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Chilcotin

by

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Chapter One

The Frontier - 1898

The last thing Melinda Mae expected to see when her mitten wrapped fingers pried open the door to the little house on a morning so sharp it froze the tips of her pigtails was an old Tsilhqot’in woman sitting over the hole. Stone cold perished, eyes whiter than creek ice and lips like goose droppings petrified on a rock. It was one of those prickly moments a twelve year old cow chaser and part-time fence fixer would carry with her a lot longer than it took to tell everyone she knew in the world. Because it was the first time Melinda Mae had ever seen a dead person. She ran squealing back to the cabin with the blanket wrapped ghost of that calcified crone flying step for step beside her over the snow. It almost beat her into the kitchen, coming to life once more in the wild eyes and tale told so breathless that her mother would be able to recite it in detail for the next fifty-two years of her notable life. And Cheng Wah, the cook, probably about twenty.

“Mum, Mum…Two-Tooth!”

Lavinia Cole wrinkled her brow. With all it took to raise a daughter out here in God’s bountiful backyard, it was a feature which saw a lot of exercise. “What have I told you about closing that door?”

“But, Two-Tooth…”

“And the firewood?” Stern mother eyes scanned the woodpile beyond the open door.

Which made no impression on snowy moccasins hopping on a raw plank floor. The moccasins were brightly beaded, with tasselled drawstrings snaking the top tight over winter trousers beneath a cotton dress. The dress was straight hemmed and colorless as a grain sack, but a scarlet toque and mittens added all the bedazzlement an emerging firebrand needed. “Aren’t you gonna come look? It’s old Two-Tooth, she’s froze herself solid right in the middle of the little house! I swear, Mum, I thought nothing ever happened around this place, but she’s twelve colours of purple and about made me jump out of my eyeballs with awfulness.”

Lavinia’s gaze settled finally on her daughter. “Mercy…the little house?”

Even dour faced Cheng Wah looked up from his smoking skillet of potstickers. He didn’t say anything, but he rarely did, just raised his permanently arched eyebrows.

“You gotta come, Mum. You gotta see.”

A deeper dip of the brow. “Pity sake, now they’re coming here to die.” Lavinia’s eyes narrowed. “Close that door!”

Melinda Mae pulled the door shut finally against the crackling outside air, chewing on the tip of an auburn pigtail. She had remarkably distracting green eyes for her age, given that the world rarely takes the eyes of a child seriously, unless to gauge the current level of cheekiness or hunger. In particular, these eyes nearly always had something to say about the state of things around the giant family backyard, which only ended ten miles down the buggy road at the next door neighbor’s ranch. Now, though, they just wiggled with urgency. “Mum, I gotta go pee.”

Lavinia’s shoulders sagged and she sighed, “Then I suppose I’ll have to move her.”

“Could you, please? I need to pee.”

Lavinia collected her wool coat from the deer antler rack by the door, poking the bun at the back of her head which, like most of the rest of her, seemed to be always coming slightly apart. A rogue wisp of hair got jammed back in place, only to swoop straight out again. “If it’s such a terrible rush, you can come help. Breakfast can wait.”

A Mandarin squawk and a clang from the smoky stove announced the end of cooking. Lavinia didn’t hazard a glance toward the long black queue disappearing behind the pantry curtain, but Melinda Mae did.

“We were having potstickers fried in bacon fat.” the girl moaned. “And eggs, they’ll be cold.” Then the hopping began again.

But clearing the hole in the little house didn’t prove as simple as merely saying it out loud. The wild Chilcotin plateau of British Columbia was a region rife with unique and challenging circumstances, although never one quite so frustrating as trying to tip and wiggle a frozen, sitting down elder out the always closing door with no males around to help, this due to the cook’s refusal to even look at a deceased person. It was true the cranky kitchen gnome made little distinction in that regard with most living persons either, but when the shelf banging in the pantry climaxed so stirringly as to loosen soot from the nearby stovepipe, the matter was abruptly and decisively settled. Arthur Cole, man of the house, was conveniently elsewhere also, already a day late getting back with their one horse cutter from his trip to Hundred Fifty Mile House for stores. While her daughter stood sucking snow pellets off mittens, Lavinia clutched a frozen arm and shoved it out the door of the little house, deceased fingers still tangled like twigs in the blanket, which naturally snagged on the latch.

A dark grumble. “Lord, if you’re determined to call them home, could you not at least wait till they’re deposited on their own toilet?” She shoved a knee against a solid slab of backside and pushed.

At the headfirst end of the problem Melinda Mae said, “Mum?”

“Just sharing out loud with the Lord, dear. Get her nose over the step. Don’t be scared of it, stick your mitt down there and grab.”

“But Mum…”

Lavinia heaved a frozen leg and managed to tip the burden onto its forehead, still not quite flipping it over into the snow. Another grumble. “No wonder they didn’t want the old thing dying at home. It’ll take a week’s worth of firewood to straighten her out.”

“Mum.”

“Oh, what is it, girl?”

“Something fell out of her.”

“Fell?”

“Out her mouth. And it’s not her tongue…I think.”

Lavinia gave one last desperate shove and old Two-Tooth toppled over her head onto her back, still huddled forward, knees in the air. Triumphant in the cleared doorway, the tipper of deceased visitors heaved a sigh, then blinked at her daughter. “So what is it?”

“Dunno, don’t wanna look.”

“Alright, then I will - where?”

Melinda Mae had her face buried in her scarlet mittens; she pulled one away to point. “Somewhere under there.”

Lavinia bent and scraped snow. “Oh, my word…”

A hesitant peek between mittens. “What is it?”

“Well…a jackknife.”

“A knife, is that all?”

“Child, this is your father’s, the one he never goes anywhere without.”

Leaning forward now, curious. “You’re right, Mum, it’s Dad’s.”

“It was in her mouth?”

“When you banged your knee on her bum it looked like it fell out. I didn’t wanna touch it in case it was made out of stuff from inside her. You can imagine how nasty that might be.”

Lavinia blinked up at the sincere winter sky - first a dead person, then this? The morning sun was just scraping the treetops with a light so sharp between the branches it wanted to cut the sky in half. Mornings of this calibre were meant to bloom with that sun into frost lilies on buckets and cheeping winter chickadees, harmless pretty things. That’s not the way this one was going. She wondered out loud, “What on earth would she be doing with his knife?”

“Maybe Dad traded it to her.”

That may have made sense to a wife in a more civilized stretch of creation, but nowhere on Lavinia’s wilderness haunted features was there a hint of doubt. “There’s no way he’d do that. He uses that thing twelve times a day. They’d have to sneak up and steal it from him.” Then her hazel eyes flooded with concern. “…or worse…”

Melinda Mae stared at her mother. “You think…they hurt Dad?”

It came bursting out, “Child, these days we might all be neighbors together, but not thirty years ago these Tsilhqot’in took up arms to keep this land for themselves. The government had to hang a bunch to settle them down. It wouldn’t surprise me if there aren’t still some renegades around that think about that every time they see a white face.”

Hesitant whisper, “Renegades got Dad?”

“Oh, girl…I surely hope not.”

Maybe she shouldn’t have been quite so free with her thoughts; Lavinia tried to find something less ominous to share, but the air through the frosted hemlock branches seemed almost to crackle with dread. Then it did crackle, as Melinda Mae’s moccasins rocked on crisp snow.

“Mum…I gotta pee.”

“Of course, but be quick about it. We need to get going and we’ll have to ride.”

By the time her daughter finished in the little house, Lavinia had already managed to drag old Two-Tooth the twenty feet to the back wall of the cabin where the wood was stored. She had a canvas tarp over the corrugated head and was wedging split firewood around the edges to hold it down. She looked up.

“Go catch Diamond and get a bridle on her. I’ll try to round up Kegger, but if I can’t, we’ll have to ride double. I’m not risking a saddle on one of the green stock.”

“Want me to catch Kegger for you?”

Lavinia shook her head. “You might get hurt. Your dad’s the only soul on earth can get that one to stand still without forty calibers of convincing.”

“That’s not true, he likes me.”

“Just do as I tell you. Catch Diamond.”

“I’m friends with all the horses.”

“Then go make friends with Diamond. I’ll not say it again.” Lavinia issued her done-with-talking stare.

Her daughter turned for the barn, but not without a last, “Huh…Kegger’s my friend too.”

Lavinia finished with the tarp, then hurried across the road to the family’s trading post, hiking her wool coat high to keep it from dragging in the snow. She fed more wood into the two stoves they kept burning all winter in order to ward frost off the canned goods, then started gathering biscuits, dried fruit and jerked beef. If there was one thing in plentiful supply at Cole’s Trading Post and Livery, it was beef. Arthur Cole had started his herd of range stock fifteen years earlier when he’d first arrived at his chosen spot between Alexis Creek and Hanceville with more money than ranching skills, but a solid determination to carve himself a cattle empire out of the high Chilcotin prairie. Two years later, he managed to convince his sweetheart back in England of the wondrous beauty of the Canadian frontier, encouraging her to book passage on a steamer and come out to join him. He’d met her in Halifax, married her that week and taken her on honeymoon to Niagara Falls. Arthur hadn’t been lying; that part of Canada was majestic, civilized yet possessed of a powerful natural beauty. An endless train trip west in winter, followed by a seven day sleigh ride from Ashcroft, and now Lavinia was a veteran of the untampered, untrammelled wilderness of the Chilcotin, halfway to the Northwest Territories and it surely wasn’t Niagara Falls. It amazed even her how fast the fineries of an English drawing room could disappear from a person’s head when that person was up to her hips in muck and black flies, trying to drag a bogged steer out of a creek bed. Or schooling an overactive tomboy in the knowledge of the world, when that world felt half a million miles from this place and nobody wanted to sit in one spot five minutes without running out the door to see what new kind of trouble the wildlife, natives or imp eyed father could produce.

Lavinia dropped their lunch in a canvas carry sack, then headed back out the door into the cold. It was the kind of cold that reminded this bride from Blackpool of something even she hadn’t suspected thirteen years ago, arriving in her fine Edwardian skirts and bodice. To her surprise, she was tough as anything out here and proud as a Mongol princess to prove it. Almost as importantly, she’d discovered she liked to ride. There hadn’t been any canters through wooded glens in England, not for the likes of a clerk’s daughter like herself, and the lumpy beasts drawing the milk carts and coal wagons weren’t the sort to excite the fancy of a city girl. But when she arrived in this endless expanse of meadows, creeks and wood groves, the wagon couldn’t get to most places and it was a long way to walk between them. Art had tried to mount her properly side saddle, but the workday necessities of the fledgling ranch simply didn’t lend themselves to such fineries. If she wanted to travel in comfort on a horse, she needed to tuck her vanity inside a pair of trousers and get on with it. The next thing to hit the cedar chest after the skirt was the corset, and that had been a natural blessing, more of a blessing than any woman in England could rightly imagine. A fashionable, wide brimmed hat that wouldn’t twist in the sun or melt in the rain, and she was practically a cowpuncher. It didn’t matter to Art. In fact, it made him smile all the wider behind his sandy moustache to behold her, mounted tall in trousers on her gleaming chestnut mare. And that made her smile back. It wasn’t as if there was no vanity woven into the role of a pioneer bride; it was simply that fashion in this rugged stretch of creation needed to suit more practical purposes.

The biggest surprise of all, though, had been when she fell in love. Because she hadn’t expected it. The truth was, she hadn’t been a terribly delicate or vivacious young lady and there weren’t any other suitors back in Blackpool; he’d been the only one. Travelling to this barbarous frontier to get married had been her only visible option to spinsterhood. She’d even learned to tolerate his endless trifling wit, and in another trick of fate, had determined the best way to deal with such frivolity was to serve it right back. The first time she’d tried it had surprised them both, actually made his moustache jump. But the spark at the back of those impish blue eyes had lit so bright, and then he’d reached out to grab her, chuckling like Father Christmas and it wasn’t even December. She’d piled her long arms around him and they’d kissed like they hadn’t been married already for almost half a year. Following that, there was no more looking back to Blackpool. Not for this bride, not for this pioneer of the backcountry, not for this wilful woman in love. Lavinia believed, in fact, Art was more smitten with her now than he had been right from the beginning. It was certainly true of her own feelings. She was Mrs. Arthur Cole and there was nothing in this snowbound wilderness that was going to separate her from her husband. All she needed to do was solve the mystery of the knife.

Just one final point: it would be preferable if he was still alive.

Back at the cabin, she changed into her trousers and wide brimmed hat. Before heading out the door, she gave Cheng Wah his instructions. Not being raised among varied ethnicities, it was uncommonly awkward talking to the dour little cook and always left her with the feeling he begrudged being alive in the same room as her almost as much as she tried to avoid it right back. Art could rattle pidgin off his tongue as if he’d been born building a railroad, but when she tried it, out stumbled something more like a halfwit trying to converse with a chicken.

“You makee fire go.” She pointed at the stove.

Cheng Wah stood looking at her as if he’d died last week.

“Store you keepee burn too, yes?”

The almond eyes rolled toward the ceiling.

That made Lavinia’s jaw harden. “And makee supper…cow stew.” She pointed to the cow hide stretched across the wall. “Missy girl and me go, but come back chop-chop.” Then she let out a puff of relief and turned to get out of there.

The last thing she heard before the door thumped shut behind her sounded like a muffled snort.

When Lavinia got to the corral, Melinda Mae was standing with two horses bridled and a pair of saddles slung over the middle fence rail. There was a blanket on the back of each animal.

“I caught Kegger for you, Mum.”

“…um-hum…”

“It wasn’t hard, he likes me.”

Lavinia made the sensible decision to let the obvious go unchallenged and carried on moving forward. “Why aren’t they saddled?”

“It’s too high, Mum. I’m only twelve, but I’m getting bigger.”

A dark mutter, “Huh…twelve going on thirty.”

“Sorry?”

Louder, but still prickling with nettles, “Never mind. Go fetch a scabbard, I’m taking the Henry rifle.”

“Yes, Mum.” Back went Melinda Mae to the barn.

When her daughter reappeared a few minutes later with two scabbards, Lavinia looked around from cinching the mare’s saddle and said, “Guess you didn’t hear. I don’t need two scabbards for one rifle.”

“I think it’s best I take a gun too, Mum. There might be renegades.”

That didn’t need a lot of thought. “No, you’re not. You don’t know anything about shooting guns, you’re only twelve.”

The girl delivered a smug shake of the head. “That’s not true. Dad taught me to fire the four-ten. Those grouse we ate for Thanksgiving, I shot them.”

“Oh, dear Lord…” The parental composure finally cracked. “What on earth is your father doing teaching you to fire weapons? You won’t pay any attention to your lessons, but you run around the bush like a wild pygmy, blasting birds and God knows what else. Has he taught you how to wrestle a bear yet?”

“Not wrestling, Mum, but he’s showed me a thing or two about knife fighting.”

“Oh…oh…” Another line etched itself across Lavinia’s beleaguered brow. “I swear when I find that man, I am going to wrap my hands around his neck and…” Her voice trailed off into breathlessness.

“Are you okay, Mum?”

“Oh, just go fetch the four-ten and the Henry.”

Melinda Mae went bounding through the snow. “Oboy, we’re gonna shoot some renegades!”

Scabbards were hung from saddles, and coat pockets stuffed with lunch. Lavinia mounted, but Melinda Mae had to hike her little girl dress halfway to the top of her trousers in order to reach a toe to the stirrup. Once mounted, dress and coat bunched around her waist like a bad idea on a particularly lumpy day.

“Is it gonna be a long time before I get to wear just trousers like you, Mum?”

“You’re twelve. A young lady needs to be raised wearing skirts.”

“I’m pretty near thirteen already, y’know.”

Lavinia had been hearing that for the past six months. “Be sure to keep your water next to your body so it doesn’t freeze. Eating snow isn’t good for your teeth.”

Rolling eyeballs. “Yes, Mother.”

“You haven’t got that shotgun cocked, do you?”

“No, Mother.”

“And when we find your father, I get first shot at him.”

That made Melinda Mae stare. “Are you mad at Dad, Mum?”

“Only enough to wound him.”

But the attempt to deflect worry with dark humour was lost in the swirl of a child’s imagined perils. “I really hope he’s alright.”

“Girl, with all the trouble that man brings on himself, it would surprise me if there was anything left in this world that could do him serious damage.”

That, though, wasn’t the tomahawk ravaged shadow laying siege to Lavinia’s thoughts.

The fork leading off the main wagon road and down through Hanceville was clearly visible even with the winter snow pack. Horse and sleigh tracks marked the gentle slope like a life-sized map. Mother out front, daughter following, they rode with the muted squeak of plodding hooves disappearing along with their ghost breath into the hills and bunch groves around them. There were drooping hemlock branches straining under suicidal burdens of snow; occasionally one would slip its load with a muffled whump, leaving a trail of sunlit sparkles in the still air. Or it was a grove of towering western cedars, umbrellas of impenetrable denseness where chickadees flitted, cheeping and searching for seeds. Winter poplars stabbed frozen fingers at the sky. Sometimes the tracks of a mule deer or mountain caribou crossed their path, although Lavinia couldn’t tell one from the other. Even the drag marks of their own cattle were just random marks in the snow. But not to Melinda Mae.

“Look, Mum, that’ll be Maisie the heifer, those tracks there. See how her udders touch sometimes? That’s because she’s with her first calf.”

“You give them names?”

“Only the ones I like. The ones I don’t like, I just chase them out of my mind like they don’t exist. Y’know, like you gotta do when you bite through a biscuit with half a weevil in it.”

Lavinia shivered and filed that thought where such things belonged, but found herself asking, “So what makes you like one cow and not the other?”

“Y’mean, you don’t?”

“No, they’re just cows.”

“They’re not all cows, Mum. Some are steers, some are heifers and some of them are just plain misery going four different ways at once. Like that old bald faced bull, always thinking about himself and not being nice to the rest. He’s most of the time knocking into one of his neighbours or trying to jump on top of them.”

“I suppose I’ve just never given it much thought.” The concept of bovine selfishness left Lavinia understandably indifferent. She allowed the ins and outs of pasture politics to reside in her daughter’s busy mind while she sank deeper into her saddle, letting the slim rays of the winter sun and the pristine quiet of the ride determine her mood. Troublesome as this day had started out, it was possessed of a comforting beauty, the sort that invaded a person’s soul to not leave it dismayed or angered for long. Nurtured by such feelings, she was quite enjoying the trip; it was the uncertainty of the ending which produced uncomfortable thoughts.

Old Two-Tooth’s family lived apart from the new reservation, preferring to winter instead by the river just east of Hanceville. They were known to be an independent bunch and that made them suspect in Lavinia’s book. If nobody wanted to talk about the unnatural appearance of Art’s jackknife, it was possible the sight of a lever action, forty-four calibre Henry might help to loosen some tongues. That’s when Melinda Mae dropped her disquieting nugget of information.

“I think I might’ve heard her, Mum.”

“Heard who, old Two-Tooth?”

“Well…last night there was this scratching at the door and I thought it might be a griz woke up to come sniffing around for food. I just didn’t want to go look, y’know.”

“You think it was her?”

“Well, Mum, why else would she be sitting in the little house? It wasn’t like she had herself bared to pee.”

Lavinia shook her head. “No she wasn’t, that’s surely true.”

“So maybe she was trying to wake us up and come inside before she froze to death.”

“…oh…”

Melinda Mae’s voice behind her mother was unnaturally subdued. “What do you think, Mum?”

“Well…I think we still have to find out what she was doing with your father’s knife.”

A final quiet observance, “You’re right, Mum. We gotta do that.”

But first they had to pass through Hanceville. Ten years ago, Lavinia wouldn’t have considered such a social spectacle wearing pants. Women, especially those who lived in what passed for civilization out here on the raw fringe of nowhere, didn’t go parading in public dressed as men. But women in town, even a town like Hanceville, which was really little more than a post office and jail on the TH ranch, didn’t have to wrestle bogged heifers out of mud banks or ride hell-for-leather through thickets, heading off strays. As hostess around Cole’s Trading Post and Livery, there was plenty of opportunity to be a lady, but out in the practical world of horses and half-wild cattle, she just didn’t have the time, even if she made certain her half-wild daughter still did. Lavinia lifted her chin and pointed Kegger toward the cluster of buildings.

“Good day, Lavinia!” Tom Hance, first permanent Chilcotin settler and town’s namesake, was out front of his post office in long coat and big black moustache, enjoying a smoke. Born in America to an aristocratic eastern family, the commanding figure was known widely as a gentleman who spoke with a pleasant voice, but better be listened to carefully. Down the street, his new log jail stood open for business, its official British Columbia Provincial Policeman already well settled into Tom’s old chair. Word around was that the first order of business for the new constable had been to have the Civil War veteran (and jail builder) removed from his former position as resident lawman on the grounds of being too lenient with the local law breaking natives. Of course, it was also widely known that one of those natives, a Miss Rose Tahlekwah, had provided Tom with four strong children, the last to arrive a mere two months after his pretty young wife, Nellie, gave birth to the fifth of their own official brood. It was rich stuff, but rather than condemn the fifty-seven year old patriarch for his lively libido, Lavinia was more apt to embrace the warmth of his natural human presence.

She waved back. “Good day, Tom. You haven’t seen Art through town, have you?”

“Why no, not since his last mail call. Is that Melinda Mae with you?”

The girl at the tail end of the two horse parade beamed and waved a scarlet mitten. “Hi, Mr. Hance!”

“By golly, don’t you get more grown up and prettier every time I see you. I can absolutely tell why my Lucas is always asking about you.”

All but the pigtails disappeared behind mitts.

Lavinia passed on her news. “Old Two-Tooth turned up dead in our little house this morning. I’m going out to tell her family.”

Tom scraped a shred of tobacco off his lip. “Is that a fact? I know she took to wandering. Was just a matter of time before she went to The Maker outside somebody’s place.”

“Well, I wish she wouldn’t have picked my facility to do it in.”

Tom shook his head. “You take care around that bunch, Lavinia, they can be a tad otherwise sometimes.”

Lavinia patted the big lever action Henry sticking out of its scabbard. “I’ve been known to get a bit otherwise sometimes myself, Tom. Besides, it’s a courtesy call and I’m sure there won’t be any trouble.”

Behind her mother, Melinda Mae patted her bird gun. “I can get otherwise too, Mr. Hance.”

Tom grinned and blew a thick blue cloud into the sunshine above his roof. “You ladies don’t do anything to land yourselves in jail or our fine new constable might just have you hung before I can get around to shooting him. Want me along? Purely unofficial of course.”

Lavinia smiled back. “Not necessary, I’m sure. We’ll take care, don’t you worry. And you tell Art if he passes through, where we’re headed.”

The big man waved.

Lavinia gave Kegger a nudge and glanced across the street in time to see Meredith Parker holding the curtain back and shaking her hangdog face at her. Meredith Parker, Tom’s second cousin, whose husband had died of consumption four years back without the good sense before his demise to arrange for his widow to go live in her hometown Victoria, was a nettle in Lavinia’s knickers. Now everyone had to put up with the old thing until she died, hopefully soon but probably not, as her life expectancy seemed to swell with the energy of each new scandal around her – not just illegitimate babies, but women wearing trousers. Lavinia gave Meredith’s window an unblinking eyes right as her scandalous parade plodded past.

A half hour later they were off the road and following the trail toward old Two-Tooth’s family winter home. The name of the husband and elder was Kakitesun, as near as Lavinia could pronounce it. She knew him because he spoke a smattering of English and liked to spend time around the store. He’d told her one day he was a hundred and five years old, and then proceeded in the next breath to declare her canned goods winter frozen and she should sell them to him for half price. It had been so cheeky she’d almost allowed him a deal on the jar of peaches he’d been watching, but then let better sense prevail - one jar of peaches for half price and she’d have his relatives from far away as Anahim Lake arriving to strike the same bargain. Kakitesun…as for a second name, most Tsilhqot’in didn’t acquire such things unless they spent a lot of time around whites, or if they did, never got around to sharing that information with her. She hadn’t been to Kakitesun’s home before, or to any other Tsilhqot’in residence, for that matter, and had heard only that they lived in big family lodges through summertime or roofed over dugouts come winter. As it turned out, it was neither; more like a slope roofed settler’s cabin in a poplar grove by the river. The handles of a ploughshare poked through the snow and a horse harness hung off the wall of a shed. It was all surprisingly non-exotic and quite uninteresting but for the thing that caught Lavinia’s eye. That thing was Art’s cutter parked around back and his horse pawing up graze by the riverbank. What the devil was going on here?

It didn’t take long to find out. As they rounded the house, Art’s body appeared by the runner of the cutter, sprawled face first where he’d hit the snow after the murderous bandits had mowed him down on his way to their door. They hadn’t even bothered to drag him off - what were they thinking? That sleigh would be a dead giveaway and they sure as dickens couldn’t sell or trade his branded horse for a hundred miles in any direction.

Before their first gasps faded in the crisp air, Melinda Mae was down from her mount and Lavinia’s Henry out of its scabbard. The abruptly widowed wife swung to the ground with the horse between her and the cabin. She held her breath and carefully worked the lever on the Henry.

But her daughter ran straight to her father’s body, tears streaming, “Daddy…oh, Daddy...”

Even with the huge rifle in Lavinia’s hands, she couldn’t feel more inadequate. This was no time to let her heart take over her head. She forced herself to read the scene: nobody inside seemed to have heard their arrival or she and Melinda Mae would also be dead now. In fact, the place was so quiet as to look deserted – no smoke from the chimney hole, no dogs, nothing. Maybe the killers had realized the seriousness of their wanton act and run for the mountains. Well, if they had, it would be the smartest thing they’d done since murdering her husband, because this wasn’t going to go well for whoever she found in that cabin.

Dry snow made it impossible to move without crunching. One foot carefully leading the other, she crept to the low hole they used as a door. She paused beside the wall, listening. A thin stuttering hiss. Her brow furrowed – what was that? There was a heavy blanket hanging over the opening. Well, if getting inside was that easy, they certainly couldn’t be expecting the forty-four calibre judgement clutched in her cold hands.

She kicked the blanket and dove through, weapon first.

Then the door flapped shut behind her. Dark - hadn’t thought that far into it. There weren’t any windows in the place, only a crack of light seeping past the edges of the blanket. It took too many seconds of adjusting to the shadows, but finally she made out the scene. More bodies were strewn inside. There was one on the floor by a wall, another slumped next to their fire pit. Dear Lord, Art had taken a bunch with him; he hadn’t perished in vain.

Again the hiss.

She swung the Henry.

Something moved on the floor - she fired.

In the tiny space between walls, the big rifle’s report was a cannon blast. Glass exploded, spraying fragments and some sort of liquid everywhere.

She slapped the lever action forward and back, retreating for the door. In a cold flash, she realized the light was behind her, a silhouette of certain death if anyone was still alive. She dove for a wall and crouched there, ears ringing with the fearsome aftermath of the Henry.

More movement, groaning…*only wounded.*

Now the smell hit her. In the wake of broken glass and liquid, the close air inside flooded with a sweet stench…disagreeably familiar.

Rum.

They were drunk. Art had gone to One-Fifty Mile for stores and one of the items he’d been hauling back was rum. They’d murdered him and fallen on his cargo like a pack of greedy wolves, lusting not for blood, but the fire of the whiteman’s liquor. Exactly as she’d been told in England, savages they were, filthy barbarous thieves with no respect for human life.

A hiccup parted the groaning, followed by some unintelligible words.

“Stay down!” Lavinia shouted. “Or the next shot blows your head off! I mean it!”

“Uhhh…no shoot…big noise. Hundred five year old…head hurt.”

And from outside the blanket, “Mum?”

“Stay back, Melinda Mae! There’s one alive in here!”

“But Mum - ”

“Back!”

The voice from the floor groaned again, “No shoot…no more…”

A blanket corner lifted. “Mum…Dad says he’s thirsty. My water’s froze, do you have any?”

“…what…?”

“Water, Dad wants water.”

Pulse hammering in eardrums. “You say your father’s alive?”

“Uh, huh…was that you shooting?”

“But I saw him dead. They murdered him…right?”

“No, Mum. Dad threw up on his coat and he stinks something awful. But he‘s not dead. Have you got water?”

Lavinia straightened and the big Henry lowered. She began to quiver, perhaps from the tension of the last few minutes…but more probably with red raw fury. “He threw up on himself?”

“Like nothing you ever smelled.”

Lavinia spun and stooped through the doorway. “Arthur Cole, you rum sucking pirate! I am going to put a bullet right between your deceitful eyes!”

There was a pained whimper. “Lavinia…dear…you came looking for me?”

The woman in trousers pointed her weapon at the pathetic creature gazing up from its knees with red swollen eyes, frozen pink chunks stuck to unshaven cheeks. She vibrated with deadly purpose. “I mean it! One more word and you are a crow’s breakfast!”

“But Lavinia…dear…”

The cold steel barrel didn’t waver. The prey sniffed a bubble up its nose.

Melinda Mae’s voice chirped, “Look, Dad, here’s something that isn’t froze.” She skipped in front of the rifle and proudly held out a rum bottle.

Arthur Cole pitched over his daughter’s moccasins and vomited.

Chapter Two

If Lavinia could’ve dug a hole in the frozen earth, she would’ve shot everyone but her daughter and the horses, then tossed their alcohol pickled corpses inside. But as delicious as that thought seemed, the ground wouldn’t be ready till spring and she didn’t have a shovel. There was also the business of the perished matriarch in the woodpile and the fact that old Kakitesun needed to be told. Nobody in the cabin had even noticed their fire was out, much less that grandma had wandered off to her doom somewhere in the middle of the rum soaked night. And in possession of Art’s jackknife - what was that about, anyway?

“Get up, Art.”

Her husband wobbled to his feet, albeit with scanty control of his liquefied limbs.

“Go fetch your horse.”

A staggering plod toward the riverbank…stumble, retch again, then stagger on.

Melinda Mae whispered, “You’re really mad, huh, Mum?”

“Don’t you dare help your father.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“In fact, fetch your four-ten and come with me. But wipe your moccasins off first.”

Melinda Mae dragged her rum befouled footwear through the snow. The stench was eye watering. She reached Diamond, their chestnut mare, and stretched on tippy-toes to retrieve her bird gun. “What’re we gonna do, Mum?”

“You just point that the same place I point mine. Come with me.” She led the way into the cabin.

Inside, she motioned her daughter to stand beside her and pointed the Henry toward the far wall. Melinda Mae’s four-ten followed.

“Your wife is dead.”

A dry rasp, “Heklan’uk…he die?”

At the confused gender, Lavinia wondered if the old man had heard right, but carried on, “She’s in my woodpile. You can come up in the cutter and we’ll load her. Not going to be able to bury her till spring and I’m not storing her all winter at my place.”

There was a muffled sob. “He hundred five year old. He…good woman.”

It seemed everybody in the family was a hundred and five years old, not to mention male. Lavinia kept the Henry trained on the figure slumped by the wall. “There’s two jars of canned peaches if you tell me what went on here last night. And remember we’ve got a rifle and a shotgun pointed at your belly.”

Old Kakitesun started talking, “I walk high road, time back. Art go for fetch stores. I tell bring flour, sugar. Got furs, we trade.”

“There’s furs, where, in the cutter?”

“Uh, huh.”

Lavinia growled, “And that bloody rum, you two decided to seal the deal with a drink?”

“Rum good, make legs not hurt no more.”

“Old man, that’s hundred and fifty proof. You swallow enough of that poison and your whole body will stop hurting permanently.”

He mumbled again, “That right, rum good.”

“Well, I came here to tell you about your wife.”

The old man’s head slumped and he rasped again, “Heklan’uk…Heklan’uk…”

“I’m sorry, I liked her. In fact, I used to like you too, right up until I found you here with my drunk husband.”

“Art good man. Make trade. You want fish?”

“Your wife had his knife on her. Tell me how that happened, then maybe we’ll talk fish.”

“Not know…suppose knife fall. He good woman, bring knife back…not know.”

Lavinia sighed again. “Now why on earth would she walk all the way to our place if Art was right here?”

Rattling breath, “Suppose he want trade. Like peach lots.”

Lavinia let the Henry drop finally and the four-ten followed. “You mean it was her who liked the peaches? Back at the store when you were trying to get some for half price, it was for her?”

“That right, he good woman. We marry hundred five years.”

Notwithstanding the old man’s arithmetic, Lavinia paused to consider this information. She asked, “Do you like peaches?”

“No good me. Make gut run. Heklan’uk like plenty, now dead.” His head drooped again.

“So you don’t want any peaches.”

“No good. Make gut run.”

She sighed, “Alright, if you can get those legs to work, come on outside and we’ll load you in the cutter. You can pick something else you like from the store and ride back with Art and old Two-Too…your wife. Huh, the peaches were for her, that’s sweet. You never liked them at all.”

“No good. Make gut run.”

Lavinia waved the Henry toward the figure slumped in front of the fire pit. “Is that your son?”

“Good son, catch fur. Got daughter too.” The old man nodded toward a nearly invisible figure crumpled in a corner.

Lavinia said, “Melinda Mae, get a fire started for this bunch or Kakitesun’s going to be a lonely man the next hundred years.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“And any rum you find, pour it out.”

“Yes, Mum.”

\* \* \*

With Heklan’uk properly delivered to her relatives, and given that Cheng Wah’s reign over her kitchen meant she didn’t need to cook, Lavinia’s winter schedule consisted mainly of educating her daughter, organizing the store and greeting the occasional customer dropping in for a bit of flour, coffee or sugar, but mostly to pass a few minutes in convivial chat. One of those neighbors, Darryl O’Hare, managed a considerable amount of coffee drinking alone in his one room cabin, wide awake and counting the minutes until he could get back to the store for more. He’d never got around to marrying and when it came to commingling with the natives, appeared too prideful of his milky Celtic skin to pursue that adventure either – he was from Cork, as he liked to remind people, and not from the wild Gaelic north. But he did manage to find a lot of time for Lavinia. She had friends in Ireland, so she’d travelled there and actually knew a fair bit about County Cork, where Darryl was from. That, however, wasn’t what he preferred to talk about.

“I never see you in one of those fine hats from Europe, Lavinia. Surely you could order them into your shop?”

“Never been one for the fineries, Darryl. If the Good Lord had wanted me to flounce about like a peacock, he’d have given me prettier feathers.”

If she made a little joke, it was a certainty Darryl would laugh till his eyes watered. “Oh, Lavinia, you do cause me to come apart sometimes! Ho-ho-ho!”

It wasn’t as if she didn’t feel flattered by the attentions of the bearded, wool wearing bachelor, but she was, after all, married. Not for one second did she entertain the notion of offering anything more to the likes of Darryl O’Hare than dry goods tied with string or a few moments of neighbourly chat. Still the man persisted.

“A colleen as lovely as yourself should sport fineries at every chance.”

That produced a dry chuckle. If Darryl thought he required a lot of coffee, he should see her straight off the morning mattress in her post-sleep, pre-caffeinated state – probably not quite the picture his bachelor fantasies entertained. “Your parcel’s weighed and tied, Darryl. Whatever do you do with so much coffee, anyway?”

“Why, I drink it, dear. All alone.”

“With no one anywhere to talk to.”

Sad drooping eyes. “Aye.”

She poked at her unruly bun. “Have you thought of writing home for a bride? I hear such arrangements are popular in these modern times. What might’ve shocked our parents isn’t worth batting an eyelash at these days.”

Darryl’s lonely eyes stared down into the worn wooden counter. “Ah, but I’m not like most men, y’see. I’ve no more interest in a woman I’ve never met than I would in a horse someone described to me in a letter.”

She had to admit that made sense. “Well, it’s not a notion I’d entertain either, but if a man’s as lonely as you say…”

The eyes aimed up again. “Ah…that it is, Lavinia…that it is.”

“…then I’d think about selling off some cattle and ordering in a bride. There’s paper and ink on the shelf behind you, and if you’re short of cash I can let you have it on tikky.”

Sad woolly rejection - Darryl collected his coffee. “No need, Lavinia. I’ll just go back to my home and brew up a pot on the stove. My fine new stove, all the way from Chicago with its porcelain inlaid doors and super-size fire compartment. The very latest in modern kitchenware.”

Lavinia let out a sigh. “I’ll send Cheng Wah along sometime to admire it. He’s a fine cook, maybe you can talk him into staying.”

Darryl slouched for the door.

And in trudged Kakitesun. The day had barely begun, but the parade of lonesome souls seemed to be lining up at her door. The Tsilhqot’in elder mumbled a greeting and shuffled toward his customary rope spool by the corner stove. This morning he looked even more world worn than his hundred and five years allowed and Lavinia felt the old man’s loss tugging at her heart more than she cared to admit. She measured the sunken eyes in a face like a dried leaf.

“Kakitesun, when’s the last time you had proper food?”

“Not hungry, Missus. Suppose me sit some, make warm.”

“What if I get Melinda Mae to bring over some of Cheng Wah’s fresh bread? You get that inside you and some dried fruit. You appear more shrivelled than usual too – have you been drinking enough? And I don’t mean rum.”

“Me fine, Missus. Sit some, feel better.”

Lavinia went to the door and shouted, “Melinda Mae!”

When her daughter’s pig tailed head poked from the cabin, the bread was ordered, then she ducked back inside and pulled a bottle off a shelf. Very popular this cold winter, Dr. Miles Restorative Tonic ‘Excites in a moderate degree the energies of all parts of the body’, just the thing for a grieving hundred and five year old widower. She went back to the porch, scooped snow into her coffee mug and banged it clean against the door jamb. Back inside, she poured a generous portion of Dr. Miles elixir and swirled it around, melting the last ice crystals off the bottom of the mug. But when the rejuvenating tonic was pushed into the old man’s hand, he sniffed it and jerked his head back like a horse offered caustic soda. She squared her shoulders - any woman who’d raised a child all the way to twelve wasn’t about to be put off so easily.

“You drink that if you want to stay in here by the stove.”

“Huh…more better die in snow than make fire in throat.”

“It’s true you’ll die, old man, if you don’t let somebody look after you. Now drink.”

The cup rose to the withered head and the wrinkled lips parted. But when Kakitesun’s nostrils drew close to the evil smelling brew, they shied again.

“Drink!”

He closed his eyes and slurped. Slowly the Dr. Miles Restorative Tonic disappeared. With a final desperate gasp, he rattled his head and held the empty cup at arm’s length. “Huh-uh-uh….”

Melinda Mae pushed the door open carrying two thick slices of bread on a plate, generously smeared with lard and mustard. She turned to her mother. “For him?”

“The old fool’s killing himself with grief. We’ve got to feed him up or he’ll never make it to Christmas, let alone his next wife.”

