No more tra-la-la!”

Karin froze, blinking.

Duncan smirked up at his wife. “See? We’ve been telling you for years.”

“Well, I was only trying to make an example, that’s all.”

Further along the table, Pauline said, “I thought it was darn pretty, Karin. Why, with a little teaching, maybe we could start up a choir.”

Arnold snorted, “So you think you can sing, too?”

“And just what makes you think I can’t?”

“Aw, c’mon…”

Pauline shoved back her chair and headed for the bride, but not before grabbing a hunk of bread from her plate and chomping off a mouthful. She slapped a hand on Elsa’s shoulder and through a spray of crumbs announced, “Tell you what, little lady, you get the mink man, here, to clear a decent road to your cabin and I’ll come out twice a week for lessons. Not piano, mind you, too poncy for me, but when it comes to singing, why I’m like a dang bird. Yodelling’s my favorite, ain’t it you Europe people like to yodel?”

Elsa peered at the calloused fingers on her shoulder, then up into the breadcrumb storm. She must’ve sensed the intrusion wasn’t an attack, for despite the uncertainty in her eyes, forced her mouth into a thin smile and said, “…tra-la-la?”

“Dang right, tra-la-la! Oh, we around here are gonna bend us some ears with our melodious voices, we are. Heck, maybe I’ll even start coming to sing in church.” She eyeballed the reverend at the next table. “No offence, your worship, but I never cared a whole bunch for that religious stuff. Too poncy for me.”

Reverend Giles gave the big, springy haired woman a dry look and said, “You might be interested to know we serve wine with our communion.”

“You do?”

“The Lord welcomes all. Bread and wine provide the sacrament.”

Pauline peered at him. “I only said maybe, but that makes it a bigger maybe.”

“I can’t tell you how comforted The Lord and I are.”

It was a shaky start, but after dinner was cleared and with the introduction of Whit Newton’s by now infamous tub o’prune punch, the atmosphere began to loosen. Clive and Pearl Herriot, accompanied by children Marlon and Marlene, lit a fire on the dance floor with *Wabash Cannonball* exactly as it sounded on the radio above Frank’s bunk whenever there happened to be reception. Frank let out a wild prairie whoop, grabbed the nearest redhead and boots started sailing.

Pauline stood in her huge fluffy dress beside Arnold and said, “Y’know, there’s just something about a wedding, ain’t there?”

The Missourian had combed his beard. He smelled of vanilla extract, but that was all; the tub of lukewarm water and lye soap had done its job and no other fragrances wafted from under his shirt. He nodded. “Scares the shit outta most men, but I got nothing against marriage. Hell, I think about it all the time.”

Pauline had already dispatched two cups of prune punch in rapid succession. “Well ain’t that something - I do too. About every time I wipe my ass I think how some things are easy to get rid of and some things stick to you like glue. Husbands ain’t one of them.”

“Pauline, you just picked the wrong man. Some are cut out for a life in the bush and some just ain’t.”

Pauline stared wistfully at the happy couple enjoying their first dance together as husband and wife. She said again, “Yup, sure is something about a wedding.”

Arnold reached for her hand. “C’mon, let’s go cut a rug.”

Hard skinned fingers met and wrapped around harder skinned fingers. “Dang it, Arnold…where were you when I was young and pretty?”

“Standing right here holding your hand.”

“Huh?”

A startlingly straight bank of teeth appeared through the hole in the bushy beard. “Why, you ain’t never looked younger or prettier to me, darlin.”

“Oh, you silver tongued Yankee devil. How am I gonna two-step with my knees going all mushy like this?”

He grabbed her. “Easy, I’ll hold you up.”

She let his arm slip behind her shoulder and draw her big body much closer than necessary. “Be gentle.” she said. “It ain’t my first time, but it’s sure the hell been a long time.”

Arnold’s teeth flashed again. “Just keep an eye out for Frank. He ain’t never missed a moving target yet.”

She stared into his eyes. “Who the hell is Frank?”

All around the floor it was true – there was just something about a wedding.

Chapter Thirteen

The church was never built. His presbytery in Vancouver persuaded the devoted, if somewhat anxious, Reverend Giles that his intended circuit through isolated snowbound communities might serve The Lord’s purpose better than ministering to a single flock in a railroad town like Lone Butte. To forward thinkers like George Stiles, who saw a permanent house of worship as a cornerstone in the foundation of any growing community, it was a big disappointment. Others like Charlie and Duncan were less crestfallen. Charlie was beginning to suspect the light of the Lord shone from within a person anyway, as evidenced by people with a dismal lack of it, like Gunnar Erickson and anyone armed with potentially lethal hand tools. Surely that beacon of divinity might be tapped by less formal means and the town better served by building something more immediately useful, like a jail.

Elsa and Rueben gracefully accepted their wedding gift and arrived at the lodge in mid-December. It was a festive time of year with Christmas approaching and the newlyweds, bundled in scarves and brightly coloured mittens produced as an offshoot of the overflowing pile of baby clothes knitted by Amalia, were included in all the preparations. The perfect tree was chosen, no small task considering the forest of available candidates, then decorated in the lounge with brightly dyed popcorn strings and gay twists of crepe paper. Greeting cards from the world over were strung across doors and window frames. In the evening, the lounge flickered with candlelight and sweet crackling firewood glowing in the hearth. Drinks were served by the fireside to the accompaniment of a gramophone twisting out Sophie Tucker singing ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’. There were other songs as well, but that one brought tears to Elsa’s eyes because of the piano in the background.

“I no piano more.” Her cheeks reddened and tiny diamonds of moisture collected at the corners of her lovely green eyes.

The open hearted girl had the same effect on Amalia she’d had on Karin, who tried to comfort her. “Don’t cry, Elsa. A piano will be coming someday, I know it. The world is not so far away as you think.”

*Sniff, sniff.* “So nice this place.” She looked around with watery eyes, settling eventually on Amalia’s tummy. “Better with baby.” Next the eyes travelled to Rueben stretched in his leather chair and sucking from a brandy snifter. “Baby soon.” she sniffled.

The drink in her husband’s hand froze halfway to his mouth. What he did not do was make eye contact, no doubt terrified any connection at all might somehow initiate offspring.

Amalia said, “Oh, wouldn’t that be wonderful? Our children could grow up together.”

Elsa beamed. “Yah…baby.”

Rueben looked like a man with an hour to live. The brandy glass trembled, then continued on its mission of mercy to his mouth.

Bear Creek Lodge wasn’t the only hub of festivities for the season. There was a Christmas concert at the Forest Grove School, attended by families from miles around, including some who didn’t even have children. Later all were invited to Walter Briggs’ Cypress Lake ranch for New Year’s Eve. As most motorized vehicles, for those who had them, were paralyzed already by the snowpack, everyone arrived by sleigh. It was jingle bells and holiday spirits rising to the stars. Auld Lang Syne by lamplight. But all the feasting, merriment and dancing were just a prelude to the most important event of all.

Lord William John Stamford arrived in the world one early January morning during a cold snap so fierce the windowpanes in Amalia’s bedroom froze half an inch thick with condensation from all the steaming water Charlie delivered to their French Canadian midwife, Annalise. It was water which might’ve come from the tap in the room, except with the branches on the trees banging like popcorn in the deep freeze, it had long stopped coming. That meant hauling it from the creek to the lodge by sled and heating it on Ah Joe’s big cook stove. The electric lights, thankfully, still worked.