The girl marched to the rope spool and thrust her plate under the withered face. With a hand on her hip she announced, “You eat this if you know what’s good for you, or my mum will pinch your nose and shove it in your mouth. And she don’t care if you choke like a chicken. I oughtta know, cause that’s what happens when I gotta eat tripe.”

The old man blinked at her.

Young green eyes bored into ancient brown. “You listen to me - my mum knows more about fixing up sick things than anybody around. Why, I seen her once blow on a dead calf’s nose and bring it back to life.”

Lavinia blinked. “That calf wasn’t dead, Melinda Mae, it was just having trouble getting started breathing.”

But the girl wasn’t finished. “She might look like she’s all wore out, but that don’t mean she won’t pull down your pants and smack your bum with a spoon if you don’t do what she says. You better do what she says.”

Lavinia rolled her eyes.

Kakitesun reached to his bread.

After he’d been fed, elixered and sweetened with dried fruit, the old man appeared to be in moderately better health. He looked up at Melinda Mae, still watching as if he might turn into a bird and fly away. He asked, “When wife die, you there?”

“Uh, huh…I was first outside to the little house.”

A slow nod. “What say Heklan’uk, last thing?”

“She didn’t say nothing. She was froze solid.”

“Before froze, what say?”

Melinda Mae turned to her mother, blinking.

Lavinia cleared her throat. “Kakitesun, your wife was already gone when we found her. Nobody knows what her last words were.”

The leathery head hung. “She no say…good husband?”

“Oh…” Lavinia had to look away. “…yes, that’s what she said. It was, ‘Tell my husband he’s a fine man and I’ll miss him.’” She hid behind her hand.

The old man muttered, “He good woman. Give five child. We marry hundred and five year.”

It was difficult, suddenly, to look at the figure slumped on the rope spool, but Lavinia straightened her back and said, “Kakitesun…what’s the word for ‘happy’ in your language?”

He looked up. “What mean, ‘lan-guch’?”

“Your talk, the word for ‘happy’ in your talk.”

*“Gunt’in.”* He said it, but his face didn’t look it.

She let the feel of it roll off her tongue a few times, then asked, “And your word for ‘sky’?”

*“Ya’tax.”*

She drew a long breath and with a serious nod recited, “Heklan’uk is *gunt’in* waiting for you in the *ya’tax.”* She pointed at the roof.

Melinda Mae cocked her head at her mother, blinking. The old man sat stone faced. Suddenly he pitched forward over his knees, then laughed so hard he looked ready to spit out his teeth. Lavinia scowled. The laughter degenerated into a dry choking sound and she marched back toward her counter.

“Wait! Missus wait!” Katitesun braced himself straight with both hands.

She stopped.

There were shiny tracks running from the corners of his eyes. “Me tell thanks. You make *gunt’in*. You good woman sure.”

She poked at her bun. “Well…I may not be terribly gifted at languages, but I was known during my school days as something of a scholar.”

Clearly, he hadn’t understood a word, but sat smiling wide as his cracked old face would allow. “Me *gunt’in* plenty now.” He chuckled again.

Lavinia thrust out her chin. “Good…that’s good. Now I have a job for you.”

He looked up, understanding at least the word ‘job’.

She said, “I want you to come here every day and sit on that rope spool and teach me your talk. Can you do that?”

His sparse teeth showed and he nodded. “Me come. Teach talk.”

“Good.” She poked her bun one last time and marched back to her counter, then with a purposeful glare at her daughter said, “What are you looking at?”

Melinda Mae mumbled, “Um…nothing, Mum. I gotta go help Dad.” She bolted for the door, face so puffed with news it looked ready to pop.

Lavinia called after her, “You tell your father he’s not the only one around here with a gift for languages.”

\* \* \*

Art Cole wasn’t the sort of man to let a bout of bottled Jamaican flu keep him from executing his duties around the ranch. This, though, was a challenging morning, one which found the sunlight off the crisp snow blazingly bright and the hat on his head too tight around the brim. He shuffled from barn to corral, shoulders slouched, feet searching for a path forward that didn’t involve lifting his boots too high. His straw stuffed mattress under its painting of an old English fruit bowl already seemed a world of hours behind him. No matter what he felt like, though, there was still wood to be split - it took a lot of wood to keep three stoves going all winter – hay to be tossed and a hole knocked in the ice trough under the brand new hand pump. As wonderfully as the contraption worked, sometimes when the weather got too cold the water would freeze on its way up the metal pipe and there was nothing for it but to get a fire going by the base. He was tending that chore now, one of the more pleasant and less strenuous around the place, when his daughter dashed up in her beaded moccasins and toque.

“Dad, guess what! Mum’s gonna learn Indian talk!”

If Art was surprised, he didn’t show it. “Your mother’s an intelligent woman. I don’t imagine she’ll suffer a problem. In fact, if Cheng Wah wasn’t sour as a chokecherry, I’ve no doubt she’d be learning Chinese too.”

“Mum’s smart, isn’t she? I can tell by the big words she uses.”

“Smart enough to marry me. And smart enough to raise you with a proper English upbringing.”

“That might make her happy, but I hate getting upbrung.”

Art let that hang; no sense going where he knew there were only thorns. He shifted away from the smoke and poked at his little fire.

Melinda Mae stood watching, an auburn pigtail in her mouth. “Dad, is it true there’s gold up north in the territories?”

It was the kind of question he loved. There lived at the core of Arthur Cole a sense of adventure rooted in the grand tales he’d grown up with of an empire so vast the sun never set on it. His wide brimmed hat got pushed back, his eyes found a spot at the horizon and his nimble Lancashire accent slid off into that peculiar dusty drawl he imagined cowboys shared around campfires. “Why, I’ve heard there’s more gold in the territories than a man could load into a wagon twice the size of ours.”

“So howcome you don’t go get some of that gold, Dad?”

The eyes came back to hers. “Well, that’s because I’m a rancher. I admit when I first came to this country I had my sights set on the gold fields, but when I got to the trailhead at Yale, something changed my mind.”

“What was that, Dad, a grizzly bear?”

“No, child, something a great deal more frightening. When I spoke to the pilgrims there, a lot of men were heading up to Barkerville with their eyes full of glitter just like mine, but even more were on their way back with pockets empty and not a hope left in the world.”

“So there isn’t any gold at Barkerville?”

“Didn’t say that. I’m simply pointing out that when it comes to gold, the first problem is to find it. Then once you manage that, the next problem is to not get shot by someone else who wants it. And after you’ve got all that done, for the rest of your life you’re obliged to sit around thinking of ways to spend money. And that sounds boring.”

His daughter stuck another pigtail in her mouth, the last she had to work with. “Pump’s froze, huh?”

“Yup.”

“So you don’t want a bunch of money, Dad?”

“Didn’t say that. But what really matters is to enjoy what you’re doing to get it.”

The pigtails popped out, glistening. “And you like ranching, huh?”

His blue eyes rediscovered their twinkle. “That is a true fact.”

Melinda Mae pushed out her skinny chest. “Know what? I’m gonna be a rancher too. I like horses and I like cattle…well, most cattle. But the ones I don’t like, I’ll just drive them down to Ashcroft and sell them like you do.”

The hat brim nodded. “Driving cattle is difficult work, but I’ll admit it’s a pleasure besides. And that’s why I came to this country. Sometimes I can’t believe I was born in England, with the way this land suits my temperament.”

That drew a long quizzical look. “What’s England like, Dad?”

Followed by a short answer, “Wet.”

“Sounds awful.”

“It is, especially if you have to do what I was doing to live there.”

“What was that, Dad?”

“I was training to be an architect.”

Another quizzical look. “What’s a art-i-kect?”

“You add up numbers all day long and determine whether something might be inclined to fall down when you build it.”

“Ugh…that sounds awful.”

“In fact, it rather gets to be like that.”

“Not like ranching, huh?”

“Most decidedly not.”

Melinda Mae said, “I guess that’s why everything you build holds together, huh? I never seen one single thing fall down yet, except maybe that slide full of water over the river.”

“That wasn’t a slide, dear, that was a flume for irrigation.”

“Well, it sure was great to slide in. Maybe you could fix it up again and charge people money to come ride in it.”

“Nobody would want to ride in a flume full of water, Melinda Mae, except people with addled minds. Anyway, I’m convinced it’d still be standing if the bull hadn’t used it for target practice after you hung your dress on it.” His forehead furrowed and he gazed off again beyond his fire. “Of course, if I’d considered the lateral stress of the bull’s head and the wave energy of sloshing water…”

Melinda Mae said, “That bull’s got about as much use around this place as a bucket without a bottom. He’d be the first thing I’d be driving next year to Ashcroft.”

Art shook his head. “You’re forgetting the first rule of ranching, honey: every healthy herd needs a strong bull. You can’t be selling off a useful animal just because you don’t particularly care for his personality.”

“Then I’d trade his nasty hide for another bull, an agreeable one who wouldn’t try to knock everything down all over the place.”

”Well, I suppose that’d be your prerogative.”

“Yeah, my pre-ro…”

“It means you can do whatever you want.”

“Like you, huh, Dad?”

A wry chuckle. “Sweetheart, you have no concept at all of the blissful union of holy matrimony.”

“Holy what…?

“Marriage.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, I am never gonna get married. I’d as soon kiss a duck’s bum.”

Art glanced disapprovingly, but let the colourful comparison pass. “No boys around interest you, huh?”

“There’s nothing interesting about boys, Dad, especially Lucas Hance.”

He aimed a curious look at the eyes beneath the scarlet toque. “Lucas Hance, you say? Am I right to guess he pesters you at every chance, pulling your pigtails and such silliness?”

“Dad, that’s not the half of it. He’s a halfwit and he’s awful.”

Art dropped an understanding hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Don’t you worry, sweetheart. As your father, it’s my business to keep an eye on young men like Lucas Hance.”

“Oh, please, do not waste any time on him. I surely don’t.”

“…um-hum…”

A decisive toss of the pigtails. “If you knew him, you’d hate him too.”

She wandered off toward the horses and her father was left to contemplate the mystery of why smoke always found its way to your eyes, but no female ever seemed to find the route to the obvious thing right in front of her.

Art got back to the cabin to find Lavinia standing toe to toe with Cheng Wah in the kitchen, stabbing a finger toward the big iron pot on the stove.

“Look-see pot, you cookee cow! Me say not cow day! Me say now-now chicken!”

Cheng Wah’s copper ladle, nearly the length of his arm, mimicked the accusing finger. “Me no cook chicken! Need chicken for egg!”

“Baloney, there’s lots of chickens, you miserable little gargoyle! You start doing what I tell you or you’re fired!”

Art’s head snapped back. He hurried to the pair and placed a hand on his wife’s quivering forearm, just above her clenched fist. “Now, dear…patience. Cheng Wah has a point, we’re not about to run short of beef. Chickens do lay eggs and heaven knows they’re a blessing on a cold winter morning.” He waited a moment to gauge the temperature of his wife’s smouldering hazel eyes, then satisfied her head wasn’t going to blow up behind him, turned to his simmering cook. He didn’t say anything, just clenched his teeth, jerked his head toward the pot and waited for the cooking to resume, even if it did so under a cloud of Mandarin muttering.

Lavinia snarled, “A one eyed duck could see that man’s a mistake. He exasperates me. Where’d you find him anyway, tied to a tree in the forest?”

“Lavinia, dear…you said yourself you’re not much of a cook. Well, I sure as Joseph don’t have a gift for it either. Now we don’t want to starve to death, do we?”

“Huh…I’m beginning to think I could look forward to that.”

Art gently guided his wife’s arm toward the door. “You worry about the store, dear. I’ll take care of Cheng Wah.”

Lavinia allowed herself to be urged toward an honorable exit. She never got there. The door burst open and Melinda Mae came charging in, snow crystals from her moccasins spinning across the floor.

“Mum, Dad, wait’ll you see what’s coming!”

They wouldn’t have wanted to miss it. Whatever came dragging down the road toward them was led by a dozen bawling mules being bullied and swore at by a bearded creature in a fur parka and tassel balled sombrero. Behind that, creaking and clanging as if the devil himself crouched inside it, came the cargo on a sledge. It was a monstrous thing, a metal contraption festooned with gauges, levers and doo-dahs unlike anything they’d ever seen. Behind the little family, the door cracked open and a copper ladle tapped a pant leg.

Melinda Mae had to shout above the cussing and braying of animals. “What is it, Dad?”

Art stared. “Well…I imagine it would be…huh, quite mystified, I’m afraid.”

The odd procession drew abreast and its driver bellowed, “Whoa! Whoa, I say, you pack of swaybacked bellyachers!” Everything crunched to a halt, then the sombrero swivelled and a long streak of brown fluid squirted into the snow. The driver swabbed the dark dribble from his otherwise snow white beard and proclaimed, “A good day to you, my friends. My name is Everett McCauley and I come seeking shelter and feed for my mules. Would you be capable of providing such a service?”

Lavinia’s mouth opened, but whatever she’d meant to produce stayed put at the back of her throat.

Art was first to his senses. “We would.” But that, too, was the best he could manage.

The visitor wobbled his enormous hat and continued, “Why, that is a pure boon. I’ve run entirely out of patience with this army of equestrian half-wits. If you’ve never had cause to skin mules, sir, you have no concept at all of purgatory.”

Art blinked. So did the rest of his family. Behind them, the door clunked shut.

Then the big man clapped his leather mitts together and gazed upward as if in prayer. “Please tell me you can provide a tot or two of comfort to remove the chill from this endless day. Something of a spirited nature.”

Lavinia’s eyebrows crowded together.

Art answered quickly, “Mr. McCauley, we have everything you could possibly need for a comfortable overnight stay. Provided you don’t mind sleeping with the cook.”

The sombrero wobbled and tassel balls bounced. “Well, I suppose a man can’t be questioning every detail of his good fortune. Cook, you say…is he an agreeable sort?”

Art pulled on his chin. “I can honestly say he is a fine cook.”

“Well, so long as he doesn’t have gas. I will not abide a sleeping partner with gas.”

Art shrugged. “…he’s a fine cook...”

“Marvellous, where do I unhitch?”

They got the steaming team of animals turned loose with the horses and Art pumped fresh water onto the ice in the trough. Melinda Mae and the newcomer tossed hay from the barn, then with the winter sun skidding toward the horizon, the trio retired to the cabin. Cheng Wah had already disappeared to his little shed with his portion of the day’s meal, but heat from the stove and his simmering Sichuan stew saturated the air with a tantalising fragrance that moved Everett McCauley to a much less mule hating mood. When Lavinia arrived back from closing up the store, it was to his big voice booming off the log walls, informing Art and Melinda Mae of the benefits of regular bathing and straight teeth. She nodded at her houseguest, who politely removed his sombrero and temporarily shut up.

“Mr. McCauley, I hope you’re partial to beef. I’d planned on chicken, but unless you’ve got a three foot pigtail down your back, your plans don’t amount to much around this place.”

Art peered at his wife’s empty hands. “You didn’t bring a bottle?”

Her hazel eyes frosted. “I am not contributing to the sort of debauchery I had to witness three days ago at that heathen camp.”

“They’re not heathens, dear. To the best of my knowledge, they’re Catholic. And I was just trying to offer our guest a hospitable refreshment.”

Everett McCauley smoothed his tobacco stained whiskers. “I’ll confess mule skinning does work up a fair thirst.”

Which drew a flat stare from Lavinia. She growled, “There’s water.”

The big man drew his sombrero tight against his parka. “And I thank you for your generosity, ma’am.” Then he sensibly shut up again.

But Art didn’t. “Well, I’m not going to stand by and be made to look a worthless host. It’s my house, my store, and I’m going to fetch a bottle.”

Lavinia crossed her arms. “Then you won’t mind sleeping with the cook.”

Art crammed his hat back on his head and stomped out the door.

Lavinia crooned to nobody in particular, “It’s going to get terribly crowded in that little shack.”

Two minutes later, the rum arrived. Art clunked the bottle on the table and smoothed his sandy moustache. “You appear to be a man of manners - cup?”

Their guest cast a nervous glance at the lady of the household. “Uh…perhaps a tiny one. Not much bigger than a thimble. I’m not given particularly to drink, except at the end of a difficult day.”

Art grumbled, “Then you don’t want to be staying too long in this place.”

A pair of cups were produced and the cork clamped between Art’s teeth. There was a pop and the host spit the cork into the wash pail under the counter. He poured and lifted his drink. “To your health, Mr. McCauley. Have a chair.”

Everett McCauley glanced one last time at Lavinia, still hovering arms crossed, and pulled a chair from the table. “To your health, sir.” He tipped back his head, glugging and sitting in one thirsty motion. The final sound was like a calf sucking the bottom of a milk pail dry.

Art’s eyebrows went up. His gaze crept toward his wife, then back to their thirsty guest. He squared his shoulders, tossed back his head and swallowed. His Adams apple quivered, then jumped up under his chin and froze there. He appeared to quit breathing.

Lavinia uncrossed her arms to lean forward, fingertips creeping together.

Everett McCauley appeared unaffected. He passed a hand across his furry mouth and exhaled loudly. “An exceptional libation. Would that be demerara?”

Art hadn’t yet taken a breath. Lavinia held up the bottle and proclaimed, “It’s a hundred and fifty proof, makes fine hair remover.” Then she offered it again over her guest’s cup. “Would you care for another, sir?”

“Ah, well…that would be most gracious of you, missus.”

She poured and turned back to her husband.

At the approach of the bottle, Art finally found his breath. “Oh…” he gasped, “…I don’t think…” But the rum glugged out until it spilled over the top.

Lavinia cocked her head and purred, “More rum, dear?”

He blinked up as his wife gripped his hand and guided it toward the cup. Like green twigs stiffened by an ice storm, she curled each finger around the handle, then stood back again, arms crossed.

If there was one rule of the American west which had followed the parade of pilgrims to the Canadian goldfields, it was that a drink already poured required itself to be drunk. Everett McCauley was already wiping his whiskers and eyeing the bottle like a five-year-old at a Christmas present.

Art trembled, raised his cup.

Lavinia’s lip corners curled upward ever so imperceptively.

There was a moment of deathly expectation as the drink reached his lips. Even Melinda Mae held her breath. Then his eyes closed, his head tipped back and his Adam’s apple bobbed once more with a gasping choking retching sound. He froze, face aimed at the ceiling…scarlet glowing ears.

Their houseguest gazed, intrigued.

Lavinia leaned past the statue in her kitchen chair and graciously offered, “One more sip before supper, Mr. McCauley?”

“Ah, missus, you are indeed an angel of mercy. After my trying day on the trail, I believe I will accept your kind offer.”

Lavinia smiled sweetly and poured. She turned to stare at her husband, who still hadn’t moved. “Oh, dear,” she cooed, “it appears Arthur may have slithered off into hibernation. It happens sometimes in this desperate wilderness. Why, I’ve heard of men lying down in November, to wake up with their hat and boots on a hundred miles from where they last remembered, sometime in March. Grizzly bears do it too. And skunks.”

The guest took a more leisurely sip from his cup. “I saw a man like that once in San Francisco. Folks told me he got a funny look on his face one day, then never uttered another single word. Just spent his days in a chair, dribbling and peeing his pants. You sure your husband’s okay?”

She pooh-poohed the question with a wave. “Oh, Art can be a pickle sometimes. He has a wonderful sense of humor, you know. For all the world, he could be having a little joke right now.” She gave the nearest cherry ear a cartilage shredding thwack. “Is that it, Art, are you having a joke?”

None of it seemed to affect their houseguest. He sat, elbows on the table, sipping and plucking at the thick brown suspenders holding up his pants.

Lavinia asked, “So what is that thing out there anyway, Mr. McCauley?”

At her question the rheumy eyes snapped to life. “Well, that, missus, is the pinnacle of scientific gold production. It is none other than the McCauley Mound Masher, a creation of my own ingenious thought, and if you knew anything about me you’d know I give a lot of thought to producing gold.”

Lavinia allowed herself to appear impressed. “Is that a fact?”

A sip and accommodating nod. “It is, missus. And if its revolutionary design wasn’t such a beast to drag behind mules, I’d be singing its praises even louder. My own fault, really, a consequence of my single-minded determination to bring it into creation as quickly as possible.”

“You made it too fast?”

“No, I made it in the wrong place.”

Lavinia nodded. “Oh, you should’ve built it where the gold is.”

“Exactly. But as is occasionally my nature, I was in a big hurry.”

That was when Melinda Mae piped up from her warm spot beside the stove, “If you wanna get to the gold, mister, you’re going the wrong way.”

The big white head turned and said through its bushel of whiskers, “Huh?”

“The gold’s in the other direction.”

Everett McCauley turned to his hostess. “What’s that the girl’s saying?”

Lavinia tried not to appear discouraging. “Well, that depends. Which goldfield is it you’re headed for, anyway?”

“Why, the Cariboo, of course, Barkerville.”

“Oh, dear, then I’m afraid you made a wrong turn at Hundred Fifty Mile House. You’re in the middle of the Chilcotin, Mr. McCauley.”

“But madam, it’s vital that I get to Barkerville as quickly as possible and establish my claim. Production needs to begin first thing after the rivers thaw.”

Across the table there was a hiss like escaping gas, then a raw whisper, “Barkerville…played out…gold’s finished. Miners moving on…to Klondike.” Art’s paralysis had subsided, allowing his head to collapse onto an arm sprawled across the table. His lips managed to move, although his face was pointed sideways at the cowhide on the wall. No one could see his eyes.

Neither the news of Barkerville’s demise, nor its disembodied source seemed to sway the big mule skinner from his described ambition. “Why, this is a terrible situation. I need to get there now.”

Lavinia offered the only comfort she could think of, “Perhaps you’d care for another drink?”

“Oh, indeed, missus...in light of such news, I believe it’s entirely necessary.”

Lavinia poured and shook her head. “I’m afraid what my husband says is true, sir. News coming up the road is the gold’s played out. You’re too late.”

The big man’s eyes followed the rum streaming into his cup. “That’s of little consequence. It’s my navigation that troubles me. You see, those are precisely the conditions I require, as the innovative design of the McCauley Mound Masher focuses not on extricating gold from the ground, but recovering it from leftover tailings, employing a revolutionary new method called cyanide heap leaching.”

It was a lot of big words strung close together, too close for anyone not fully in command of their senses. On the tabletop beneath Art’s face, a spreading pool of liquid trembled with another droplet.

But Lavinia was demurely attentive. “My, that sounds quite fascinating, except for the part about the cyanide. How exactly does it work?” She sat waiting while her guest took another sip. Moments of heavy breathing followed more moments of fluttering nostril hair. Not until she saw his eyeballs begin drifting in contradictory directions did she heave a tired sigh and say, “How, Mr. McCauley? How does that machine make gold?”

“Oh…” A shake of the head. “…it’s a water powered cylinder, y’see. Crushes the ore by rolling it with old cannon balls. Spins it, crashing, smashing, until out the end pour pieces no bigger than this.” He showed her two fingers the required distance apart. “Then you pile those in a heap and drip down cyanide mixed in water. That seeps through, sucking up gold in the process. Afterward, you mix in some zinc, run it all through a special filter, and there would be your mother lode – all from leftover tailings. Beats panning and sluice boxes a hundred times over.”

By the stove, Melinda Mae gushed, “Wow.”

Lavinia shook her head with wonder. “Old leftover tailings, you say...”

“Missus, there’s piles all over Barkerville just waiting to be worked. If I can ever get there.” His head drooped again.

“Don’t worry, we’ll point you the right direction in the morning.”

He looked up. “But I didn’t tell you the best part. The best part is, you don’t ever have to go hungry at the end of a long day. Just run off a little of that cyanide water back into the creek and fish pop straight to the top, dead as a disappeared cat. Just mind you clean them well, is all.”

Another ‘wow’ from Melinda Mae.

Followed by her father’s mumble, “Klondike…Klondike’s the place for gold…everywhere.”

Lavinia said, “I’m glad to hear it’s Barkerville you’re headed for, Mr. McCauley. Because only a crazy person would try getting to the Klondike from here, especially hauling that thing.”

Melinda Mae said, “Even my dad won’t go there.”

Lavinia nodded toward her husband’s sideways head. “And if that man’s not interested, then you know it’s either knee deep in snakes or there’s nothing there worth having.”

“Oh, no,” said Everett McCauley, “I may be a man of adventurous spirit, but I most definitely am not crazy.”

Chapter Three

Winter in the Chilcotin may have had its unique wilderness charms, like wandering with desert nomads through the pages of a favorite book by lamplight. Or mornings so thick with solitude even the mule deer tracks across the path to the little house seemed an invasion of personal space. Fat feathery snowflakes drifted like wishes from heaven. Haloes of warm smoky giggle space surrounded crackling heaters and stoves, legs squirreled toe-to-toe under a hand stitched quilt. These were pleasures of substance, but when the ice finally loosened its grip, bringing the lakes and ponds to life with rafts of clamouring geese, nobody wasted time mourning the loss of a season. Because here was the beginning of more abundance than the world had seen in over half a year. Trapped by the cold in smoky cabins, out crawled the weary residents, rubbing their eyes in the sunshine, twisting out the kinks. All were hungry to celebrate. Particularly for the families who ranged their cattle on the grassy plain south of the Chilcotin River, it was time to get together for the regional spring roundup.

More than simple work, although there was plenty of that, the roundup was a chance for souls stifled by the long solitude to break out and mingle with neighbours not visited in months. For the cowpunchers under their broad brimmed hats, it was an opportunity to show off skills with rope and saddle, to laugh along with missed throws and proud new mounts that might look handsome behind a bridle, but were sometimes still so green as to toss their riders in front of everyone they respected in this world. At the end of a dusty day came the communal feast of fire cooked beans, beef and home baked treasures every lady in the region couldn’t wait to present. With darkness came storytelling around the big pile of burning sticks, sparks twisting to the stars. Tom Hance’s fiddle was a perennial treat. There would be singing and even dancing until the most stalwart of celebrants could carry on no more. Because as much fun as evenings tended to be, there was still an abundance of sorting and branding to be carried out the next day. Dust, sweat, a few laughs with cherished friends – it was all there, including Melinda Mae and the Hance’s eldest son, Lucas.

“Hey, Melinda Mae, wanna watch me squeeze out some warbles?” The larva of the warble fly was a parasitic pest that hatched under the hides of the spring cattle in a fat mound of slimy squeezable muck.

Melinda Mae was on the top rail of the corral taking a break from helping her mother and Cheng Wah with the cooking. She sniffed, “Huh, first you gotta rope something, Lucas. It ain’t as easy as you think.”

“I can rope, I’m a real cowpuncher. I rope all the time.”

“Sure you do, big talker.”

“I do.” Lucas spun and called to his father leaning over a calf with its legs cinched in a half-hitch, castration knife flashing in the sun. “Ain’t it true I rope all the time, huh, Dad?”

“Lucas, fetch our branding iron like you’re supposed to be doing. Quit yapping to the girls.”

Lucas pulled the required item from the fire and strutted over with it. His father tossed a couple of freshly removed prairie oysters in a nearby cold skillet, then took the cherry red iron and sizzled his TH brand into the animal’s haunch with a puff of acrid smoke. The calf twitched a little, but the only indication of sorrow was a weak slobbery yowl. Suddenly, Lucas dropped to his knees and jammed his thumbs each side of a lump on the creature’s hide. Out gooshed a fat white grub in a bloody bath of mucus. He jumped up, grinning.

“Look at that, Melinda Mae! I got one!”

Even with her powerful tolerance of things disgusting and boylike, the twelve year old braveheart had to fight back a rising lump from her stomach. “Oh, who cares, Lucas? It’s just an old warble.”

He came twisting toward her, all teeth and glittery eyeballs, dangling his slimy catch. “Wanna see me eat it?”

She fought back a shudder. “Huh?”

“Betcha never seen nobody eat a warble before.”

“Even you’re not that stupid. Go away.”

Lucas wobbled his warble, grinning and smacking his lips. “I’m gonna do it, Melinda Mae. Yeah, that’s what I’m gonna do.” He lifted the prize and rubbed his stomach.

She couldn’t help it, had to spin away.

Busy as he was, Tom Hance, like everyone else, could hardly ignore the show. He straightened under his big black hat. *Now what was the little bugger up to?*

Lucas opened his mouth….plop.

Tom shot the twenty feet to his son like a lightning bolt out of God’s perfect sky. He grabbed him by the ankles, upended and banged him between the shoulder blades with a sound so loud it made the calf bawl again. Out popped the grub.

Melinda Mae turned to peek between her hands.

The big rancher dropped his wiggling offspring on the ground and bellowed, “Gawd-almighty-boy! Where do you think cows get those things from anyway? They swallow the eggs! And here you are sucking down a live worm!”

Melinda Mae sniffed and shook her head. “Halfwit.” She jumped to the ground and presented the disgraced youngster with the back of her new flower print dress. Then she headed for her father, who like everyone else on that sweet sunny morning had stopped what they were doing to witness the disturbed but impossibly intriguing spectacle. She tossed her pigtails behind her back with a huff and proclaimed to her father, “Now you see what I mean?”

Art’s blue eyes crinkled at the corners. “I couldn’t agree more, that boy is completely addled.” Then he shook his head and squeezed his daughter’s shoulder. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a lad quite so love struck.”

The shoulder under the hand went stiff as a fence post. “What’d you say?”

“Why, it’s clear that youngster is so blinded by your charms he’d walk straight through a spider web. That is young love just as strong as I’ve ever seen it.”

“Dad, it is not!”

“Sweetheart, trust me, I’ve been around long enough to know when a lad is smitten.”

“It’s not true!”

“Oh, it’s true.”

“NO!”

Horror, denial and trying to suck her head down inside the collar of her pretty new dress. She spun to stare around her. Did everybody see it that way? They were looking…oh, indeed they were looking.

There were two things here: first was the word ‘love’, which had no place in the presence of Lucas Hance. Second was the way the fluffy headed dope was still plopped on the ground, mooning through the rails at her. He had dark curls like his mom, which if you liked that sort of thing maybe made him cute in a dumb boy sort of way, but when you looked at how he kept doing stupid stuff all the time and…somebody should make him quit looking at her like that. She blinked and spun away.

But she couldn’t quit fuming about it, especially the cowboy junk, how he just assumed he could impress her because no girl could possibly be good at such things. Huh, she should challenge him to a knife fight someday with her bone handled knife, the one she’d got from Floyd Billyboy, their part-time hand and horse trainer. She snuck a peek – still looking. Dear heaven, not in front of everybody, not goofy Lucas Hance.

Melinda Mae had her problems, but when noting the social aspects of the spring get together, there was a more fundamental point which took its origins all the way back across the sea to the pair of soggy islands most of these pioneers originated from: the English had their corral and the Irish had another. Not that in the bursting green plenitude of a western Canadian springtime was there much call for ethnic belligerence – this wasn’t, after all, Quebec – but the natives of Eire tended to be a headstrong lot, given to fervent bursts of ideology, song and especially in the grip of whiskey drenched philosophising, the rebellious concept of republicanism. Or separation of the Irish homeland from the smothering harness of Protestant landlords growing fat off their ill-gotten land. Of course in this brave new frontier, all were equals beside each other, but given an Irishman full of grog – and in fairness, the English besides - it was probably prudent that the two species be kept apart, at least while working off their hangovers under a high hot sun. The evening camp, however, with its food plates and bonfire twisting to the stars was a melting pot of commingling, where the inevitable bottles of liquid comfort made their appearance even under the steely gaze of wives.

Something else about the Irish – many who chose to settle on the Chilcotin plateau had been raised back home on a small plot, thick with green grass and a happy munching milk source. They imagined themselves to be born cowpunchers. Particularly Darryl O’Hare. With the sun nearing the horizon and the day’s toil at an end, everyone drifted toward the tantalizing aroma of the well-earned feast.

“Lavinia, dear, did you see me cutting cattle today on my fine new mare? She’s a quarter horse, y’know.”

“Your corral’s a distance off, Darryl, but I have seen your horse and she’s a handsome mount, as you say.”

“Isn’t she, though. And spirited besides.”

Lavinia wiped her hands on the apron she’d been living behind all day. “Is that why she appears to want a chunk of you at every chance?”

The Irishman wasn’t put off. He twisted his brown beard. “Practically stole her, I did, for thirty dollars from a trader in Quesnelle.”

“Was he covered in bites?”

“Ho-ho…Lavinia, you do impress me with your wit.”

She rolled her eyes and reached for her copper ladle. “Beans, Darryl?”

“Ah, yes, thank you. Your beans are the finest I’ve ever eaten. Do you have some special way of preparing them?”

*Scoop, plop.* “I do. I park Cheng Wah over the pot.”

“Oh… ”

Lavinia waiting.

Darryl standing.

The ladle pointed. “Beef’s over that way, Darryl. Take some to your horse. My guess is she likes it rare.”

The Irishman dallied a final moment, then incapable of concocting more blarney, shuffled toward the steaks.

Art appeared, thumbs in britches, looking much too cocky to be sober. He smirked. “How’s your secret lover? Try anything I need to talk to him about?”

“Beans, Art?”

“If I didn’t know you were a happily married woman, I’d guess there’s something you’re doing to attract him.”

“I do. I stand by this pot, he’s hungry.”

“Um-hum…thought so, you fixed your hair. It’s all tucked up with that new comb I bought you for Christmas.”

She gave up. “It’s true, Art. Darryl O’Hare and I secretly share beans together when you’re not looking.”

“Ah-ha!” He winked and cast his wife an amorous, alcohol fired look. “Well, it won’t be Darryl O’Hare who shares your blankets tonight, m’lady. You save some of those winsome charms for the man who found you first.”

“You want me to bring beans to our bed?”

He twisted the tip of his sandy moustache. “You’re sharp as a pin tonight, my love. You know what that does to me. I was thinking we could peg a tent for Melinda Mae over by the wagon and you and I could get started on a son.”

She shook her head, but not without a spark in her hazel eyes. “Back when we still did that sort of thing, I recall you had quite a gift.”

It was a compliment and a small dig at the same time. True, with all the work to be done in this season, there wasn’t a plenitude of time for each other, but no man wants to hear he’s lacking in that department. Still, Art had strong shoulders and with all the sap rising everywhere, was feeling a share of it himself. “Young lady, if you know what’s good for you, there better be a mound of pillows under your backside tonight or you’re going to be bent at the middle tomorrow.”

She plopped beans on a plate and shoved it at him. “Get some food in you before that rum takes away your senses. Because Arthur, dear, you’re going to need both your hands and the balance of a bronc buster to keep from flying off.”

“Whiskey.”

“Excuse me?”

He winked. “It’s not rum, dear, it’s whiskey. And that is the elixir of love.”

“Pooh…go get yourself some meat.”

Art did that, and settled on a log beside his neighbor, Tom Hance. Whenever he spoke to the former Union soldier and ex-defender of the law, Art felt his Englishness paling him in the face of near legendary grit and tended to paint things with a rougher brush than usual. Considering the big man’s education and aristocratic background, it was an unnecessary and sometimes even ridiculous affectation.

“So, Tom, I hear prices in Ashcroft are getting kicked in the ass this year.”

Tom pulled a chunk of gristle out of his teeth and flicked it toward the fire. Unless watching a grub disappear down his son’s gullet, he rarely involved himself in or responded to profanity. Still, a good neighbour was a commodity to be cultivated and he liked Art Cole; he turned and nodded agreeably, “Four dollars a head. Not even worth driving them down there.”

Art said, “Damn thieving buyers. They know with Barkerville drying up we’ll take whatever they bloody well offer.”

Tom lowered his plate, looking around for any ladies who may have scorched their ears on his companion’s indelicate opinion. He leaned closer to keep the conversation private. “Well, I’m not entirely dependent on ranching, Art. I’ve got the post office, my grist mill and mule freight business. You’ve got the store and livery, but what about these Irish? If they can’t sell their cattle, I’ve an uncomfortable notion they’ll start ploughing up pasture and planting it with spuds.” He allowed a sociable nod. “I favour a potato as much as anyone else, but without beef it’s not worth putting in your mouth.”

“It’s a lamentable situation, I’ll admit.”

“Government could do something.” said Tom. “We need a railroad up here. If we could load directly, we’d get a fair market price.”

“Well, you’re the man to make it happen. You got that bridge built behind your place.”

“Twice.”

Art grinned. It was well known in the area how the government bungled the first effort. “That’s right, and the second time above the high water mark.”

Tom’s dark eyes levelled. “Trouble is, since Victoria yanked my badge they’re not paying attention like they should. I’m not quite as dead as they think I am, though, I’ll get something moving.”

“My money’s on you, Tom. You’re a man of considerable talent.” Art leaned forward and slapped his knee. “Talking of which, did you bring along your fiddle?”

The big man winced behind his moustache. “It’s a violin, Art, a Borelli - no more a fiddle than a thoroughbred racehorse is a donkey.”

But Art’s mind was too marinated in whiskey for lessons in music or biology. “Well, you sure know how to scratch it like a fiddle.”

“I could scratch some Paganini if you wanted, but I’m not optimistic you’d appreciate it. Or anyone else around here, for that matter.”

“By God, you can scratch anything you like. We all love a lively tune.”

Tom just shook his head and went back to his steak, sawing and chewing.

Art left him to it, but after awhile asked casually, “So how far do you imagine it is to the territories from here, anyway?”

That brought his neighbour’s eyes up again. “Territories…you giving up ranching and taking off to chase after gold? Because I’ll make an offer for your place, a fair one, cash.”

“Nothing like that. Just wondering if it was a long way to go.”

Tom shook his head. “Gotta be over a thousand miles.”

“A thousand, huh?”

“As the crow flies, but if you’re thinking about the Klondike, that’s another four hundred from the border to Dawson City.”

“More than the two hundred to Ashcroft, huh?”

“A mite.”

Art decided to share the crazy thought taking shape in his mind, “Do you believe a man might drive a herd that far?”

Tom sat back on his log. He didn’t say anything, just presented a face full of scepticism at what he’d just heard.

“I mean it.” Art said. “If we can’t get a fair price in Ashcroft and Barkerville’s dried up, then we’re out of options. I can imagine beef in Dawson City must be worth as much as gold.”

A sad shake of the head. “I’m sure it is. But you’re looking at fourteen…fifteen hundred miles of raw wilderness stuck between mountains. That’s further than Canada to Mexico and I don’t imagine there’s anything but trees to eat most of the way. They use dogsleds up there, for Pete’s sake. How in blazes do you propose to push a herd through that?”

“Tom, I was trained to be an architect.”

“Well, congratulations, I hope it helps.”

“The point is, I haven’t done anything I was meant to do since I got to this place. And I honestly couldn’t be happier.”

The big head shook again. “Well, you write me a letter when you get halfway and I’ll send some money ahead for your funeral. At least that’ll make your widow happy.”

But the displaced architect was already drafting a plan in his head. “I’m sure a cautious man would agree with you, Tom, but a far thinker might just go ahead and try it anyway. And that person would need some good cowpunchers. What’s that son of yours up to lately?”

“Lucas? Probably eating another bug, who knows.”

“Not that son. You know the one I mean.”

Tom sat back again. His dark eyes were just visible under his hat. “Yeah…he’s doing pretty good. Got his own little ranch on the reserve. He’s about the most natural horseman I’ve ever seen in my life, and I’ve seen a lot.”

“Now that would be the kind of cowpuncher I need.”

Tom sat forward, his voice deep with pride, “That boy can track a spider over a rock too. Pretty much got the best of both worlds in him, that one.”

Art said, “I’d bring him back healthy, Tom. I promise.”

“Art, it’s more likely he’d be carting you home in a sack. You can’t imagine half of what you’re getting into.”

“Been there before, Tom, been there before.”

The big man just shook his head.

\* \* \*

For Melinda Mae, who loved the roundup as much as anything ever in her life, there were still unfair restrictions that didn’t apply at home, like the fact girls weren’t allowed in the corral, no matter how much she might complain about it. That didn’t mean she just stood around watching the fun. Working beside the other ranchers’ daughters, washing and peeling vegetables and ferrying necessities to mothers and cooks – many families had a cook and he was invariably Chinese – provided an abundance of social sharing normally reserved for a favorite dog or horse. Her ranch didn’t have dogs because Mum couldn’t tolerate the mangy troublemakers, but they did have horses and it was true Diamond was a fine listener, Kegger too, provided he wasn’t preoccupied banging his belly with his pecker while you talked to him. Around the cook tables, though, the only problem with so much elbow-to-elbow closeness was that being an only child, Melinda Mae had no built up resistance to fun poking.

“Why, Melinda Mae, if I was given to guessing, I’d guess that fine young Lucas Hance has made up his mind to marry you.” Lucy Corcoran came from a family of four girls and three boys with curly red hair and freckles on everything but their eyeballs. They were always squealing and trying to hit each other with something, but the one skill they all managed with born Celtic assuredness was carrying on about any subject at all.

It was a talent Melinda Mae might’ve matched, but not when outnumbered and outgunned by such practiced confidence. She barely mumbled back, “Huh.”

Of course, the whole point of teasing is to try and raise more than a single syllable response. Lucy wasn’t one to give up so easily. “If he wasn’t dim as a turnip, I’d be interested in him myself. Not that I’d have a moth’s chance in a flame with such a pretty thing as you around…is that a new dress?”

“Oh, it’s - ”

“My Da says Lucas’s family is bigger than you might think. Apparently the new reservation is already half filled with little Hance papooses, if you know what it is I mean.”

In fact, Melinda Mae had no idea what she meant - *little Hance papooses?*

It didn’t matter; Lucy wasn’t one to dwell on a subject too long, probably because around her home there were so many subjects happening at any given moment in seven places at once. “We’re about to have a new baby, y’know.”

Even a twelve-year-old could see the obvious problem with that. “Haven’t you got enough babies already? Why, you folks must be sleeping on top of each other in that little house.”

A haughty shake of copper curls. “My Da says children are the Lord’s blessing on a family. He’s praying for another son. I frankly don’t mind either way, but if I was given to wishing, I’d wish for a girl, because as everyone well knows, girls are smarter and just a whole lot easier to get along with.” She giggled. “Excepting of course, if the boy’s a curly headed cutie all googly in love with you like Lucas Hance.”

“Who cares about Lucas Hance!”

“Why nobody, Melinda Mae. Unless he’s fixing to marry you.”

“He is not fixing to marry me!”

“Oh, I’d say he is. Then the two of you can bless the world with a string of babies all lined up dumb and fluffy, eating worms.”

“NO!” Melinda Mae stormed off.

She’d almost made it to her mother by the bean pot when Tom Hance spotted her from his log. “Melinda Mae!” The big man turned to her dad. “Art, I’m almost out of tobacco. Can I send her back to the store for a pouch?”

Art checked the sky. “It’s less than an hour to dark, Tom. I don’t want her out there alone. There’s wolves and all manner of things, especially around these calves.”

“Why, that won’t be a problem. I can send along someone no wolf in his right mind would eat.” He waved. “Lucas, get over here, boy!”

Melinda Mae’s breath froze in her chest. Oh, no…this couldn’t be happening. She tried, really tried, to imagine it was all a terrible dream and she was about to wake up. But she didn’t wake up and Lucas came bounding toward his dad like a dog sniffing bacon, curly hair bouncing in the light.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Son, you go along with Melinda Mae to the store for some tobacco. Over the bridge and no shortcuts, it’s still high water. And look out for wolves. Take the Winchester, over there by my saddle.”

Lucas’s eyes lit, but his face was stern with the sober stuff of work. “You can count on me, Dad, I’ll get her there safe. You want me to skin out the wolves I shoot?”

Tom sat silently a moment, then his hat dipped to mask his face. “Son, you bring back that tobacco without shooting a hole in your foot and I’ll be a happy man. Don’t shoot the girl either…you got that?”

“You bet, Dad, I got that.” Lucas stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and turned to his charge. “C’mon, Melinda Mae, it’s near dark. We better get moving.”

Melinda Mae made a face at her father – he couldn’t be doing this to her, not after all she’d told him, but there was something wrong with his eyes, droopy and mushy looking. With a dumb smirk, he winked and said, “Bring back some hard candy for the youngsters while you’re there. And if Kakitesun’s waiting on the porch, tell him your mum will be home the day after tomorrow.”

She shuffled away, wilting with hopeless despair. Over by his father’s saddle, Lucas was already standing under his fluffy head with the Winchester, waiting.

“Don’t worry, Melinda Mae, I’ll take care of you. Want me to hold your hand?”

*Seriously, getting chewed up by a wolf couldn’t be half as horrible as this.*

The bridge was a long way back and not for one squiggly moment did Melinda Mae entertain the notion of walking that far with Lucas. Nor did she particularly care what he thought about it. She set off directly for the river, her escort hopping along behind making bossy boy noises.

“Hey, where are you headed? You can’t go that way! We gotta use the bridge, my dad said!”

“Shut up, Lucas. You use the bridge.”

“But I can’t go without you. My dad says I gotta shoot the wolves.”

“Lucas, you’re so dumb you make my head hurt.”

Her new lace up boots clumped as she marched and the cotton dress brushed up leafhoppers and lacewings. If it wasn’t for the irritating commotion behind her, it might’ve been a peach perfect afternoon, the late sun warming the side of her face and shining off last year’s grass like God poured a bucket of gold over the world. If it wasn’t for all that noise...

“It’s high water! We can’t get across! We’ll drown!”

She reached the top of the bank and peered down. There it was, the supporting section of her dad’s broken irrigation flume. The river was running hard, but well down from spring flood, and what remained of the bottom rails was clear and dry. Two log beams stretched across the main course of the river, side by side, and above those beams were upright posts and cross members still in place, perfect to hold onto. Except for about twenty feet near the centre - that only had logs to stand on. She hesitated.

Lucas clumped up beside her, all puff, sweat and contrary opinions. “We can’t go on that! It’s busted! We’ll fall in the river and drown!”

That was all it took. Down the bank she went.

“You’re crazy, Melinda Mae! I’m not jumping in to save you!”

She marched across the stones to the edge of the river. The water humping and boiling over boulders was a rush of noise that drowned out any complaining from above. She stretched up to the log over her head, then wrapped her legs around the big supporting pile and shinnied far enough up to grab a cross member. She got her feet onto the beam. Now the sideways shuffle, one foot at a time. Huh…not such a big deal, after all. At the first upright post, she peered back. *Oh, misery, he was coming after her. Fine, let him try to keep up.*

As her confidence built, so did her speed. She was almost to the centre span with its bare log footing, when behind her came, “Oh, no!”

She jerked around.

Lucas was yelling and staring down into the rushing water. But he was still on his log, so what was the big problem?

“I dropped the rifle! My Dad’s gonna kill me!”

She yelled, “Lucas, you halfwit!” And set off again.

She reached the middle – nothing to hold onto. Balancing on fallen trees had always been one of her favorite games; she could walk a deadfall over a gully like a squirrel. But that was a dry gully. This was the river and that water down there looked awfully cold and fast. She peeked back. Lucas was coming again; he’d be here in less than a minute.

Something her dad had once told her came back. Keep your eyes on where you’re going and not on where you’ve been, and you’ll get there every time. She locked her gaze on the next post twenty feet in front of her. Eased out onto the bare log, then started walking. *Eyes on where you’re going.* The beam was dry, but not very big – for the first time since she’d set out she noticed it wobbled with her weight underfoot. First step…second step.

She had to be close to the middle, but there was still a long way to go. Without thinking, she almost did it, almost looked back to check. No looking back.

Nearly there, an arm’s length from the post, she lunged.

Grabbed it…alive.

She hugged that wonderful post and let out her breath, hadn’t even noticed she’d been holding it. Then she turned to look behind her. “Lucas, don’t do it! I’ll go get the tobacco and come back!”

“No way!”

“You were right, it’s crazy! No point two of us taking such a chance!”

“I’m supposed to look out for you, Melinda Mae!”

Jinks, he was stupid. Here he came across the span.

He was bigger than her and made the log wobble worse than ever. She held onto her post and stretched a hand back to meet him. He was halfway there; she reached as far as she could. Almost at her hand. “Keep looking at me, Lucas! Don’t look down!”

Lucas looked down.

Then toppled into the river, rushing away, swinging his arms and yelling at her, “Help!”

*Drowning, he really was drowning.*

One blink she was safe on her log, next blink she was in the river. And it was cold. It was also in her mouth and up her nose. And her eyes. She kicked her feet down to hit the rocks and they did, but wouldn’t hold – the water was stronger than a team of horses. She tried flailing her arms to swim, but it was no good. Time and again, she got tossed under the surface, gasping, choking. The weight of her wet dress pulled her down, hard to keep her head up. Where was Lucas?

A shout, it had to be him. Then nothing more above the rushing river.

Impossible to catch a breath. Cold so sharp it burned. All at once her head bobbed high and through her smeary eyes she saw a rock, the big one in the middle where she liked to climb in late summer. If she could reach it, maybe she could crawl out and call for help. The water was so strong. She flailed, gasping, rushing toward that rock…

*Whump.*

She slammed the big wall of stone and bounced off, whirling around it and grinding her fingernails over the slippery surface. Got sucked down behind it. No bottom, just spinning and looping, chest burning for air.

Then…*pop*…up she came again. Sweet wonderful air, she threw back her head and gasped. Coughed, choked, sweeping again down the river.

The water was growing warmer. Not like knives in her skin anymore. Arms, though…hard to move. Bumping, banging, but not hurting. Under she went again and this time it wasn’t scary. So nice…why had she been afraid?

Sliding in the flume on a summer day…warm and drifting…sun in her eyes, letting the water carry her. And warm…so very, very warm.

Then in a dream, she was flying. Flying over the river. Angels were here to carry her, lifting her into the sky.

*Thump.*

She hit the rocks on her face. Coughed so hard her stomach wanted to jump out her mouth. She retched slimy stuff everywhere, even out her nose. With all the horrible hurt of it, there wasn’t much thought to anything else. Until she saw the hoof and fetlock of a horse. Gasping, she turned her head to peer. She followed the leg bone up and saw the stirrup, then the saddle and the man high above her. *But what a man.* He gazed with eyes so dark they might’ve been black. Straight nose, chin like something chipped out of rock, and the way his hair twisted around his face, it looked shiny as split coal, blue in the light. He looked…stunning…absolutely the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen in her life. Was this what angels looked like, God’s soldiers who watched over the forest? He didn’t seem very interested, though, doing his heavenly job, sitting on his horse and gazing down like she was just another creature he had to save.

Finally, “You okay?”

“I…*sputter*…guess.”

“Why were you in the river?”

“I jumped in…to save Lucas.”

The black eyes snapped past her like a hawk searching for prey. “There’s somebody else in there?”

She nodded. “Lucas…Lucas Hance.”

He was gone, galloping down the river, not caring about stones or boulders. She pushed to her knees, watching. It was as if horse and rider were absolutely fearless, or guided by the power in the sky, greater than anyone could understand. Then while she knelt watching, the horse froze as if turned to stone, while its rider leaned to scoop something out of the water. They cut back toward the bank and the thing flopped onto the rocks, exactly as she had done.

She pushed to her feet, dripping, shivering now with her thawing arms and legs. Stumbling, she set off along the bank. It was a long way, but when she got there the body of Lucas Hance stretched lank and dripping in the disappearing light. Once again the angel sat gazing down like he had with her.

“Is he…” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

The angel didn’t even look at her.

She lurched toward the sprawled body on the gravel. Dropped beside it…reached out. But couldn’t…couldn’t bring her fingers to go there. Still as stone, that chest full of bossiness and bragging was just a lump inside lifeless clothes. Her eyes began to smear again – his hair, that dumb boy hair with its shiny curls, was finally flat, plastered against his head like pondweed over a rock. At last her fingers crept to his cheek, touched the skin, frog skin…cold, dead…and her stomach sank into a hole so deep it went all the way to her toes. She’d made this happen with her meanness, hadn’t she? Her selfish horrible meanness drowned him, and all because he’d wanted to marry her. She didn’t deserve that specialness, didn’t deserve the love of sweet innocent fluffy Lucas Hance. Tears burned the side of her face; she couldn’t be bothered to wipe them. She stared back up at the angel. Then with a voice bleating like it wasn’t even hers, asked, “Why…why did this have to happen? Because of me?”

But the dark eyes didn’t blink. Didn’t show any wonder, didn’t move or offer anything.

That’s when Lucas decided to throw up. He jerked like a branded calf and a bucket load of water and slimy stuff blew onto the gravel in front of his face. Heaving and hiccupping, he blew bubbles into the puddle. It was absolutely…wonderful.

She poked him. “Lucas…”

He gasped again, jerked.

“Lucas…hey, Lucas, are you alive?”

“Uuhh…is that you, Melinda Mae?”

“Well, dammit, who’d you think it’d be?”

“Melinda Mae…you swore.”

“Lucas Hance, you are such a halfwit. Why did you look down?”

He tried pushing up to his hands and knees, but buckled again and retched. He looked up with slime dangling from his nostrils, glowing in the disappearing sun. “You told me not to. And if you tell somebody not to do something, that’s what they gotta do.”

The angel spoke suddenly, “Do people know you two are out here?” He had a voice like the sound of the river, cold water over a rock.

Lucas looked up. “What…where’d you come from?”

Melinda Mae said, “The angel pulled us out of the river. He saved our lives.”

“Victor?”

“You know the angel?”

Lucas coughed and spat muck from his throat. “Pretty much. He’s my brother.”

Wide eyes. “But he’s from the forest, he’s…Indian, isn’t he?”

The voice from the saddle rumbled, “Lots of people are Indian. And they’re smart enough to stay out of the river.”

“You’re Lucas’s brother?”

“I didn’t pick it. You’re the one from the trading post?”

Melinda Mae nodded. The last of the sun was sliding below the horizon, casting this strange horse and rider against the sky like a beautiful statue. It was the most amazing sight she’d ever beheld in her life. In fact it left her a little breathless. She said, “I never seen you around before.”

“Ranching takes work. Too busy to go out much.”

“You got a ranch?”

“That’s right, a ranch run by an Indian.”

“Where?”

The man didn’t answer.

She said, “You sure speak English good.”

“So do you.” He eyed Lucas. “Are you coming from the whiteman roundup?”

Lucas nodded. “Dad wanted tobacco. We were heading to the store.”

As if those few words were all the answers he needed in the world, the rider wheeled his horse and set off up the bank. “Well, if you’re smarter than you were a minute ago, you’ll take the bridge back. It’ll be too dark to spot you if you drown again.”

Lucas said, “Bye, Victor…thanks.”

But the man didn’t answer, just kept climbing the bank toward the growing shadows of dusk.

It took Melinda Mae a long time. A lot had happened in the last few minutes and she was having trouble twisting her mind around even half of it. Oddly, the first thing out of her mouth was, “He sure has long hair.”

“He’s half Indian. I reckon he likes it that way.”

“So if you two are brothers, howcome he doesn’t look like you?”

“Huh? He looks exactly like me.”

She stared. “If his hair was curly like yours he’d look like his head blew up. And he’s got different eyes.”

Lucas shrugged. “He’s my big brother. And we both look the same.”

But, oboy, Victor Hance didn’t look anything like Lucas. He was just…wow.

Chapter Four

Art wasn’t a former English architect running a cattle ranch and trading post on the frontier because he was the type of man who allowed his dreams to wither with neglect. In fact, ever since his first expedition across fresh pond ice behind school on a £2 dare, the intrepid doer of deeds had built a well-deserved reputation as a man of his daring word. He’d also gotten wet and lost his money on more than one occasion, but that never deterred him for long. Athletically composed, more like a bantam wrestler than a track star, he wasn’t a large man, but he was a man of large ambitions. And as more than one adversary squared off before him had discovered in an often drawn out and painful manner, he had a terrible reluctance to give up, an essential quality in a pioneer. His favorite saying to family, friends and anybody who cared to listen was: “If you’ve never tasted failure in your life, then you just haven’t reached far enough yet.” Thus it was in the saga of Arthur Cole’s uncommon existence that another amazing dream was about to be infused with the breath of determined thought.

Of course, there were always detractors.

“You want to do what?”

Art drew a finger along his moustache and squared his jaw. “I’ve given it careful consideration, my dear, and I see no reason why it couldn’t be done.”

Lavinia looked like a woman with one too many crazy husbands in her life. She blinked so hard the bun at the back of her head twitched. “The Klondike? You want to drive our cattle up to the Klondike?”

Art sat firm behind his jaw and refused to accommodate his wife’s hysterical skepticism.

It didn’t matter; she’d been married to him long enough to have plenty of hysteria in reserve for both of them. She snipped, “What’s wrong with Ashcroft, too close for you?”

“I can’t make any money in Ashcroft, Lavinia. They’re offering four dollars a head this year.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Tom Hance, but everyone’s saying the same thing. With the goldfields drying up, the agents know they’ve got us at the railhead. We either sell to them or drive the cattle home again.”

“Why, that’s just piracy!”

“That’s business, dear. Take it or leave it.”

“Well, I say we should leave it. There’s always next year.”

Art reached to his wife’s hand. “Sweetheart, next year might be even worse. Now we can sit out here on this prime land raising worthless beef, or we can think of something else. And that’s what I’ve done, I’ve thought of something else. I been asking around and do you know what beef’s going for in Dawson City?”

Hard eyes and a harder jaw, “I don’t know, a handshake and a glass of whiskey?”

“Three dollars a pound.”

Lavinia’s flat stare told the story behind her eyes. “Arthur, they don’t charge three dollars a pound for steak in Paris, France.”

“That’s because Paris has cattle around it. There aren’t any pastures outside Dawson City, just a whole lot of hungry miners with pockets full of gold. Do you know what a thousand pound steer dresses out to, butchered?”

”I don’t think it really matters. What’s important is how long it’s been dead when you drag it into town.”

“Five hundred pounds.”

Lavinia sat tapping her fingers on the table. “Art…”

“That’s fifteen hundred dollars a head, dear.”

“Art…”

“Yes, dear?”

“That’s impossible.”

Her husband squeezed her hand, staring into her eyes. “It’s the truth – fifteen hundred a head, compared to eight in Ashcroft. Now I’m told there’s a government slashed trail all the way from Quesnelle to Telegraph Creek, put in for the line they abandoned a few years ago.”

“And where on earth is Telegraph Creek, Arthur?” She appeared, at least, to be listening.

“It’s about a hundred miles short of the territories…give, take.”

“Give, take, how much? Four, five hundred miles?”

“Not certain. Never been there.”

Lavinia returned her husband’s grip on her hand. “Art, you’re a powerful thinker with a will to match. But sometimes things don’t work, like that boardwalk over the river. You can’t simply dash off and do every wild thing that jumps into your head.”

“That wasn’t a boardwalk, that was an irrigation flume.”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t matter, Art. What matters is it’s a long, long way to the territories and nobody’s ever tried driving cattle there before. Maybe, just maybe, because it’s complete lunacy.”

“Lavinia, anything can be done if you set your mind to it. It’s simply a matter of measuring the angles and calculating the risk. And the way I see it, if you can’t sell your beef for a fair price here, what’ve you got to lose by trying to sell it there?”

She shook her head. “Oh, Arthur…”

“Lavinia, sweetheart…”

“Why on earth did I marry a man who can’t do anything the normal way?”

“Because you’ve never liked normal. You couldn’t stand the thought of moss growing up the side of you in England any more than I did. You wrapped yourself around this place just as fast as me - we’re no different.”

“Oh, I’m not quite like you, dear. I’ve got a full five grains of sense.”

His blue eyes twinkled. “Want to come along?”

“And get buried out there on the trail beside you? Who’s going to raise our daughter?”

“Dear, that little flower’s growing up fast. With us out of the way, some young man will come along and finish the job with all the eagerness of a six point buck. You’ve got nothing at all to worry about.”

That wasn’t quite what the mother of a twelve year old girl wanted to hear, either. “Art, sometimes you have no idea how much you frighten me.”

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As for the part about Melinda Mae being twelve, it nearly wasn’t true; she was about to turn thirteen. In spite of the maturity such a pivotal event bestowed on a young lady, birthdays were still magical times, occasions of getting ridiculously spoiled and behaving even worse. There was the cake her mum always made, vanilla with preserved peach chunks in it, her favorite. Cheng Wah showed no interest in baking cakes, even for little missy girl, in spite of how he favoured her over the chickens or even his favorite duck. Which was fine; he cooked other special stuff, like egg custard tarts or *jin deui*, little crusty dough balls with sweet filling. They were yummy, but they weren’t vanilla cake with peach chunks. Then there was the business of a surprise birthday present. She already knew what she wanted.

A horse.

And not just any horse, she wanted one she didn’t have to share with her mum because Kegger was hard to catch and Mum didn’t like sitting on the big buckskin stallion any more than cinching a saddle on a powder keg and waiting for it to blow up, which was where he got his name. What Melinda Mae wanted was a horse who wasn’t Diamond or Kegger. She even knew exactly which other horse that should be - Frisco, the bay gelding her dad had traded for three slope backed nags to a passing prospector who knew how to count just fine, but didn’t know horseflesh from apple skins and went away far happier than he probably would be when he got to the next place down the road and tried to triple his money. Her dad still sniggered about that one.

Their part-time ranch hand, Floyd Billyboy, figured Frisco was a warmblood, Belgian or Dutch. That meant he was close to sixteen hands and a pretty tall mount for a thirteen year old girl, but built for riding. Or even jumping, if a person might secretly dream of racing trails and leaping deadfalls like some warrior maiden on a magnificent bejewelled steed. He was also beautiful. With his gleaming brown coat, almost copper in the sunshine, and his black socks and mane, he was just built for falling head over heels in love with. And that’s what happened the first moment they saw each other; they absolutely fell in love.

If Frisco could talk, he’d tell how the girl coming out to visit him with handfuls of fresh dandelions was the perfect owner for him, not only because she came every single day, but also because she loved to stroke his big head and tell him everything she was thinking about for hours at a stretch, never taking a breath and hardly ever wanting an answer in return:

“My mum’s got a box of coins she keeps for going on holiday to Niagara Falls where her and Dad went for their honeymoon. Do you know what a honeymoon is, Frisco? Never mind, I suppose horses don’t have honeymoons on account of you got to get married first and I never heard of a horse getting married. Unless maybe there’s some preacher who’d do such a thing when he passes through, but they spend most of their time with the Indians, on account of Indians got souls that need saving. My mum says nobody ever wants to save her from nothing because she was born Christian and then they’d have to prove they know what they’re talking about instead of just teaching people to sing all the time. What do you think, Frisco? Oh, never mind…want some more dandelions?”

So when after weeks of sideways suggestions and outright hints, Frisco was presented as Melinda Mae’s official birthday horse, it was a match already made in green grass and sunshine, if not heaven overall. Now she could concentrate on her riding and roping, then come the next roundup, show Lucas Hance and all the grownups under their big hats a thing or two about what a girl might do from the saddle. There was just one problem: the stupid dress her mum made her wear all the time over her trousers wasn’t going to work. Whenever she and Frisco got out of sight from the house, she made a point of peeling that dress off and stuffing it under the cantle, where it might get a bit crunched and smelly, but at least it wasn’t in the way of her roping. Besides, the undershirt took care of covering her top parts, which were starting to develop some promising bumps if she stood sideways in front of her mum’s mirror and took a really deep breath. Anyway, who was going to see her out there all alone, other than a mangy old coyote or crow?

Thus it was a hair spiking impossibility that the very first person to do that would be Lucas’s eyeball-icious big brother, Victor. Right out of nowhere while she was tossing rope at the top of her dad’s Russell fence, he snuck up behind her on his black horse.

“Your dad around?”

She nearly dove off Frisco and right out the top of her undershirt. She grabbed her chest, mortified, but he didn’t seem to notice, just sat there with those coal black eyes like last time, as if she might be some tree he’d decided to talk to. The horse, at least, wasn’t looking at her half undressed.

“Uh…my dad’s fixing fence over…” She blinked; now he wasn’t paying any attention at all. He’d dipped his hat to peer under the sun at something behind the tail of her horse. She gave him a sour look and said, “What’re you looking at?”

“You got company.”

She snapped around. “Huh? Where?” She didn’t want a whole parade of visitors, not outside her dress.

“Just sit up tall in your saddle and she won’t bother you.”

“Who? Somebody’s come to bother me?”

“Cat over in the willows. Got her eye on you, but up on that horse you’re too big. Wouldn’t risk getting off if you drop that rope, though. Probably got babies to feed.”

The willows were only about eighty feet away. “You mean right there? I don’t see anything.”

Apparently he didn’t think a mountain lion in the bushes was worth more than a passing mention because, cool as you please, he said again, “So which way is your dad?”

How rude was that, brushing off such a deadly peril as if her life wasn’t anything of worth? “So you’re not gonna shoot it? You got a rifle.”

“Got no use for the pelt. Bullet would ruin it anyway.”

“But you said it’s looking at me! It wants to eat me!”

The breeze caught his hair and pulled it across a cheek. “Spring cat with babies wants to eat everything. Now if you’d point me toward your dad, I’ve got business.”

The mountain lion obviously wasn’t going to get shot. “Well, if you’re not about to save me, why should I help you?”

At that, he swung his horse around and started heading along the fence.

“You’re riding off? You’re just gonna leave me all alone with a mountain lion?”

He didn’t look back.

“Oh…oh…” It was amazing how frustrating a few minutes with that one could be – caught in her undershirt, a deadly animal waiting to drag her off for its babies, and Mister Man of the Forest not even caring one whit. She peered one last time into the willows. *Huh…probably made the whole thing up just for a scare.*

That same moment, the breeze twisted and Frisco’s nostrils flared, ears flattening, withers twitching.

She grabbed the reins and got out of there.

When Art announced at suppertime that Victor Hance had been hired for the drive, Melinda Mae nearly swallowed her chicken leg whole. She knew her dad was planning a spring drive; it was all he’d talked about lately, but suddenly that sourpuss on his perfect horse was going to be working for them? What about his own ranch – she even asked as much, trying to make it sound casual as possible.

Her dad stared, apparently surprised she knew who Victor was, let alone that he had a ranch. He wiped chicken fat from his moustache with the side of his finger. “It’s not big, a few acres of swamp hay on the reserve. His family can look after things while he’s gone - you know him?”

“I…he’s Lucas’s brother. We ran into him awhile back.”

He didn’t look away. “I see, so you know all about Lucas’s relatives on the reserve.”

“Well, just Victor…he’s got long hair.”

“He does. And a reputation as a fine horseman and cowpuncher. In fact, he’s already run one of Tom’s drives to Ashcroft.”

Lavinia interrupted, “Tom Hance is his father, you’re not. Are you sure hiring an Indian as foreman is a good thing? What about the white hands, what if they take offence?”

“They can take it any way they like. And I didn’t say he was foreman. I’m foreman and everybody rides where I put them, whites, Indians and Chinese alike.”

The way he said it made Lavinia pause. In everyday matters her husband was a casual, even whimsical man, but when it came to work there was a core of determination in him that bordered on belligerence – he decided how things happened and that was that. Eventually she said, “You’re hiring Chinese hands?”

“Just one. You’ll have to get along without Cheng Wah for awhile.”

That caught her attention. Lavinia’s eyes sparkled and she leaned forward, practically fizzing with her bright new mood. “I’ve said before I don’t mind eating my own cooking, especially if it’s for a good cause. Who else are you taking?”

“Well, I’ll admit that’s a bit of a problem.”

“It is, why?”

“Apparently you’re not the only one who thinks it can’t be done.”

“Oh…” Lavinia reached to her hair, patting the bun at the back of her head. “Dear, I hope you don’t think I have no faith in you. You’ve a strong reputation around the area and I’m sure eventually there’ll be takers.”

Art shook his head. “Well, Floyd Billyboy and Victor are the only ones so far.”

She nodded. “Floyd’s a good start.”

“I didn’t want to, but I hear Skip Tanner’s back on the Chilco and maybe I’ll ask him. Nothing he’d rather apply himself to than a drive.”

Lavinia sat back. “Oh, that one…”

“As I said, not my first pick. But I need riders.”

“Have you talked to Jim Prentice? I’m sure the Gang Ranch can part with a few hands for the summer, or at least send some job hunters your way.”

“I suppose…but Jim’s always so busy I feel like a soap salesman riding in there and asking for favours. I was thinking about the Stoddard twins, if I can get them. I imagine their poor widowed mother could use the forty dollars each they’ll be making every month and that still leaves the little one at home to tend chores. As for a horse wrangler, maybe young Moot Mayfield or Lucas Hance. Both of them are wiggling out of their skin to be real cowpunchers.”

This time Melinda Mae actually spit chicken halfway across the table. “What! Lucas Hance?”

Her father cocked his head. “Excuse me?”

She sat back, caught like a rabbit on the wrong side of the garden fence. “Uh…I mean…he’s my age.”

There was a moment’s pause while Art digested the outburst. Eventually he settled back in his chair. “I believe he’s a little older. And he’s a Hance, which gives him a good pedigree in my estimation. Horse wrangler’s a good spot to start a hard worker and I’d be willing to try either of those lads.”

Lavinia said, “If it was just Ashcroft, I’d agree with you. But is this really a good time to be breaking in a young hand? It’s over a thousand miles of country you’ve never seen before.”

“Lavinia, everyone has to start somewhere. We’ll just all be on the same page.”

She shook her head. “I can only say I’m glad I’m not the mother of any of those boys.”

Art went back to the chicken wing he’d been chewing and offered one further bit of news, “If you’re worried about help around here, Darryl O’Hare offered to stop by whenever he gets a chance. Seemed eager to help and wouldn’t even talk about taking wages.”

Lavinia snapped her eyes away. “Well, that’s hardly a surprise.” Then she stuffed her mouth with food.

For Melinda Mae, whose appetite had followed her chicken across the table, there was more than one target to keep her eyes on in this forest of information. The most important was, if her dad thought Lucas was old enough to get a spot on the drive, then for absolutely certain that spot wasn’t going to be wasted on the goofy likes of him. The problem, of course, would be how to go about changing that already made up mind to suit her purposes?

Fortunately, God designed females with a magical ability to twist webs around the simple logic of males without the prey ever sniffing the snare. This included thirteen year old females not quite grown into their extraordinary ambitions, but learning quickly. First to go was the dress. Melinda Mae arrived in the kitchen next morning in trousers and the deerskin shirt Kakitesun’s daughter had presented after old Two-Tooth’s passing. No matter how often it was pointed out otherwise, the grieving family still thought she’d been around for their matriarch’s demise and such an honorable deed apparently made her something special for the rest of her life. The shirt was artfully stitched, decorated with ochre dye and fringes, but that wasn’t the thing that caught her mother’s eye. The thing that caught her mother’s eye was something even more fundamental.

“Your hair…”

“I’ve decided now I’m thirteen, it’s time to start looking my age.”

“You’ve taken out your pigtails…your pretty pigtails.”

Melinda Mae tossed back her thick auburn mane. “I’m trying it like this, or maybe up like yours, just not falling apart all the time.”

“And where’s your dress? You’re not going outside looking like that.”

“Mother, that dress is a flat curse on horseback. I’m sick of flapping around like a scarecrow in the saddle. When I start teaching Frisco to cut cattle, I’ll spook them to the moon.”

Her mother blinked, “You’re cutting cattle?”

“We live on a ranch, y’know.”

Lavinia’s eyelids fluttered. “I know that, Melinda Mae, you’re a girl raised in a life plenty of men would be too soft to handle. But your pigtails…”

“Have you seen Victor Hance? He looks more like a woman than I do. I’m not little anymore and I’m tired of looking like it.”

That brought her mother to her senses. “Victor Hance is half Tsilhqot’in. Even the rest of the men don’t wear their hair like him, like a Sioux warrior or something.” Her eyes settled on the deerskin jacket. “Is that what you’re trying to do, look like him?”

“Dad thinks he’s good enough to ride scout.”

“That’s got nothing to do with his looks. He happens to have lived his whole life in the bush and he’s something of a legend on horseback.”

“I know, I’ve seen it.” Her mouth said it, then snapped shut. As an afterthought she mumbled, “Uh...just one time.”

It was too late. Lavinia felt the sudden lurch in their world and tilted her head. “You have…where?”

The problem wasn’t that Melinda Mae had seen Victor Hance galloping through a boulder strewn river, a river most horses balked at even entering; the problem was the pact she’d sworn with Lucas to never mention their near-drowning for as long as they lived. It just didn’t seem like a practical idea if either of them were to be allowed to go anywhere without adults around anymore. “Uh…once…at the river.”

“The river.”

“Uh, huh.”

“So just fording the river, you could see what a superb horseman he is.”

Quick nod, “Absolutely…nobody does it better.”

“I’m sure they don’t.” Then her mother’s head tilted the other way and almost as an afterthought she said, “He’s a striking looking young man, don’t you think?”

“I dunno...”

“Especially in that wool shirt he’s always wearing.”

“Oh, he wasn’t wearing wool. He was wearing a deerskin…” The daughter’s tongue tripped again to a halt.

“Shirt? Deerskin shirt?”

“…that might’ve been it…”

Lavinia’s eyes softened. “Melinda Mae, there’s nothing wrong with seeing the beauty in a man. You’re growing up and that’s completely natural.”

“Mother, I am not seeing the beauty in any man! Men don’t interest me! Especially any man named Hance.”

“Why, strange as it sounds, in the olden days in Ireland women were known to marry when they weren’t much older than you.”

“And I definitely am not getting married!”

“No, thank goodness, you’re not. But all the same, there’s nothing wrong with growing into a woman; all girls do it someday. Just don’t let it run away with your mind, though. You’re at a very impressionable age.”

This wasn’t anywhere near the conversation Melinda Mae wanted to have before breakfast and the best she could offer was, “I just want to go on the cattle drive.”

Stark motherly terror. “Goodness gracious me, you are not going on any cattle drive at thirteen years old! That is a flat certainty! Get it out of your mind right now!” Then with eyes like stones, “And you’re a girl!”

“But I thought I was old enough to get married.”

“In Ireland! If you’re Irish! And Lord knows, there’s nothing normal about that!”

“But I’m a better cowpuncher than Lucas.”

“Even if that’s true, he’s a boy and you’re not.”

“What difference does that make?”

Her mother’s face glowed like overripe fruit. “Melinda Mae, that makes all the difference in the world.”

“Huh, not to me.”

“Well, thank heaven, it certainly does to everyone else.” Lavinia marched out of the room.

Melinda Mae stared after her. Be that as it may, there was only one person in charge of a cattle drive and it didn’t happen to be her mother.

That first part hadn’t gone very well. The next part had better be more carefully thought out.

Melinda Mae peered through the log rails at the colts and fillies in their corral. “Boy, that green stock we got from Del Schroeder sure needs a bunch of work, huh, Dad?”

Her father had his forearms folded across the top rail, gazing at his new horses. He looked around. “That’s ‘Mr. Schroeder’ to you, young lady.”

“Yessir, that’s what I meant, Mr. Schroeder. So I hopped on that dun colt a couple of days back and about thought I’d end up over the rail before he settled down.”

Her father’s head whipped around so fast it nearly left his hat behind. “You rode the dun?”

A tish-tosh shake of gleaming auburn hair. “Well, I wouldn’t exactly call it riding. Just got a halter on and jumped up to buck him out. Like I said, it took awhile to settle him down.”

Her father blinked. “Oh, really…you bucked out the dun, bareback?”

“Well, sure, I hop on the green stock all the time. It’s fun.”

Art pulled his arms from the rail and coolly pushed back his hat. “Think you could do it again?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s a good horse.”

“He will be someday. But he nearly killed Del trying to pony him over here with a lassrope.”

“Well, Del...Mr. Schroeder…he’s not exactly a born horseman. You said so yourself.”

Art nodded evenly. “And I suppose you are.”

“Dad, you seen me with the horses. You know I am.”

Her father’s eyes found their familiar twinkle of mischief. “Alright, let’s see you catch the dun and get a halter on him.”

“You haven’t noticed my hair.”

“Your hair looks wonderful. Are you changing the subject?”

“I think it makes me look older.”

He chuckled, “Not going to do it, are you?”

This was the part she’d been carefully working up to. This was the part that was going to earn her the spot to change the rest of her life. She looked up at the smug grownup face behind the moustache and said, “You’re right, I’m not gonna stick a halter on that colt. Already covered that. This time I’m gonna go straight to the bit.”

It was just possible her father’s face was going to freeze like that. Then he’d look like someone had smacked him on the forehead with a pole for the rest of his natural life.

Of course, the problem was that it hadn’t all been exactly true. It was true she’d lured the dun to the rails with a handful of dandelions, just like she’d done with Frisco. And stroked his head and talked to him. He was amazingly calm, almost as if he’d been born somebody’s pet. Then she’d gotten a crazy idea and climbed through the fence - at which he hadn’t bolted. It had impressed even her. He’d just stood there chewing, which Floyd Billyboy said was a sign of calmness in horses, and allowed her to stroke his neck and shoulders, even pat his rump. He might be green, but he wasn’t wild. And he obviously liked her. That was part of her suspicion about horses; she suspected that if you liked them, they were going to like you right back. Floyd had once told her that was half the secret of getting them broke. Still, there was one thing she’d exaggerated about to her dad – she hadn’t actually tried putting a halter on him. Okay, two things – there obviously hadn’t been any bucking either.