Charlie had been anticipating the event with a bottle of twenty-year-old brandy stored in the liquor cabinet and fine cigars hidden from greedy eyes under a newspaper beside his favorite chair in the lounge. Even at two in the morning Frank was on hand to help celebrate the occasion. The top hand made a mission of accompanying his boss to the private apartment with each basin of water, where the lovely face of Annalise would appear at their knock and murmur *merci* with the most breathlessly exotic voice he’d ever heard in his life. She wasn’t a redhead, but it was clear there was passion in those lightly fuzzed arms that no cowboy could tame with a rope. Every second question was not about the missus’s condition, but where Annalise had come from, when she was going back and did Charlie think she might stay on awhile after the baby was born?

“Frank, I only met the woman three days ago at the train. She’s from Ashcroft, highly recommended by Wanda Stiles and I would imagine probably no more interested in living in a bunkhouse and sewing crusted jeans than any midwife in the country.”

“She’s French, ain’t she? I know what *merci* means, it means ‘thank you’.”

“Yes, I know what *merci* means too.”

“You see the way she looks at me? I reckon she’s ready for a little of the old wild horse whoopee.”

“Dear God, I hope I never have to guess what that means.”

Lewd wink. “Yup, served up by yours truly.”

“I shudder with sympathy for any girl who has to endure such indignity.”

“Annalise…” Frank’s wistful gaze drifted to the dancing flames in the hearth.

At two-thirty, Annalise appeared in the lounge. “*Monsieur,* you may come now.”

Frank jumped from his chair, but the woman shook her dark curls. “Not you, only *Monsieur* Charles.”

“Is there news?” Charlie asked. “Has the baby come?”

She nodded. “*Oui,* you have a son.”

Charlie whipped the newspaper off his cigars and tossed one to Frank. “Here, have a smoke. I’ve produced a son!” He rushed after Annalise.

Outside the closed bedroom door, the woman stopped, turned and looked up at him with sincere eyes. “*Monsieur,* your wife she is very weak. The baby it was hard coming, she has lost much blood.”

“She’s alright, isn’t she? I mean…we don’t have to worry?”

Annalise looked down. “It will take some while. Worst will be this night. I can only say there were times I was ready to cry for them both.”

Charlie gazed at the top of the woman’s head, which did not turn upward again. “I thank you…Annalise.”

“*Oui, Monsieur,* I will wait here while you go to meet your family.”

He opened the door.

It wasn’t the scene he’d been anticipating; Amalia was not sitting up. Beside her on the bed was a tiny bundle wrapped in a blue blanket. With what appeared painful effort, she turned her head to look at him. “Charlie…we have a son. Isn’t he a beautiful sight?”

“Yes, beautiful…are you alright?”

She let out her breath with a tiny shudder. “I’m cold, sweetheart, so cold. Is there another blanket?”

He glanced at their fireplace with its well stoked flames, then sat on the bed. “It only feels that way because you’ve been losing blood. Annalise said the birth was difficult.”

“For the family we wanted I would do it all again.” She drew another quivering breath. “Charlie…”

“Yes?”

“He must go to a fine school, promise me. You may call him any name we talked of, but his school must be a proud one.”

“Of course, dear, we’ll send him overseas to Oxford or Cambridge if you like. And his name, I rather thought William after my grandfather, a distinguished gentleman of great character. But we can talk about it later.”

Her eyes blinked so slowly. “Yes, we’ll do that. One other thing…”

“Of course, dear.”

“Will you take down that picture of me in the hallway? The one with the flowered hat…I don’t want my son remembering me in that ridiculous thing. I was so young.”

“But dear, I thought we both loved that hat and the silly look on your – wait, what do you mean ‘remembering you’?”

“William is a wonderful name. He will make us both so proud.”

“Yes, but what do you mean ‘remembering’? Come now, you’re talking silly again. You’re not going anywhere, I assure you.”

The smile appeared again displaying her perfect white teeth. “I must tell you now Charlie, that one of my eyes is crying while the other one is laughing.” She gazed at him with both eyes wide open and the green flecks appeared again in the lamplight. It was true; there was a tear in the one nearest their son.

He shook his head. “There you go again with those silly sayings. Whatever is that supposed to mean?”

She didn’t answer, but lay still as a porcelain doll silently studying his face. He took her frail hand in his and gazed at their child in the blanket beside them. Then with the wondrous certainty that the world had changed forever, he turned to smile at the woman he loved, who gently squeezed his fingers and smiled back. He would remember that smile the rest of his life. They didn’t say anything, but the moment that passed between them was a lifetime lived in a heartbeat, brimming with everything they’d been together since that first magic in the Italian sunshine, the moment their eyes had met. Charlie was still gazing in the flickering yellow light when the baby stirred and he turned to check on it. He sat marvelling at their tiny pink miracle beside him with her fingers resting in his, when a warm kiss brushed his cheek. It was an odd sensation. He turned to tell her about it, but when again he found her eyes, realized with a terrible shudder there was no one looking back. “Amalia,” he stammered, “no…you can’t.”

But it was too late; she already had.

The baby gathered its tiny breath and with a faint gasping gurgle, puckered its face and cried.

\* \* \*

A mound of smoky, sweet smelling coal was heaped on the gravesite two days before the diggers could begin working their way through the midwinter frost. Reverend Giles was called back from One-Fifty Mile House to perform the service and on a bright Saturday afternoon Amalia’s casket was carried by sleigh to the tiny Bear Creek graveyard. Sunshine sparked off the frosted tree branches and the air crackled at twenty below zero. Charlie stood by the edge of the hole, fedora hat dangling in gloved fingers, long cloth coat carelessly unbuttoned below his scarf. No one, not even the crusty Ah Joe, could look at him without water coming to their eyes. The baby snuggled quietly in the arms of his wet nurse, Emma Brewster from a neighbouring ranch, a busy, round faced woman famous for one earthly thing – she loved producing children and had been doing it now for an astonishing eighteen years, most of which she’d spent pregnant. Her husband Art, top hand at the ranch, stood by her ample arm in a suit which hardly looked better than the coveralls he wore everywhere else, fixing fence, riding down strays or just stretched before his drum heater at the end of a long day. They were an honest, hard working couple with a lot of child experience and rather than start the baby on one of the new formulas, William was offered to Emma. It was an arrangement which suited the misery inside Charlie just fine.

George Stiles snuck another glance at the grieving widower and whispered to Wanda, “He looks like they should be sticking him in the ground.”

“Enough, George, the man’s just lost his wife.”

“If somebody doesn’t get to him soon, he’ll be next, mark my words.”

But there was no way anyone was getting to Charlie. His neighbours came, eyes floating in a sea of sympathy, touching his arm and inviting him to drop by for dinner anytime he wanted. Bring along the baby for the ladies and children to fawn over. He acknowledged their words with a nod and grey faced smile, but it was clear there was nothing behind it. The tolerant twinkle was gone, dropped into a hole beside the only thing he wanted to live for. Nothing anywhere on earth could replace her. He never even looked at his son.

When the reverend tried to offer a few words of timely solace, he was snapped at, “What was God doing five days ago? Well, man, have you got the answer to that?”

“Lord Charles, The Lord giveth and The Lord taketh away. It’s not for us to determine when.”

“Oh, go rattle your collection plate. That’s what you do best. And leave me alone.”

The reverend blinked with understanding and said, “The Lord knows how difficult it is to cope at a time like this. With grief in our heart we think and say things we don’t truly mean. But through Him comes the light and with that we find lasting comfort. He will still be there when you’re ready.” Then he wisely walked away, leaving Charlie alone, angry and staring into the hole.

George said to Wanda, “That’s too bad. When we turn our back on our faith, we close the door to healing. I wish there was something I could do.”

Wanda shoved a stray wisp of steel grey hair back under her hat. “Time, George, that’s what it takes. Time and something worthwhile to look forward to.”

Unfortunately, Charlie had nothing to look forward to other than another hard winter on a ranch that wasn’t making any money. The fall sale of two-year-old steers and cull cows had barely fetched enough to cover their shipment to Vancouver. Winter road travel, and with it visitors to the lodge, had practically stopped. Nothing he did made a difference. He rode out every day with the boys to chop water holes for the cattle, pitch hay and watch for wolf tracks in the snow. With a brief thaw and then the temperature dropping again, the top crust hardened and the murderous pack had an ideal surface to race over. The ranch lost more healthy yearlings and breeding stock, the snow bloodied around another picked over rack of ribs and hooves, mournful howls drifting far off through the trees.

Charlie said to Frank, “You know, perhaps this plateau isn’t meant for cattle. There’s nothing else for the bloody wolves to eat with all the deer and moose wintering in the valleys.”

“Well, we could poison them or trap the bastards.”

“Yes, I suppose we could.” Then he’d sit in his saddle and listen to his nemesis celebrating their bloody victory, shake his head and ride away. Frank could do little more than follow.

It was as Wanda had said: a person needs something to look forward to and there just wasn’t anything around to do that. The last straw came when Emma Brewster offered in late February to keep the baby on in her home after weaning, which should happen sometime in summer, and Charlie agreed. Even Ah Joe could see that was wrong and said so when delivering the boss his lonely supper in the deserted guest dining room.

“You let other family raise son, then you lose son. You bring boy back, I help make milk bottle. You all time staring at fire, no got mind. Father need son like he need father, now bring boy back.”

“It’s not your business, man. Stick to cooking and I’ll manage my own family.”

“I family too, you say so to fat cigar man. You wrong now and need somebody tell you.”

The worst thing was, Charlie didn’t get upset. He sat staring over his plate of beans and potstickers, and simply muttered into the fire, “I don’t know the first thing about being a father and neither do you. He’s better off with the Brewsters until I can arrange for him to go to school in England. He’s an heir, he’ll be well looked after. Just let things take their course and do your cooking.”

Ah Joe shuffled off, but not without a sing-song chorus of Mandarin delivered at the top of his lungs. He hammered the door shut behind him as he left. Then in English somewhere down the hall, “You bloody well wrong!”

It was late in March, the buds on the birch and poplar drenching the air with a smell like sap boiling in a bucket, when a terrifying visitor appeared on the front porch. Charlie opened the door, then slammed it again, not certain he could trust his eyes. Someone or something was standing there. And so was a bear. Now he wished he’d sent for that glass peephole he’d seen in the Sears mail order catalogue. He tried to make sense of the scene, couldn’t, and called out, “Is that a bear on my porch?”

A voice like boulders tumbling down a mountainside said, “She won’t hurt you. She likes people.”

“That’s reassuring…so what do you want?”

“A job.”

The problem with that seemed obvious. Charlie tried not to sound insensitive or offending. “Look, even if you’re the top cowhand in the country, I’m quite certain the rest of my men wouldn’t want to share their bunkhouse with a bear.”

“That’s okay, she sleeps outside.”

It seemed cowardly shouting through a closed door. He opened it a crack and peered at the fearsome figure draped in a monstrous fur coat. “I’m sorry, you appear to be a pleasant fellow and I’m sure you do good work, but I’ve got all the hands I need until spring roundup. Come back then and we’ll talk…only perhaps without the bear.”

“Cows are calving. Little ones make easy pickings for wolves.”

“What? What’s that you say about wolves?”

“Wolves kill calves.”

Charlie swung the door open and stared up into the dark eyes under the heavy jutting brow. “Yes, I know wolves kill calves. So why would you stand here and tell me about it?”

“Because I can fix it for you.”

“You can make the wolves go away?”

“No, but I can trap them.”

Charlie bent sideways as the bear poked its snout toward him, sniffing and licking its nose.

The big visitor said, “It’s okay, she just woke up and she misses people.”

“I quite imagine she does. That’s what worries me.”

“I’ll trap your wolves and take no pay, but I keep the hides. Another thing I can do is teach your son the ways of the bush. When he grows older, of course.”

*That couldn’t be what he heard.* “Excuse me, did you say something about my son?”

“I heard you had a son. If he’s going to run a ranch, he needs to know as much as he can about the land. You can’t teach him everything, you’re not from here.”

Charlie took a step forward. “Look you, I have no idea what cave you’ve crawled out of, but my son is none of your business. And just so you know, he’s going to be a scholar, not a rancher.”

“That’s a terrible waste for a person born on such fine land. But you’re his father, if that’s what you think is best.”

“That’s right, I’m his father.”

“You must be a good one. Mine never cared what I did or wanted me around at all.”

Charlie almost said, ‘I can well imagine why’, but managed to find his manners. “Look, if you want to trap wolves, be my guest. But I can warn you they’re diabolical creatures and too clever to come in rifle range. Nobody around here has been able to deal with this lot.”

“You mean nobody *from* around here. I’m from here and I can deal with the animals. The only thing I won’t do is kill a grizzly bear. My people don’t kill grizzly bears.”

“Your people…oh, you’re Indian.”

“Of course, do you think I look white?”

“Um…I wasn’t entirely sure. It’s the bear, you see. I thought possibly you might be a circus person.”

The big man blinked. “My name is Henry. I’m pleased to meet you, Lord Charles.” He stuck out his hand.

“Yes…” Charlie offered his fragile looking fingers to the giant paw. The grip was firm, but not crushing; clearly the fellow had learned to control his strength. “Well, good luck with the wolves. In fact, I’ll throw in five dollars for every mangy hide you produce. That should provide some extra incentive.”

Henry said, “I don’t need more money, the hides are enough. But if I catch ten, I want you to bring your son out to meet me. Maybe I can get you to change your mind.”

“Oh, he doesn’t live - ” Charlie stopped before finishing his sentence. The only thing he could think to do was offer a half-hearted nod. “Yes, that will be fine. We’ll do that if you reach ten.”

Henry turned and so did his bear. They lumbered together down the steps. “See you in two weeks, that should be enough. And think about what I said. The sooner the boy starts, the more he can learn.”

Charlie stood staring after the impossible pair. That had been an odd job interview from beginning to end, but one thing the man had said, so sad and wrong, had cut to a place in his heart. *His father hadn’t wanted him.*

In six days, the big wolf trapper was back on the porch with eight enormous hides, grey and black, two of which were over eight feet long. Charlie stared at the catch and said, “Quite impressive, but I counted sixteen in the pack. That means there’s still eight out there ravaging my cattle. Not only that, but you didn’t get your ten.”

“I have four more hides at camp, but they’re wet and heavy, too much to carry at once. You’ll get them tomorrow. Maybe I’ll stretch and dry them here, that okay?”

“On my front porch? Not a chance - you’ll terrify the guests.”

“You have guests?”

“Well, not at the moment. But if you hang those hideous things by the door, I won’t be getting any either. Take them down to the barn.”

“Got horses in the barn?”

“No, some orphaned calves and nurse cows. Where’s your bear?”

Henry began collecting his furs. “Guarding my camp. I don’t want those hides ripped up, they’re prime.”

Charlie said, “You can stretch them on the side of the barn if you want. There’s plenty of space.”

“That won’t work. You stretch a fur whole on a stretcher, not slit up the middle like a moose. I could teach your son that and a lot more, like how to catch his own wolves.”

“Look, I said you could meet him, but he’s going to school when he’s of age. Every young man should go to school. The more we learn, the better we live, it’s a rule of civilization.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been saying.” Henry heaved his hides over his shoulders and turned for the barn. “There’s a lot to learn out here.”