She fetched her favorite bridle from the barn, the one with the twisted snaffle bit that Floyd said was the fanciest piece of work he’d ever seen. Frisco liked it, but his head was bigger, so it would probably need adjusting if she could get her crazy plan to play out that far. With her dad watching, mouth twisted like he’d suddenly cut a whole new set of teeth, she picked a handful of dandelions and headed back to the corral.

“You’re going to bribe him?” he said. “If you start that now, you’ll spoil him forever.”

“You want me to do it your way? Because we could do that, but then you won’t see what works.”

Art jammed his thumbs in his belt loops and stood back.

Melinda Mae poked her dandelions through the rails, clucking her tongue softly. The dun had been watching the whole time. He perked his ears, then came ambling over, swishing his long, cream coloured tail. He had a darker stripe down his blonde back and faint zebra markings on his legs and withers, truly a remarkable looking colt.

Art said, “We’ve got hackamores, y’know. You shouldn’t force a bit on him so soon.”

“Dad…”

“Alright, you’re the expert.”

“Thank you.” After a minute of contented dandelion munching, she climbed carefully through the rails - so far, so good. Again, the colt let her inside with him and didn’t shy. She stroked his strong neck and showed him the bridle. His ears pricked, but he held. She smoothed his long face, talking the whole time, “You’re so pretty…do you know you’re pretty? And smart too, I can tell. We’re gonna have so much fun together.” The colt mouthed while she caressed him, enjoying her touch like a big dog on a sunny day. Okay…here goes. She offered the bridle for a sniff, then gently lifted it beside his head. He shied away, but when she stroked his neck, came back for more. She raised the handful of straps again and took its measure – too long, fitted for Frisco’s big skull.

Art grumbled, “If you sour him on the bit, Floyd’s liable to do a war dance like the time the roan took a chunk out of his shoulder.”

“Could you not talk, please? He doesn’t like people saying bad things about other horses.” She adjusted the cheek straps and measured again – much better.

But from outside, “You want help getting his head down?”

“Shhh…”

Her dad was right, though; his head was too high. What was it Floyd had told her? Slow as watching the grass grow. Another dandelion did it, brought his head down far enough to drop the reins gently over his neck. He held, munching, while she reached to hug his nose. But when she raised the bridle again, his head jerked back and she lost it.

“If he takes off now, you’ll never catch him.”

“Father…I swear.”

“Alright, alright.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a finger to rub over the colt’s lips. It was as if the young creature had jumped over a cloud and landed in horse heaven – his head shot forward and out came his tongue, rubbery lips slurping and slobbering.

“What’s that? What’d you put on his mouth?”

She didn’t look at him. “A little trick Floyd taught me.” She poked her finger back in the pocket and rubbed it over the bit.

“What is that?”

“Molasses.”

“Molasses?”

“You’ll need to be quiet now.”

“But that’s just another trick.”

“I asked you…please…to be quiet.”

That was all it took. She lifted the bridle again, got her thumb in his mouth to open it and the colt sucked up the bit like it was horse candy, which of course it was. They might’ve come at the business a little sideways, but with all the sucking and slobbering going on, no one inside the corral objected and the headstall tucked over the colt’s ears perfectly. She collected the reins and stood there.

Her father mumbled from his rail, “Alright…well done.”

“No way Lucas could’ve done that. He’s not as good as me with horses. He’s more of a big mouthed worm eater.”

“Well, the bit’s in, but I wouldn’t call him broke yet.”

No point waiting any longer, she swept back her long hair, grabbed a fistful of mane and just the way Floyd would’ve done, tossed a leg over to whip atop her mount. The colt’s ears flattened, but he didn’t move.

Her dad stood staring.

Melinda Mae, buster of beautiful broncs, shook back her thick auburn mane and announced in a chirpy voice, “Of course, I don’t hardly weigh nothing. I probably feel like a bird to him.” Then she reached to rub that young strong neck again, murmuring and telling him how pretty he was.

Art’s voice was hushed. “Can you…ride him?”

“Dad, I think we better let Floyd take first ride. I don’t wanna show off and maybe ruin him.”

“…of course...”

“I’d make a pretty good horse wrangler, though, don’t you think? On the drive, I mean.”

For the second time today, her father’s head nearly snapped out from under his hat. “What?”

“The drive, I should go on it with you.”

Art’s big hat swung determinedly side to side. “Not a bumblebee’s chance in a hailstorm that could ever - ”

“You were gonna take Lucas. I’m way better than him with horses and I’m no relation to that strange bird you hired for a scout either. They don’t get on good together, I think you should know, even if they are brothers.”

Art peered at her. “What makes you say that?”

“Because Lucas acts like a dumb little kid and Victor’s got no time for that stuff. Then there’s the cattle – I know them, Lucas don’t. And I can shoot birds for Cheng Wah. Everybody would like that. In fact, I don’t think Cheng Wah would like Lucas at all. He’d probably chop him up with that big cleaver of his and stick him in the pot. Then we’d end up eating him and not even know about it till we all got sick.”

Art blinked at his daughter. “Lucas likes you, y’know.”

“Who cares?”

“Well, no matter what Cheng Wah thinks about the idea, or even me, there’s no way your mother would let you go on a cattle drive.”

“I thought you were in charge. You said so.”

Her father pulled a hand down his face. “You’ve never been married. You have no idea what it’s like.”

“Huh…when I get married, it’s gonna be me who’s in charge.”

He nodded tiredly. “That’s pretty much what I just said.”

Chapter Five

Thus it came to pass that Melinda Mae was added to the roster as horse wrangler, cook’s helper and general camp roustabout. It might’ve had something to do with Cheng Wah’s lobbying for missy girl over a loudmouthed worm eater. It might also have been her father’s quiet observance in the privacy of a parents’ bed that it would break her heart if she got left behind in favour of Lucas Hance or Moot Mayfield, neither of whom Art now felt possessed his daughter’s innate ability with horses, or any other animal for that matter. But what probably made the biggest difference was Melinda Mae’s bulldogged determination to rope everything ropeable around the cabin, store and barn every time she saw her mother looking. She galloped by on Frisco at least twelve times a day, swinging her lassrope and jumping the big steed over anything standing still, including a clump of Cheng Wah’s precious ducks sunning themselves outside the master’s tiny shack. That had set off a small storm of quacking, flapping and fist waving, but it felt so good, even bringing a smile to her mother’s lips, that in the end it was certainly worth it. Because when you added all those things together with the fact that neither Lucas’s parents nor Moot Mayfield’s thought a cattle drive to the Klondike was anything but loon spit crazy, the man in charge simply wasn’t left with any other choices.

The decision was made official with the presentation of a hat, any hat the aspiring cowgirl wanted from the selection at the store. At her mother’s urging, that came down to a black Spanish riding hat, the *sombrero cordobés*, a saucy little thing, which when tilted at a slight angle, presented a daringly chic profile. Melinda Mae tried it on in the mirror beside the flour sacks, clad in her tasseled deerskin shirt, and that prompted Kakitesun to rattle from his rope spool, “No cowboy watch cows when girl ride by.” Lavinia set aside the last of her misgivings and reached behind the counter to produce a pair of leather chaps she’d been storing for Christmas morning. Then she stood beside Kakitesun admiring her stylishly outfitted Chilcotin princess. She had to admit that with the new hairstyle, hat and jacket, this budding heartbreaker might do less damage on the trail than batting her eyes at the random young bachelors who happened by the store.

\* \* \*

With Art’s enticing offer of ten dollars a month bonus for each hand who finished the trip, a crew was finally assembled. The roster of intrepid volunteers was: Victor Hance, Floyd Billyboy, Skip Tanner and the untested Stoddard twins. Cheng Wah went along as cook and Melinda Mae, horse wrangler. On the morning of May 17, 1898, two hundred head of cattle, spare saddle mounts and nine pack horses set out under sunny skies across the Chilcotin prairie. They were heading for Anahim Flats just east of Alexis Creek. From there they would turn north toward the Telegraph Trail, a government project abandoned thirty years earlier, intended to string a communications line linking North America to Europe via the Arctic. Where the trail met the Northwest Territories border, it would be a further four hundred miles to Dawson City. The journey would cover fifteen hundred miles in all, a distance never before attempted by a cattle drive, certainly not in Canada, probably not anywhere in the world. In Arthur Cole’s words, ‘It would be a test of men and animals on a scale yet unknown.’ And it would be a triumph, if they managed to make it back alive, that is. But there, of course, is the golden fleece at the heart of all epic adventures - if the task was easy, it would hardly be worth doing.

Cheng Wah set out first, bouncing on his hard bench at the front of the wagon, queue marking the rhythm of every rock and gopher mound. Behind him came Melinda Mae and her pack train with instructions to wait for the herd at the flats. The drive was aiming for an untested route along the rugged Blackwater River, rumoured to be a shortcut to the Telegraph Trail. It was mid-May and Art intended to make Dawson City before freeze up in September or early October, four and a half months away. Every day they could shave off that time would mean less weight off the cattle and more profit for the crew.

Melinda Mae rode with her bird gun, keeping watch for feathered treats they could add to the cookpot. At the first sharp tailed grouse hurtling out of the grass, she had the hammer cocked and almost pulled the trigger before remembering her horses. It wasn’t worth the risk of trying to chase down a string of spooked animals carrying half their supplies on the very first day out. She congratulated herself on her good judgement and settled into the saddle to let thoughts of the Stoddard twins taking turns riding drag at the back of the herd warm her thoughts in the clear spring air. It hadn’t rained in a couple of weeks out here in the open country and there wouldn’t be much clear air behind two hundred head of jostling cattle.

The oldest rider, Skip Tanner, aside from waving his lanky arms and sounding off about a whiskerless redskin riding point, didn’t much care for the thought of a female along either, even if she did happen to be the boss’s daughter. It was only when Art threatened to move the Stoddards up to flank and Skip backward onto drag that the yellow toothed moustache muncher started keeping his mutterings to himself. It didn’t mean he was happy. Babysitting a different twin on flank each day, either Percy or Orville, was in itself a kick in the pants, as a man of his considerable talents would be put to better use leading the herd. At least that’s the way he saw it.

Not in Art’s mind.

Skip was a competent cowhand, but he tended to think not so much about the welfare of the cattle as the glory of Skip Tanner. One time when the well-travelled Oklahoma cowboy had been working for the mighty Gang Ranch, they’d been crossing the Fraser River by cable ferry. A line had broken in mid-stream, sending the scow and its cargo of cattle and horses whirling down the raging river out of control. Skip had been one of the riders on board. Back on the bank, another man, Hobart Keefe, spurred off immediately, trying to catch up to the imperilled scow. He managed to get ahead of it and out onto a spit where he might toss a rope. But Skip had his own grand plan. He intended to leap his horse into the raging water and swim a line to shore, a gallant act by anyone’s standard. And a pretty darn stupid one by all later accounts. He did at least have a good horse, which against its walleyed better instincts, did as asked and plunged in. It turned out, though, that scow and horse were being swept at different speeds and pretty soon the rope ran out. Skip being the genius that he was, had cinched a firm knot around his saddle horn and couldn’t get it loose. The horse was now being dragged, nostrils barely above water, back into the powerful mid-stream current. At this stage, rather than thinking to cut the rope with his ever present Bowie knife, Skip panicked and left his mount, floundering on his own to safety. Hobart Keefe was forced to give up on the scow and concentrate instead on getting a rope out to the drowning hero. With a single throw, he managed to hoop the thrashing victim and drag him to the bank.

But the scow was still whirling downstream and below that were rapids. There were no further bows in the river before the whitewater. In another couple of minutes, the current would sweep between steep canyon walls and the ferryman and two remaining riders would certainly be lost. Hobart left Skip and galloped off. Somehow he caught up. Somehow a line was tossed from the ferry. And somehow Hobart caught it and managed to dally around a tree, saving everyone. For which he got no medal and when thanked afterward, only hung his head modestly. Sadly, before the men on the ferry could cut Skip’s rope the poor horse was drowned, an unsuitable trade in the mind of most for a cowhand with more flash than sense, and very little good to say about even the man who’d saved his life: “Hell, I could of swum that rope back to them if dang Hobart hadn’t hooped it around my arms.” Still, Skip was useful on a drive, if only because he’d done so many of them. And of course, Art hadn’t exactly been swamped with applicants either.

With all the time he’d spent in rivers, you’d think such an experienced hand would be more accustomed to getting wet. But when it started raining just as the herd caught up to the wagon for the night, it wasn’t young Percy or Orville Stoddard complaining, or even Melinda Mae. It was the mouth under a dripping yellow moustache letting the cattle and half of Anahim Flats know that if it wanted to rain on Skip Tanner, then the power up in the sky had better get used to a cussing out starting right now and going on till somebody made it stop. God might be the big boss in the sky, but Art was second in command, at least on the ground, and he put Skip on first night watch with Percy Stoddard, getting the complainer out of camp to let everyone else eat their first meal in peace. It was a decision which instantly raised Art’s stock with the crew. The only person it didn’t suit was Melinda Mae, whose job it was to deliver supper to the riders.

The hunched figure of Skip under his slicker peered out at the messenger bearing a dripping plate of chow. “How old are you, girl?”

“Old enough to know it’s dumb to cuss the weather.”

“I’ll cuss whatever I want, whenever I want. I asked how old you are.”

“You gonna take this food or not?”

The choice of hats for most cowhands in this part of the world was tall as a bucket and wide as half a wagon wheel, a practical admission to the frequently quarrelsome climate. Skip’s narrow eyes glinted from under his now, delivering the twisted brand of opinions he was famous for, “Smart little thing, ain’t you? Reckon you know all about driving cattle halfway to hell without nobody up front knows the way?”

“My dad knows the way.”

Skip grabbed his plate without a thank you. He didn’t use the spoon she held out, just started shovelling beans with his hand. He had brown juice running from his mouth, spluttering and spraying, “Well pardon me all over the place, and here I thought he hired a Injun for that part.”

“You got beans all over your face. You eat everything with your hands?”

“Girl, you got a mouthful of sass. Maybe I’ll teach you to mind your elders.”

She swung Frisco away. “No time for that. Still got supper to fetch to the other man.”

A beany shout from behind her, “That ain’t no man! That’s a boy and he ain’t even old enough to know about kissing! I could teach you a thing or two about kissing!”

That was the coldest moment she’d ever felt in the rain. In fact, it was the coldest moment she’d ever felt anywhere. As she eased big Frisco around the herd in the settling darkness, Melinda Mae thought about telling her dad how Skip Tanner had just made an offer to kiss her, something that mouldy sack of guts should never say to nobody, especially her. Then she got mad and decided she was big enough to handle the problem herself. If Skip Tanner ever tried to plant his mossy mouth on her, she’d blow his head off with the four-ten and leave the carcass for crow bait. And if her pack string ran off and her dad got mad, well so be it. But most of all, she didn’t want anyone ever to know the disgusting thing he’d said to her – it just felt dirty.

At least Percy Stoddard was polite when she arrived on his side of the herd. The lanky rider on the mottled mare offered a quiet ‘thank you’ for his plate, followed by stony silence and worming in the saddle. Melinda Mae hardly knew him and his twin, outside of seeing them at the roundups, but they seemed decent enough, if desperately quiet and a little rangy under their wool shirts. Percy’s shirt was covered by his dripping slicker now, but he still looked like a pole sticking out of his saddle. It was weird how he wiggled around, not looking at anything close to her.

She tried talking to him, “Your mum’s sure got a pile of work, all alone since your dad died.”

Silence and squirming.

“Aren’t you gonna eat that?”

Another ‘thanks’.

For some reason his lack of talkativeness only spurred her to press harder. “My mum’s all alone at the store too while we’re gone, but Darryl O’Hare’s promised to drop by and help out. You know Darryl O’Hare, don’t you?”

Finally, “Uh, huh.”

Melinda Mae declared her knowledge of Darryl O’Hare. “He’s Irish. My mum says in the olden days they got married there even younger than me. I couldn’t imagine that, getting married at my age. I’m fifteen, y’know.”

All of a sudden from out of his mouth, “You don’t look fifteen.”

Her eyebrows popped up at the sound of an entire sentence. “Well, I am. Oh, I get it, you think I look older on account of the trousers and chaps. I’m kinda small for my age and my mum made me wear pigtails like a little girl until last month cause she figured it looked cute or something, but I finally told her I wasn’t gonna listen to her no more. That’s howcome I’m on this drive. I just decided I wanted to do it and that’s the way it’s gonna be.”

“You sure got a lot of hair.”

She rocked back in her saddle, actually letting out a little squeal. “Why, Percy Stoddard, aren’t you the yappy one all of a sudden? I got a lot of hair because I’m a girl. But how about our scout, Victor? He’s got almost as much hair as me.”

At that, Percy shut up again.

Melinda Mae said again, “That Victor’s sure got lots of hair, don’t he?”

Nothing, just silent staring at the plate.

She changed the subject, “Herd looks restless. My dad says the first few nights they’re gonna wander all over the place if you don’t watch them close. You better watch them close.”

Nothing.

“My dad’s a nice man, but you don’t wanna get him disappointed in you.”

“Victor’s hair ain’t half as nice as yours.”

Her eyebrows jumped halfway to the top of her *sombrero cordobés*. “Why, Percy Stoddard, thank you, even though it’s all just a drippy mess right now.”

Rain drizzled off their hats.

After a full minute more of silence, she said, “Well, I better let you alone to eat or you’re like to starve to death right in front of my eyes. I haven’t had supper either and Cheng Wah don’t like people coming late. Sorry yours is so cold…and wet.” She peered at the lean young face under the hat brim a moment longer, then swung Frisco back toward camp.

She was four lengths away in the twilight, when from behind her came, “Thank you, Melinda Mae.”

She waved over her shoulder and broke to a lope. Quite the opposite of the first food delivery, that was one of the warmest moments she’d ever felt in the rain. At least somebody on this drive appeared to appreciate her being there. Now if she could only find a way to tell which Stoddard was which, she’d make sure that one got an extra serving of beans, pork belly and bannock every time he drew first watch.

It turned out not that difficult to tell which Stoddard was which. When Melinda Mae got back to camp, Orville was sitting under Cheng Wah’s wagon, coughing like his insides were ready to jump straight out his mouth. Her dad squatted by a wheel, peering at the young man.

“You alright under there?”

*Cough, cough.* “I got a flu maybe, Mr. Cole. Been coughing near a week, but I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yeah…” *Cough, cough.* “Just a little shivery in the rain, is all.”

Art said, “Well, you lay out your blankets under the wagon tonight and I’ll get the others to pick up your watch. Just keep yourself dry and get some sleep.”

*Cough.* “Thanks, Mr. Cole.”

“The name is Art. You don’t have to salute me either.”

He left the ailing young cowpuncher and went to lay out the schedule for the rest sitting around the fire with rain drizzling off their hats. “Everybody’s on night herd except Cheng Wah and young Stoddard there.” He turned and called toward the wagon, “Which Stoddard are you again?”

“Orville, Mr. Cole.” *Cough.*

He turned back to his crew. “The one under the wagon. Tomorrow morning when I count out the herd, I want two hundred head. The first few nights they’ll be restless, so keep a sharp eye for strays. Two riders on watch, two hours each. Anyone who doesn’t bother to get up when he’s been woken loses his bonus straightaway, so think about whether that extra sleep is worth it – any questions?”

“Yeah, howcome the pup under the wagon don’t have to night herd?”

“Well, Floyd, he’s sick. Very little sense making him sicker, unless you want to look after him.”

Floyd Billyboy aimed his proud nose at the boss. “No, that’s fine with me, Art, just asking. Hell, I’ll do two watches each turn. Fact is, I’ll do two of his and two of my own, I don’t mind.”

“Well, that’s a generous offer, Floyd. I believe I’ll put your watch in front of mine and that way I’ll get to sleep all night.”

Floyd’s coffee colored eyes glinted in the firelight. “If that’s what you want, Art, I don’t mind.”

For the first time since they’d stopped, Victor’s ice water voice sounded, “Thunder coming. With the herd this fresh, might need more watching than we hoped.”

Art said, “You’re sure, Victor? Feels like it’s settled into a flat rain to me.”

“Wind’s picking up, getting colder. Switching west.”

Floyd Billyboy sniffed, “You’re only half blood. Whaddya know about weather sign, anyway?”

Victor didn’t offer so much as a glance toward the big Alberta Blackfoot. But he did unsheathe a hunting knife and start scraping his fingernails.

Floyd took that to indicate exactly what it was meant to. He growled, “You might ride point out here in the open, but that changes when we hit the trail. You still got a lot to learn. Don’t make me teach you, baby rabbit.”

Victor looked up slowly and met Floyd’s eyes; that’s all he did. And went on scraping his nails.

Art didn’t wait any longer. “Nobody on this drive is different from anybody else. We’re all cow hands together…and a cook. I don’t give a tinker’s damn what your pedigree is and I bloody well won’t tolerate feuds. Anybody starts a fight gets paid out and sent home. I won’t say it twice. Now I’m told we’ve got thunder coming and whether you want to believe it or not, if something rumbles on your watch, you wake the camp and we all mount up. Keep your horses saddled. Everybody understand?”

The pair continued staring.

Art leaned across the fire. “I said, do you two understand?”

Floyd broke eye contact and grunted, “Right, Art.”

Victor tugged his hat over his eyes. “Yessir.”

Art called toward the wagon. “And you don’t start snoring either, Percy or Orville or whatever-the-hell your name is.”

*Cough.* “Yessir, Mr. Cole.”

“Melinda Mae, get your horses hobbled. When it starts thundering, you won’t have time.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Art normally rode point himself, but these first days until they cleared the open country and the riders switched around into close trail formation, he wanted to be free to roam as much as possible, keeping his eye on whatever situation might present itself. Overall, he was happy with the man he’d chosen to fill his spot. He hadn’t picked Victor Hance for such a key position because of his family name or even his growing reputation as a top cowhand. The fact is, there are simply some people you meet in life who, no matter what age, convey merely by standing in front of you the absolute rock solid belief that they are a force to be reckoned with and they needn’t bother to hide it. It was that quality Art had noticed right off in Tom’s eldest son, but knowing the father, that was no real surprise. The real surprise was his own daughter on her first drive, handling her horses exactly as she’d dared to predict. Could it be she was another? Then he chuckled to himself. The girl was thirteen years old. Bloody hell, everyone that age thought they could do it all, right up to the moment they discovered they couldn’t. So far she was making him proud, but the trail in front of them was long and entirely unknown. No doubt there would be plenty of opportunity to measure not only her mettle, but the combined worth of them all.

As a father, though, there was one small thing which made him nervous. Whenever she thought nobody was looking, the emerging heartbreaker kept sneaking glances across the fire at the proud cool cowboy under the black hat. Now that could prove a problem anywhere, especially considering that Victor was married.

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Melinda Mae had never night herded before. In fact, other than helping round up the range cattle for this drive, had never worked a large herd at all. In the dark and rain she couldn’t see much further than a couple of black lumps in any direction and it was a wonder how anybody could. She thought of riding over and asking Floyd how he knew what was going on around him, but as she had no idea where Floyd was, that didn’t make much sense. All she knew for certain was she was on the near side of the herd to camp. When she’d come on watch Floyd had generously ridden over and explained what was expected of her, “Don’t let the wolves, griz or mountain lions scare these pokies.” That’s what he called them, ‘pokies’. “You hear a noise, check it out. Pokies are slow and stupid until they spook, then you better head them off fast or you’re gonna be halfway back home before you see their tails again.”

“Like when the thunder comes?”

“There ain’t gonna be no thunder.”

“Victor said there would.”

“Hell, that pup ain’t cut his dog teeth yet. How’s he know?”

It was obvious Floyd would never give Victor credit for anything. She let it drop, thanked him for riding over and then settled to watch the herd. Which basically meant staring at some soggy lumps in the dark.

When the first rumble broke, as the rider closest to camp it was her job to wake everyone and she’d better get going. She swung around to set off into the night. The fire must’ve died. To make matters worse, with the next flash and drumroll in the sky Frisco turned wilful, refusing to head straight and veering away from the noise. She forced him back, but couldn’t make him hold for more than a couple of steps before veering again. She tried and tried, then lost her temper and for the first time in their friendship, spoke sharply and slapped the big horse with the reins. He whirled, whickering, hooves stamping and twisting. At last he calmed, but staring into the darkness her heart plunged into a cold hole - which way was she was facing? She was alone in the wild with wolves, grizzlies and mountain lions, lost on a horse that couldn’t be trusted to head straight. If only she could find something to fix on: a snore, a snort, anything. But there was only rain and the icy claws of dread creeping up her spine.

The sky rumbled louder, closer, and with a twitch, Frisco was off again, not waiting for her to tell him this time. A steer bawled. At least now she knew where the herd was. But stupid stubborn horse, the more she tried to correct him, the more he wouldn’t listen for even so much as a step. Now he wouldn’t halt, refusing her every command. She had to turn him. This was more than just embarrassing. What kind of horse wrangler gets lost the first night out on the trail? Or worse, has to hit the dirt and lead her mount back on foot? She was just about to do that when…dear Lord, there was something else out here.

A dark shape appeared. She tried again to halt Frisco, but he carried on straight toward it, stubborn as ever. The wagon…impossible. But there it was, real as Orville snoring underneath it.

Frisco, beautiful see-in-the-dark Frisco, she lurched over his wet neck and patted him, eyes smeared with tears. “Thank you, boy…oh, thank you.” Then she dropped to the ground and hurried to wake the camp.

Melinda Mae was alone with her horses, everyone but Cheng Wah out tending the herd, when the sky burst open with a fury that wanted to tear up everything not tied to the ground and blow it into the next province. Devil forks stabbed from cloud to cloud, bristling with evil. Icy rain slapped her slicker. Maybe she wasn’t quite as grownup as she’d thought; this cowboy life came with an icy streak of misery. She wanted her mum, wanted soft words and hugging, anything to make the night shrink smaller than the big ball of fear sitting on top of her stomach. Frisco wanted it too, twitching beside her, the only horse not hobbled and hitched to the picket line. As much for her benefit as his, she stood by his neck, rubbing and soothing like he wasn’t a horse at all, but a giant child trying to wiggle under the bed. Truth be told, if she’d had a bed, she’d have been right under there with him. A bolt cracked overhead and a horse toppled, squealing, launched off its rear legs only to plunge over its hobbled front. Before she could move to help, it twisted upright again, eyeballs backward, tramping the ground and doing everything but tripping again over its bindings. She huddled inside her slicker, hiding.

Out in the wind and mayhem, men shouted and cattle bellowed. Her father’s voice called orders, a note above the rest. Sometimes a rider was trapped in the blaze of a lightning strike, galloping to head off an animal broken away from the rest. Cowpunchers yelled and whistled. Alone as she felt under that sky, she decided she was thankful for her job, as she couldn’t imagine what it was like with those half-wild beasts straining to bolt at every boom. She was thankful right up to the searing, ear splitting instant the lightning hit the wagon.

Orville Stoddard had been roused to ride with the others, but the last time Melinda Mae had looked, bundled in a little black ball under his roof of planks was Cheng Wah. The camp cook either had a fear of storms or didn’t enjoy getting wet. Whichever was true, the only thing left of his shelter was a smouldering hulk on four glowing wheel rims. She dropped Frisco’s reins and took off toward the disaster.

“Cheng Wah! Cheng Wah!”

There was nothing but the sizzle of rain on seared wood and a queer sweet smell. Was that Cheng Wah? She had no idea what cooked people smelled like and didn’t want to imagine. With that horrible thought in her head, she called again, “Cheng Wah!” Still nothing, until a flash revealed him rolled in a ball right where he’d been…alive…dead? At least he wasn’t smoking like the thing above his head.

She crept to the splintered wreck. What if the lightning came again?

With the lump from her stomach halfway up her throat, she dropped to her knees. She crawled under the wreck. Reached to his long shirttail and tugged – no response. His proud queue draped on the ground. She reached to it, yanked.

“Aiee!” The terrified victim whirled and scrambled backward, eyes like peeled eggs.

“It’s only me, Melinda Mae.”

The white circles below the trembling eyelids shrank, but he whimpered, “No touch…no touch.”

“Alright, I won’t touch you. But we better clear out before this place gets hit again.” She took her own advice and began backing up.

Cheng Wah blinked. “Mouth move, no talk.”

She blinked back. “What do you mean, ‘mouth move, no talk’?”

His forehead wrinkled and he pointed to his ears. “No hear…Cheng Wah no hear.”

At last she understood. “I guess the big boom must’ve busted your ears.” She ignored the no touch rule, grabbed his hand and pulled. “C’mon, we gotta get outta here.”

He followed and they climbed from under the wreck just as her dad rode up. “Are you two alright?”

Melinda Mae pointed back to the wagon. “I’m okay, but Cheng Wah got blown up by lightning.”

“He was in the wagon?”

“Under it. I saw it happen.”

Art was a shadow above them. “Absolutely amazing, not something most people live to talk about. Are you hurt, Cheng Wah?”

“He can’t hear, Dad, he’s deaf.”

“Oh, right.”

Her father stared into the night. “Storm’s moving past. Get a blanket over him and we’ll look him over in the calm.”

“Sure…and Dad?”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know what I’d do if Cheng Wah got killed. He’s the best friend I got in the world.”

Art swung his horse away. “He’s also our only cook.”

As predicted, the night calmed. The spring storm must’ve drained the sky of misery because as the last dark smudges disappeared eastward, out popped the gentle holes in heaven where the light shines through. With skilled riding and a lot of luck, the herd seemed intact and Frisco proved his measure for the second time that night by staying where he’d been left with his reins dropped. A good strong fire was built on the soupy ashes of the first and but for soggy clothes and a smoking wagon, it was difficult to remember just how crazy this place had been less than an hour ago. Cheng Wah became instantly famous. Everyone wanted to talk to the little cook and most took no notice of the fact he didn’t answer. They fingered his sooty quilt jacket and poked at the scarred remains of his wheeled sanctuary. Theories went around how a five foot wisp of nothing could take on the sky and win.

“It’s the pigtail.” Skip said. “That thing’s China magic. That’s why they got it, to ward off evil and snake venom.”

Percy Stoddard said, “You mean snakes can’t bite them?”

Skip bared his yellow teeth. “Damn, you’re uneducated, boy. Of course snakes can bite them, it just don’t make no nevermind.”

“…well I’ll be…”

Floyd wasn’t so sure. “I saw a China once got bit by a rattler down Rock Creek way. He didn’t look so fine. Leg swelled up like a bloated pig about ready to pop.”

“Did he die?”

“Well, no, but - ”

“There you got it.” Skip said. “Ain’t even a rattler can kill them when they got the magic.”

Floyd said, “Gotta admit I never heard before of nobody walking away after getting hit by lightning. Something’s working for this one, that’s for sure.”

“It’s the pigtail.” said Skip.

Victor was squatting in front of the fire, drying his jacket. He didn’t bother to look up, just stated dryly, “Lightning likes high places. It hit the wagon because it was high, but missed him because he was low.”

Floyd couldn’t stop himself. “Y’know, for someone claims to be half red, you sure the hell sound all white.”

Cold warrior eyeballs swerved from under the black hat.

Floyd met the eyeballs and raised them a dog toothed sneer just as Art came riding back from the herd. He didn’t bother to dismount. “Are you two at it again? Which one wants to go home first? Go on, try it. After tonight, I’m in the perfect mood to make somebody else’s life just as miserable as mine.”

The men behind the hate masks broke it off.

Art said, “I can’t get a tally in the dark, but when we move out tomorrow we’ll count them through. My guess is we held them pretty tight. Who was on watch when the storm broke?”

Melinda Mae and Floyd answered.

“Alright, the next two get out there. Still a few hours till light. The rest of you would do well to catch some sleep…Skip, what in blazes are you doing?”

The lanky Oklahoman had his fingers on Cheng Wah’s queue. With his back turned, the little cook was unaware of the intrusion, poking at something inside the remains of his wagon.

“There’s magic in this here thing.” Skip said. “I reckon maybe I’ll lop off a foot or so and take some luck for myself.” He lifted Cheng Wah’s lucky charm and twisted it in his grip.

With a spin so fast it all but disappeared in the firelight, the little man was around and Skip’s arm flew backward as if whipped by some invisible wind.

“Ow!” The cowboy grabbed his wrist and stared. “What the hell…did you just hit me, runt?”

Cheng Wah turned back to what he was doing, but only halfway, keeping one eye on the meddling cowpuncher.

“I asked, did you hit me, sing-song?”

Art said, “He’s deaf, Skip. His ears are popped from the lightning strike. Leave him alone and get some sleep.”

“No China runt lays hands on me and gets away with it.” Skip stomped forward and reached for a handful of jacket. He never got there. As if stepping into a hole, his feet whipped out from under him and he sprawled backward, thumping the ground like a sack of wet grain.

Art gazed down from his horse and sighed. “Get some sleep, Skip.”

The stunned Oklahoman caught his breath, then spluttered, “You see that? This China did some kinda magic to my legs! Little bugger made them fly so I can’t walk!”

“You can walk, Skip. Get up and do it over to your bedroll, because I need you rested when we move out. Now either sleep or herd, but leave our cook alone.”

Skip pushed to his feet, shaking his head. “Damn magic, ain’t never seen nothing like it.” Then he looked up at Art. “Say now, maybe it ain’t the pigtail, after all. Maybe that lightning shot powerful medicine up his backside, is what. Why, I bet if he can make my feet fly, maybe he can lift his whole self off the ground and flap around like some damn bird.”

“Oh, for the love of Myrtle…” Art swung his horse around and headed back to his herd, waiting for the sun to come up.

Sunrise had always been Art’s favorite time of day on the trail, or anywhere else for that matter. Men who work hard to make things happen are invariably men of vision, and men of vision look forward to their dreams cast in reality. Right now that meant watching a horizon fresh with possibilities spread light over his borrowed chunk of creation, cattle grazing in a wash of copper light, steam rising like a swirling blanket off their saturated hides. As if the rain had washed away their restlessness, his herd grazed quietly before him, framed by something no English architect would find in a thousand city sunrises – wild natural beauty. You couldn’t engineer this place with the mountains purple in the distance. You couldn’t draft the angles of the ragged peaks or calculate the heart twisting romance of an eaglet chirp-squealing out of slumber in its towering basket of sticks. All you could do was pass through, smelling, listening and giving thanks for the richest life a person could live. Art knew he’d hate being a miner, had the good sense to realize he wasn’t a lawman, prospector or trapper, but when his eyes first fell on this rolling expanse of aspen dotted grassland they called the Chilcotin, he knew quite simply the person he was born to be.

Back in the beginning, in the years before family, there’d been sunrises that hadn’t seemed quite so plump with promise. His first hard winter had wiped out close to twenty percent of his herd, a harsh introduction to the realities of open range grazing on the interior plateau of British Columbia. Like everyone else wintering stock south of the Chilcotin river, all he could do was pray the snow wouldn’t fall too deep or last so long as to starve his dreams out of existence. It had been an icy worry to wake up to every winter morning and he knew he wasn’t the kind of man to live with such a gamble. He’d better find some formula to improve his odds, which he saw in swampland where the grass grew tall in springtime, then turned golden brown in the heat of August and September. He’d dug drainage ditches, cleared willow thickets from the spongy soil and cut trails for his wagon. The construction of the flume had been an attempt to carry water for irrigation to the dry northern terraces above the river. He even built a barn. The logs for the new structure came from the closest place he could find suitable timber, a quarter mile up the north ridge. The favourable part of that plan meant that snaking them home would be downhill. He’d done all the work himself with an axe, Swede saw and horse team. It wasn’t an architect’s dream, but the result was a dry sturdy structure which he had no doubt would hold together for as long as he was alive to need it.

Those were the simple facts. Now, the complicated ones:

Mowing hay with a scythe was hard work. Backbreaking, in fact, and that didn’t count pitching the product into the wagon afterward, one fork at a time. The first year of haying had almost sent him back to England with his pride in his back pocket where he could sit on it while he calculated stresses and applied trigonometric functions. It seemed he’d made a mistake; homesteading in the wilderness sounded sweetly adventurous over ale at a favorite local, but knocked you to your knees pretty fast in the dust, flies and merciless molten sun. And that was when things were going well.

One afternoon snaking timber, a horse had lunged at something sailing up its nose and trapped Art’s thumb in the bight of a rope. The crack of bone and tearing tendons had been so loud it spooked crows in a nearby tree. A man needs both his thumbs to work like he needs his legs. The nearest medical attention was three days ride to One-Fifty Mile House, the escalating pain and swelling, eye watering. There was one bottle of rum left. He drank the first half splinting a stick to the mangled digit and wrapping the hand in a wad of cloth the size of a rugby ball. The second half of the bottle got him through the next day, hitching his team and snaking more logs. The third day had been hell. Around midday, teeth clenched like blacksmith tongs, he’d unwrapped the hand, if only to let off some of the pressure. He shouldn’t have done that. The swollen purple and green appendage before his smeary eyes looked like it might’ve been better situated between the legs of a donkey; it certainly didn’t belong on his hand. It was a battle to even get his eyes shut at night. After almost a full week the swelling began to subside to where he could just tolerate living again, at least enough to hold an axe. The incident had brought about a decision, though. If he was going to exist out here so far from doctors and nurses, he’d better put in a sensible supply of rum.

With the help of that rum, he’d managed to pull two of his own teeth.

More rum had dulled the agony of splinters the size of penny nails cut from practically every part of his body, even the part he sat on.

There’d been food poisoning one winter from some not-so-well jerked caribou. Again, if he’d climbed on a horse to go for medical help, he’d probably have toppled off and died in a snowdrift somewhere alongside the trail. He just clenched himself in a ball before his drum heater and let the poison pass from both ends until he’d been so weak from dehydration he could barely crawl outside to fetch snow for melting.

Beaver fever: more cramps, diarrhoea, vomiting.

With the use of a polished shovel, he became a pretty good barber. It might’ve been the Englishness or more probably just a young man’s pride, but even all by himself in a smoky cabin, he managed to maintain a degree of civilized grooming, although he was inclined to confess a certain lack of fastidiousness when it came to toenails.

In his favor, there wasn’t much he was afraid of out here on the great frontier, with the exception, of course, of wolves. Alone in a tiny cabin in the dead of winter with the lamp snuffed out and the glow from the drum heater dying down, there was nothing to run icicles up a person’s spine quite like the howl of a marauding wolf pack half a mile away in the snow. He knew they took calves in springtime, even full grown cattle in winter, but there was just no way on his quivering straw stuffed mattress he was going to pull on boots and get out there to match wits with those demons of the wilderness. Slathering fangs, evil yellow eyes and a taste for human flesh – he didn’t care what tough guys like Tom Hance said about their earthly limitations, he’d been taught since birth they ate every child, lonely traveller and unwitting grandmother they encountered. He just didn’t care much for wolves.