Charlie gritted his teeth and called after him, “He’s going to be a scholar, not a rancher!”

“A shame in this beautiful place.”

When Henry met little William, the baby in his hands was like a puppy wiggling in a snow shovel. Emma Brewster was there and despite her initial shock at the big man’s appearance, soon seemed to recognize the gentle soul behind those dark eyes. She offered up her charge with little more than a slight tremble and nervous blink. Little William reached out to grasp the thick brown finger offered him, then pulled it into his mouth. Henry made a sound like a sheep, presumably a chuckle, and the baby let out a happy squeal. Henry’s finger was wet. He held it up. “Good gums. He’s going to have strong teeth.”

Emma said, “That’s a true fact, he’s horrible hard on my nipples. Plenty worse than my other twelve.”

Henry said, “Rub some bear fat on your teats. Softens the skin so they don’t chafe.”

“I…thank you…I’ll think about that.” She stared at the big man and tugged up the front of her dress.

Charlie, too, stared. He’d planned to end this whole ridiculous episode early, but instead found himself nodding and saying, “I have good teeth. Not very English, luckily, and so did Amalia. If William takes after me, he should have fast legs as well. I earned my colours in rugby, you know.”

Henry displayed his enormous smile. “My teeth have plenty of colour. And strong like rocks.”

Emma said, “Lordy, I imagine you could bite through a tree with those.”

Charlie started to explain, “I don’t think you understand. You see, earning your colours means…” He paused, looked to his son gurgling contentedly in the wolf trapper’s hands, then cleared his throat and said, “You’re from Canim Lake Reserve?”

“I was born there. I live in my own place now, best for me.”

“So you live in the bush?”

“Yes.”

“And you trap for a living.”

“No, I only caught those wolves to help you out. I heard you lost your wife and you were having a hard time with the winter. It was a hard winter. And when a person is having a hard time, sometimes it just takes a little help to turn things around.”

Charlie’s brow furrowed. “So where did you hear all this?”

Henry just looked at him and shrugged.

Emma said, “It’s the bush telegraph. The further they live from town, the more they know and faster. I had an uncle up by Alexis Creek got his legs caught in a mower. A Chilcotin Indian rode up, threw him over his horse and got him out to help or surely he’d of died. They asked the Indian later how he knew what happened and he couldn’t say, just knew - bush telegraph.”

Charlie turned to the giant in the fur coat. “You’re saying you could teach my son about such things? About this bush telegraph?”

“I could teach him the land. The thing you’re talking about is the land speaking to us. We just have to know how to listen.”

Charlie shook his head. “You caught a dozen wolves in two weeks. Clearly you’re a phenomenal trapper.”

“No, English Deka, he’s a trapper. He wouldn’t have let four get away.”

“About those four. What’s going to stop them from raiding my cattle?”

Henry said, “I told you they got away. They’re gone, or I’d have caught them too.”

Another shake of the head. “Amazing…just amazing.”

“No, English Deka, he’s amazing.”

This time Charlie didn’t shake his head. He didn’t produce a counterfeit smile and try to send the big man away with vague pleasantries like, ‘drop by again sometime’ or ‘check back at spring roundup’. Instead he gazed at the hands holding his son, who had now drifted off to a contented, pink cheeked slumber, and said, “Very well, I’d like you to teach him. You come back when you think it’s time. It would be quite beyond belief to have an offspring gifted with wilderness skills such as yours. Perhaps you should consider opening a school.”

The big head shook from side to side. “Not me, I hated school.”

“Well, so did I, but it dulls the pain somewhat if you allow your students to play rugby.”

The yellow teeth appeared again. “You’ll have to teach him that. We only learned to grow beans and carrots.”

Charlie shook his head, produced a smile and said, “I suspect William’s early education is going to be one of his favorite memories of youth. Now may we have the child back, please?”

Henry passed the slumbering handful to Emma with a soft clucking sound. William hardly stirred. She turned her round face up toward the deep brown eyes and said, “You got a natural way with babies, you do. You’d make a first rate father.”

Henry squirmed inside his fur coat and had to look away.

When he was gone, Charlie turned to Emma. “About our plan for you to keep young William on after weaning, I’m afraid I’ve had a change of heart…”

Later that day, he climbed into the pickup truck and drove to the cemetery. Some things were changing with the season, some things were slow. There was a robin in the spruce grove by the old fence raising a ruckus about how much he needed a mate, but on the ground under the heavy branches, patches of snow still clung to winter. That was how Charlie felt. The spring sunshine on his shoulders warmed him, but the hole in his stomach just as cold as it had in January. He approached the mound of earth, still without a headstone. Every time he came, it was hard to believe she was here. Ordering a stone would make it seem so final. He fought back the empty ache that rose with him every morning and told Amalia the news of bringing William home. Strange, but somehow that lit a familiar warmth, quite as if she was there to listen. He stood a long time afterward doing that, just listening, to the robin, to the branches shuddering in the breeze. Then as he was turning to leave, he could’ve sworn the spruce nearest the fence bent to whisper something. A trick of the wind, for certain, but it almost sounded like, “God bless, Charlie…love you.”

Chapter Fourteen

With William home, life at Bear Creek Ranch changed, a condition which could be naturally expected with a baby in the house. About the only thing which remained the same was the continuing necessity for hard work. The work simply felt harder. No one slept through the night, certainly not William. Ah Joe proved better than his word and including the two AM formula bottle deposited in the icebox for Charlie to warm on the woodstove, began creating gastronomic baby treats like rehydrated apple surprise on a shiny Choo-Choo spoon. He even assumed the daunting responsibility of feeding and caring for the baby when Charlie was busy, which was most of the day, and attempted to recreate western verbal coercion to the best of his eastern bachelor abilities.

“How go train…shoo-shoo…open wide.” The shiny spoon chugga-chugged to the wiggling mouth. Pudgy little arms waved with excitement.

“PHOOO!” Rehydrated apple surprise sprayed halfway to the Orient.

“Bad baby! Ah Joe make all morning! You eat now, eat shoo-shoo.”

“AH…AH…WAAAAAA!”

“What matter? What want? Want bottle?”

“WAAA-AAA-AAA!”

“Here bottle…here, that good. Not tell boss Charlie. Bottle only for night.”

Happy wiggling toes.

“Now need make more bottle. Next time eat shoo-shoo or get nothing. Next time you see.”

“Hee-hee-hee…” Wet little fingers reached for the cook’s nose.

“Oh, you bad baby…hurry, finish bottle before boss see.”

But Charlie saw almost nothing. He poked around the ranch like a badger on opium, red rimmed eyes fighting to focus on where next to put his shuffling feet. Even the dogs lost interest in following him. Then he fell off his horse. Frank had been up front on his big gelding, talking over his shoulder, when a loud thump and a groan announced the embarrassing sin of falling asleep in the saddle. It was suggested he take a few days off ranch duties to recover from whatever was ailing him, but the thought of spending more time staring down a tiny gaping maw at a wiggling epiglottis seemed the most disturbing prospect of all. The sound of a baby gathering its breath to cry caused his Adams apple to quiver.