In the glow of this perfect morning in May, though, there were no wolves around and the storm had left more immediate problems to be dealt with. They needed another wagon and it was his business to go find one. Tom Young’s ranch was just under a half day’s ride away and their mutually adventurous spirits got on pretty well together. Tom would likely be accommodating if Art said he needed a wagon, provided there was one on hand and a plan could be made to replace it. He would set off right after breakfast, hopefully getting back to transfer what was left of the supplies before sunset. Cheng Wah could go ahead with the pack train today and Art would catch the slower moving herd the next day. If he didn’t get a wagon, well, they’d just have to press on with packhorses alone.

Riding back into camp to inform the crew of his decision, Orville Stoddard’s cough greeted him like a colicky calf on wobbling legs.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

*Hack…sniffle…cough*. “Oh, yeah, Mr. Cole, I’m fine. Still got this tickle, is all.”

Art shook his head. Soon they’d be heading into country even a man of vision had difficulty seeing into. Nobody he’d questioned about the Blackwater River trail knew it well, even if convinced of a strong opinion based on the knowledge of somebody else. Apparently it had once been part of the old Indian ‘grease road’ used to pack rendered eulachon oil from the coast through the Rockies for trade, but that had shut down with the interruption of the whiteman. There certainly wouldn’t be any doctors. If Orville got deathly ill, their choices would be to either carry on with him in the wagon up toward Quesnelle or tie him to his horse and send him back alone. “I’d say that’s more than a tickle. Are your clothes wet?”

“No, sir, I dried off by the fire.”

Art looked the young man over. “If you want to go back now, I’ll pay you out and take you on again next year no matter where the drive goes. No shame in a man catching sick, happens to the best of us.”

“Mr. Cole, I hired on to get these cattle to Dawson City. I been on a horse since I was five and no dumb cough is gonna cut me out now. I’m fine, sir…*cough.”*

“That’s admirable son, but we can’t go back even if you look like you’re off to Saint Peter with the next breath.”

“I won’t die, sir, I promise.”

Art shook his head. “I’ve heard healthier men say that, then still go ahead and do it.”

Floyd was listening. “Yeah, you die, it gets a whole lot harder to keep your promises.”

“Well, I still promise. Except for my dad, dying don’t run in the family.”

“I admired your father greatly.” Art said. “And I expect he was as surprised as anybody. Keep that in mind.”

Skip Tanner was standing by the fire. “I don’t care what the pup does. Where’s this China’s chow?”

Breakfast was served: coffee to melt a spoon, fried sowbelly and bannock flapjacks with Lyle’s Golden Syrup. After the first day in the saddle and that harrowing night’s work, there wasn’t an appetite in camp that didn’t come back for seconds and even thirds.

Art called Victor over and told him to push along the Blackwater River whether a new wagon arrived or not, insisting nothing was to hold them up, unless they got there and the trail was impassable. “That’s your decision, you’re in charge. But keep in mind we’ve still got over fourteen hundred miles to go and every day backtracking is two days lost.”

“What about those brothers? You still want them on drag when we hit the trail?”

“No, when the herd strings out, move your best man back to watch for stragglers in the trees. That’s Floyd whether you like it or not. But you stay on point - I need a good head up front to make decisions. Anybody doesn’t listen, answers to me.” Then Art pushed back his hat. “But I don’t expect anyone to be stupid enough to try that on you.”

“Me either.” Victor crammed his hat down tighter and headed to his horse. Without another word, he swung over the saddle and set off to fetch Big Willy, the lead steer. Big Willy was pretty much an ox by now and the others, two and three-year-olds, naturally followed his lead. When Willy got moving, the herd followed. The man in the saddle didn’t whistle, whoop or wave his hat; just pointed his quick little quarter horse at the animal he wanted and the expert under him carried on as if reading his mind. This morning to make a particular point of his right to ride the position he’d been appointed, Victor hooped his reins around the saddle horn and sat with arms crossed while the horse went confidently about its business. It was a sight even Floyd couldn’t watch without nodding reluctantly. “Good horse.”

Skip Tanner growled, “Damn show off, is all.”

Melinda Mae and the Stoddard twins just stared.

Floyd said, “That’s the red in him. Don’t mean the other half knows diddly.”

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But all the fancy cutting and herding didn’t mean Victor was entirely comfortable with his promotion to trail boss into the unknown. The last time he’d been in charge on one of his father’s drives, there’d been cowhands along he knew well and trusted, and the route south to Ashcroft had been as familiar as the path to the nearest lake. Other Tsilhqot’in cowpunchers he’d talked to had no experience with the trail along the Blackwater and the elders who knew of it had no knowledge of cattle drives. Important as it may once have been, the path was little used anymore and may or may not be the workable shortcut Art hoped it was. In fact, the storm and lightning strike on the wagon had come at a curious time. With the boss almost certainly away longer than it took to get off this aspen dotted prairie, it seemed almost as if some power greater than themselves wanted Victor in charge when they put the familiar hills of home behind them.

Passing a stand of white poplar, a raven gurgled from a branch. Victor turned his eyes to look, but not his hat - the bird was staring straight at him. As if stopping by to share a joke, it tossed a few cheeky clicks, then stretched its wings and chortled. The raven was a hero who brought the salmon to his people, but he was also a well-known trickster. This particular day, Victor had no time for pranks. Life in charge of a herd was difficult enough without making a joke of it. He spun and hissed like a Lynx, rocking the visitor backward to almost topple off its branch. Gleaming wings whipped and off it swooped in a big circle to hide behind the sun. Much better…let it watch from a place away from people who were trying to work. Grasshoppers clicked and flies buzzed in the rising heat. The day fell back into its rhythm, exactly as it should.

With a few moments to relax in the saddle, Victor cast his eyes to the sky where God lived, moving the sun and keeping the stars in order. He knew of God because he’d been baptised in the Catholic mission at William’s Lake and taught by his mother, who in turn had learned from the visiting priests. It wasn’t hard to understand: God lived in the sky, just as the ancestors lived as water in the river. He was the Big Father in charge of heaven; they were the old ones who managed things on the ground. In His great camp in the sky, God didn’t like to be challenged, so if you wanted to keep storms off your head, you did things His way. Victor understood about big fathers, because even though his own hadn’t been around much while he was growing up, there was no question of how important he was to the family.

That family, which included his mother and little sister, hadn’t lived on the reserve then, but in a small *keek’willy* dugout house close to an uncle by a big lake they called *Nabi Tsi*. Not just a traditional winter home, his mother kept the family there year round to make it easier for Father’s visits. She would be getting ready for days, moving things to this side of the house, then that side and back again. There’d be fresh bannock with berries in it, salmon or trout, and coffee – Father liked coffee, which he brought for Mother whenever he came. On normal days his mother wore a scarf, wrapping her shiny hair under it, but for that day she had a special one, folded and put away just for him. She hummed the song Father always sang to her, *Annie Laurie*, and bobbed over her cook fire preparing the feast. Everyone would speak English and put on shoes. He and his little sister had to speak English every time Mother remembered to teach them, but that day she would think of it all day long. She had learned from Father. At last, up would ride the big man on his black horse, a sight so impressive Victor still thought about it often, whenever he dreamed of the old days. Then down he would swoop in a flap of leather smell and tobacco to squeeze and tickle him and little Alice till the tears came. There would be pockets stuffed with presents and saddlebags filled with salt, flour and treats in tins and jars. The family would eat together and Father behind his black moustache would sit with them afterward and tell stories with the children on his lap. Mostly the visits would last overnight, sometimes longer if they were lucky. They were special times for everyone, warm regular ones that filled Victor’s world with happy memories for nine wonderful years. Then suddenly it changed.

Just like that, the visits got far apart and nobody knew when they were going to happen. His father was still the same man when he came, in fact more smiling and squeezing than ever, but his mother was different, especially after he left. It wasn’t hard to see something was wrong. He asked the uncle who lived close to them and was told with a bark like a dog that his father had gotten married. ‘Married…wasn’t he married to Mother?’ No, he wasn’t married to Victor’s mother; she was only a toy he played with whenever he wanted. He would never marry her and never take any of their family to live in his big house. He was a whiteman and they were *Siwash*…savages. They didn’t belong with him because he was ashamed they were even alive.

His uncle spoke so strongly that Victor had almost believed him. But then came the horse brought by Father one shining day in spring when the geese flew overhead. What man is so ashamed he gives his son a horse? Uncle was wrong, jealous of all the things Father brought. And the horse was magnificent. After that visit, Victor asked his mother if they could move into Father’s house when the time came for him to ask them. She spun so fast he thought she was going to hit him for the first time in his life.

“Never ask that again! Our place is here!”

Victor had seen his mother angry, but this was different. Her eyes were like pools with no bottom anywhere. He barely dared to ask, “But we are his family, aren’t we?”

That’s when she told him, “We are *this* family. But he has another family in his house and no room there for us.”

He remembered what his uncle had said and asked with a tiny voice, “A whiteman family?”

His mother’s eyes snapped away. “There is no room. Go ride your horse.”

“Does Father love that family more than us?”

Still not looking, “He loves them the same as he loves us.” She paused then and the next part came slowly, “But he is white and we are not. Someday you will know what that means.”

“I will? When will I know this?”

She turned with eyes that suddenly had found a bottom. “When you meet other whitemen.”

He should have been warned, but after that Victor couldn’t learn enough about this mysterious tribe to which his father belonged. His uncle had been more than happy to teach him, staring out of his round face like an owl and baring his cracked teeth. It was said he had a workable knowledge of English, but no one at home heard him speak it, not like his mother who used the words at every chance. Instead, when he told of the ones like Victor’s father his Tsilhqot’in words were like his teeth, dark and split with bitterness.

“Our people have lived on this land between the mountains longer than anyone can remember. We were great hunters and fighters, feared by all on every side. When it came time to make war, whole villages died and when the whitemen tried to take our land, they died too.”

“We killed the whitemen?”

Glittering owl eyes. “Our famous war chief, Klatsassin, killed them like a wolf kills a mouse. And it made their leaders red in the face because the whiteman likes to think he is best at everything, especially taking what he wants even if it belongs to someone else. No Tsilhqot’in person should dare to stand in his way. Riders were sent to catch our fighters, riders on horses, but the longer they chased the sillier they looked, because our people move like a cat through the grass and trees. No man can catch what he cannot see.”

“Our fighters were smarter than the whiteman?”

“They were by far, but here is the lesson: know when the whiteman speaks, his words are a basket of smoke to blow away with the wind. He will say whatever he needs to fool you and then do what is best for him. The white leader thought how he could never catch our fighters, so he sent word to talk of peace. We are a peaceful people by spirit. We will not fight if our enemies offer terms.”

“So peace was made.”

“Wait and let me tell you - when our fighters went to the meeting it was a trap. They were ambushed and put in chains, then carried to the place called Quesnelle where a white judge sat to speak his law. Our fighters told the truth of how they were at war with these invaders when the call was sent to talk peace. But the white leader lied and said no such word was sent. He boasted how he had caught a band of murderers trying to run away. Remember this was a house of white law ruled by a white judge. The judge listened to the words of the liar and made five of our people to be hung, including our chief, Klatsassin. The rest were locked in a jail. One of the hanged men had only killed a horse. I warn you that once the whiteman has found a way to take from you what he wants, you and your life are worth no more to him than the bones of what he eats.”

“I…am half white, Uncle.”

“Then try your whole life to respect your murdered ancestors and maybe one day you will be better.”

“I never say things which are not true.”

“This is so, but you are born from two worlds. Soon you will do the fasting and seek your vision. I hope there is enough of our people’s blood inside you to hear the spirits speak. And if they do, I hope your power will not be the raven. For a man born of two worlds this would be worst of all, because the raven must battle with himself every day. Hero or trickster – which one, nephew, would you be?”

Victor snapped back to the sunshine and remembered, his power had been the raven. Indeed, everyone knew the willing rancher who could keep wolves at bay when the snow was belly deep to a cow but frozen on top for a hungry pack to race over. Or save an orphaned calf by carrying it on his shoulders out of the swamp. But only his family had seen the other man, the one who could laugh and give hugs like his father, teasing and tickling his pretty wife, Suzanne, and their small son, Charlie. When he was with these people, the ones he loved more than anything, he knew he was happier than any man in this world should be. So why was it when he heard of a cattle drive that would keep him gone a full spring and summer, had he jumped at the job like a man offered a pardon from jail?

Protector and trickster. Husband and wanderer. Red and white – this is what he was.

His horse’s shadow led their journey north. He knew the hero in him would find a camp for the night and everyone would be safe as he could make them. Each man would be told his job and all would listen; he’d see to that. He had no worries about men, but the trickster sensed something in the horse girl, something he knew too well. It was another part of the trouble that tangled his spirit – the way women looked at him, no matter what age they happened to be. He knew he shouldn’t like it, but that was the other side of the raven, sleek, shining and proud. Ready to fool people with his tricky voices and make everyone look, when really it didn’t matter, not to him. The problem was that most times it mattered to the women. When the herd reached camp at the river tonight, he would go to the water and ask the ancestors to help with this one; she was too young and too much the daughter of his boss. No one else in the crew, not the swaggering white cowboy or the ugly Blackfoot, were nearly as dangerous as that girl.

Chapter Six

Lavinia was already growing tired of her husband’s arrangement with Darryl O’Hare. In the past the furry faced stray only had licence to wander in when he needed something from the store, like coffee. Now he did most of his coffee drinking a few feet from the sack where it originated, sipping from his bottomless mug and sharing every lamentable detail of his lonely, lonely life. It was enough to draw tears from a block of coal, which Lavinia wasn’t. She was a busy person with a hand beginning to drift dangerously near the rat poison when his carnivorous mare arrived each morning, twisting to reach her rider before he could jump clear and bound safely up the steps.

“Lavinia, dear, I’ve a tiny present this morning to put a smile on your face. Guess which hand.”

“Darryl, I’m busy. Pour yourself a coffee and go sit down.”

“Oh, now…too busy for the treasure I’ve got in my right hand? Guess now, which hand is that?”

“The left.”

“Ha, wrong! One final guess and that’s the last I’ll allow.”

She looked up from her books spread across the counter. “If you’re here to help, I could use that bicycle hoisted into the rafters.”

Disappointed eyes. “A bicycle is it? What’s gone wrong with the front wheel, shrank in the rain?”

“It’s the latest invention, a safety bicycle. Not so far to fall if you’re clumsy. Or had too much drink.”

“Lavinia, dear, only a drinking person would want to be climbing on that contraption.”

She aimed her gaze to the traps and harnesses dangling from the rafters. “It goes up there.”

He ignored the bicycle and offered a wink. “Which hand? Come now, time to pick.”

She sighed. “…the right one…”

A quick shuffle behind his back and Darryl offered his palm. “As I said, a tiny gift to make you smile.”

She stared. It was a brooch, silver with a sparkling stone at the centre, remarkably like a diamond. “Isn’t that…?”

“It was my mother’s. She’s passed on now, hasn’t needed it for years.”

“Darryl, I could never accept that. And what are you doing bringing me presents? It’s not proper at all.”

His eyebrows drooped. “But I thought we were friends.”

“Darryl…” She leaned over the counter to deliver a stern look. “You and I are neighbours. Nothing more. Now if Art ever sniffs you’ve been trying to give me jewellery, not only will I be in trouble, but you’ll be picking buckshot out of your backside for the rest of your confused life.”

“Oh, Arthur would never shoot me. He likes me.”

“Listen carefully - no presents.”

Darryl stuffed his dead mother’s brooch in his pocket. “I could barely sleep last night for the wolves. Did you hear them out there under the moon?”

Eyes back to her books. “I don’t hear anything at night, not even Art’s snoring.”

“Terrible it was, like the sorrowful souls in purgatory crying to make their way home. Never before have I felt such icicles up my back. There’s no wolves where I come from, y’know, just faeries and the odd old bugger singing his way home from a drinkup.”

“Darryl, I’m trying to do the books. If you’re not going to deal with the bicycle, go collect eggs.”

“Of course, dear, just as soon as I’ve finished my coffee…ah, now, who might that be?”

The door was open to the spring breeze. A horse arrived at the rail and a man dismounted, a small Tsilhqot’in man wearing pants so baggy they looked ready to drop around his ankles. Rocking his way up the steps, it was clear his boots also belonged on bigger feet, or maybe he’d ridden so far he’d forgotten what the ground felt like. There was nothing, though, in the unblinking stare from his owl-like face which suggested tiredness. He was a good six inches shorter than Darryl, but swaggered under the Irishman’s nose as if challenging someone to stop him from reaching the counter.

Nor did he have time for pleasantries. “Bullets for gun.” A weapon appeared from the waistband of his trousers.

Lavinia’s eyes went wide - it was a handgun. None of the natives she knew carried a handgun; it was difficult to hit anything smaller than a horse and thoroughly useless in the bush. “I’m sorry, I…don’t know guns well. What type is it?”

He waved at the shelf behind the counter. “It cowboy gun, bring bullets.”

Darryl, too, stared. “I doubt you’ll find bullets for that device around these parts, chief. It’s not the Excited States of America you’re in, y’know.”

The customer pivoted slowly to peer up with wide set eyes. “You store man?”

“I, no…”

“Then better you no talk, yes?”

The Irishman’s mouth opened, but slowly closed again.

The stranger never seemed to blink. His oversized pants were held up by a belt with a massive silver buckle and his footwear was narrow and tall heeled - American style cowboy boots. Few local ranchers and only the occasional cowhand wore such things around here. And none of them carried a handgun, with the exception of Skip Tanner, which was one of the reasons Lavinia didn’t like him.

She swept her books aside and started grabbing ammunition boxes from the shelf behind her. She tossed everything onto the counter. “Here, bring your gun. We’ll find the right ones.”

The visitor was still staring at Darryl. He dragged his eyes away and swung the revolver’s cylinder open. “Give bullet, I try.”

“If you pass me the gun,” Lavinia said, “I can get through them faster. I’ll compare the calibre to - ”

“I keep gun! You bring bullets!”

She head snapped back and she began fumbling to open the boxes, few of which contained revolver ammo. Her voice seemed to have dried up in her throat. “If I don’t have it,” she rasped, “we can order it from Ashcroft and it’ll come with the next post.” Then she paused to collect her breath. “You’ll just have to leave a deposit.”

That produced a chipped toothed sneer. “If gun not fit bullets, I find different gun. That easy.”

She went back to fumbling with her boxes. She had a pretty good idea where the gun had come from and didn’t particularly want to hear about it.

The customer was almost at the last cartridge when: “Ha, fit!” He pointed. “That one.”

She shoved the box across the counter, didn’t care what calibre it was - what difference did it make anyway? There was one final bit of business she truly didn’t want to bring up, but there was no avoiding the issue. “That’ll be seventy cents.”

He jammed ammunition into his weapon, then smacked the cylinder closed and with a scalp prickling yip, pointed his gun at the coffee sack by the counter. “Maybe I kill sack!” Then he turned and bared that ragged sneer again. “Or maybe I kill something else.”

Darryl was backing away from the loaded weapon. He bumped a shelf, sending a jar to the floor with a thump. The gun blasted toward it, sending wood chips flying. He froze. “Wha…what are you shooting at?”

“Maybe I shoot you. What you think?”

The Irishman’s mouth moved, but nothing came out.

Lavinia set her jaw. “No shooting in the store, please. That’s seventy cents for the bullets.”

“Ha! Money for bullets? Gun cost nothing, why I pay for bullets?”

“Because that’s the price and you’re not on my books for credit.”

She had to force herself not to stare. The hand gripping the weapon had rings on every finger, sometimes two or three. The index and little finger blazed with diamond wedding bands, women’s wedding bands. With her voice almost cracking, she declared, “Maybe you have relatives in my credit book. What’s your name?”

He seemed to like that. His round face broke again into that ragged sneer. “My name, maybe you hear, they call me Klatsassin.”

In fact, she had heard of Klatsassin. Everyone in the Chilcotin had heard of Klatsassin, but she also knew that body had been dropped in a hole outside the Quesnelle courthouse and covered with dirt thirty years ago. She said, “I heard a rumour you were dead.”

“Ha! I dead, not yet. Maybe you die, then I not pay.”

Despite the threat, he seemed to like talking, appeared tickled by the things she said. She forced herself to look directly into his wide set eyes. “Dying is easy. Living’s hard and getting money owed is the hardest thing of all.”

“Huh…special when man got gun.”

She shrugged. “Nothing’s impossible.”

His face grew suddenly serious and he peered at her. “What mean…im-puss-uble?”

“It means it can’t be done. Like jumping a horse over the moon.”

The ragged teeth showed again. “Jump horse over moon, ha!”

She thrust out her chin. “Seventy cents, please.”

The man who called himself Klatsassin smiled. “Okay, I get money.” He swung suddenly to point the gun at Darryl.

“Oh…” The Irishman lurched back again into the shelves, knocking over more jars. One shattered to spew a wash of sweet smelling prune juice down the aisle.

Lavinia opened her mouth, but couldn’t produce a sound.

Darryl spluttered, “Uh, of course…let me pay for those, chief.” He jammed a hand in his pocket and offered the contents for the man to grab.

There were coins, a jackknife and a silver brooch. Gun dangling, Klatsassin turned back to the counter and skidded money toward Lavinia. He twisted the brooch in front of his face and looked up. “I like. What it do?”

She could barely breathe. “You…wear it…here.”

“Ha! For woman, make pretty. You want?”

She shook her head. “…no…”

“Okay, I take.” He clunked past paralyzed Darryl and out onto the porch, where he paused to study the horses before heading down the steps. He removed his blanket and saddlebag from his own horse, then unhitched the rancher’s handsome quarter horse mare. Predictably, the animal craned her neck to reach him, but a slap aimed at the carnivorous head whipped it back out of reach. With a satisfied grunt, the handgun toting horse trader swung a baggy leg across the saddle and wheeled onto the road atop his new mount.

Lavinia had no weapon, the Henry rifle and bird gun gone with the cattle drive. She grabbed the closest thing from a shelf, a heavy stovetop iron, and crept to the door for a peek. The rider in flapping pants was urging his mount to a lope out on the road. He hauled back suddenly, bringing the mare to a halt in a stiff legged avalanche of dust, then without so much as a backward glance, nodded happily and carried on over the hill at a walk. Lavinia collapsed against the door frame letting her eyes slide shut. They shot open again. The horse still hitched to her railing was the dun colt, the one Melinda Mae had broken to bridle, which left with the drive five days ago.

\* \* \*

As hoped, Art’s trip to his friend’s ranch had produced a replacement wagon. It was late afternoon on his third day away when he finally caught up with the herd and rolled to a dusty halt in the quiet camp. Two things made him wonder if there’d been another lightning strike he hadn’t been around to see: there was no fire going and instead of minding the cattle, everyone seemed to have decided to take the day off somewhere else. In fact, there appeared to be only one soul in attendance. He waved at the big familiar hat of Skip Tanner sticking out from behind a tree.

“Skip, what’s going on here? Where the devil’s everybody gone?”

The cattle were clustered peaceably in their clearing, chomping on lush grass and not looking up at his arrival. Skip’s hat, though, appeared to be wobbling at him. He shouted again, “Skip, what do you say, man, are you there?”

Finally, the Oklahoma drawl called back, “Howdy, Art! Good trip?”

“Bloody hell, are you under that hat or not?”

“Nope.”

Art wasn’t sure he’d heard right. “You’re not wearing your hat?”

“Nope.”

“Well, if you’re not there, where are you?”

“Over here.” Skip stood up in his red long johns with a sheepish wave. He’d been crouched without his clothes on in a patch of raspberry bushes.

Art stood on the seat of the wagon and shielded his eyes from the sun. “If you’re in the middle of your business, I can wait.”

“Nope.”

This was getting to be a tiresome game. “Alright then, where’s everybody else?”

“Dunno, Art, somewhere around, I reckon.”

Art set the brake on the wagon and climbed down. “Well, get yourself over here and start telling me about it.”

“Okay.”

At that, the lanky cowboy began picking his way out of the berry bushes. He hopped and danced toward the wagon.

Art stared. “What on earth happened to your boots?”

“Uh…got stole, I reckon.”

“Stolen? Somebody out here took your boots? And your trousers, I imagine, too.”

“…yup...”

As the information didn’t seem to be gushing like spring water from the droopy mouth, Art was forced to continue his guessing game. “Alright…you had your boots and trousers filched, and everyone else ran off to let you mind the herd on your own?”

“Took my gun too.” At that, Skip hung his head and looked ready to cry.

“For pity sake, man, did you get held up by bandits, is that what happened?”

“…I guess...”

“Way out here? I don’t believe it.”

Suddenly the long face behind the drooping moustache twisted and the painful saga exploded in a torrent of regret. “They snuck up right after we got here, Art, a pile of outlaws with evil spiteful eyes. I seen lots of bad guys in my time, let me tell you, right up to Comanche war parties, but I ain’t never seen a bunch so busting with hate as this crew. Wasn’t nothing nobody could do. They waited till we all got together looking for chow, then they rode down hard and pinned us cold. Hell, Wild Bill Hickok couldn’t of done a damn thing without getting shot full of holes.”

Art pushed back his hat. “Bloody hell...” He gazed around the clearing. “So did the outlaws drive the others off?”

“Well, y’see, one of them was this mean eyed little renegade that had a conflab with your point man in Injun talk. I reckon they’re in cahoots and we got led right into a trap. They let everybody ride off but me. Just left me here by my own self with them bandits whooping it up and trying to shoot me with my own gun.”

“They shot you?”

“Well, they shot at me and made me do some stuff I don’t wanna talk about. But no…I ain’t hit.”

Art studied his man in the red long johns top to bottom. “In my opinion, Skip, you got off lucky. When it comes to outlaws, losing your clothes and gun is a lot better than what happens to most people.”

Skip hung his head again. “The mean one, that Injun, he said I should live a long life and remember every minute of it. He was laughing when he said it.”

“He did? Now why on earth would he say a thing like that?”

“Because he’s a rag toothed coyote, is what.”

Art drew a deep breath. “Well, I suppose there’s not much we can do but wait here for the rest of the crew to come back.”

“I reckon.”

“You cold?”

The shadows were growing, with the air chilling rapidly. “Little bit.”

Art said, “There’s blankets in the wagon, but unless the others have something to lend you, I’ve got no idea where we’re going to find a whole new set of boots and clothes.”

“Maybe I better just go back.”

“I need every man, Skip.” Art straightened and looked around. “Did they take the horses?”

“A couple, but that’s the strange thing. That little renegade, he made some sort of deal with Victor. He said they were gonna trade for the stuff they wanted, like horse for horse.”

Art blinked at him. “You mean they traded for what they took?”

“Well, not what they took from me. They just damnwell took it and didn’t leave squat. Hell, they’re no good bandits is what they are.”

That left Art not only blinking, but shaking his head and wondering just what it was about Skip that made him different from the rest of his crew in the eyes of a gang of brigands.

By the time the others reappeared, the sunlight was gone from the clearing and the first hint of evening was settling on the grass. The only person not amazed to see Skip alive was Victor, gazing down from his mount at the blanket wrapped figure as if nothing more remarkable had happened today than Cheng Wah had forgotten to make supper. Art watched Melinda Mae towing her horses into camp with particular interest. As Skip had warned, there were two new animals among the saddle mounts, but exactly the same count as before. It wasn’t his daughter he wanted to talk to, though, it was Victor.

“So I hear you met some outlaws. Anybody you know?”

Their point rider didn’t seem surprised by the question. He met his boss’s gaze and nodded. “We lived beside one of them when I was a boy. He’s my uncle.”

Art’s eyes widened. “Your uncle…he’s Tsilhqot’in?”

“He is.”

Art pulled on his chin, absorbing this. “Well, according to Skip, he’s found himself a whole new group of friends. It would seem he’s taken company with some fairly shady characters.”

“He’s a warrior.”

“Warriors make war, Victor, they don’t steal. Criminals steal.”

“Nobody stole here, Art.”

“Not according to Skip. He doesn’t even have any boots.”

“That’s his fault, he brought it on himself.”

Art swung a look toward the blanket wrapped cowboy, who hung his head and looked away.

“Is that so…and how did he manage that?”

“By trying to trade your daughter to save his life.”

Even the cattle appeared to stop munching. Art’s eyes narrowed. “He did what?”

But Victor didn’t repeat it, just gazed down from his horse with a look that spoke clearer than any words.

Art stood like a man hit from behind by a rock. He turned slowly and with a voice straining to contain itself, asked Skip on his log, “Is that true? Did you try to make a deal with those outlaws to take Melinda Mae?”

Cheng Wah and the girl in question were out gathering firewood, but everyone else in the crew stared. Nobody seemed to be breathing, including Skip.

Art said again, “I’m talking to you, man.”

The lanky cowboy shrivelled backward under his blanket, Adams apple trembling. “I, uh…” Then he dropped his head and stared at his socks.

Art stalked toward him. “What kind of man are you? You’d trade an innocent young girl to save your own contemptible skin? Speak up, dammit!”

Skip shrank lower.

“Why, you - ”

A shriek like a scalded eagle froze everything up to the top branches on the jackpines.

Art swung startled eyes to the source, the man on the horse behind him.

Victor said, “Your daughter’s fine, Art. We still need this one and he’s already been punished.”

“I have not yet begun to punish this contemptible coward!”

Victor said, “I wasn’t here, but I can tell you what they did.”

The boss’s fury pooled at the front of his eyes. “You can? Tell me then, tell me what they could possibly do to make up for something so despicable.”

“They did to him what he planned for your daughter. They made him their woman.”

Art’s features froze. He turned to study the figure cringing under the blanket. There was no mistaking it, cold squirming shame. “Really…”

Victor said again, “He learned a hard lesson about what he is today, Art. It’s not something he’ll forget soon.”

The boss swung away. “Alright, he can ride on with us. But he rides in his underwear until I decide different.”

Melinda Mae wasn’t entirely comfortable with the man who’d threatened to kiss her riding in red long johns with socks in the stirrups and only his dirty grey hat to keep the sun off his head. It seemed improper even way out here, whether his clothes got robbed or not. At least he wasn’t leering at her anymore. In fact, he wasn’t looking at anyone or talking either, except for a sometimes grunt when told to get moving. That endless see-sawing string of opinions, gripes and cuss words had dried up like the spring snow melt with the coming of those desperate looking men. It had been a scary time, for sure, and one she would certainly tell her mum about when they got back. The way that bunch had rode down on them, all beards, busted teeth and never mind the language, it reminded her of stories she’d heard of America where people got robbed for the shoes they wore and all manner of terrible things got done to them. Like carrying the women away. For the first time in a long time she was happy not to be a grownup woman yet, thank you. Or gracious me, she’d surely have been married to some knife waving desperado by the time the sun set. Which would be just terrible…unless of course the desperado looked like Victor. Hadn’t he been the hero, stepping up and saving them all when it looked like something awful might be getting ready to happen? She had no idea what was said, but the first time Skip went over, all eyes had turned on her in an uncomfortable sort of way and there’d been some considerable muttering. Then Victor tossed down his reins, marched over beside Skip and made him the one looking worried. Everything just got better again after that. With a bit of horse trading and some swapping for food, everyone but that yellow toothed sack of misery had been allowed to ride off. By that time she was just happy as pie to get out of there, thank you very much. Whatever that raggedy bunch wanted with Skip was a mystery no person on earth could surely imagine, but it didn’t matter none. Nobody wanted him around anyway. No big surprise then, the gang had changed their minds and decided to leave him right where he was. She just wished they hadn’t taken such a liking to his clothes because it was eye blinking awful to have to look at that sorry sight every time he rode past.

\* \* \*

Lavinia, wife and mother, feared the worst. She had more important things to worry over than listening to Darryl moan about the theft of his precious quarter horse and whimpering over his lost saddle. Most ridiculous of all was the declaration of vengeance if ever he should meet the thief again, puffy words that rang quite as empty as the resistance he’d offered in the first place. What was wrong with men, anyway? As if not allowing oneself to be shot dead was somehow belittling - a gun in the face was a gun. There was precious little a sensible person could do, other than go tell the police and pray for the return of stolen property. Which is what Lavinia planned to do.

“Darryl, that’s our horse hitched to the rail. I need to get Constable Hobbs to ride out and check on the drive.”

“And what about my mare?”

“Look, my husband and daughter are out there in the wilderness, certainly robbed and probably in dire need of help. I’m closing up the store. You’re welcome to come along on the colt and report the theft of your mare.”

At that, the Irishman pulled on his beard. “No, you go speak for me, Lavinia. If I can have the loan of your horse, I’d rather get back and check on my property. With that one prowling about, there’s nothing safe at all.”

Lavinia said, “I’ll speak with Tom Hance too. If anyone might know the villain’s real name, it’ll be him.” She paused and aimed concerned hazel eyes. “And Darryl…”

“Yes, Lavinia?”

“That’s a dangerous man out there, not to be trifled with. If you do meet up again, don’t do anything stupid.”

“You needn’t worry, dear. I’ve a shotgun at home and a Remington rifle. I’m well armed and I can look after myself with the likes of him.” He tried to reach for her hand. She smacked it out of reach.

“I’m sure you can, but all the same, nothing stupid. Do you hear?”

“Lavinia, dear, you’re speaking to a stalwart son of Ireland.”

She sighed, “Just be careful.”

When Lavinia returned from Hanceville, her dun colt was back again at the ranch, grazing quietly beside the store. Its saddle was still in place, but the reins had snapped, probably stepped on by the horse. She hitched Diamond and eased her way around the porch to catch her runaway. An icicle stabbed her spine. The horse’s upper coat was wet with a dark stain, the saddle and stirrup soaked with thick fresh blood.

\* \* \*

A raven came to Darryl’s funeral. It beat its coal black wings and chortled barbarous sacrilege as good Father Thomas leaned to sprinkle holy water over the coffin. Bad enough that every Irishman in attendance and fully half the women were so inebriated they could scarcely hold each other up, but when the blasphemous bird interrupted, they burst into a chorus of jeers, accompanied by flying dirt clods and phrases quite unlike the language of the church. To the bird’s luck, nothing but words found their mark and indeed the vandal appeared to be basking in the attention until a near miss launched it for the gathered faithful, swooping so near the black veils, shawls and wool caps that a hand in the air might surely have snagged a feather. Women shrieked, men ducked and Seamus Corcoran toppled into the hole. Mary, his flaming haired wife, peered down at her sprawled spouse, then nearly pitched in herself, howling and hiccupping helplessly.

Father Francois Thomas, a Frenchman noted for his tolerance of frontier eccentrics almost to a godly fault, had finally seen too much. He scowled at this Celtic spectacle and stalked away, muttering into his robes. As well, the English in attendance aimed their Protestant noses in the air and shook their heads - surely good Queen Victoria could see the wisdom of granting this lot their independence? Accompanied by Swedes, Germans and other sober ethnicities, they turned toward home, glad to be done with the circus. Lavinia walked with Tom and Nellie Hance to their wagon.

Nellie was twenty-seven years Tom’s junior, married thirteen years earlier when she was just sixteen, daughter of a respected Victoria family. A petite, pretty woman with dark curly hair, she hardly looked older than that now. Her diminutive charms, though, belied a toughness at her core unmatched by anything the frontier could throw at her. To reach her home as a teenage bride, she’d ridden over three hundred miles sidesaddle, forded rivers and camped in the bush beside a man who’d battled Confederate soldiers, crossed North America in search of adventure and then carved the first successful cattle ranch out of the land along the Chilcotin River. Yet he possessed the ability to make charming conversation at a dinner table set for gentry. Despite the obvious age difference, it seemed they were a pair of indomitable spirits who couldn’t be more the same.

Nellie’s sweet voice offered, “I’m so sorry, Lavinia. It’s terrible what happened to Darryl. I simply can’t imagine how frightening it must’ve been to face down that bloodthirsty murderer standing right in your store.”

“Oh, that’s not what I did at all, Nellie. I hid behind the door with an iron and prayed he wouldn’t come back.”

“Gracious me, I couldn’t have done it. Simply couldn’t have.”

Lavinia said, “Oh, I think you might, dear, the iron wasn’t that heavy.”

Nellie looked up at Tom. “I’ll just leave the bandits to my husband, thank you very much.”

Tom shook his head. “Not this time, dear. It’s my turn to sit back and watch our shiny new constable round up his first murderer.”

Lavinia said, “Do you think he’ll get him?”

“Truthfully, the lad’s not as dull as I like to let on, but there’s more to enforcing the law around these parts than just reading it out of a rulebook. I’d offer my help, but I’m not that inclined at the moment.”

“After getting fired, you mean.”

Tom’s forehead wrinkled. “Wasn’t exactly fired, Lavinia. Just told my services are no longer required now there’s a fulltime Provincial Policeman on duty.”

“So do you think he has a chance?”

“Nope.”

“Well, why is that, Tom?”

“Because the people I was apparently too lenient toward are the exact people this popinjay needs to build up a trust with in order to find out who the devil he’s looking for.”

“Oh, I told him who he’s looking for. The killer said his name was Klatsassin and the horse he rode in on came from our string on the cattle drive.” Her eyes darkened. “I do hope nothing’s happened to them out there.”

Tom said, “Did you tell all that to Constable Hobbs?”

“Of course.”

“Then I suppose he’ll be chasing around the countryside after a dead war chief called, ‘I don’t know.’ Because that’s what Klatsassin means in Tsilhqot’in.”

“Really? Well, do you have any idea who he might actually be?”

“Nope, but I know where I’d start looking.”

Lavinia lifted her dress to pick her way around a cow patty. “Where?”

“The new reservation, of course.”

“I suppose you know plenty of people there.” Then she clamped her eyes shut and said quickly, “Oh, dear, I didn’t mean to - ”

Nellie spared her the next few clumsy moments. “Lavinia, I know Tom’s son Victor quite well, and his wife Suzanne and little Charlie. They come to visit regularly and they’re always welcome. I’m quite aware that Tom knew another woman before myself and see no reason to take umbrage. I’m as proud of those kids as if they were my own, even though I’m much too young to be a grandmother.” Then she changed the subject. “For all we know, Art and Victor might’ve sold that horse or traded it to make the villain go away.”

Lavinia shuddered. “I’m told there’s no post office until they get all the way to Telegraph Creek, just this side of the territories. Between here and there they might as well be in Timbuktu. If they’ve met with disaster, I wouldn’t know about it until somebody rides back with news.”

Nellie said, “My guess is you’ve met with a great deal more disaster running the store than they have tending cattle. My advice is not to worry.”

Tom reached to Lavinia’s arm. “There’s no point making yourself a nervous wreck. Why don’t you close the store awhile and come stay with us? You’ve been through a lot.”

Lavinia sighed and shook her head. “No, I’m probably the one person around here who doesn’t have to worry about that criminal. If he wanted to do something to me, he’d have done it when he had the chance.”

“Well, I’m still worried.” said Tom. “I’ll drop by every chance I get to check on things. And I want you to take a rifle. There’s nothing better for keeping contrary customers on the other side of the counter where they belong.”

“Thank you, Tom, but I wonder if a man like that has any respect for a woman even if she’s pointing a rifle.”

\* \* \*

Constable Harland Hobbs of the British Columbia Provincial Police had a rifle, which was his own. He also had a grey horse named Duke and a government issued Enfield revolver, but no uniform – the budget didn’t stretch far enough to cover uniforms, only badge, bullets and gun. The year previous, in fact, the Attorney General in Victoria had decreed the government would no longer pay for hay; the constables could cover that cost out of their fifty dollars a month wage. It had been November, the beginning of winter, a time when hay was at a natural premium and the cabinet was trying to cut costs. Outraged, the force’s superintendent, Fred Hussey, had called an emergency meeting with the premier. There under the acid glare of their penny pinching Attorney General, the determined Mr. Hussey persuaded the premier to revise the order, allowing at least reimbursement for hay eaten while a horse was on official duty. Hobbs was currently tracking a murderer. For the moment, then, anything Duke ate that wasn’t rooted to the ground would be on the government tab, unless the rule changed again before he got back to submit the chit.

Hobbs was still a rookie. A year ago he’d answered a recruitment ad to boost police presence in the central interior, the government’s attempt, despite cutbacks, to cope with the serious influx of treasure seekers using the province as a springboard to the Klondike goldfields. He was twenty-four years old and a Vancouver Island son. Although bristling with enthusiasm, he was by nature a practical person, which meant he harboured no illusions about his odds of chasing down a local murderer in unfamiliar territory. He could ask Tom Hance for help, but feared his larger-than-life predecessor would stare down his nose and tell him to get out there and do the damn job he’d been hired for. He knew the big man secretly blamed him for having his badge revoked, even though it hadn’t been Hobbs’s doing, but rather the grumblings of local trader, Art Elkins after the murder of his brother by a member of the same Nemiah Valley band as Tom’s not-so-secret mistress. Although not given to misplaced pride, Hobbs also had his fledgling career to consider. Even if Victoria could be persuaded to put the ex-lawman back on temporary salary, a rookie constable on his first assignment might look a bit wet behind the ears asking for the old man’s help. No, he needed to rely on his knowledge of the law and local history, including the hanging thirty years ago of a Tsilhqot’in warrior chief called Klatsassin. It appeared some newcomer with no other motive than puffy pride was assuming the identity of this famous figure in order to inflate his outlaw persona. Fortunately, the culprit appeared to be either overconfident or stupid, leaving behind evidence hitched to the rail of the last place he’d been seen.

Hobbs had been riding hard and was a half day from catching up with the source of that evidence when Duke came up lame. He got down to inspect the problem and found the big horse had thrown a shoe. The route up the Blackwater River had proven rocky the past fifteen miles, no doubt inflicting a temporary bruise on the unprotected hoof. He cursed his foul luck and realized he’d have to proceed on foot, leading his mount. What made things worse were the flies. Hobbs had been raised next to the coast where an insect infestation amounted to little more than a few mosquitoes at sundown. These high country vampires didn’t care what time of day it was and proved voracious predators when they smelled anything warm inside its skin. Not only did they bite like lit cigarette ends to send blood trails trickling down arms and foreheads, but they produced welts the size of crab apples. Under such circumstances, it was difficult to pay attention to much else.

A bear the size of a small cabin following a herd of slow moving prey hardly allows in its predatory brain for caution. That’s not its nature. In fact, stalked grizzlies often become the stalkers, given their surly disposition and undisputed supremacy at the top of the wilderness food chain. Hobbs wasn’t stalking, but the bear didn’t know that. It just didn’t like being followed. If the wind had been from another direction, the day might’ve ended differently, but the scent wafting to those nostrils the size of shotgun shells meant nothing was blowing back to the horse. Hobbs had his head down, flapping at deer flies. His Winchester carbine was in its saddle scabbard, Enfield Mark II revolver holstered on his hip.

Horse plodding and lame.

It may have been its improbable height above the intruders, over nine feet on hind legs, weak eyes straining to measure the threat. Or more likely it was the uncommon belligerence of the trespassers to ignore the obvious warnings: jaw popped, ears flat back. Whatever the reason, when the pair insisted on pressing closer they left the monster no choice. It dropped and charged.

Hobbs stood stupidly frozen, trapped in a string of impossible moments that weren’t really happening, couldn’t be, not to him. *Where the hell had that come from?* He watched as his arm stretched lamely to ward off a paw the size of a skillet swung from a mountain of fur. His forearm flapped open, bared to pink bone. He was staring at that when the next blow sent him sailing like a sparrow thirty feet into the trees. He smashed into a trunk and flopped, eyes wide, to the ground. Chest paralyzed with shock, vision swimming in haze, he heard big Duke scream and saw the horse spin and kick. Hooves hammered the creature’s head, only to blow a froth of saliva and roar again. Then the terrified prey was gone, cured of lameness, galloping as if the devil himself was coming behind it. But the devil wasn’t coming, not for the horse.

Hobbs could barely draw a breath, couldn’t move his right arm. He stretched his left across to claw at his holster, but the revolver refused to come, jammed. The tower of fur was up again, bawling and sniffing for scent. Hobbs yanked and the gun came finally. Wrong hand aiming, he held his breath. Then let it out with a thin gasp. Too far for a service revolver and shaking the way he was. The goliath’s dim eyes swung his way but still didn’t see. When at last it dropped, circling and sniffing the rubble, Hobbs let the gun sink. His face followed to the twigs and litter. Pine needles crammed his mouth, salted with a bloody froth bubbling up his throat - strange how he didn’t care. The only thing that mattered before his world swam into a thick red mist was: ‘They don’t want to pay my feed bill…and I do it for this?’

Cold. Bone rattling cold. And pain without beginning or end. With each impossible breath his shattered ribs ground in his chest. He’d fallen on his stomach, lay staring into darkness - how long since the sun went down? He tried to roll, but his arm caught fire and he cried out, fell back. *The bear, the bear did this…where was the bear?* He held his breath, listening – quiet thick enough to smother a man’s mind. He blinked but couldn’t see through the darkness, maybe empty, maybe filled with drooling death crouching inches away.

Body on fire, he tried to bend his legs. Then with his good arm pushing, rolled over finally…he needed to see. Clear above, stars still alive in the sky – good to see living stars. And easier to breathe. Teeth gritted, he flexed each muscle in turn and took stock of the damage. Both legs working fine. Arms - one, just one. Chest like a splintered fence. *Where was the gun?* Good hand rummaging through sticks and roots, he found it…thank God, something to fight with. Tree, crawl back to tree. He sat against the solid trunk and let out a tortured breath. Guarded from behind, revolver on lap, he could wait here till morning. With daylight he could get back on the trail, find help. The herd couldn’t be more than a few miles ahead.

*Please let the bear be gone.*

He must’ve dozed or passed out until something woke him. The first sense he had of its presence was only a feeling, the one that comes with hairs rising on clammy flesh. Then a sound, nothing more than a swish. *A paw on needle carpeted ground?* He gripped the gun, raised it before blind eyes. He didn’t need to see, though, to know it was out there, drawn to the irresistible scent of blood steeped in sour fear. It was close and yet it waited. He couldn’t be more awake if he’d jumped in a freezing lake.

The stars waited with him. Why couldn’t there be a moon? The bush seemed so quiet now, maybe he’d been wrong, maybe…

Like a vibration in the darkness itself, it came. Something clamped his arm, the leaking one, and dog stench filled his nostrils. It twisted backwards, trying to run with its prize into the night as he jammed the gun into fur, fired.

There was a squeal and seconds later by his feet a fury of thrashing, snapping, snarling. *Tearing it to pieces.* He jammed back hard against his tree, stabbed the gun at the darkness and fired again – a yelp. Then a flurry of paws on soil, twigs snapping.

After that, nothing. Nothing but the sound of hunger waiting.

When he was five, Hobbs’s dad had taken him fishing. It was the first time they’d done this special thing together. On the shore of a beautiful place called Elk Lake, near Victoria, they’d walked out on a big toppled tree in the sunshine and he’d first dangled a line and hook in the water. His dad had shown him how to jig it up and down. The worm wiggling on the end was what fish ate; they liked nothing better. His dad had a fly rod. That was the other thing fish liked, a bright fuzzy fly. Dad swept this over the water and the sunshine flooded down soft and warm on their heads. Afterward they stretched on the grassy shoreline and ate cheese sandwiches his mom had made. They drank warm milk from a jar and talked about fishing. His dad had caught two; he hadn’t caught any. But that’s not what fishing was about, Dad said. Fishing was about fresh air, ripples shining in your eyes and cheese sandwiches in the sunshine. He remembered thinking it would be nice to catch some fish, but had to admit the other stuff was pretty good too.

It was the sunshine Hobbs was remembering and the silky pleasure of warm milk on your tongue when the pack came in. First for his ravaged arm – he fired, fired, fired. The gun emptied, but the last shot set off another squeal. They thrashed at the body; it didn’t take long. Then in they came again, mad with blood, desperate to fill their mouths with the scent swarming their nostrils. Back against his tree, he swung the empty revolver and kicked with both legs. They snapped, snarled, twisted.

The gun was heavy. His kicks slowed to feeble jerks. Something had his leg and he swung the weapon with all the fight he had left. Then finished, he let the worthless thing drop and used his arm to protect his face. Head slumped to his chest, he barely heard the roar, but it was enough to make him think: ‘No…not the bear too.’ As the gentle blanket of warmth spread over him, there was no way to stay where he was. He had to get back to his dad. They were eating cheese sandwiches in the sunshine and drinking milk from a jar just like it used to be. It felt so good to be home.

\* \* \*

There wasn’t much about a day Rose liked better than smearing a big hunk of fried bannock around a pan of melted beef tallow and chewing it into mush for baby Willie. In the old days it would’ve been sheep or caribou fat, but with the loss of their hunting grounds the men on the reserve didn’t go out much anymore and the little land left to them had to provide for a few cattle and any vegetables they could grow. Rose didn’t mind so much; she had her children to keep her happy. Willie wasn’t really a baby anymore, about the size of a nearly grown dog and already happy to use his sharp little teeth on anything she put in his bowl, but he still loved a mouthful of that morning mush about as much as running outside after breakfast to squish his toes in one of the cows’ fresh steaming pats. He was sucking his greasy fingers and looking out the cabin door for signs of wandering cows when the horseman appeared on the path to their home.

Rose hadn’t seen him in years, but would know him from any distance by the look of him on a horse. It was something he shared with his nephew Victor, not so much riding as offering himself to the rhythm of muscle and bone beneath him, one more example of how he lived connected to the animals and earth around him. Sadly, it was those things which made him a natural man that had become the heart of his problem, pushed aside like the hunting grounds to make room for this modern world they lived in. But her brother didn’t move over easily. Defiant as the north wind, he’d refused to live on the reservation, claiming the land was his to use as he wanted, all of it, not just some chunk set aside for tame government *Siwash*. He refused to be rooted anywhere, had set out on his path of defiance and last she heard taken company with a band of wandering no goods. That was what she called them because that was what they sounded like - no goods. Word also drifted in how he’d honoured himself with the name of Klatsassin, the famous warrior. Back in their childhood during the excitement of the uprising, this hero of the people had been all he’d talked about, all anyone had talked about, actually. No doubt that was how he saw himself now, grand and warlike, a spirit of resistance against the invaders. Well, he wasn’t a child anymore. He might enjoy pretending, but he should also remember the part where they’d caught that noble hero and hung him, hung him up high like a criminal. She absently swallowed the last mouthful of mush, staring the same direction as Willie - perhaps the name did fit, after all.

“It is the uncle I told you about,” she said, “my brother, Silpat.”

Little Willie wiggled his toes and chewed. He had other uncles on the reserve who came and went like the cows. He liked all of them because they usually meant something good to eat, like when Father came.

But his mother had a dark look for this one. “He brings trouble.” she said. “We will give him food and all he will leave is trouble.”

Willie’s toes stopped wiggling. Trouble usually meant no happy tickles and eyes that looked hard the other way. “Ma-ma…” he said in the English he knew she liked, “Uncle not like Willie?”

Rose looked down to her son in the new chair his father had brought, a tall chair made especially for children. “Oh, no…Uncle not know Willie yet. Uncle is come for visit, nothing more.” She called out, “Alice, bring fresh water!”

The girl was behind their new house on the Anaham reserve. She arrived at the door staring over her shoulder at the approaching man on the horse. “That looks like Uncle Silpat. Is he back?”

“Yes, it is Uncle. Fetch fresh water and pick some raspberries. And watch for bears this time, go only where the birds feed.”

The girl grabbed her bucket and ran out. “Uncle, I see you!”

The man on the horse waved at what could only be his grown niece running toward the lake. A minute later he was at the house, gazing down at his sister and an unfamiliar barefoot child. His eyes wrapped around them both.

Rose said, “I see you, Silpat. Has your journey been good?”

“Better than that. And you have been busy, another mouth to feed.” Then as if it had to be said, “He is even more pink than the last.”

“He is more like his uncle than you know, chasing bees and playing games with the tricky wind.”

A chipped tooth smile. “He will grow well then, smarter than most.”

She pushed a stray wisp of hair from her eyes. “Silpat…”

“That is not my name.”

“I have heard this other name. It will bring no good.”

The smile withered. “The ancestors speak to me. They tell me they are pleased I put blood in the veins of our hero.”

“The only blood I have heard of spills from those who have things you want.”

He shrugged. “You hear the wild whispers of women. I am a traveller and a trader, that is all.”

She sniffed, “They will kill you. They will find you and kill you like the real Klatsassin. They - ”

“The first Klatsassin.”

“The first Klatsassin was hung. What makes you think - ”

“Stop talking! What makes you think you can decide what will be? You are the woman of a whiteman, it is not your place!”

Rose hung her head; it was true. But even a whiteman’s woman could see the horse he rode had a rancher’s brand on its haunch and a fine new saddle. His fingers were wrapped in shiny rings and there was a strange looking gun sticking out of his shiny buckled belt. Even his boots had no place on his feet, awkward looking on blocks no person could walk on, let alone stalk deer. For a man who had no use for whitemen, he was gathering a lot of the things they valued. She covered her thoughts and looked up again. “Come inside and I will cook. We are honoured by your visit. Alice is picking raspberries.” She patted her little boy’s head. “This is William. He came a winter after you left. He likes cows and throwing rocks at things too quick to catch in your hand.”

Her brother’s small eyes warmed as he gazed down at his nephew. “You make fine children, sister.”

She blinked upward. “You are kind, but the children I make are only half my doing. Surely you know that.”

His eyes darkened again.

Willie couldn’t see the trouble his mother had spoken of inside his uncle. While the man sat eating, he climbed up to stare into an ear hole sucking on a piece of salmon skin. Uncle must’ve liked Willie too, or was too hungry to stop and push the explorer away.

Rose said, “Let Uncle eat. Go find something outside to play with.”

With Willie out the door and heading for the nearest cow, fourteen year old Alice took over: “You have many rings.”

Uncle looked up from his bowl. “I trade with people for things they no longer want.”

His sister let out a snort, a ringing one which drew a flat stare.

Alice asked, “Why would they not want something so beautiful?”

“Because when this land drops them to their knees, they trade what they thought they wanted for what they truly need. Would you like one?” He put down his bowl and twisted a finger.

“No!” Rose batted his hand so hard the ring flew off. It rolled to a corner of the floor with a diamond studded ping.

His eyes flared. “Never do that again! Why can I not give my niece a present?”

“You know why. You and your friends, the things you take, they are…are…”

“Mine to give as I please. And these friends you talk of, who are they?”

“The dogs you run with, then, where is the pack now?”

“I ride alone.”

Rose blinked, “This is true?”

“I ride where I want and stay with no one long.” Then his face clouded with something not unlike regret. “Sometimes to remember what waits behind is worse than moving on.”

She broke her gaze from his face with a sharp shake. It was a look she’d seen in the past. She thought she knew where it came from, but didn’t want to go back to that place, the place where things are not spoken of, only felt in moments of misplaced feelings. Like the time in her thirteenth spring when he’d touched her not like a brother – that was something neither of them spoke about, not then or since. It had never happened again, if only because she made sure there was no chance of it. But there were times, especially when the whiteman she loved came to visit on his tall black horse, when she’d see the look again. Sometimes when Tom rode away, big and strong as he was, she was frightened for him. Because she knew her brother’s power was the wolverine - clever, determined, ferocious - and if his spirit took the will, she was sure there was nothing of earth or sky which could stop him. Not even Tom.

He said as if reading her thoughts, “Your man, he still comes?”

“We grow old this way, waiting for our times together.”

“You waste yourself. It is not too late.”

Rose played with the scarf binding her hair. “I have three children from a whiteman. Even if I thought to change my life, who would want me?”

“Any man would want you.” The look returned. “That one takes what he has no right. He comes to you, but marries another because her skin is snow white like his. Is this the life you were born to? Better you are freed of him, better for all.”

“Many men have two wives. Would you free each one?”

“You are not his wife!”

She hung her head again; he was right. She spoke with breath that barely touched her lips, “If there is shame for you, brother, because of me, I am sorry. But there is no other man I would want.”

“It is not shame.” His eyes seethed with the wolverine’s wrath. “It is anger that he shows you no respect. You, who shine like the sun. You, who make all men look to see you walk, even now with babies and hardened hands and bent back. He takes your very life.”

“I have a bent back?”

He threw his hands in the air. “I said that because that is how old women walk. You are not old…yet.”

She took his bowl and for the first time since her thirteenth springtime, reached to touch him. “Brother, I am honoured that you care so much about me. But Tom has given me far more than he takes. And I will tell you a secret - it is not his fault that he chose me. Since the first time he came to talk with our father, it was my eyes which danced for him, and as you point out like a cawing crow, he had very little hope after that. If anyone is to be blamed, it is me.” She turned away and took the bowl to the wash bucket. Then without turning said, “I have seen his wife.”

“You have met her?”

“No, but I have seen. She is another one who makes all men look when she walks. I also have heard she has a heart which is open to all people. He did not marry her only because she is white.”

The silence behind her was a wall.

She threw one more rock against it. “If I would change anything about my life, brother, it would not be the man I love. I would choose only to be as right for him as the one he married.”

Chapter Seven

The next day he was gone before the first whisper of dawn slipped between the treetops. Rose awoke later in the light to find something left on her table, something small but filling the room with a strange chill, like winter sifting through cracked window glass. She tried not to look, had almost decided to sweep it blindly into a basket and dump it in the bush, but with a sigh that knew the weakness in her heart, went to pick it up - a piece of jewellery. She’d seen such metal before, a whiteman prize usually grey with neglect, but this was freshly polished. Someone had taken time to make it beautiful again, coldly perfectly beautiful. Drawn to the tiny carvings, she twisted it in the thin light. There were designs spinning around the edges and a stone at the centre that seemed to burst like a rainbow shattering into pieces tiny as a grain of sand. Of course she knew where it came from. Of course it was wrong to even consider keeping it, but she’d never been given anything so beautiful before. Not even by Tom.

Tom, though, brought true gifts to make her happy. This was a temptation of spirit from a man who knew she disapproved. Yet even with such a shameless attempt to corrupt her pure heart, he was still and would always be her brother. Already he felt like a ghost. Certainly his trail would end soon and then like his famous namesake, they would talk of him until the words cooled on their tongues. Afterward they would forget. Wrong as it may seem, for her at least there was this trinket; she couldn’t throw it away. Couldn’t show it to anyone either, but the crime of making it disappear felt even darker than the story no doubt hidden behind its prettiness. Sad, how such a secret hurt.

There was a sound outside and she shoved it down the front of her dress.

From the early shadows of the forest two men had appeared, one white, one of mixed blood, on horses so ragged they looked ready to cave in under their saddles. If not for the alertness of their eyes, neither rider seemed better off than his mount. Rose stared from her doorway, then quickly down at her feet. The lead figure, bearded and wrapped in a coat that looked sewn from old quilts, drew up so hard his horse almost fell over.

“Squaw, bring food!”

She peered timidly upward, pretending not to understand. These weren’t good men; you didn’t need to be a seer to know that.

The man pointed to his mouth. “Something to eat!” Then he growled at his companion, “Dammit, you talk to the stupid cow. You’re the one’s halfway Injun.”

The second was hunched under his hat with rounded shoulders and an almost invisible face deeply scarred by some long ago battle with pox. He wouldn’t have been pretty anyway. Without a word, he dropped to the ground and slipped doglike to the doorway, where he shoved Rose out of the way and went inside. A moment later Alice called out, “Who are you? Go away!”

There was a crash and a squeal.

The bearded one snarled, “Your kid speaks English?”

Rose ran to the door. “She only girl, not hurt you! I get food. You go outside, wait with other man.”

But the bearded one was already behind her at the door. “Think I’m stupid, huh? You’re gonna get food alright, and then you’re gonna tell me where that dog toothed Injun’s at. I know he came here.”

“Who…I don’t know?” Too late; her face had already betrayed her.

Pox face sat on her daughter’s rabbit fur sleeping robe, staring at the girl beneath it and quietly rubbing the softness between his fingers. Over in the corner, little Willie was out of his bed space with giant eyes, too terrified to utter a sound.

Beard face said, “You know who I’m talking about, woman. He came here maybe yesterday.” He jerked a thumb toward his companion. “This one tracked him.”

Rose couldn’t imagine anyone tracking overnight through bush, but the way that one sat watching without letting anyone see under his black hat hinted that no small thing ever escaped his notice. The hat turned her way and the flesh of her forearms prickled. She stammered, “Yesterday only I saw my brother. He was come to visit and then he leave. I do not know his path.”

Beard face said, “Sure you don’t, just like you didn’t know English.”

She blinked and turned away. “I make food now, bannock with syrup.”

“What about meat? You got no meat?”

She had meat, smoked and salted in strips hanging from the roof, but not even pox man had looked up. She shrugged. “Maybe you shoot deer. I cook then.”

“I got no damn time to hunt for you, woman. What kinda Injun’s got no meat around? I oughtta - ”

There was a grunt from pox man. He pointed up.

“Oh, now…” said beard face, “ain’t no surprise there, huh? Lying to me again.”

“I not lie. That meat old, keep for dogs. You not want.”

“I’ll decide what I want. And you’ll cook it.”

She shrivelled backward, started pushing handfuls of shavings into the drum heater, then poked in kindling and lit it. Holding out her bucket, she said with a tiny voice, “Need more water. I send daughter to lake. Maybe you like some berry? Good with bannock.”

He snarled, “That splashing I hear in the bucket?” It didn’t sound like a question.

Barely breathing, “Not much water, need more.”

“Fine, but use what you got to start cooking. And throw in some meat.”

Rose poured her water in a pan and called Alice. Wiggling from under her sleeping robe, the girl wrapped both arms around her chest and turned quickly away from pox face. Her mother handed her the bucket. “Fetch water from stream this time, good water, no sticks.” Rose stared into the girl’s eyes and clamped a hand hard over the fingers on the handle. When Alice glanced down at the painful grip, her mother released the hold to make a quick running motion with her fingers. Alice glanced up again. Rose said, “Pick berry too, ripe. No bugs.” Again the running fingers.

Alice nodded. “Yes, mother…no bugs.” Her forehead furrowed. There was no stream close to the house, only the lake. The nearest stream was over half a mile away. Then her eyebrows rose and she asked, “You mean the stream we swim in all summer?”

“Yes, go now.”

Alice headed for the doorway. They never swam in a stream. In fact her mother never swam at all, only bathing in the shallows of the lakeshore usually before father’s visits. The running fingers could mean just one thing.

It was a strained voice behind her that said, “Go fast.”

“Yes, mother.”

With her daughter safely away, Rose’s worst fear was out the door. She mixed her bannock dough and looked to the corner where her son stood. Little Willie hadn’t uttered a word since waking. She said, “Do you like bannock, Willie?”

His voice was barely a squeak. “Willie like…you chew?”

“If you best boy ever, I chew up for you like always.” She turned to beard face and tried to force a smile. “I teach son English. Him smart like father.”

“The kid’s a breed, huh? You’re a whiteman’s woman.” Then he too smiled, but with nothing approaching warmth. He’d moved close enough to touch her, which he did, fiddling in her morning hair which hadn’t yet been tucked under a scarf. She flinched as he murmured, “Good looking and you can cook too….yeah, that’s the second best thing about a woman.”

The part she found impossible to ignore was the smell. Sour and yet overpoweringly sweet, like wet corn rotting in sunshine, it was the whiteman smell she’d taken so long to accept when first she started laying with Tom. This creature, though, reeked of it, the clothes plastered to sweaty skin for probably more than a year, his shaggy hair and twig tangled beard – why were they always so hairy? His teeth were mostly black and standing this close, the breath from that mouth was rancid as rotten fish. Tom bathed and cut his hair, shaved too. This one was a fine example of how without constant scrubbing and scraping, the white tribe was so much like animals.

Beard face said, “Looking forward to some of that meat. Got a feeling I ain’t gonna mind how old it is…like you.” He reached again, this time not for her hair, but the skin below her ear, which made her almost drop the spoon she was stirring with. She went stiff as a birch pole when he leaned and whispered, “Yeah, cooking, that’s the second best thing about a woman.”

When they were finished eating her food and then the part which made little Willie cry out from his corner until a hairy arm reached to slap his screams into whimpers, Rose lay for a long time just breathing and staring at the ceiling. She hadn’t told where her brother was, not that she could’ve even if she’d wanted. It would’ve made no difference anyway, not to what they did; she’d known what was coming from the first sight of them. The good thing was that Alice had escaped. In the coldness afterward that wrapped her body like the waters of an icy stream, there was more than one regret, but the strangest one she hadn’t seen coming at all. As the bearded creature had ripped the front of her dress, the jewellery sprang out almost to hit him in the face. Now in the filthy pocket next to the filthy crotch of that godless reeking animal was the last thing she’d had of her brother. She hoped he sensed they were after him. She hoped the wolverine would somehow find a way to set a trap. This was the first time she was glad for who he’d become, because with all the aching these two monsters had put inside her, she hoped he would find some terrible way to kill them…and kill them. And kill them. If only she could cry.

\* \* \*

The last miles along the Blackwater River were hard miles. The trail was littered with deadfall and the cattle broke constantly into the bush, forcing riders into the pine gullies to chase them back to the herd. It was wearing out the horses, even with spares along, and it was wearing out the men. Then there were the flies. No cattle drive was without its challenges, but with the biting bugs, contrary bovines and seemingly backwards momentum, another twelve hundred miles of trail appeared about as attractive as the last march of Jesus. The cowpunchers had plenty to grumble about, it was true, but they didn’t have to drive a wagon. When the herd bunched up behind Cheng Wah and Melinda Mae struggling to wiggle the cumbersome contraption around yet another detour through the lodgepole pines, Art dug out an axe to help clear the path and sent Victor ahead to scout anything nearby for a camp.

Melinda Mae peered down at her father chopping out this latest obstacle and wiggled in her saddle. She tugged a branch from her chaps and whined, “Are we almost there yet?”

The axe didn’t miss a stroke. “Melinda Mae, leave your pack string here and ride ahead to shoot something for supper.”

“Sure. So how much further do you think?”

*Chop…chop.* “Not much more than a thousand miles. Won’t be long now.”

“A THOUSAND MILES?”

“Go shoot something, Melinda Mae.”

“But a thousand miles, that’s a long way!”

*Chop…chop…chop.*

The girl swung big Frisco, muttering, “A thousand miles…can’t be. We’ve already been gone forever. My bum hurts.”

With his daughter out of earshot, Art paused to swat a fly off his forehead and aimed weary eyes at Cheng Wah. “A thousand miles to go and missy girl’s bum hurts.”

Cheng Wah gazed back, maybe hearing him, maybe not. “This place crazy. Flies too much. We finish soon?”

Art bent back over his log.

The fact that Big Willy kept having to wait behind the wagon meant the herd had too much time to spread out looking for graze, of which there was precious little, encouraging them to wander further. That kept the flank men busy, but at the rear where Orville Stoddard had been sent to plod along on drag, he had time to count his blessings. Even though the flies could make a nun curse, the relaxed pace had a calming effect on everything including his cough. It freed his mind to think and when Orville drifted into thought, he usually went about that in the form of Cathleen Corcoran.

In truth, he didn’t know very much about the eldest Corcoran daughter other than she was two years older than him, which to a young man was a highly attractive quality in a woman. She had flaming red curls that danced around her head when she walked and she walked with the spring of a fawn. Not that fawns sprang so much, but that’s how she looked in Orville’s mind, light, graceful and definitely a little bit wild. There ended his actual knowledge. The rest he had to fill in, but that was the attraction of the game, giving words and thoughts and…lips to enchanting Cathleen Corcoran. He could almost hear her calling.

“Help…help me…”

*Huh?*

“Water…please…”

Orville spun in his saddle. And nearly jumped out of it at the most gruesome sight he’d ever seen anywhere in his life. A person - at least he thought it was a person – stumbled toward him holding what could only be the remains of an arm. There was no shirt, chest clawed into shredded meat. Face like something already dead and half eaten, with leaves and pine needles pasted to shredded skin. The hair was peeled sideways off an almost bare skull and hanging past one ear. And blood, everywhere red and black caked blood. He heard his own voice stammer, “Uh…water, yeah, I got water.” He fumbled for his canteen and the figure collapsed. Orville stared. *Should he get down there and help it, or ride forward and find someone?*

He’d almost decided on riding forward when with another moan the heap pleaded, “…water…”

Orville swung down and crept like a rabbit toward a hole the dog had dug under the fence. *Where to put the water?* There were teeth visible through open gashes in the cheeks. He wanted to turn around, jump back on his horse and keep pushing the herd away from this place. Then the only remaining eye in the ravaged head trembled open and Orville saw what raw human suffering looked like from the inside. It looked like death pleading for life.

He dropped to his knees, wormed a hand under the head to lift and the flap of torn scalp dangled against his skin - he nearly let go. But he didn’t, not even when the bare boned arm trembled toward him, trying to touch his shirt with blood soaked fingers. He held the canteen to shredded lips and dribbled water over the teeth. There was a desperate sucking sound. Pine needles and dirt stuck to everything including the ravaged hole that used to contain an eye. The creature’s chest jumped with a cough and the good arm reached to pull the canteen closer. Orville remembered, “No…that’s enough…not too much at first.” He looked up at the herd plodding away from him. “I gotta go get help, but I’ll be back.” Then he left the canteen in the good hand – the better hand – and as much for his own benefit as the victim’s, said one last time, “Coming straight back, I promise.” Orville, the good cowboy, climbed on his horse and threaded his way through the cattle as fast as he could to reach help. Because that’s what a man does; he helps when help is needed. Even if it makes him feel sick.

Art couldn’t believe the thing Orville found was alive. He’d never seen a human body in such condition before, not even a dead one. It was all he could do to force himself to look at it. But with the help of Floyd and Skip, he picked the sad thing up and loaded it across his horse, then rode to the front of the herd and set it in the bed of the wagon. He wrapped three layers of blankets around it while Floyd shoved a sack of flour under the mangled head.

The sight brought Skip out of his silence, “Damn, never seen nobody so torn up before. Whaddya think it was, Injuns?”

Floyd growled, “When an Indian wants to kill a man, he kills him. But he don’t torture a man half to death and then turn him loose to go get help…you stupid idiot.”

That shut Skip up again. He wandered away in his underwear, looking for a place to sit.

Melinda Mae’s natural curiosity brought her to the wagon. She peered with the others over the edge of the box and choked back a scream, then afterword couldn’t stop staring. There was a terrible moment when she imagined the creature might somehow leap to life and tear them all up to look the same way it did, which scared her half to death. What in the name of Sunday supper could do this and how could it possibly feel to lay there inside that shredded mess of a body? That this poor person had somehow managed to walk to them with only half his parts was…*ooohhh*.

Victor arrived back with news of a grassy clearing about an hour ahead. Art gave orders to push the herd there and stop for the night. The man in the wagon complicated things. Unlikely as it seemed he would live through the night, any caring person could not condemn another human being to lingering death in the back of a wagon, no matter how certain the outcome appeared. It would be inhuman to press on without making some effort to get him to medical attention. They were heading for where the Blackwater River met the Telegraph Trail and turning east at the junction would lead directly back to Quesnelle. There might be a doctor there who could be persuaded to try his luck sewing this shredded sack of organs back together. It was clear to Art where his duty lay. What he didn’t see coming, though, was Cheng Wah’s determination to cure anything short of death.

The wagon made good time and reached the clearing ahead of the herd. Rather than hauling out his pots and pans for supper, though, the little cook climbed from his driver’s seat into the back beside the victim. He opened the blankets to peer inside, then with a cluck of the tongue, hopped down and set off into the clearing.

Melinda Mae’s hunting expedition had produced a trio of freshly killed spruce grouse now dangling from her saddle strings. She called, “I got birds, Cheng Wah. Want a hand fetching wood for supper?”

The little man’s hearing hadn’t fully recovered, but he appeared to have an awareness of when somebody was talking to him, if only because of the greatly increased volume. He stopped and turned, “You start fire. Cheng Wah pick *pu gong ying.”*

She shook her head. “*Pu gong*…what?”

He pointed. “This one.”

“Dandelions…you’re cooking dandelions for supper? But I’ve got grouse here.”

He’d already turned away, bending into the grass and tugging up his flowered harvest.

The herd arrived and settled to the work of mowing the clearing flat while the men drifted in looking for supper. Three cleaned and plucked birds lay on a wedge of wood near the big black pot bubbling over the fire. Floyd called up to Cheng Wah in his wagon, “What’s for chow, Cookie? Some kinda bird stew?” When the little man didn’t answer, he picked up the ladle and dipped it in the pot. His nose wrinkled. “What the devil’s this, some kinda cabbage?”

Melinda Mae said, “It’s dandelions. Don’t ask me…”

“Ain’t nobody gonna cook the birds?”

She said, “I cleaned them, but I don’t know how to cook. I’m the wrangler.”

Floyd scowled. “Hell, it ain’t hard. You shove a stick up their backsides and twist them over the fire. A little salt don’t hurt.”

Art arrived. “What’s going on?”

Floyd said, “Your cook’s forgot his job, he’s boiling weeds. A man can’t work all day and eat weeds. We need real chow.”

Cheng Wah hopped down from the wagon. He shuffled to the fire and sprinkled something from a small bottle over the pot.

Art leaned next to his cook’s head and bawled, “Cheng Wah, you cookee food now?”

“No cook food. First make man good.”

Concerned blinking. “You’re not going to cook supper?”

“Man hurt, fix or die.”

Floyd twisted away, groaning, “Hell, you can’t fix that. He was mostly dead already when we found him.”

Art said, “If Cheng Wah thinks he can help, then that’s what he’s going to do. And he’s got my blessing.”

Melinda Mae sat in front of her saddle braiding a necklace out of dandelion stems. “Floyd knows how to cook birds, he told me.”

The big Blackfoot’s eyes widened. “I never said that!”

“Yes, you did. You said it’s easy, just takes a stick and some salt. I bet you know how to cook bannock too.”

Floyd spluttered, “What the…Art, I ain’t no cook! I’m a cowpuncher and that’s what I hired on to do.”

Art asked, “Can you make bannock?”

“Hell, anybody with half a brain can make bannock.”

Melinda Mae grinned, “I don’t know how to make bannock.”

Art shot her scowl.

Floyd carried on whining, “I’m a cowpuncher, I ain’t got time to ride all day and then cook. Hell, that’s what we got the Cookie for.”

Art asked, “What were you planning on doing right now, Floyd?”

“I wanna eat! That’s what I wanna do!”

“Then you’d better start cooking. Because unless you’re willing to trade places with the doctor in the wagon, it seems to me you’re a man with a whole lot of time on his hands.” He glanced toward the wagon and his eyes bulged. “Cheng Wah, what’re you doing with my rum?”

The little man sat tipping overproof Jamaican rum into a wad of cloth and rubbing it on the patient. Art rushed to the wagon with the rest of the crew behind him. The little doctor looked up at the row of faces.

“I sew man. Make better now.”

It was possible they were more stunned now than the first time they’d peeked in the box. The patient lay naked on his blankets, motionless but still breathing. That wasn’t the startling thing, though, the startling thing was he’d been stitched top to bottom, every wound closed - torn lips, ribs, even the lacerated arm. The scalp flap with its mat of blood crusted hair had been patiently, if a little crudely reattached, offset toward the right ear.

The proud surgeon said, “Eye no good. No can fix.” Then he pointed toward the bubbling pot over fire. “Missy girl bring tea.”

Melinda Mae came back with a steaming cup and Cheng Wah sat with it blowing over the top. He nodded at his handiwork. “Rum good outside. *Pu gong ying* and *chuan zin lian* good inside, make hot gone. Man better soon.”

Art finally found his breath. “Rum is supposed to go inside, not out.”

Skip’s voice wiggled its way back, “Hell, he almost looks like a real person again.”

Floyd threw up hands. “Fine, I’ll go start cooking.”

Everyone that night allowed Floyd’s stick roasted birds were mostly edible, nodding and muttering thanks to the cook. Supper might’ve arrived a bit chewy and scorched on the outside, but the wings were deliciously salted with a delicate crunch. His bannock and beans weren’t bad either, providing a person was blessed with strong teeth to grind the charcoal and wood chips that somehow found their way into the skillet. Percy spooned up a well-cooked moth, but was smart enough not to complain. Cheng Wah remained with his patient, working through a second bottle of rum with Art cringing at every tip of his precious liquid. Floyd turned to the boss with a voice loud enough for everyone to hear and asked, “Is he gonna make breakfast tomorrow?”

Cheng Wah looked up. “Me take wagon first thing, drive man to doctor.”

Seven voices together shouted, “No!”

Art measured the concern on the faces in the firelight. He cleared his throat. “If this poor fellow somehow survives the night, I’ll take him into Quesnelle when we hit the main trail. The herd can carry on north and Cheng Wah can take over cooking. Maybe I can find some fresh vegetables in town. Might even manage some potatoes.”

Victor was sitting against his saddle, scraping a strip of latigo with his knife. “You want potatoes?”

It seemed an odd question. “Well, of course we’d like potatoes. Who wouldn’t?”

“I can get them. Mile back in the bushes up the hill.”

Art stared. “Potatoes in the bush?”

“Wild potato, *chunezch’et,* it grows in the mountains.”

Floyd snorted, “Is that right? Mister half-Indian learned all about potatoes from his mommy.”

Victor’s eyes flashed and the knife froze on the latigo.