One evening on the front porch when William was crawling around in the orange glow of sunset putting everything in his mouth, Charlie looked up from his Vancouver Sun newspaper to see a most extraordinary sight. These last few months the youngster had been cultivating a top cover of fine fluffy hair, which lit by the sky behind it appeared to radiate an aura around his tiny skull. He was sitting up holding what looked like a wiggling beetle. Charlie watched, amused, as the little explorer prepared to administer the baby acid test of sticking the insect in his mouth, when from behind the tiny head came a brilliant green flash. William’s fluff lit emerald green and the beetle disappeared. Charlie knew what he’d just seen; he was after all an ex-sailor. It was the green flash of sunset, a rare phenomenon witnessed by the fortunate few usually alone and far out to sea. He’d also witnessed another bug going out of sight. He dropped his paper and pushed wearily off his chair to dig yet one more treasure out of his son’s reluctant mouth. He bent over to administer the big scooping finger, when: “PHOOO!” Out came the beetle to bounce off the porch, split its shiny black wings and go buzzing over the railing. William looked up to his father, pointed and said, “Da…”

Charlie straightened. “What’s that, did you just say, Da?”

William pointed again toward the disappeared bug and said, “Da-Da.”

“Great Scott, you’ve said your first word!” He hoisted the tiny person in his arms and went charging into the house. He burst into the kitchen where Ah Joe was preparing the nightly bottle. “Ah Joe, William just said his first word! And it was Da-Da!”

The cook beamed at his tiny daytime companion. “He smart fellow, learn fast.” He went back to measuring condensed milk.

A pudgy finger pointed. “Da-Da?” Then a giggle, “Hee-hee-hee…” William was pointing at Ah Joe.

Charlie’s head snapped back. “What…you’re calling Ah Joe, Da-Da too?”

The cook held up the bottle and shook it. “He learn word. Word mean all things. You not worry, you Da-Da sure.”

“But…he was pointing at you.”

Ah Joe sighed. He held up the bottle and in a voice like sugar dusted on cinnamon cakes said, “William, what this?”

“Da-Da?”

“See, only know one word.” He pointed at Charlie. “William, this Da-Da.”

William waved at the bottle. “Da-Da.” His mouth puckered, preparing to cry.

“No, no bottle. Not nighttime now.”

“Ah…ah… Da-Da!”

“No bottle, William.”

“WAAA-AAA-AAA!”

Charlie screwed up his face at the child howling in his arms. “Oh, bugger it, give him the bottle.”

Ah Joe gave him the bottle.

Little William sucked and gulped. He popped the rubber nipple from his lips and like a little general declaring the end of war announced, “Da-Da.”

Soon enough, though, Charlie was properly Da-Da, Ah Joe was Otto and anything with fur and a waving tail became Gog. They even had Gogs racing up trees, chattering to get away from bigger barking Gogs that wandered everywhere around the house, licking faces and hands. William seemed to find the giggly side of everything, a tickle under the slippery wet chin, a raspberry on the tummy button. Occasionally, increasingly, he forgot to wake up at night. Charlie’s cheeks regained colour, his eyelids returning to their proper position at the top of his eyes. It was a day such as this that Hank Newton appeared with the request which would set in motion the beginning of a brand new world.

Hank arrived at the ranch, unnaturally polite and hair oiled, cloth cap crushed in both hands. Instead of the familiar gasoline smell from oily coveralls, he was clad in shoes and pants, all of which whiffed much more pleasantly of the fancy new Aqua Velva appearing in ads everywhere. Unfortunately, Charlie was at the orphan calf pen supervising young Eldon in a cleanup made long overdue by his extended period of barely coping with life. Hank’s new shoes sank into a soup of overflowing calf manure as he wasted no time getting to the point.

“Good morning, Lord Charles, I’ve come to propose a business venture.”

“Unless you’ve come asking for money, Hank, let’s keep it informal with ‘Charlie’.”

“Oh, no, I’m not here for any handouts.”

Charlie stared at Hank’s disappeared shoes. “That’s just as well, because my hand doesn’t reach out very far these days. So, how can I help you?”

“Well, you’ve always known me as a truck driver. I’ve been doing that for fifteen years now, since I was seventeen, and that’s a long time.”

“The longer we do something, the better we become at it. I can honestly say you’re an excellent truck driver. Um…were those new socks?”

The only thing Hank seemed aware of was his cap, which was suffering terribly as he continued, “Thanks, but I’m sick of driving truck. I ain’t never at home and about the only darn thing I can count on is breaking down at the most miserable spot in the most miserable weather without a soul around to help me. And if they say we learn from our mistakes, then the one thing I learned in fifteen years was how to fix a motorized vehicle.”

“It’s not a mistake, Hank, if it makes us wiser.”

“That may be, but I been thinking what would make me happier and Bear Creek better off?”

“You want to buy a new truck?”

“No, what I want to do is open up a garage. With a gas pump.”

“Oh…” Charlie paused to point young Eldon and his wheelbarrow toward a suspiciously bottomless corner of the pen where a calf was standing hock deep in muck, wiggling its ears at flies. “With a petrol pump, you say?”

“Uh…what’s petrol?”

“Sorry, gasoline, that’s the proper English word for it.”

“Absolutely, I been looking into it and the very latest thing is an electric pump that does everything without cranking. Sucks the gas up into a little jar at the top, then all you gotta do is squeeze a handle.”

“Yes, I saw one of those in Vancouver. Quite the device and very popular. Cars were lining up to be filled there.”

Hank said, “Can you imagine how something like that’d change the way drivers look at our little whistle stop here? I mean, we’d have the only gas station between One Fifty Mile and Cache Creek. And right along with it, I can supply mechanical fix-ups. Hell, everybody’d be stopping.”

Charlie swished at the squadron of flies surrounding his head. “I believe you may have something there, Hank. Have you noticed lately how there appear to be more people travelling by road than railway? I mean other than the vagabonds, that is.”

Hank squished closer to the pen and said, “You bet I have. Why, when I started driving truck, I was mostly alone out there except for saddle horses, pack strings and the odd freight wagon. Now I gotta look out for Jim Dandies in shiny Sunday sedans and I even seen one guy with an army pack on his back riding a bicycle out the other side of Clinton.”

“Really? That must’ve been hard work.”

“Never stopped to talk to the crazy fool. Maybe his horse died, I dunno.”

Charlie said, “I believe your dream has merit, Hank, but you talked about a business proposition and quite honestly with beef prices lately I can barely rub two dimes together.”

“Well, Lord Char…I mean Charlie, I’m pretty much pressed between that spot and a hard place myself. But the way I see it, I gotta do this before somebody else does. And like I said, I ain’t here for money. I got my truck and I already been to the bank in Ashcroft where the manager says he can advance a loan on it if I plan to open my business.”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m afraid the only thing I’m not seeing is where I fit in.”

Hank’s cap began to suffer again. “Two things. Number one: the best spot for a garage would be next to the main road, heading for Exeter Station and your stopping house. That’d put three conveniences in a row – we’d be bringing each other business. And number two is electricity. I need electricity to run that pump.”

“Oh…electricity.”

“Uh, huh…and besides that, you own the land.”

“Oh, yes, I do own that land.”

The cap compressed down to barely a handful. “Unfortunately, I can’t afford to make you an offer to buy it.”

Charlie peered at the hesitant entrepreneur with earnest eyes. Then the old tolerant twinkle returned and he aimed a finger toward Hank’s nose. “Wait, what if I lease you the land you need? Might that satisfy your requirements?”

It was as if someone had lifted a tractor off Hank’s shoulders. His head rose and he let out a long breath, but his eyes remained cautious. He said, “How much?”

“Hmm…” Charlie stared down hard at the ground…or manure in this case. He looked up again. “How does a dollar fifty sound?”

Hank blinked. “A dollar fifty…a day?”

“Heavens no, man, I’m not planning to get rich off you. I’ll do that when cattle prices turn around and as you say, this idea of yours will be good for the stopping house, as well. A dollar fifty a month.”

“I…are you serious?”

Charlie shook his head, but his blue eyes twinkled. “Of course you’re not obliged to accept if you think you might find a better deal elsewhere. However as you said, the location is ideal. A dollar fifty a month, take it or leave it.”