Floyd growled, “C’mon, rabbit.”

Art hurled a stick into the fire with an explosion of sparks that challenged the stars in the sky. “Enough! I have bloody well had it with you two! You want to find out who’s the reddest? Toss a feather in the air and see whose head it lands on. Otherwise, shut up!”

Floyd peered from under his hat. “You think that’d work, Art?”

For the first time on the drive, Victor’s teeth appeared in a cutting little smile. “I guess he wins. Only a real prairie dog would be stupid enough to do that.”

Floyd hurtled to his feet. “Dammit, I ain’t gonna - ”

“SIT DOWN, FLOYD!”

The big man lurched backward. “Hell, Art, I wasn’t gonna hurt him. Maybe just a little slap to straighten out his head.”

“There won’t be any slapping, not now, not ever while I’m in charge. Do you know how to build a travois?”

It took a few seconds, but finally: “Oh…sure.”

“Your people used them all the time following the buffalo, right?”

Floyd folded to the ground again in front of his saddle. “Um…yeah.”

“Well, you build me one of those and I can take the injured man to Quesnelle without tying up the wagon. Probably travel a lot faster too, right?”

Floyd pulled his legs up to his chest and nodded. “Absolutely.”

Art studied him. “You don’t seem too sure. You *can* build a travois, can’t you?”

Big confident nod. “Hell, Art, my people used them all the time. Ain’t a Blackfoot alive don’t know how to build a travois.”

“Well, good. When we get to the Telegraph Trail, the job’s yours.” Then he added, “That’ll give you a chance to prove how red you are.”

Floyd looked away. “…absolutely...”

The clearing full of lush grass and a herd which had found its trail rhythm meant the crew could get some much needed sleep without the need for night watch. Sometime after midnight, though, a mournful bout of moaning started Orville coughing again and Percy grumbling for quiet. Art crawled out of his blankets and followed the sound to the wagon, where Cheng Wah was still sitting in the dark, dabbing rum on the patient.

Art poked his head over the sides of the box. “Listen, mate, you makee rum all gone. Me fetch water for wash instead.”

“Art…”

The boss blinked; his cook had never used his first name before, at least not that he could remember. “What?”

“This man woke up and told me something.”

Art leaned closer to study the shadowy face; it was Cheng Wah, alright, but it didn’t sound like him. “Is that you speaking real English?”

“I’ve lived here over thirty years. Do I look stupid?”

“Well, no…but why the pidgin talk, then?”

“It makes people leave me alone and that’s the way I like it.”

“After all these years…”

“Forget about me. This man said he’s a policeman come to find you. He says - ”

The patient moaned again and doctor Cheng Wah bent to cool the burning forehead with his swab.

Art said, “What? What was it he said?”

“A man was murdered. The killer left behind a horse, a dun horse with your brand on it.”

“The colt?”

“That has to be it.” Then he looked to the bundle of blankets again and said, “The other thing we have to think about is there’s only one policeman for this area.”

Art stared. “This is Hobbs?”

“He’s the right size. I’d guess the same age.”

“You can’t be serious. This fellow looks like…like…”

“I know what he looks like. From the claw marks I’d say it was a bear attack and then afterward something else, maybe wolves. To go through all that and last this long means he must really want to live.”

Art shook his head and breathed again, “Hobbs…”

Cheng Wah stared into his boss’s face. “You makee Indian sled, ride chop-chop to town. Maybe man live.”

“I…I’ll do that.”

“Thank you, Art. And I’ll cook for your cowpunchers.”

The Telegraph Trail, when they met it, turned out to be a gift from the government more tantalizing than free beer at a public hanging. After all the deadfall and sapling growth of the route they’d just conquered, this was like a road cut straight through the bush as far as they could see. But that wasn’t the incredible thing. What surprised everyone following their weeks of near perfect isolation, was the traffic. Their plodding cattle were met by a parade of pilgrims all heading the same direction as them.

“Where are you going?” Art called to the nearest, a ragged pair leading the most miserable looking pack horse he’d ever seen.

“Klondike, ain’t you heard? There’s gold just laying on the ground up there. What about you?”

“Same place, different dream.” He tipped his hat and wished them luck.

It was exactly as he’d heard; the worked out claims of the Cariboo were being abandoned for glittering promises a thousand miles further north. All manner of man and beast had joined the migration: horses, mules, even one fellow pushing a wheelbarrow. The other thing was the weaponry. A hefty percentage of the travellers appeared to be American gold seekers, while the rest, from everywhere else in the world, were quickly learning to live among American gold seekers. With all the Bowie knives and six-shooters, anything jumping out of a tree intending to bite someone on that trail would surely meet with death forty times over before it stopped wiggling.

Percy said to Orville, “They all look like Skip.”

“No they don’t. They got clothes on.”

“I meant all the guns sticking out everywhere.”

Orville shrugged. “Skip ain’t got no gun. Boots neither.”

Percy gave his twin a face full of sibling disgust. “Don’t be stupid. And quit acting like you’re adopted.”

“I ain’t adopted! You’re the one’s adopted!”

“Okay, you’re not adopted, but you’re still stupid.”

Art rode past. “Have you two seen Floyd?”

Twin voices together said, “Nope.”

“Alright then, spread out. I’m not paying two of you to do the job of one.”

The pair split up and Art carried on forward. He found the big cowhand almost at the front with Victor. “Floyd, there you are. Come on, man, we’ve got a travois to build.”

“Oh…I forgot.”

“You forgot?” Art shook his head. “The wagon’s waiting back at the fork. I want to get going.”

“What about these pokies?”

“Floyd...” Art stared under the man’s hat, trying to make contact with eyes that seemed to be avoiding him. “The cattle will be fine for a few minutes without you.”

“Yeah…okay.”

The first thing Art discovered back at the fork was that Floyd was no architect of travois. The poles already chopped and the rope Cheng Wah provided from the wagon might as well have been a sack of duck feathers stirred with a stick. Art watched a few minutes of useless grunting and rope twisting, then said, “Want a little help?”

“Oh…sure.”

He pushed around the big cowhand. “Maybe if you lashed it like a raft. See, long poles here, cross pieces there.”

“Right, that looks more like I remember.”

Art tipped back his hat. “Floyd, you don’t know a single thing about building a travois, do you?”

“Uh, it’s been a long time.”

“Or maybe more like never?”

Floyd nodded, “Pretty close to that.”

“Look here, you said all Blackfoot Indians knew how to build one of these and I took you at your word. This is just a bad bloody time to find out you might’ve been stretching the truth.”

“Art, I just never had no call to make one before, is all.”

“You mean on account of your people never crossed the plains following the buffalo?”

“Oh, my people did that, alright.” The big cowpuncher squirmed inside his wool shirt.

“Floyd, you are actually a Blackfoot like you said, right?”

The forehead under the big hat began to sweat. “I’m Blackfoot, bona-fide, one hundred percent…only raised by a white family.”

Art stared. Standing beside him, Cheng Wah’s eyebrows arched higher.

Art said, “Is that a fact?”

“Well…yes, it is.”

Art had known Floyd for years, employed him for roundups and cattle drives, trusted him to train his horses, which he did exceptionally well. The pair even went hunting together for mountain caribou and sheep. They knew each other about as well as any two men could who hadn’t sat at the same table as children. It was understandable, then, that this was a revelation which might require a certain degree of tact.

“So the only thing Blackfoot about you is that nose.”

“And my skin. I’m a shade darker than my brothers.”

“Dammit, man, why didn’t you ever tell me?”

More squirming inside the shirt. “Well…it never came up.”

Art said, “I’m English, did I tell you about that?”

“Never had to, Art, it’s sort of obvious.”

“Well, I’d swear it’s just as obvious that you’re an Indian. And you told me, Blackfoot.”

“Hell, Art, I *am* a Blackfoot.”

Art let out a long breath. “Alright, I suppose there’s no point carrying on forever about it. So do you think an English rancher, a Chinese cook, and a sort-of-a-Blackfoot cowpuncher can work out how to build a travois?”

“Shit, Art, how hard could it be?”

“Well, I’ve been known to construct some questionable devices.”

“That’s okay,” Floyd said, “you got me to help.”

With surprisingly little conflict, the inter-ethnic trio managed to lash together a pleasing pile of poles with all the outward appearances of a sturdy transportation device. That the casualty was Hobbs still barely registered, as his swollen, one-eyed head had only spoken once with Cheng Wah. He was feverish and unconscious when they transferred him to the travois, a medical blessing considering Floyd dropped a leg and then Ed forgot to secure the bad arm, which flopped over the side at a disturbing angle. When they finally had the body lashed in place, Cheng Wah dribbled more cold dandelion tea into Hobbs’s mouth, which disappeared somewhere, and Art mounted. Then he bid goodbye and set off on his mission of mercy toward Quesnelle.

With their boss riding away, Floyd leaned down to yell at the little cook, “I want you to promise not to tell nobody about my family, okay?”

Cheng Wah jerked his head back and wiggled a finger in his ear. “No shout, I not deaf.”

“You’re not?”

“I no tell, if you no tell.”

Floyd said, “I no tell what?”

“That I raised by Panda bears.”

The big man blinked. “Really?”

Cheng Wah sniffed, “Boy, you raised by whiteman, alright. You dumb enough to believe anything.”

With her father gone, Melinda Mae saw her chance. She was holding up her pack string, waiting for Cheng Wah’s wagon and riding not far from Victor on a gorgeous day in June, the month most brides choose for their wedding because of the beauty springing from every corner of creation. It was enough to make a person’s heart positively bubble with romantic notions.

She called back to the long haired point rider, “I got no hurry to go ahead, not till Cheng Wah catches up.”

Victor glanced her way, then back to the bush beside him. He was always looking around, a good thing when it produced treasures like the wild potatoes they were going to have with their supper.

“What are you looking for, more potatoes?”

This time he didn’t even bother to turn.

She said, “We got plenty already. You sure got sharp eyes.”

More silence in the saddle.

“I found a dead goose once.” *Now why’d she go and say a dumb thing like that?* Everybody knew a dead goose was only interesting if it happened to drop out of the sky onto someplace special like the roof of your house. This one had been down by the river in a patch of reeds…boring. Just to make sure there wasn’t any confusion, she added, “It wasn’t on the roof.”

Victor looked around. “Was it springtime?”

*Wow, he answered….maybe he liked geese.* “Uh, middle of summer.”

He went back to scanning the bush.

“But it might’ve been spring, I don’t remember exactly.”

He said, “Sometimes if a goose loses its mate, it dies. In springtime a mate can get killed defending their nest.”

“Golly, that’s real romantic.”

“Why is getting killed romantic?”

She nudged Frisco closer. His eyes were bottomless and dark, so bottomless a person could get lost in them. “Because it’s so in love it dies of heartbreak.”

“Dying is never romantic.”

He was looking away again so she added quickly, “When I fall in love, I’m gonna be just like that goose.”

He looked back. “You want to be dead?”

“Only for love. If my husband dies, I wanna die of heartbreak right alongside him.”

He sniffed, “Huh.”

She said, “You obviously never been in love.”

Suddenly he was *really* looking at her. “You act younger than you say. You don’t know anything about love and even less about me.”

She lifted her Spanish riding hat and shook her hair out in the sunshine. “I’m old enough to go on a cattle drive and I know your brother Lucas is in love with me.”

“Lucas loves everything, especially dogs. He’s still a boy.”

“I’m fifteen.” she lied again. “I’m about marrying age and maybe I’ll marry Lucas.”

It worked; his face twisted with what was surely jealousy. He said, “That would make you my sister.”

Then again, maybe it wasn’t jealousy. “You look upset. What’s so horrible about that?”

“Bad enough I have to pull you two out of the river. Next it’ll be full of my nieces and nephews.”

*Ouch.* This wasn’t quite the romantic banter she’d dreamed would swirl sweetly between them, alone in the sunshine on a bountiful spring morning. In fact, it was painfully similar to every other conversation they’d ever had. He never took her seriously and when he did, in no time at all went off in some contrary direction that made her look and feel stupid. At least this time she had her shirt on. She gave Frisco a nudge. “When Cheng Wah catches up, tell him I went on ahead to get some peace and quiet.” She led her pack string off at a trot.

Victor watched her ride away. For a woman her age, she seemed painfully immature. Suzanne had been sixteen when they’d married, but sometimes it felt like she was thirty, the way she’d steered their family from the beginning. Maybe when this one started taking herself seriously and stopped looking at married men she’d make a good wife too. Maybe next year when she turned sixteen.

Chapter Eight

Art had never been to Quesnelle, gateway to Barkerville and the legendary Cariboo gold fields. Since abandoning his quest for the yellow metal earlier in life, he’d had no call to venture this far north. He’d certainly heard about it, though, its thriving businesses and rafts of paddle wheelers moored along the bank of the Fraser River, delivering trade goods and thousands of glittery eyed hopefuls each year to the most populous city west of Chicago and north of San Francisco. Compared to tiny Hanceville and in the wake of the last two weeks on the trail, the town seemed hyperactively huge and confusing right down to its three names, depending on who you spoke to: Quesnelle, Quesnellemouth or the more official sounding, Quesnelle City. Not to mention its sister settlement sixty miles north, of Quesnelle Forks. The good part was he didn’t feel out of place among the prospectors, natives and Chinese merchants milling in the dusty streets. Almost no one gave him a second glance with his human cargo strapped to a travois, plodding his horse down Front Street in search of a doctor’s shingle…almost no one.

“Say there, pilgrim, would you and your partner be requiring reasonably priced accommodation this evening?”

Art peered under the ‘Lazzarin Brothers Practical Horseshoeing Blacksmithing and Livery Stable’ sign, to a long faced man with a moustache wider than his cheeks. “You mean myself and this fellow on the travois?”

“Of a certainty, sir, it appears he could use a good sleep.”

“He’s nearly dead, if he isn’t already. He needs a doctor, not a hotel room.”

The moustache wobbled side to side. “Oh, a doctor.”

“Indeed, and do you know where I might find one?”

“Afterward would you be requiring accommodation?” The man twizzled the ends of his moustache. “Fine and dry with very little interference from the other occupants.”

“I…maybe…look, how about the doctor?”

“Certainly, sir, next street down, fourth door on your right. And please remember where you heard it. Shall I prepare you a fine warm stall?”

“Stall?”

“Absolutely, and very reasonably priced at four dollars per evening. Unless you want separate accommodation for your horse.”

Even with the pressing business of finding a doctor, it was difficult to simply ride away. “You want me to sleep in a stall? And you’re charging four dollars a night for the privilege?”

“Fresh straw and complimentary coffee in the morning at six. But not later, I have blacksmithing to do.”

Art stared from under his hat. “If four dollars is the price of a horse stall, what the devil do the hotels charge?”

“Oh, you won’t find room in a hotel, sir. Oh, no…got to get here before the boats dock, never this late in the day.”

“Huh…” Art started riding off shaking his head. “…four dollars...”

But the blacksmith called after him, “You wouldn’t be a drinking man, would you? Because I can help in that regard at half the saloon rate.”

Art stopped, leaned over his saddle horn and squeezed his forehead. He turned. “Throw down some fresh straw. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“And your horse, sir?”

“We can share a room. We’ve been together a long time.”

The doctor behind the enormous mahogany desk was drunk. Of course, it was late in the day and Art had noticed quite a few people in the streets appeared to be either celebrating their good fortune or drowning their goldfield sorrows; there was a considerable amount of weaving going on out there. He closed the door. “I have a man strapped behind my horse who’s been attacked by a grizzly bear. Possibly a pack of wolves too, he needs a doctor.”

Dr. J. B. Moffat smiled past the blurry amber of his Scotch bottle. “It would be my professional opinion that the man you describe requires a mortician, not a doctor.”

Art’s eyebrows sloped toward his nose. “He’s still alive. I checked before I came in.”

Sceptical chuckle. “Well, check again. I’d wager five dollars he’s dead this time. Can I offer you a drink?”

“No, I don’t want a bloody drink. I want you to come outside and examine the patient.”

“But I’ve already told you he’s dead.”

“Listen here, I’ve ridden forty miles off my route to get to this place. I’ll pay your fee, I’ll pay for his bed and whatever it costs to save his life, but I’ve got to get back to my crew. I have seven other people depending on me besides this unfortunate cop.”

“Cop?”

“He’s a B.C. Provincial Policeman. If you save his life, maybe the government will give you a reward.”

That brought another chuckle. “The government…of course, they’re going to give *me* money.” The rheumy eyes somehow found a way to focus. “You’re not a miner?”

“I’m a rancher. I’m driving cattle to the Klondike and if I don’t get back to my herd, my cowhands will probably kill each other before sunset tomorrow.”

Dr. J. B. Moffat blinked, “You’re driving cattle to the Klondike? Are you insane?”

“Look, will you just examine the patient?”

The doctor attempted to stand, which set the scotch bottle on his desk rocking. He sprawled to catch it with both hands, then pushed up to one elbow and smiled. “Got it…nearly a damn disaster.” Then he found his feet and began wobbling toward the door.

Art said, “Don’t you need a stethoscope or something?”

A bleary wave. “My good man…me doctor, you cowboy. I don’t need gadgets to determine the absence of life.” Then as he banged his shoulder on the way through the doorframe, “You’d be amazed at how many otherwise intelligent people simply don’t know when to lie down and stop breathing.”

Art pulled his hat lower and followed the medical professional outside.

It didn’t take long. “This man’s alive!”

“I’m pretty sure I said that ten minutes ago.”

“Who did these sutures? Or should I say, who sewed him up like a Christmas goose?”

“My cook. He’s Chinese.”

“Ah, yes, they do fine poultry. I’m concerned about the arm, though. Was the musculature repaired before closing?”

“I don’t bloody know.” Art started untying ropes. “All I know is he fed him dandelion tea and used up two bottles of my rum.”

“Ah, that would explain the pleasant odour.” The doctor leaned over the patient and rubbed his eyes. “Amazing…there appears to be almost a complete absence of putrification, even in the arm.”

“That’s wonderful, could we get him inside?”

With Art at the top end and the doctor following with the legs, they tottered, stumbled and puffed their way upstairs. The patient was deposited on the surgery table, leaving the good doctor apparently seconds from expiration himself. He puffed, “Your policeman friend must’ve kept all his insides, he’s heavy.”

“Is he going to make it?”

Sad shake of the head. “Impossible.”

“What?”

“Sir, you can’t be mauled by grizzly bears, shredded by wolves and then expect to simply rise up like Lazarus from the dead.”

“Well, why didn’t you bloody well say so before we carted him all the way up here?”

“Because it would be inexcusable to have patients publicly expiring outside my office. Terrible for the doctor business.”

A strange strangled voice interrupted, “Dad…can you…take me fishing?”

The doctor blinked toward his operating table. “Was that him?”

Art growled, “Of course it was him. Do I look like I want to go fishing?”

The doctor shambled over to the body. “My dear policeman, are you feeling in better spirits?”

“I want…fishing...”

“Yes, well I’m afraid that may be difficult at the moment. You see, you’re very nearly dead and in fact we had to carry you up here from the street.”

Art growled, “He doesn’t want us to take him fishing, you imbecile. He’s delirious and…oh, why bother? You’re further gone than he is.”

“I actually feel fine.”

Art’s head drooped. He mumbled from under his hat, “How much do I owe you? If he dies by morning, what will it take to bury him?”

“Five dollars should bury him. But the real expense, I’m afraid, lies in the remote possibility of his survival. You see, there’s medicines as yet undetermined and possible removal of putrefied parts. Food, constant care…he’ll need some clothes. And I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do for that eye. Would you like me to try and locate a glass one?”

“He’s an employee of the government. Let them locate a glass one.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have much government around here, sir. Mostly ungovernable scallywags and riff-raff. I’ll see he gets fitted with a nice patch…fifty dollars.”

“What? Fifty dollars?”

“Fine, I’ll just spoon out the damage and sew up the hole. He can find his own patch…forty-five dollars.”

Art dug out his wallet. He tossed the money on the patient’s stomach. “I’ll check in tomorrow before I leave. If he’s dead, I want forty dollars back.”

Dr. J. B. Moffat reached for the pile of cash. “Of course, my good man, satisfaction guaranteed or your money returned. A pleasure doing business with you.” He offered a mushy smile. “One final opportunity for a drink?”

Art headed for the door. “Just fix him. He’s got a murderer to catch.”

\* \* \*

The reborn spirit of Klatsassin had burning in his breast a legacy left by perhaps the greatest of all Tsilhqot’in leaders. That the newcomer wasn’t of noble blood simply meant one more thing shared with the original, who had gained power and prestige not through birthright, but by distinguishing himself in battle until none could dispute his place as a true war chief. The old Klatsassin’s exploits against enemies like the *Secwepemc* (Shuswap) and *Dakelh* (Carriers) were legendary. The new Klatsassin’s were less well known, but that was a situation only someone of lesser spirit need learn to live with. His power was the wolverine, a savage opponent when pressed to fight. Since the arrival of the men from ships, the great Tsilhqot’in nation had been brought to its knees by smallpox, hunger and insolent whiteman rule making. Traditional land was occupied and hunting rights ignored by a gluttonous invader who claimed everything for himself. The old Klatsassin had been right, this outrage couldn’t be tolerated.

Near Puntzi Lake was a spring the people had used forever, stopping to refresh themselves with the sparkling water or simply enjoying a pretty place to camp when travelling to hunt or visit relatives. It wasn’t on any of the new reserves, but rather land that thirty years ago the first whiteman to try settling had arrogantly decreed *his* ranch. Without asking, the invader had built a house, fenced the spring and threatened to send smallpox into any group who tried to camp at *his* spot. Chief Anahim of the local band, still reeling from the last bout of that cursed disease upon his people, was roused to a fury. He shared his anger with Klatsassin, himself freshly returned from a bloody encounter with a road crew pressing into their territory from the coast. Klatsassin’s men, faces blacked and lusting for more, eagerly followed him again on *deni ts’ulhdilh* (the path of war). While Anahim took his warriors to deal with the squatter on the ranch, Klatsassin’s moccasin commandos ambushed a trespassing pack train, justly relieving them of their food supplies and lives. The Chilcotin war, with its treacherous ending at the Quesnelle gallows, was on.

Now more than thirty years in the footsteps of those ghosts, a new hero of the people sought a spot to camp. What better place than in the trees beside a rightful Tsilhqot’in spring?

How anyone could ride right up to the water and not see him sitting among the poplars was simply one more example of how far above the land these fools held their noses. He even had a cook fire going, its narrow tendril of smoke twisting up through the branches.

As if to prove his thoughts, the first words from the man’s mouth were like a silly child’s. “Oh, didn’t see you there. Got a rabbit, huh?”

To speak the obvious branded any man an idiot. Of course, next would come the order to move from the land.

But instead, “Just passing through?”

“Maybe I go, maybe I stay. This good camp.”

The man dropped his reins and let his horse drink. “Sure is. Been about my favourite spot since I bought the place. Good graze, clean water, plenty of hay for winter. Nice looking mare you got there - quarter horse?”

“It horse. You like, maybe we trade.”

“Well now…” The man pushed back his hat. “I gotta admit I’m generally up to talking a deal, but you just happened to catch me on my best mountain horse. Not the cleanest bloodlines, but packed many a sheep outta the high country with this beauty. Caught her wild when she was a filly.”

“Wild horse belong Tsilhqot’in. Maybe horse already mine.”

The man’s eyes went to the six gun behind the shiny buckle. “Wild horses belong to who catches them. Never seen you over this way before. From the new Anaham Reservation, are you?”

“I not reservation. I free man, live everywhere, hunt everywhere. Maybe I hunt this place.”

“You can hunt wherever you like, friend. I got no problems with a man taking a deer or duck if he’s hungry.” Then he aimed a steady gaze. “Just don’t shoot my horses and don’t shoot my cattle. They ain’t for eating.”

“Maybe you hear my name, I Klatsassin.”

That lifted an eyebrow and brought the hat brim back down. “Uh, huh…well Mr. Klatsassin, you enjoy your rabbit. But I’d think about picketing that horse if you’re staying. Spotted a mountain lion here a couple of days back, don’t want to end up walking to wherever you’re headed.” The man mounted and wheeled away. He wasn’t in a hurry and he didn’t look back.

The reborn spirit of Klatsassin stood up from his tiny fire. He walked to the spring and peered at the ground. Careless, he’d been careless – the tracks of an adult lion stared up at him from the mud. But that wasn’t what bothered him. What bothered him was the man didn’t care at all where he camped. He hadn’t tried to stop him from hunting and hadn’t so much as blinked when he’d claimed the Tsilhqot’in people owned all the wild horses. In fact, he’d acted as if he felt there was plenty of land and animals to go around for everybody. What kind of whiteman was this?

In truth, Tom Turner was neither a bully nor a fool. He had no quarrel with the natives who lived up here on the grassy plateau and in fact harboured more than a small amount of respect for them. Several worked for him on occasion and when you took the time to understand their particular slant on things, usually based on some understanding of animals and their connection to the land, they were valuable assets to any ranch. He also had a wise man’s caution around belligerence backed up by a gun. This one had tried to goad him into a fight. He might just be the renegade he’d heard they were looking for. He certainly was crazy enough…Klatsassin, eh?

What would the real…the first…Klatsassin have done? Probably shot the fool and smashed in his head. To smash a head - like crunch, or mush? Of all the things he’d done, noble and not so noble, he had no experience of that. He pulled his rabbit stick from the fire and picked at the smoky flesh – strangely unsatisfying. If the rancher had been less disappointing and the meal more interesting on his tongue, his eyes might never have wandered to the visitors before they came upon his camp. The rabbit stick dropped and so did he.

Horse grazing in the open.

Fire glowing, but coals now, almost no smoke.

Not a good spot for an ambush, low ground, no hard cover.

They were still a long way off and almost disappeared against a hillside, but he knew who they were as surely as if they’d called to him. The way the half-blood rode, shoulders hunched, face hiding under the hat brim, he practically sent a smell ahead on the wind of hard skinned meanness. And that ugly thing behind him, not a man, but winter starved grizzly, all fur and stomach. They weren’t here by accident; they’d followed him. Another careless mistake – he hadn’t thought them determined enough to take up a trail of vengeance. But they were twisted with hate and that gave them focus. He, of all people, should have read that.

No time for the saddle. Cautiously, staying low, he crept toward the horse. It stopped pulling up grass to look at him. *Of course it knew he needed it quickly.* The long tail swished at flies as he crept closer, murmuring a gentle song to the wind. But sensing his urgency, the beast began plodding away, always one eye watching to see if he followed.

He stopped. Lifted his face to the sun*. Feel the warmth…feel the calm power of the spirit there.* Eyes closed, he started walking again. The horse scent was strong in front of him. Walking and using the warrior trick of borrowing from the spirit of something else, he was the hummingbird in sunshine, tiny, almost not there at all. Step after careful step. There was no more movement in front of him. He reached and felt the horse – it hadn’t even tried to bite him. A handful of mane and up he swung, then away from the spring, flying.

Behind him there was a shout. But he knew already he’d beat them. The way their mounts were dragging, they’d be lucky to make the spring before falling over. It was how they’d always behaved, not understanding that no animal needs a man – they could all get along without him - but a man has need of animals for food, work or simply balancing the spirit of the land. That’s why these two deserved what he’d done to them. They had no purpose on earth besides their own selfish desires; it was in the white blood which ran through both of them. There was only ugliness and greed, nothing noble. That was the thing, the very important thing, which separated a warrior from the rest – nobleness of purpose.

\* \* \*

Rose went to the lake to wash. While little Willie sat with his bum in the water watching from behind, she stepped from the torn dress and dropped to her knees. She spread her legs to open the soiled place and flood it with cool liquid. Fingers deep inside, she tried to scoop out the poison. Threw the dress further into the lake and scraped at her skin with stones. Scooping, scraping, panting with effort, the water turned red around her. Still the curse clung.

Two hours later, Alice returned to find her kneeling in the lake. Willie had tears down his face. He gazed up at his sister from the rock he sat on and pulled his thumb from his mouth. “Willie hungry.” he said.

Alice stared at her mother’s back. “Why is she in the water? What happened?”

“Bad men hurt Mother. Hurt Willie too.” He showed off his split lip.

“Oh…” The girl’s throat went dry and her voice almost cracked as she called out, “Mother, are you alright?”

Rose didn’t turn. “Go make food for Willie. Did you bring berries?”

“No…I…”

“No matter, fetch later. Best time now for *texaltsel*…” Her voice trailed off. She was staring over the lake, sun glittering off the water and the contours of her copper coloured skin. Her lovely raven hair hung glistening down her back.

Alice said, “Willie told me they hurt you.”

“No…they have no power of that. Only they can hurt my body.”

“Did they…”

“They did what men do.”

“Oh…”

“Go make food.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Alice made bannock and poached some dried salmon, then when her mother still hadn’t returned from the lake, went to the shore with a blanket. “You should come out.” she said.

“Soon.”

“I made food and I’ve brought a blanket.”

“I am not cold.” The remains of the guilty dress had sunk to the bottom of the lake. The water must be freezing.

“Still, you should come. Soon the sun will be behind the trees.”

“Yes.”

When her mother made no move to rise, Alice laid the blanket across a bush. “The blanket is here. Willie can come with me to pick berries. He learns fast, if only he wasn’t so busy catching bugs. He eats them too, I think almost as many as the berries.”

“You teach well. You will be a good mother.”

Alice stared at the slender back a few moments longer, the bumps of her mother’s spine like a necklace of beads laid perfectly down her skin. Then she went to collect her brother.

Rose wanted to run to him. It was the only thing she could think to fill the emptiness, but the more she saw his face in her mind, the bigger the hole grew. Over twenty years she’d been his woman…in every way but one. She couldn’t go there now, not like this. He had his family, his other family, and they were perfect. She knew even with all the songs he’d sung while holding her next to his chest and the tender fingertips and gifts, she’d never felt completely worthy, but now when he learned of it - and he would - how would he ever look to her eyes again with love? How could she lie beneath him in the night and not feel the smothering weight of a beast upon her body, huffing and sweating, grunting and pawing until her spirit wanted to leap from her throat and hide in the deepest hole? Now the violation was done, what magic could make her forget?

A thought clouded her mind – what if there was a child? How wrong would her family be then? Even to him.

Always she’d waited and always he’d come. This time she feared not the waiting, but the coming. He’d never want her again, never. What man would? Silpat had been right; she’d been playing the game of pretending to be a whiteman’s woman, but if Tom loved her as he said, why was she not a whiteman’s wife?

It was almost dusk when Alice returned and found her still kneeling, still refusing to turn. The concerned girl waded out at last with the blanket. The sun was behind the trees and already the loons had begun to call. Mosquitoes sung all around. Inches from her mother’s shoulders, the blanket froze. Alice looked past the bowed head and wanted to scream. Even with night swooping down, nothing could mask the terrible dark stain everywhere around the body. She remembered their last words: the sister was now a mother.

Chapter Nine

When the desperado in his ill-fitting boots stalked into the store, it was clear he hadn’t come to buy knitting wool. He peered with eyes like stones at Kakitesun on his rope spool, then hiked up the pants behind his shiny buckle. Everyone watched as if they knew there was big business about to happen. True, from the wild hair on his head to the tips of those boots, he was a sight only a fool wouldn’t take seriously.

He announced, “I changed my mind.”

From behind the counter, “Is that right? About what?”

“About everything.” Then he peered at Kakitesun. “You look like somebody I know.”

The old man turned away as if trying to avoid an answer.

Again, “What’s wrong, no English?”

Lavinia said, “Lucas, leave Kakitesun alone and tell me what you want.”

“Oh…” The belt buckle got a twist. “I’ve determined to join the drive, Mrs. Cole.”

Her eyebrows rose. “That drive’s more than a hundred miles up the trail already. And it’s not safe for a boy to be travelling on his own, not with everything that’s happened lately.”

“You mean the renegade that shot Mr. O’Hare?”

Her eyebrows dipped. “Son, I haven’t got the time. Now your father will have plenty of drives for you to join when he thinks you’re ready. Come pick some penny candy for yourself and go on home before he misses you.”

That changed things; Lucas’s eyes lit. “Oboy, thanks, Mrs. Cole.” He headed for the jars on the counter. A label on the front of each said ‘five for 1 cent’. “Uh…I ain’t got no money.”

“That’s alright, they’re free today for polite young with manners.”

Big nod. “How many do I get?”

“Half a fistful should last till you get a stomach ache…now don’t be greedy.”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Cole, I won’t.” Lucas’s ambitious fingers wrapped around so many boiled sweets they could barely squeeze back out of the jar. He stood with his thumbs in his belt loops, sucking. “So what direction did they start out anyway?”

Lavinia’s mouth opened, but her eyebrows dipped and it closed again. She served up a stern look. “Lucas, I’m not going to tell you that. I absolutely do not want you chasing off into the wilderness after them. Your parents have already made clear their wishes. Besides, I’m sure there’s no way after this amount of time - ”

“I heard Melinda Mae went along.”

Her shoulders sagged. “That’s right, Melinda Mae’s on the drive. And as her mother I can tell you I’m not one bit happy about it. That’s why I know there’s no chance your parents would want - ”

“My folks don’t care about me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, Lucas.”

Wet crunching sound and a pouty face. “It’s true.”

“Lucas, all parents care about their children. It’s the natural order of things. Now if you just take a few minutes to stop feeling sorry for yourself, you’ll find your life isn’t so bad and your parents love you very much.”

“They killed my dog.”

Her head drew back. “What?”

“My dog, Jock, Dad shot him in cold blood.”

“Well…Lucas, sometimes parents have to do things for reasons children don’t understand.”

“He wasn’t doing nothing, just stuff a dog does. Maybe chewed up a couple of old lady Parker’s chickens, but they were dumb chickens anyway. Didn’t never know enough to keep inside their coop when he came around. Heck, they even let a skunk steal their eggs. Nobody shot the skunk.”

“I see…”

“Anybody can see it wasn’t Jock’s fault.”

Lavinia squatted before the sorrowful figure in boots and tin buckle. “Lucas, you’re a cowpuncher, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well, a cowpuncher has to know that rain will fall, wind will blow and dogs can’t be allowed to kill chickens. If they taste even one, they’ll never stop. A cowpuncher has to know that, and he has to be strong and do the right thing when the time comes to do it. Even if it means shooting a chicken stealing dog.”

“Jock never stole them. Just left them right where old lady Parker could’ve plucked them and cooked them up anyway.”

“Lucas, dogs shouldn’t kill chickens.”

The young man pushed another candy in his mouth. “I think I’ll go on home now, Mrs. Cole.”

Lavinia poked at her bun and let out a sigh. “Yes, that would be the right thing to do. Your parents are probably wondering where you’ve got to already.”

“Like I said, they don’t care.”

“All the same, you’re too young to go running off into the wilderness alone, whether you think you’re big enough or not. Now don’t make me send someone to fetch your father.”

“No, ma’am, I’ll go. Don’t want my dad to come up here and shoot me too.”

Lavinia sighed and rolled her eyes. “Tell your folks everything’s fine here at the store and I’ll come for a visit Sunday.”

“Yes, ma’am. Bye now.”

Boy, that had been too easy. If Mrs. Cole had figured he’d be put off just like that, then she didn’t know diddly about the iron will of a cowpuncher. And if anybody figured he was too stupid to follow the trail of two hundred cattle…well, just shut your mouth and watch. With a pocketful of candy and enough jerked beef and beans to keep him going forever, Lucas pushed his big black gelding as hard as he dared, stopping only to pee and fill his water bottle. By the time darkness fell, he was camped, cooking beans and darn near out of candy. That was okay, though, because he’d be caught up with the herd soon and they’d have plenty of stuff to eat. He didn’t have a tent, but real cowpunchers don’t mind sleeping out under the stars. If it rained, he had his slicker. The only thing he wasn’t sure of was whether Buster, his horse, would take off home in the night. For that reason, he’d brought hobbles; he didn’t like to use them, knew the big guy hated the dumb things, but even with all the graze around, he just didn’t want to wake up in the morning, horseless. With his blanket and Dad’s new Winchester across his legs, Lucas lay his head back against his saddle and in the blaze of his giant campfire, closed his eyes to the stars.

It was the kind of a campfire that could be seen for miles. That was no problem unless you were trying to hide. Lucas didn’t know he should be doing that, thought he’d ridden so far and so fast that nobody could possibly catch him.

Just like a hard luck Jasper to be wrong at the worst possible time.

\* \* \*

Returning from Quesnelle, Art caught up with the herd at a place called Tsincut Lake. The cattle were milling before a broad stream, with a raft ferrying a group of pilgrims and their luggage across, the cattlemen waiting their turn. Melinda Mae spotted her dad across the herd and came pushing Frisco between horns and rumps to meet him.

“Dad, Dad! Guess what?”

“Let me think, you want a hug?”

The young lady under the Spanish riding hat drew up and blinked at him. “Um…not here, there’s all kinds of people around.”

Art shrugged. “That’s alright, didn’t really want a hug anyway.”

“You didn’t?”

“Mostly I need to eat, where’s Cheng Wah?”

“I dunno, somewhere.” She nudged Frisco closer. “I’ve thought about it some more and decided to give you a hug.”

He chuckled and leaned across for his squeeze.

She bubbled inside his arms and said, “We found a dog.”

“What?”

“A dog, I named him Prickles on account of we found him hiding under Cheng Wah’s wagon with porcupine quills sticking out of his face. He’s real smart, but not about what he eats. We pulled out the quills, but he got real shaky after Cheng Wah doused rum all over his snout, so we decided he can ride in the wagon till he feels better.”

Art lurched over his saddle horn. "Do you mean more of my rum disappeared over a dog’s snout?”

“Cheng Wah said it would keep him from getting sick, but then Prickles couldn’t walk afterward.”

“This nonsense has got to stop! What’s wrong with a bacon fat poultice like everyone else uses?”

”Dad, calm down, we need a dog. Dogs can chase cows and I already taught him to roll over.”

“Of course he’s rolling over, he drinks rum.”

Melinda Mae said, “Look, there’s Prickles now.” She pointed across the herd to Cheng Wah’s wagon where a black and white dog had appeared behind the driver’s bench, one ear up, one flopping down.

Art pushed back his hat. “Say, I know that dog.”

“You know Prickles? Are you serious?”

“Well, not that particular dog, exactly. But the type of breed he is – he’s a border collie.”

Melinda Mae said, “Wow, that’s great. What’s a border collie?”

“It’s a Scottish herder. Usually for sheep, but I don’t see any reason he couldn’t herd cattle. We can’t take him home, though. Your mum doesn’t like dogs, you know that.”

“C’mon, how’s Mum not gonna love something as cute as that?”

Art stared across the herd at the black and white, floppy eared addition to his crew. “He better be the type of dog I can count on to keep the cattle together without barking all night or sneaking off to play poker with wolves.”