Hank’s hand shot out. “Deal! Dang, I don’t know why I figured you might be a hard sell. I guess it’s because you’re royalty and all, and it just got me flustered. A dollar fifty a month…I don’t believe it.”

Charlie offered his fingers to the eager grip. “Oh, I’m not royalty, good fellow, merely a Marquess.”

“What’s that, Russian or something?”

“Never mind, it’s been a pleasure doing business with you. How’s your father and that steam engine performing?”

“Oh, just great. The sawmill’s going balls over chin. Y’know, if this place gets as popular as I think, it might even grow into a real town, maybe bigger than Lone Butte. More people might want to lease off you.”

“Well, I’d look forward to such expansion, Hank, if it’s gone about properly with careful thinking. The ability to plan ahead is what sets us apart from the animals.”

Hank nodded. “It sure does. Know something else I noticed? Something I got reminded of on my mileage meter in the truck.”

“What?”

“Well, we’re exactly a hundred miles from Lillooet.”

“I realize that, Hank, but exactly how do you feel it’s significant?”

“Well, it just so happens that Lillooet is mile zero of the Cariboo Road. Your lodge and my garage are exactly a hundred miles north of the start.”

“Really…that’s quite interesting when you put it that way. Might help people to plan a stop if they know exactly how far it is to where they’re going.”

“Yup, it might at that.”

Charlie said, “I must say I’ve always felt Bear Creek Stopping House sounded a bit of a mouthful. Now I’m thinking, how about Hundred Mile House? I rather like the way it rolls.”

“Makes a lot of sense, it does.”

“Sort of distant and romantic.”

Hank nodded. “And a gas pump too.”

\* \* \*

Great trees are born from tiny seeds, and so are elephants, monuments and nations. A gas pump and a stopping house may have hastened the founding of Rome if such amenities had been available at the time. It certainly worked for Hundred Mile House, as did land leased for a dollar fifty a month. Charlie immediately saw the potential of Hank’s proposition and while the garage was being constructed, began pacing out plots for a new town site. It would be an ordered expansion, nothing like the wandering monkey cluster of most frontier outposts. There would be parallel streets with intersecting avenues. Electricity delivered to each home and business at reasonable rates. Perhaps even a landing strip for those new aeroplanes that claimed to be opening up the north. Possibly even a church, now he was coming to terms with life and making amends with God. The possibilities were limited only by the bounds of human imagination, the vision intoxicating. Back in his home country, the entrenched socialist government may have managed to strip the family of land, power and money, but Canada was still in the process of being born. Perhaps someday little William might be a Marquess not only in title, but guiding the helm of a proud estate and contributing to the growth of a thriving community on a legendary road. Hundred Mile House – why one might even go so far as to imagine it a fine name for a town.

Once again, the only obstacle was money.

By 1934 the depression had been relentlessly wearing down the will and resources of pioneering spirits for too many hungry years, forcing banks to step in and crush the dreams of many who couldn’t meet their debt. Foreclosure sales, especially on agricultural ventures, were epidemic. Charlie didn’t owe money, thank God, but he didn’t have any to invest in his conviction of a glowing future either. Hank Newton appeared to have guessed right and his garage business was taking hold with a growing reputation; he was one of the few. Charlie sat supervising William’s dinner one night, or more accurately enduring the messy endlessness of it, when he grumbled to Ah Joe how government meddling had crippled the cattle ranches in the province, particularly the American import tariff on beef. Lately it was cheaper to shoot cattle than ship them. As well, there was talk the B.C. Liberals were considering raising the grazing fees on crown land to support their fantasy of extending social services and providing relief to the unemployed. The way Charlie saw it: “About the only thing that’ll succeed in doing is bankrupt ranchers and create more unemployment. Fees and taxes do not increase prosperity.”

Ah Joe said, “Boss want money?”

Charlie’s head drooped toward the mushed peas and carrots coating his tabletop. “Ah Joe, a ranch is a business and all businesses need money. But I don’t have anything to sell and the only way for people like myself to get money from a bank these days is to take it out with a gun.”

“So want money.”

A gob of mushed peas splattered Charlie’s forehead. He didn’t wipe it off. “Truthfully, we’re starting to do better with the lodge, but I believe it’s nothing compared to the potential for beef. The Americans have officially announced they’re removing two and a half cents a pound from their duty this winter. Prices in North America, and that includes Canada, are tied to the Chicago market. That means the two cents we got this fall for prime steers will be over four by spring. It doesn’t take a crystal ball to see that coming, it’s simple mathematics. I have enough hay to carry at least two hundred more head. If I could raise some cash, I could buy those cattle now and double my investment with the next shipment. But try telling that to a banker.”

“No banker, but maybe I know person give money. He businessman too.”

“My friend, as I said, nobody’s lending money to ranchers.”

“Chow Dong Hoy smart man. You tell him what you tell me and maybe he lend money.”

Charlie wiped his forehead and licked mush from his hand. “And just who is this Hoy fellow?”

“He own store in Quesnel. He big man there, everybody call him C.D. Take nice pictures too.”

“Pictures?”

Ah Joe pointed at the photograph of Charlie and Amalia on the mantle. “Maybe William get picture took, put beside parents. Everybody go to C.D., all Chinese people, England people and Indian too. He famous man.”

Charlie gazed at his mush coated son. “Can you imagine someone wanting to photograph this?”

“He pretty baby, just got eyes too much round.”

Charlie allowed a small smile. “It’s true his mother’s eyes were appallingly round.”

“You tell C.D. Ah Joe send you. If not lend money, I give five hundred dollar, we split cows half-half.”

Charlie’s eyes went rounder than his son’s. “You have five hundred dollars you’d lend me?”

“Not lend, make partners. We split profit, half-half.”

“Where on earth did you get so much money?”

“Not nice ask that. Work hard, save money, that all I do. You want five hundred dollar?”

“Well, certainly we could do that. We can buy yearlings for around twenty dollars a head and I’ll see we draw up a note that says you receive half the profit on, um…”

“Twenty-five cows.”

Charlie blinked. “Yes…twenty-five…I was going to say that.”

“That good, but C.D. Chow give money okay. You good man, he like you easy. Maybe take picture for free.”

“Ah Joe, regardless of what your friend says, I’ll buy our cattle.” Charlie extended his hand. “Partners.”

Ah Joe shook. “Partners.”

It was as Ah Joe predicted; C.D. Chow agreed Charlie’s vision grew from sound thinking and loaned the capital to purchase two hundred head of mixed steers from less optimistic, or perhaps more desperate neighbours, as far away as the Chilcotin. To that the ranch added twenty-five healthy yearlings in partnership with Ah Joe. The next year under an atmosphere of relaxed government intervention, those cattle and the maturing two-year olds from the core herd fetched more than double the previous fall’s price at the stockyard in Vancouver. Charlie bought a shiny new Massey-Harris tractor from Hank Newton’s dealership expansion and hired an experienced hand to drive it, proving his philosophy that reduced fees and taxation foster a thriving business environment to create employment. Everyone benefits, not just the greedy government. Ah Joe took his windfall in cash and withdrew from the partnership. When Charlie asked why, citing his conviction this was only the beginning of a long recovery, the dour faced cook informed him he did not like how the government had stolen part of his profit as a result of the sale.

“But Ah Joe, as much as I don’t like it either, taxes here are in fact a pittance compared to where I come from.”

“What government do? Pass law telling Chinese persons they not welcome anymore to country, then take money from Chinese who live here. Why I should pay so they make laws against Chinese?”

Charlie opened his mouth to say something, then couldn’t think of anything and closed it again.

Ah Joe took his money and stuffed it under his jacket. “You like government, you pay tax. I put money where they not see.”

Word spread of the ridiculously affordable leases and new residents appeared, entrepreneurial souls looking for a foothold in a growing community like Hundred Mile House. Roadside businesses sprang up. It became effortless to stop for a cup of coffee and a meal at any time of day. Buy gas. Get that broken headlight fixed. If you weren’t in a hurry, you could sit back and enjoy a professional haircut. There were even piano lessons from lovely Elsa van Haas, recently moved to town with her newborn daughter and husband, Rueben, pump operator and understudy at Hank Newton’s garage and Massey-Harris dealership. The truly adventurous could have their fortune told by frightful Freja, shawl wearing gypsy with the ragged smile and muddled Scando-Romanian accent. “My people, the Roma, they travel aaa-vrywhere.” It was rumoured she sold moonshine whiskey out the back door of her tiny bungalow to supplement her income after the unfortunate disappearance of her husband in the fierce January blizzard of 1934. Tracking lost pigs, apparently.

Frank sent away for a catalogue girl from Ireland (mail order bride) who came with the required flaming red hair. What he hadn’t read in the small print was the matching fiery temper, so fierce it could change the outcome of poker games. If ever she caught her husband losing his wages at such a table, the resulting Celtic rage would see the other players inclined to slide the pot toward her and inch back against a wall. Frank usually dove out a window.

\* \* \*

Pioneer life is about meeting new challenges and besting them. For Duncan, Karin and the kids, their pivotal week arrived in the gentle summer of ’34, with the hawks twisting over the treetops and corn in the garden just beginning to burst into fat tasselled cobs. This time the problem had nothing to do with Duncan, the misplaced moose hunter. He couldn’t tell you where the Eiffel Tower was, but he’d learned the local landmarks from Henry and could confidently wander as far afield as beautiful Lac des Roches without losing his way back home. Of course, he never fired from the saddle again, a lesson well learned the first time. It was a good thing too, because he was a key figure in that visit from Karin’s parents, the one which nearly tore their little family asunder.

After the seventeen hour train ride through one of the most scenic but treacherous canyons in the country, the Frazer, Ania and Lech Jakubic staggered out into the legendary dry heat of the Cariboo looking more like bacon twisting in a skillet than folks in town for a holiday

Ania whined to her daughter, “That was terrible, terrible, you should have warned us. I thought the angel of death was waiting around every corner. That train driver must have thought he was in a race. Just look at all the dust, this air makes my skin so dry. When was the last time you had rain?”

“It rained yesterday, Mama.”

“It did?”

“Yes, it dries up fast because we’re close to the sun. We’re very high here, you know.”

Ania gripped her husband’s arm. “You hear that? They’re close to the sun.”

Lech Jakubic pulled a hand through his thinning grey hair. “I don’t care about the sun. Where are my *wnuki*?”

Karin reached up to give her father a kiss. “Patience, Tata, the kids are at home with Duncan. Everyone’s busy cleaning house after the party last night.”

“Party? You have parties in the middle of the week?”

Karin drew a long breath. “It’s the neighbours, we have very friendly neighbours who show up anytime they feel like it. Here, let’s get your bags to the wagon.”

Lech waved her away. “I’m not a cripple. Help your mama.”

Short, stout bodied Ania pointed her daughter to a suitcase the size of a steamer trunk and hoisted her bulging handbag. “You have a wagon?”

“It belongs to the neighbour. She’s sleeping in our cow shed.”

Ania’s face wrinkled. “What kind of a person sleeps with cows? Are they crazy up here?”

“They’re not crazy, Mama. But they live hard lives, most of them, and it makes them a bit…different. Still, they’re wonderful giving people, you’ll see.”

“We’re not sleeping in the cow shed, are we? You wouldn’t do that to your parents?”

Karin managed to topple the enormous case over the side of the wagon and turned, puffing. “There’s no cow in there now, Mama, only Pauline. And you don’t have to worry, you’re staying in the house with us. Duncan hung a curtain so you’ll have some privacy.”

“Duncan hangs curtains? He was never so handy when he lived in town. There was that counter that wobbled when you leaned on it. And the screen door that never closed.”

“Mama, he’s learned so much since we moved here, we all have. Why, Winnie even helps with the gardening. You should see how she’s grown and you should see our peas.”

“You should come back with us to the coast where there’s other little girls her age.”

“Mama…”

Lech was already on the driver’s bench. “When did you learn to drive a wagon? You were always so scared of animals.”

Karin helped her mother up, then climbed between her parents. “I can ride a horse, Tata, and milk the cow. We have moose come right through our front yard. The worst thing is the deer who want to eat our garden.”

Ania asked, “Are there bears?”

“There’s bears. But they’re not a bother if you leave them alone. You just have to be careful picking berries, because they pick berries too.”

“Bears terrify me. You should come home to Nanaimo. The raccoons are big, but they’re friendly.”

“Mama…”

When the wagon pulled into the yard, Ania dove under her husband’s arm at the sound of a bear in the cow shed.

Karin climbed back to fetch the suitcases. “That’s just Pauline. She drank too much whiskey last night and fell asleep playing cards. We laid her on a blanket, but the snoring woke the children, so Duncan put some fresh hay down in the shed and Arnold helped carry her out there. I thought she’d be awake by now.”

“She drinks whiskey and plays cards? Is she some sort of Calamity Jane?”

“She has a heart of gold, Mama.”

A wall of faces had appeared on the porch. Duncan came striding down the steps with all teeth showing and a slicked down part in his hair, clearly out to impress. Behind him bounced six-year-old Winnie. “Ja-Jo! Baba!” Colin stood at the top of the steps, staring with round blue eyes and a finger in his mouth. Behind the toddler was bushy bearded Arnold, still holding a broom.

Karin said, “Everyone’s been dying to see you. It’s been so long.”

Ania stared at the porch. “Which one is Duncan? He hasn’t grown a beard, has he?”

“Oh, Mama, quit teasing.”

Winnie bounded in front of her father. “Baba, I made a present for you and Ja-Jo!” She scampered to her grandparents with both hands behind her back. “Guess which hand.”

Ania blinked down at the curly head. “Who is this beautiful grownup girl? Do I know her?”

Winnie’s forehead scrunched. “Baba, it’s me, Winnie.”

“It is?”

“Yes, don’t you remember?”

“I remember a little girl who cried when she had to leave home. Do you still cry for home?”

The forehead scrunched tighter. “Why would I cry, Baba? I am home, and now you are too.”

“Never mind, what’s my surprise?”

“Oboy, here.” Outstretched hand and big smile. “I made it myself.”

“Goodness…it’s…beautiful. Is it some sort of teeth?”

“Uh, huh…the teeth are. They’re from a skunk. Henry gave them to me and Daddy drilled the holes, but I put the string through myself. The shiny ones in the middle are special rocks I found. Daddy says they’re diamonds.”

Duncan was standing behind Winnie. He winked.

“My…it’s just…beautiful.”

“I made it myself. Can I have a hug?”

Hugs, kisses and giggles - even Arnold tried to hug Ania. The stout little woman gave the Missourian a shove and growled, “I don’t hug what I can’t see. And I can’t see anything behind that beard.”

Arnold fluffed the bottom of his whiskers. “Don’t apologize, ma’am. I don’t remember what’s back there either.”

“I…wasn’t…apologizing.”

They trooped to the house, giant suitcase on Duncan’s shoulder, Arnold informing Lech of the fine fishing in the lake, but: “You gotta watch for worms in August. Water gets warm then. Worms love warm, y’gotta cook them up real good.”

“The worms?”

“Hell no, the fish, man. Y’gotta cook the fish.”

Lech said, ‘thank you’ and looked away with a face like a man who’d just met a three eyed muskox, which was very nearly what Arnold was, considering it was easy to lose track of things under all that hair.

Colin and Digger the dog didn’t know what to think of Baba Ania. They both gave her a wide berth while staring at the bulging blue veins on the ankles above the heavy black shoes. Eventually Digger’s curiosity got the best of him and he decided to go in for a sniff. There was a shriek, a whack and a wretched animal yelp. Digger leapt back, fur spiked, tail between his legs. The dangerous grandmother glared, hand poised for another clip. Clearly her fear of bears did not extend to family dogs.

Karin sprang between them. “What did Digger do? Did he bite you?”

Dark eyes on the offender. “He was tasting.”

“Tasting…you mean he licked you?”

Ania’s double barrelled glare sent the chastised animal slinking further, eyes still fixed on the menacing hand.

“He should keep his tongue to himself. First they lick, then if they like what they lick, they eat. They do that with chickens too.”

“Mama, we have chickens. Digger has never killed a chicken.”

“Has he tasted them?”

Karin took her mother’s arm. “Come sit down. Would you like some coffee?”

“Oh…I’m so tired after that terrible trip. Coffee would be lovely, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Karin went to rekindle the stove. “Winnie, the water bucket’s empty. Go fetch some from the lake, please.”

Ania said, “You drink water out of the lake? How do you know it’s clean?”

Duncan said, “There’s nothing around to make it dirty. We’re the only ones here.”

“What about the bears? They probably go toilet in the water.”

Arnold shook his bearded face. “Naw, bears don’t crap in lakes. They go in the bush. Moose might, though, they like water. But fish probably eat it first, I wouldn’t worry, missus.”

Ania stared as if a fungus had sprung up and spoke to her from the Missourian’s unlaced boots. “Thank you, I was wondering what fish ate.”

“Mostly bugs. Not enough moose around.”

The stare continued a few more withering seconds, then switched to Duncan. “Have you thought about going back to work, son? The Reserve Mine is opening again in October.”

Duncan said, “It is?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know. I wrote it in my letter.”

He blinked. “Uh…I didn’t know, really. Karin never told me nothing about a letter.”

It was Karin’s turn for the mother stare. “You didn’t tell him?”

“Mama, we’re very happy here. It’s plenty of work, but we always have enough to eat and we don’t have to worry about money…well, everybody has to worry about money. But like I said in my letter, nobody can take it away from us and we have wonderful neighbours.”

Arnold puffed out his chest. “You do?”

“Yes, Arnold, we do. Even the Indians are nice here.”

“I dunno, that great big Henry, he’s right scary, I’d say.”

“He’s sweet as pie and you know it.”

Duncan said, “Howcome you never told me about the letter? Were you hiding it from me?”

Karin swung toward her husband and collided with accusing eyes. “Dear…you seem so much happier here. And we were really struggling in town. The kids are happy, I’m happy…why would we want to go back?”

“So you made up your mind without me.”

Ania said, “They’re going to need a lot of men. They’re already pumping the shafts.”

Karin snapped, “Mama, this is between Duncan and me.”

Duncan said, “If it’s between us, howcome everyone knows about it but me?”

“Duncan, I didn’t want you to have to make a hard decision that would make you unhappy.”

“Well, I’m unhappy now.” He wasn’t calming down. “In fact, I’m real unhappy all of a sudden. Maybe I want to be a miner again.”

Lech said, “All my life I’m a miner. It’s honest work.”

“That’s right, it’s honest work.”

Ania said, “And the children need school. You have to think of the children.”

Karin said, “Mama, there’s school here. All the way to sixth grade.”

“Huh, how far away is this school, twenty miles?”

“…maybe eighteen…”

Duncan said, “I was a real good miner.”

Lech said, “That’s right, you were before. You could be again.”

Winnie came back with the water bucket. There wasn’t much water; she wasn’t very big, but it slopped over the side with her excitement. “Mummy, Daddy, guess what I saw - a bear!”

Ania nearly pitched backward off her chair. “A bear! Oh, no…”

Arnold wiggled his beard. “Was it black or brown?”

“It was black, real black, and I think maybe it was Henry’s because it sat down and watched me while I got my water.”

Ania grabbed her head in both hands and rocked forward with eyes the size of plums. “A bear was watching and you kept on getting water?”

“I was supposed to get water, Baba. That’s why I went to the lake. Daddy, do you think it was Henry’s bear?”

“I doubt it, muffin. Henry said he hasn’t seen his bear since last spring. He thinks she might’ve moved to the berry slopes by Mahood Lake.”

Arnold said, “That big guy had a bear? Well, I’ll be damned.”

Duncan said, “He had to kill its mother. So he raised it from small and taught it how to be a real bear, just like its mom would’ve done.”

“Well, if that don’t beat all.”

Winnie said, “Yeah, and Daddy said I can have a baby bear someday.”

“Winnie, you know I didn’t say that.”

“Well…you didn’t say no.”

Duncan scooped his daughter in his big arms. “I tell you what we will get. We’ll get some calves. I talked to my old boss, Charlie, and he said I could work for some pregnant cows and bring them back here over winter. In the springtime they’ll give birth and we’ll have our own herd.”

Winnie squealed, “Oh! Oh! I can’t wait!”

Arnold slapped him on the back. “Well, how about that? A cattle baron.”

Duncan grinned, “Yeah, I’ve been thinking if I clear another four acres this side of the lake for hay and build a real barn next year, I can start working on a herd. Boss Charlie said Herefords bring a good price and do best with our winters. That’s what he’s got and that’s what he’s trading me, purebred Herefords.”

Karin marched up and stared into his face. “You’re working for cattle and you never talked about it with me?”

“Um…I was going to, but I just got back. And with all the neighbours over last night and your parents this morning, I never got a chance.”

“So you just decided all of a sudden, by yourself, you’re going to turn our little farm into a ranch?”

“Not all of a sudden, I’ve been thinking about it awhile. All summer, actually. We can maybe get some more land toward Drewry Lake.”

Karin planted her fists on her hips. “So explain to me, dear, how are you going to mine for coal if you’re up here on your ranch learning to be a cowboy?”

Duncan stood blinking. Then he turned to Winnie in his arms and said, “Yeah, how am I going to do that?”

Winnie said, “I don’t know, Daddy. Why would you want to mine for coal anyway? It’s yucky.”

He squeezed her and aimed a big grin into her shiny curls. “You’re right, it’s yucky. Okay, that’s settled - we’re all going to stay here and raise cows.”

Ania’s shoulders collapsed. She rocked forward, muttering, “Talk to them, Lech.”

But Ja-Jo was already on his way toward the family cluster. He held out his hand. “Duncan, you’re a good son-in-law. I’m glad you married my daughter and I wish you luck with your ranch.”

Duncan shifted little Winnie to reach for the hand. “Why, thank you, Mr. Jakubic. Sorry I won’t be there when they open the mine.”

“Like I said, it’s honest work. But God didn’t put the sun in the sky because he wanted us to spend all our lives in a hole. I wish when I was young somebody had offered me cows instead of a pick. And it’s time you started calling me Lech, or Ja-Jo or anything but Mister.”

They shook hands, Arnold tried one more time to hug Ania, whose glare sent him swerving just in time, and Pauline appeared in the doorway, hanging onto the frame.

“Hey, is it another party? Howcome nobody woke me?”

Winnie called from her father’s arms, “Mrs. Rempel, guess what? My daddy’s going to be a cowboy! And me too!”

The End