“Dad, dogs don’t know how to play poker.”

“And he better not drink any more of my rum.”

The truth was that Prickles quickly became twice the cowpuncher anyone expected, simply because he was born with the instinct to do it. After a few days watching this natural athlete pick up strays and nip sluggish hocks to get stragglers moving, Art was convinced Prickles could herd a flock of cats.

“I’d be a bloody fool to let anything happen to that dog.” he said to Floyd as they watched from the edge of a clearing.

To which Floyd responded, “I never figured any animal could be so smart. Maybe he should take over point.”

Art let Floyd have his little moment, then ended the discussion with, “He’s not as good as Victor, but I asked him last night and he told me he knows how to build a travois.”

With the trail broad and straight in front of them, the drive settled into a rhythm, moving steadily north at a rate of ten or twelve miles a day. Any faster, and they risked ruining the condition of the beef, especially with the graze growing more scarce with every step. A rare moment of excitement arrived when a pack train of forty or fifty little burros bunched in front of them at a section of swampy ground, their big brown eyes staring at the churned muskeg and foot long ears poked pathetically forward. They looked like a herd of Easter Bunnies who’d lost their baskets. Still, it would hardly have been memorable but for a white bearded giant in a tartan Tam O’Shanter whacking fuzzy heads with a stick and shouting, “You don’t want to move, y’sorry little beasts? I’ll beat you brainless till you do!”

Art was up front with Victor. After suffering several uncomfortable minutes of waiting for the trail to clear, he shouted, “I believe the problem with your little mooks, sir, is they’re desert animals. They don’t want to get their feet muddy.”

The man stopped clubbing long enough to look around, then blinked and quickly turned away.

Art tried again. “The name is Arthur Cole. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Well, Arthur Cole, my name’s none of your business and neither is the state of my donks.”

Art leaned and peered at the back of the traveller; there was something strongly familiar about the voice. “That might be true under other circumstances, pilgrim, but your pack train is blocking my path.”

The giant whacked another head. “Well, if you’d leave me about my business, that’d be exactly what I’m trying to fix.”

Victor had been watching silently with his almost black eyes, at every whack of the stick, jaw hardening and fist clenching tighter around the reins.

Art looked across and said, “Do that thing you did the other day back at the stream.”

“Thing…what thing?”

“You know, that big whistle of yours.”

“You want me to whistle at them? This fool’s beating them with a club. Whistling won’t do anything.”

Art nodded patiently. “Just give me your loudest note. I’d do it, but I don’t know how.”

Sceptical shrug. “Alright.” Victor poked two fingers between his teeth and let fly an ear piercing squeal.

The burros didn’t move.

“Like I said…want me to try again?”

“No, give it a few seconds.”

Moments later a black and white dog appeared, bounding past the perimeter of the strung out cattle. Art aimed his horse at the backside of the nearest burro and took off toward it, shouting, “Let’s get ‘em, Prickles! C’mon, boy!”

Prickles knew his job, in fact loved it with a tail swerving, hock nipping passion that his ancestors had perfected over millennia. The first creature jumped to the muck, hee-hawing and hopping to get away from the darting demon by its hindquarters, then came the next and another, until the entire pack train was on the move. The giant with the stick let his weapon dangle and looked on, amazed. He asked, “How much do want for that dog?”

Art shook his head. “Money couldn’t motivate me to part with Prickles, pilgrim. He’s my best cowpuncher.”

The man pulled a hand down his snowy beard and let fly a stream of tobacco juice. The front of his whiskers were stained a muddy brown with it. “Well, I’ll confess I am powerfully impressed with his abilities, sir. If you’ve never been called upon to drive donkeys in your life, you have no concept at all of purgatory.”

Art pushed back his hat. “Everett McCauley.”

There was a moment while the man appeared to hibernate on his feet, probably working out his next move. Then he sucked deeply through his teeth and hissed, “I would request you don’t repeat that too loudly, sir. You see, I’m travelling incognito at the moment.”

“You don’t say…is that why you changed hats?”

“Perhaps somewhat, and the fact that my father was a Scotsman.”

Art remembered the other hat. “What was your mother, Mexican?”

“Irish, why do you ask?”

“Never mind, it’s a pleasure to meet up with you again, Mr. McCauley.”

The bushy head twisted side to side. “Please, sir…sshhh.”

Art glanced around, but there was no one other than Victor to be seen. Even so, he obliged and lowered his voice, “So what became of the big machine and why the switch from mules to asses?”

Everett McCauley set off across the muskeg with the men on horseback following. “Yes, well…the machine was a resounding success, exactly as I’d foretold, and the product poured forth like manna from heaven. Although it wasn’t from heaven, of course, but a location decidedly more terrestrial.”

At this stage, Victor leaned close to Art. “What language is he speaking?”

Art winked. “It’s a mixture of bible and Babel. His mother was Irish.”

Slow nod. “…oh…”

Prickles returned, the consummate herd dog, and plunked his backside on the ground, awaiting his next task. Victor got him started on Big Willy and then rejoined the other two plodding after the donkeys.

Everett McCauley’s story continued to unfold. “I thought I’d considered everything, y’see, but as the immortal Robbie Burns would attest, ‘The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley’.”

Another shake of the head from Victor and a wink from Art.

“My scheme,” said Everett McCauley, “solid as it was, in the end proved no different. At first my neighbours laughed, they did, thinking my head was addled, smashing up leftover rocks in my machine. And I let them think that. A wise man knows the best place to hide is behind the mask of a fool. But when the gold began to appear, it was difficult to contain my excitement and I may have carelessly slipped my hand after a few drams shared with some scallywags who’d previously shown no regard for my abilities.”

“Ah…” said Art, “you shot off your mouth.”

“I may have somewhat…aye, indeed.”

“Did they steal your claim and chase you off?”

“Well, it was less of a chasing than a voluntary abandonment.”

“They frightened you off with threats?”

“…not exactly...”

Art gave his head a shake. “Mr. McCauley, why exactly would a successful gold miner choose to be out here herding burros?”

Everett McCauley wiggled his Tam O’Shanter down tighter and whipped a floppy sleeve at the mosquitoes pressing in from the swamp. “Did I ever share with you the details of my scientific fishing method?”

“You mean with cyanide?”

“That would be it, yes.”

Art’s eyebrows went up. Even Victor leaned to listen.

The man under the tartan hat lowered his voice. “Unfortunately, cyanide in a person’s morning coffee may have somewhat lethal side effects. As could possibly have happened to a pair of Germans panning below my claim.”

Art said, “You killed some Germans?”

“Ah, now…only one.”

Art shrugged. “I don’t mind so much myself, but some might take offence. Austrians, maybe…I doubt the Dutch would care.”

“Well, as unlikely as it would seem, the death of a man on a gold claim raises a high level of suspicion, and when one partner dropped dead while the other remained breathing, it would seem the survivor was the prime suspect. Not to mention that the symptoms bore an uncanny resemblance to poisoning.”

“…oh…”

The big man wobbled his head woefully. “I felt it may be an opportune time to fold my operation and move on.”

There was just one thing which hadn’t been explained. Art nodded toward the flock of sad looking animals patiently awaiting their tormentor’s arrival. “But why the sorry little mooks?”

“Ah, yes…that was more of a happenstance. Y’see, I put in with an ageing gentleman who was leading them up the trail with thought to marketing their talents as work animals in the Klondike. We travelled together quite well, him a fine listener with an ample supply of whiskey, and I an engaging speaker.”

Art nodded. “I see, there was whiskey.”

Everett McCauley wobbled the club toward his patient flock. “But the one thing I am not is a lover of stubborn creatures. By the Lord’s will, if ever I’m burdened again with the likes of such unrepentant bullheadedness, I swear I’ll skin their sorry hides and sell them for moccasin leather.”

“So where’s the old man now?”

Exasperated shrug. “Well, wouldn’t you just know with things appearing so promising, that he’d up and die on me?”

“Of what, cyanide poisoning?”

“I would never do that, sir. There was plenty of whiskey to last the pair of us the journey and I rather fancied his company. He didn’t talk much, but that was probably because he was Scandinavian and barely understood the sound of his own name, which was Lars or something. The truth is he appeared almost a hundred years old. Only a fool would set off on such a journey at that late stage of life. I found him outside the tent one morning with his fly unbuttoned, face down in a puddle of piss.”

Art said, “I hope you buried him.”

“Of course I did. I may be Scot and Irish, but I wasn’t raised a pagan.”

“So now you’re an ass skinner.”

“…now I’m an ass skinner…”

The next two hundred miles of the Telegraph Trail, in order of occurrence, plodded on like this:

At the lobbying of the crew, Skip Tanner was allowed to wear boots and clothes again, which Art bought off a pilgrim weighed down with the belongings of his dead partner. It was a profound relief to most, particularly Malinda Mae.

There was a full moon.

While on night herd under that moon, Percy Stoddard declared his love for Melinda Mae to his twin brother, Orville.

Orville teased him stupid with kissing sounds and the next morning told Floyd.

Floyd told Art.

Art told Melinda Mae.

Melinda Mae’s eyes went the size of chicken eggs. “What?”

Art said, “I’m not so sure I’m comfortable with this. Does he have any idea how old you are?”

As each day progressed, Melinda Mae appeared less shocked and more flattered. She made sure her hair was brushed before appearing in front of the crew each morning and began purposefully making eye contact with shy Percy Stoddard. Percy blushed like a Macintosh apple, but managed to peek out from under his hat at his true love every chance he got. Orville harassed the bashful Romeo with ever more mocking kissing sounds and made the pangs of young romance as miserable as possible.

Percy declared his unrelenting hatred for his brother.

Prickles caught a porcupine, apparently not so quick a learner as everyone had hoped. Once again, quills were yanked and Art laid down the law about dousing the dog with his dwindling supply of rum. Cheng Wah feigned another attack of deafness and doused anyway.

The first steer was lost a week out of Hazelton to a patch of poison Larkspur.

A major obstacle was put behind them when they crossed the mighty Bulkley River over a bridge at a spot where the natives had built precarious platforms slung from twisted willow roots over the boiling cauldron below. In a riveting display of bravado, salmon were scooped in dip nets, then swung out by fishermen sometimes so young as to be barely able to hoist their catch. Fresh fish were purchased and the crew feasted.

Days were warm and meadows plentiful among the gentle birch and cottonwood of the Bulkley Valley, but there was one more dangerous obstacle to cross.

They’d been hearing about the Bear River ever since joining the pilgrimage north. The water there was reputed to be treacherously unpredictable, sometimes a gentle stream, then a few hours later, a raging torrent sweeping to lethal rapids a few hundred yards downstream. No one seemed to know the reason for such wild variations. Theories were cast around concerning melting walls of ice high in the mountains or volcanoes leaking lava under glaciers, but nobody knew for certain. All the cattlemen knew was to look out for it. By the time Big Willy poked his snout in to taste the first sip of cold rushing water, everyone right down to Cheng Wah was suitably terrified of it. Nobody could hazard a guess if this was high or low water, as they’d never seen it before, but all agreed if it got any worse, nobody was going anywhere. A lazy bridge of sorts had been tossed together by someone out of two shaky logs propped across a rickety centre span, then three logs the other side after that, but it was a reasonable assumption that no bovine or horse would be nimble enough to walk it. Swimming seemed the only acceptable course.

That was the theory, but the problem with swimming cattle across rivers is, and always has been, enticing the first to start. The task of convincing a lifelong landlubber like Big Willy to take the first plunge had already proven on earlier occasions to be akin to coaxing a pig to lay eggs. At this icy looking barrier, big Willy wasn’t moving. There was warm sunshine this side and plenty of contented company – why would any ox in his right mind want to give up such available pleasures to wade into that? Admittedly, it was a sentiment shared by the cowpunchers, with the possible exception of Victor. Even Art had trouble not imagining the dark terrors at the depths of that watercourse. Orville was so traumatized by the prospect he rode over to his brother and temporarily forgot to make kissing sounds.

“Them stories were right. That water looks scary deep.”

Percy jumped on his first chance in over a week to get one up on his brother. “Don’t appear so terrible to me. I’d say no more than a couple of feet deep at most.”

Orville wasn’t convinced. “You gonna be first in, then?”

Sounding brave was one thing, but Percy wasn’t stupid. “That ain’t my job, it’s Victor’s.”

There was the sharp bark of a dog, then a disturbed mooing and the splash of icy water around hooves. Big Willy had taken the plunge. Already ahead of him and well into the current was Victor on his quarter horse, fearlessly showing how to get it done. But Big Willy didn’t seem convinced. He stalled knee deep, eyes ballooned with doubt, until Prickles bounded in and made certain there was only one option to having his hide mauled by busy teeth.

Back on the bank, Floyd and Skip pressed a group forward, trying to get the momentum started, but it wasn’t until the best herd dog in the business swerved back, tail wagging, that things got going. With all the nipping and barking, the hesitant bovines set off after the big swerving backside of their leader, taking the most appealing option available. Percy and Orville split up, one beside the herd and one pressing from behind. Art pressed from the far side, Melinda Mae trailing with her horses behind Cheng Wah’s wagon.

That was when Orville went under. He was well into the channel in water deep enough to force the cattle to swim, when his horse tripped, plunging sideways and thrashing, tossing its rider off his perch. Orville dropped the reins, hands in the air, and went drifting down the river, shouting, “I can’t swim!” With water halfway up the wagon box and terrified that he too was about to go floating toward oblivion, Cheng Wah watched the panic stricken cowpuncher bobbing helplessly toward the rapids a hundred yards downstream. Melinda Mae dropped the lead on her pack string and charged Frisco for the deep water. Orville was moving away quickly, but she could see him staring at her with eyes pleading for only one thing. She knew what that thing was and she knew there wasn’t much time.

Rocky river bottoms are dangerous places for horses, particularly those being pressed too quickly. Frisco wasn’t having much more luck than Orville’s horse, which was now back on its feet and lunging toward safety on the other side. The broad chest of Frisco surged through the current, but at the rate Orville was disappearing downriver, Melinda Mae was beginning to realize she’d never make lasso range.

She wasn’t the only person trying. On the far bank, her father and Floyd were also charging their mounts back into the river. Percy sat frozen in his saddle, either in shock or unable to decide on the right course of action to save his brother. It was the figure on the quarter horse which caught her eye, black hair streaming, galloping along the bank toward the shallower water of the rapids. In seconds Victor was ahead of the victim and well on his way to heading him off.

Orville, though, had stopped shouting. His hands weren’t waving in the air and his head rarely appeared at the surface. Finally Melinda Mae lost him in the swirling current.

By the time Victor urged his brave little horse out into the rapids to meet the bundle in the roiling current, there was no more struggle left in it. He snagged it and dragged it to the bank. Melinda Mae reached them and jumped down to stare at Orville’s strange still face. His eyes were open and already going milky, lips a lifeless blue. Then she turned to look up at the man who’d had the presence of mind to once again read the river right and perform that brave act. Amazingly, Victor just sat in his saddle as cool and unblinking as the day he’d saved his own brother back at the racing Chilcotin River. Alive, dead, it was apparently no difference to this one, not worth getting all worked up about it.

But Percy was another consideration. The surviving twin plunged to the ground and threw himself on the body with a moan like a cedar twisting in a storm. He lifted the cold wet head onto his lap and rocked back and forth, peering up at the people around him with eyes so far gone into sorrow they appeared to swallow light. Melinda Mae had seen a lot already on this drive – lightning, bandits and naked, animal mauled policemen - but nothing could’ve prepared her for the heart twisting agony of watching a brother lose another brother. It wasn’t natural, it wasn’t fair. Orville hadn’t done anything mean or spiteful probably in his whole life, and neither had Percy. They didn’t deserve to suffer and they absolutely didn’t deserve to die. But there they were, both of them destroyed. If this was the way the world worked, she wasn’t sure she wanted to go on living in it. She looked up again at hard faced Victor. And that, of all times, was when the dark eyed cowpuncher who never spoke decided to share his thoughts.

“The ancestors live in the river. They’ll look after him now.”

Melinda Mae stared. *He thought Orville was still alive in the river.* She yelled, “He’s obviously drowned, you idiot! What’s the matter with you?”

But Victor just turned his horse and rode away.

There was no choice but to bury the young man where he died. There wasn’t any preacher and only hymn they could mostly remember was Onward Christian Soldiers. Everyone helped dig the hole. Cheng Wah, of all people, lashed together a cross and pushed it into the ground. He wasn’t even Christian. Then Art said a few words about souls going to heaven, with Melinda Mae staring at Victor’s cold black eyes on the other side of the grave, certain that if he sputtered one more word about ancestors in the river, she’d pull out her knife and stab him in the throat. When the last big rock was laid on the mound to keep out the wolves and bears, her father gently laid his hand on Percy’s shoulder and told him it was time to move on. It was all Melinda Mae could do to stop from running into the forest and letting whatever beast got there first rip out everything she was feeling inside her.

She didn’t do that, though. Instead she mounted Frisco with tears streaming down her cheeks and took up her place at the front of her pack string. She watched Percy slumped in the saddle, gazing back at the heap of rocks as he plodded again beside the herd that was apparently more important than anything else out here in the wilderness, even his brother’s life. Melinda Mae let the agony in that tormented young face swarm around her heart to the point she just couldn’t stand it anymore. Then she turned her horse north up the Telegraph Trail to whatever was waiting for the rest of them.

What waited, thank God who watches over beleagered travellers, was Hazelton, a whisper of civilization linked to the outside world by a paddle wheeler whenever the captain felt the current safe enough to steam up the Skeena River from the coast. By modern urban standards, it wasn’t much of a town, but there was a Hudson’s Bay Company store, an Indian agent’s residence and an Anglican mission to minister the abundance of pristine souls inhabiting the surrounding wilderness. Crammed between white residences were the urban native homes, complete with totem poles, some said to be over a hundred years old. The degree of civilized commitment was most evident in the native cemetery, where the graves were decorated with replica residences, like tiny summer homes, complete with windows, furnishings and trunks full of the owner’s belongings. One even had a carpet and portrait of the tenant on the wall in a massive frame. Art tried to coax Victor to peek inside, but the half-Tsilhqot’in cowpuncher flatly refused, afraid to disturb the spirit of an ancestor, albeit an ancestor from a tribe he didn’t know. Floyd was no braver. Neither, for that matter, was Melinda Mae. Even with the possibility of disturbed spirits, though, it still would’ve felt like paradise if it hadn’t been for the dogs.

Many of the local tribe members were away at the coast, working the season in the fish canneries. They left behind their dogs, up to thirty per household it seemed, animals which didn’t look like pets and probably just barely fit the category. They prowled the town alone and in packs, seeking things to sniff but most importantly, to keep their hides away from their ribcages in the absence of their owners. Therein lay the problem, numbered in its hundreds.

With all the curious sights, nobody at first noticed their top dog the guest of honour inside a circle of locals, ears flattened and fur spiked like the porcupine quills he seemed so fond of decorating his snout with. Only when the greeting committee put their intentions into action did everyone spin toward the yelping, snarling and snapping that spelled a bad day for the tourist. It was a good thing Frisco had grown fond of his workmate because when Melinda Mae set him toward the fur flying mayhem, it took a horse of serious commitment to risk the carnage in aid of a friend. But risk it he did, Melinda Mae thrashing her reins, Frisco whirling, tromping and kicking, sending bullies cartwheeling between totem poles as if launched from a one horsepower cannon. Any sensible savage beast should’ve recognized the peril, but a credit to their bloodlines, not till the last cur was dented did the limping survivors finally poke pride between legs and vanish from the street. Behind them in the dust and floating fur, bleeding from everywhere but one floppy ear, was poor perforated Prickles. Art was in the wagon with Cheng Wah on a mission to buy supplies. He sighed and reached behind the bench for his rum bottle.

Cheng Wah said, “You good boss.” And jumped down to recover the casualty.

With the doctor in the back ministering to his patient, the wagon continued to the Hudson’s Bay Company Store, where Art commenced the bargaining process for supplies vital to their final push for the northern B.C. border, which would commence the other side of the Skeena River.

“How much for a sack of flour?”

The clerk looked more like a carnival barker with a hangover than a representative of the most powerful trading conglomerate in the country. He gazed across the counter with watery, red rimmed eyes. “Fifteen dollars.”

“Merciful mother! Fifteen dollars?”

The eyes didn’t blink. “How many do you want?”

“Bloody hell, I could buy the boat they came on for what you’re asking. I won’t pay fifteen dollars here for what costs three in Ashcroft.”

The man turned away.

Art gritted his teeth and tried again. “Where’s your fresh meat? Do you keep it somewhere cool?”

The clerk didn’t turn. “If you want fresh meat, mister, shoot your horse. I sell dry goods and bacon. It’s shipped up the coast by boat.” He turned again to the customer. “And that costs money.”

“Alright, I get it, you sell for whatever people will pay - that’s business. Well, I’m a businessman too and it just so happens I can provide fresh beef. Would you be willing to talk a trade?”

Sarcastic sneer. “You brought a cow with you up the trail, is that what you’re saying? You’re a cowboy?”

“In fact I am a rancher, sir. And I have two hundred head of cattle camped a mile from this place, of which I’m willing to part with two prime steers in trade for flour, bacon and coffee. Rice or beans would be nice too, if you’ve got them, and sugar – here’s my list.” He pushed a crumpled piece of paper over the counter. “Oh…and I’ll take four bottles of Hudson’s Bay Rum, I know you’ve got that.”

The clerk stared at the list, blinking. He seemed at least temporarily to be paying attention. Finally: “What you’re asking is ridiculous. Where would I store the meat, even if I knew how to butcher it?”

Art studied the shelves and aisles. “If I were you, I’d hang it right out here where people can see it. I guarantee fresh beef won’t sit around this place more than a couple of days. There’s not a man on that trail has tasted steak in months, probably more like a year. Now, can we do business?”

“Like I said, I still don’t know anything about cutting up cows.”

“All you need is a knife and saw. Want me to find them on a shelf for you?”

The clerk stared again at the list. “That’s not enough meat…I’ll need three steers. And you do the butchering.”

“I don’t have time. I told you I’m driving a herd.” Art pulled a finger along his moustache. “Three steers, but I’ll need double the bacon and beans. Oh, and I have a dog that’s a bloody mess. What can you do for that? And don’t say rum.”

“Fleas?”

“That too.”

“Coal oil mixed with camphor works, or so I’ve been told.”

“Fine, I’ll take some. You get that list ready and I’ll be back with the beef directly. Don’t keep me waiting, I’ve got a long way to go.”

The clerk shrugged. “Alright, we’ve got a deal. Where are you taking the cows?”

“Dawson City. Heard any word about the weather up there?”

The man’s mouth dropped open. “Dawson City…you’re out of your mind. With two hundred animals?”

“One hundred and ninety-seven after this…actually ninety-six, we lost one awhile back.”

“Mister, you are crazier than a loon in June.”

Art touched his hat. “Don’t keep a crazy man waiting.”

What in fact kept Art waiting was rum. He returned to camp with the supplies, gave the two men minding the herd, Percy and Skip, the rest of the day off to visit town, then poured himself a cupful of relaxation from his replenished supply. He and Melinda Mae took over the business of minding the quiet herd with what was left of Prickles. Cheng Wah stayed too, and cooked up a sizzling feast of flapjacks heaped beside bacon and beans for just the four of them. With only the quiet swish of cattle through tall grass, it was a summer evening fat with the promise of fine weather and an easy camp. No one was expected back in a hurry, but when the sun began to set and only Victor reappeared, slumped in the saddle with his hat on the back of his head, Art expressed his concern.

“Where’s the others?”

“Drunk.”

Straight off, the boss realized his mistake. “Dammit, how bad?”

Victor dismounted and almost fell against his horse. He appeared to have hurt his feet, which seemed reluctant to pick a spot and just stand there. “Bad, especially that pile of buffalo shit from the prairie. No, the leftover brother was worse, halfway dead and throwing up on the church steps when I left.”

Melinda Mae stared. “Percy got drunk? Why, I never for one minute imagined such a sensible young man would ruin himself with drink. The way he was sorrowing over his brother, I’m surprised he even left camp.”

Victor hiccupped.

Art said, “Go find a cold flapjack, Victor. You’ll want something in your stomach to soak up the poison.”

“I’m fine, boss, not…*hiccup*…hungry right now.”

Melinda Mae said, “Victor, have you been drinking too?”

“Who cares? You’re not my wife.”

The girl’s head snapped back. “Well, no, I most certainly am not. If I was your wife, I’d make you sleep with the dog until you came crawling out, ready to say sorry.”

For the second time on the drive, their point rider flashed his cutting little smile. “If I was your husband, I’d put you over my knee and teach you to mind your own business.”

Melinda Mae’s green eyes flashed. “Why, I…”

Art said, “Alright, you two, that’s enough without a wedding. Victor, I’ll be needing you tomorrow with a clear head, so get some sleep. Melinda Mae, leave the hobbles off, but do a check around that none of your animals appear gimped.” Then he added, “Victor, I believe we can send mail from here. You want to write a letter to your wife?”

Melinda Mae looked as if she’d been hit with the flat end of a shovel. After Victor muttered he didn’t have any paper and her dad offered to give him some, but he still turned down the opportunity, she crept to her father and whispered, “Victor’s…married?”

The Tsilhqot’in cowboy was dragging his saddle across the ground like a sack of Comox Valley potatoes and hissing something through his teeth that sounded vaguely like the tune to *Annie Laurie.* He hiccupped and dropped the saddle.

Art shook his head and turned to his daughter. “You didn’t know?”

“Well, how am I supposed to smell that? Nobody tells me nothing.”

He shrugged. “You could’ve asked.”

“Jinks, Dad, why would I care anyway?”

“…jinks…?”

“He doesn’t even wear a ring.”

Art said, “Not everyone out here gets married over a bible. I don’t even know if he’s Christian. Anyway, what difference would it make, unless you were thinking you liked him.”

Instant terror. “Dad, I was not thinking anything of the sort! What’s wrong with you?”

But her father’s eyes were beginning to gather that sparkle. It had to be the rum; no wonder her mum hated when he got like this.

He smirked, “Of course, it might not be too late. I’m pretty sure the Chilcotin half of him is allowed more than one wife.”

Her jaw dropped. This certainly wasn’t a subject to be discussed with someone as indelicate about such matters as her father, and right in front of the person concerned. She gritted her teeth and forced the words out in stiff grunts. “That…man…is a rude pig. Did you not hear what he said to me?”

From the direction of the blanket covered lump in front of Victor’s saddle, a fart rang out.

Art said, “Guess he’s already eaten.” Then he reached to his daughter’s shoulder. “Melinda Mae, there’s things I don’t generally discuss with you. That’s not because I don’t love you or care what you’re doing, but you’re a girl and that makes it a great deal harder to speak of such matters as…”

She didn’t know what was suddenly so hard for him to get out, but the hand on her shoulder and creepy grownup voice made her desperately want to turn and run away.

“…falling in love…”

Oh, merciful muskrats, he wasn’t actually thinking of giving her…*the talk*.

Art took a healthy gulp from his rum cup. “The truth is, I’d prefer to leave such ticklish matters for your mother, but you appear to be growing up a great deal faster than anyone expected out here.” He paused, took a breath. “You see, there’s things you’re bound to feel when you start changing into an adult. They’re…powerful and strange.”

*Maybe there was a hole somewhere she could accidentally fall into…or jump in the fire.*

He cleared his throat.

She edged closer to the fire.

He said, “When I was your age I was sent away to boarding school. There weren’t any girls, but there was this boy who looked and sounded a lot like a girl.”

Her eyebrows went up and her feet stopped shuffling toward oblivion.

“He couldn’t have weighed more than sixty pounds. He was a lot like a doll.”

It was difficult not to listen, even though she was strangely repulsed at the same time. She mumbled, “A doll…really, a doll?”

Art cleared his throat again and went on, “As luck would have it, he drew the bunk right next to mine. And I know it sounds strange, but before we fell asleep every night, he made me tuck him in and…”

*Oh, dear Lord.*

“And give him…”

Her eyebrows slithered together and she clamped her eyes shut, not daring to breathe.

“A pat on the head.”

“Huh?” Her eyes shot open.

Her father aimed a wistful look at the sky. “I remember his hair was like feathers.”

“That’s your story…that’s it? What has that possibly got to do with anything?”

He looked down at her. “Well, he was sort of…girl like. Maybe even pretty.”

“Ooooo…Dad.”

“And sleeping beside him, I sometimes - ”

Her eyes clamped shut again, hands over terrified ears. “You don’t have to tell me everything!”

But her father wasn’t finished. “Sometimes I dreamt that he and I - ”

“Tra-la-la! La-la-la!”

“Married each other’s sisters. And lived happily ever after in a big house by a lake.”

“La-la-LAA!”

He tugged a hand off her ear. “So you see, there’s plenty of unusual feelings that can pop out of nowhere when you’re in the business of growing up.”

She was almost out of breath. She looked into her dad’s sincere blue eyes and between exasperated puffs of breath said, “You are the strangest person…even for a father. I don’t want to hear any more stories about feather head.”

“Daniel…his name was Daniel.”

She spun away, skin prickling with the disturbing visions muddling around in her head. “Your talk helped, Dad. Honestly, I’m a changed person…thanks.”

“Well, that’s what parents are for.”

“Jinks…I really mean that…jinks.”

She headed for the wagon and Prickles, where Cheng Wah had left the dog on a blanket to lick his alcohol soaked wounds. Melinda Mae climbed up and wrapped her arms around the damaged black and white head. “Oh, Prickles, you have no idea how lucky you are to be a dog.” Then she wrinkled her forehead and mumbled, “I mean, maybe not today particularly. But over a lifetime you got a whole lot less to worry about than people do, let me tell you.”

And that of course made Prickles want to lick her, not only because he was a dog, but because he was a natural born herder, which gave him a special understanding of other creatures’ needs. He slopped his wet caring tongue across her salty cheek and tried to wriggle onto his back to let her scratch his belly, but it hurt too much. So he just lay there and panted in the warm night with the girl’s arms around him, absorbing her troubled thoughts into his thick fur and being as helpful as he possibly could.

She held that warm head and stared up to the last sliver of a disappearing July moon. *Was it actually true Victor could have two wives?*

By mid-morning next day, the remainder of the crew had dragged one by one back into camp, eyes like slits and all but Skip leading their horses. Percy had his hat on backwards. If Art could’ve grown a spare foot, he’d have kicked himself with it; they hardly remembered which side of their pants their flies buttoned on, let alone how to mount a horse. He lined them up in the fine strong sun and tongue lashed them for as long as he could think of words, then made them take turns standing before a bucket of water, dousing their heads. Percy had to be rescued by the hair. Only Victor was ready to ride; he presented himself afterward, prepared to move. Art gave the others a final sour look and turned to him.

“Just head up the trail to the Kispiox crossing they told us about. I hear the Indians running the show there are Methodists and don’t want to work on Sunday, which apparently is today. If they’re not in church, find out how much they’ll charge to cross us tomorrow morning. No point risking another drowning if there’s a ferry right there.”

Victor nodded, but not too hard, and went to catch his horse.

The boss turned back to the others wilting under their dripping hair, eyes like flattened spoons. He began with a dry sigh. “In case you haven’t figured it out already, I am thoroughly disgusted by any man who drinks so much he can’t present himself for work the next day. That dog has more sense than the lot of you and he eats porcupines.” Prickles raised his head from the wagon and perked his uninjured ear. “Now get out of my sight until you’ve slept it off!”

They scattered.

Cheng Wah wandered over to his boss, copper ladle swinging by his leg. “Too many cowboys, not enough dogs.”

“I lied, the dog’s no better. He’s finished off more rum this month than a pirate on shore leave. I think he injures himself on purpose.”

“That may be, he’s a smart dog. One egg or two?”

Art’s eyebrows lifted. “You’ve got eggs?”

“While you traded cows, I went looking for chickens.”

That put light back in the boss’s eyes. “You, sir, are a resourceful cook.”

“What if I told you I’m not really a cook?”

“Well, whatever you are, you fake it better than my wife.”

“Potstickers and bacon don’t take learning in school.”

Art pushed back his hat. “So what are you then, really?”

There was a moment of honest contact between employee and employer, but then a cloud passed the little man’s eyes. “No…I’m a cook. You are what you do and this is what I do.”

Art peered at the person who had prepared his meals the past fifteen years, never once hinting a desire to do anything else. “You’re one of those Chinese acrobats, aren’t you? That’s why you can move like you do.”

“That’s right, I’m an acrobat. Watch this...” Cheng Wah leapt, ladle twirling, and landed facing the other way, cooking utensil spiked like some medieval weapon. Slowly, his leading leg extended sideways up past shoulder level – it was lightning bolts and flowers unfolding all at the same time, and it was more confusing than anything Art had ever seen in life.

“What, um…circus does that come from?”

“The circus of life.”

“I see, and when you stick your leg up in the air like that, does it hurt?”

“Only the first two hundred times. Then it gets better.”

Art said, “I saw a Wild West Show one time where a bloke folded himself inside a tea crate.”

Cheng Wah nodded. “A good thing to know if you die where there’s no coffin.”

A small chuckle. “You’re not really an acrobat either, are you?”

The cook turned toward his fire. “I already told you, I’m a cook.”

“Sure you are, and I’m a London architect.”

Walking away now. “And I come from California.”

“How’s that…California?”

Cheng Wah was almost out of earshot. “I can never go back, even to see my son. Or I’ll be hung.”

“You want to see the sun again in California?”

“I miss him very much.”

Art called toward the fire, “Never been there, myself, but I’m told San Francisco is beautiful.”

“…beautiful, but dangerous…”

Chapter Ten

Lucas awoke with a sting like a wasp on his arm. He bolted upright and hurled the blanket away; it was on fire. The next thing he saw was a face in flickering orange light, a narrow face under a drooping black hat. He grabbed for the rifle – gone.

A voice like bear claws on tree bark said, “I took that so you don’t try nothing stupid.”

Lucas blinked away sleep. “I…the fire was too big, I guess. Who are you?”

“Kid, I ask the questions and you shut up till I say different.”

There were two of them, a big hairy one and a skinny one. The skinny one sneered, “Yeah, shut up kid.”

“…okay…”

The big guy said, “So where’s the rest of your family?”

“My family ain’t with me, I ride alone.”

“Think I’m stupid? No momma lets her kid ride by hisself way the hell out here.”

“I’m trying to catch up with my brother. He’s on a cattle drive to the Klondike. He’s a top cowboy.”

The big guy was ugly, but not as ugly as the skinny one with the pock face. Big ugly poked skinny in the arm. “Cattle drive to the Klondike…he must be one helluva cowboy.”

Lucas wiped drool from his cheek. “He is. And I’m a cowboy too.”

Big ugly snickered behind his beard. “Is that what them woolly pants are for, they’re supposed to be chaps? Well, I’ll tell you what we are, kid - we’re hungry. So we’re just gonna tie you to a tree and eat your food. You okay with that?”

Lucas wasn’t okay with that, but what was he going to do? He said, “If I had my rifle, I wouldn’t be okay with it.”

It wasn’t supposed to be funny, but this guy seemed to like everything he said. “Hear that? The kid wants to shoot us, but we took away his rifle...well, boo-hoo. That what you want, kid, you wanna shoot us?”

Lucas bunched his fists and gritted his teeth.

Skinny pointed into the dark. “Rifle’s over there. Why don’t you go get it?”

*Sure…like he was just that stupid.* He said, “You must think I’m stupid.”

Big ugly’s beard shook. “Ha…hear that? I figure we got us a real smarty here.”

“…I ain’t so smart…”

“That’s right, kid, you ain’t smart. But I am, and I’m gonna tell your fortune: you’re gonna get tied to a tree while we eat your food. And then we’re gonna leave you there till a bear comes to eat you up and shit you out, and you ain’t never gonna see your momma again.” He turned to skinny. “Whaddya think, that sound about right?”

Skinny served up an evil sneer. “Bear shit him out, that’s funny.” He grabbed Lucas’s arm to yank him to his feet. Still with that twisted little smile, he dug in his fingers and said, “We should hang him up by his feet. Swing him upside down so the bear gets to play with him a little.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, we got that fish. If we shove that down his pants, the bear’s gonna go there first.”

“But I wanted to cook that fish.”

Skinny said, “There’s lots more fish around, y’big pig. Just think about the bear chewing his baby dink off.”

The thought of hanging upside down while a bear ate his dink was too much for Lucas. His eyes welled with tears and he said, “You guys…please…you don’t gotta do this. Why would you wanna kill somebody you don’t even know? Especially some mean way that’s gotta hurt like that?”

Big ugly said, “Well, I suppose we could smash your head in if you want. Then when the bear comes, it ain’t gonna hurt.”

“Mister…*sob, sniffle*…please.”

“Please what? Please smash your head or wait for bear?”

“Mister, I promise if you let me down now I won’t tell nobody how crazy you are.”

That brought a whack across the mouth and a snarl. “Get the fish.”

And that’s when Lucas knew there was no way out. He was gonna get ate by a bear, starting with his dink. He sobbed while they trussed him up with his own rope and shoved the fish down his pants. Then they hauled him into the tree and let him swing there with tears in his eyes while they ate his food and tossed rocks at him.

Skinny grinned. “Crying’s good, bear’s gonna hear that.”

Big ugly said, “We gotta go now, but we’ll be back in the morning to collect up your bones in a sack and tie them to your horse. Then we’ll send him on home to momma.”

“Mister…don’t leave me alone…*sob*.”

But they did that; they left him dangling in the dark with his hands cinched behind his back. The longer he hung there, the louder every sound got, each rustle or rattle sending a freezing shiver up his spine…or down it…until a shuffle and sniff from behind froze him stiff as a fence post. The fire was almost finished. He twisted to try and stare into the darkness. Something was moving out there, something that smelled worse than the fish in his pants. *The bear.* He would’ve cried again, but couldn’t, he was that scared.

What was it waiting for? Was it like the crazy men and taking its time to torture him? Then he wished he hadn’t thought that, because out of the bush it came.

Small and dark…a bear…no, only the size of a dog. Lucas’s heart fluttered with relief; it was a harmless little baby. Wait, baby bears didn’t roam the bush alone. That was bad, but the next thing he realized was even worse. Slinking like a shadow across the clearing, the thing wasn’t a bear at all. He’d only ever seen such a creature once before and that was a long time ago by the edge of the river, lurking over a salmon carcass. He knew all about it, though, knew it was the smartest thing in the bush. A wolverine - it snuffled as it came, staring up at him hanging from his branch. It stopped and twisted to see better with its evil little eyes, trying to figure him out, but it didn’t trust what it saw, wouldn’t press too close. He knew they were ferocious, that a lone wolverine could chase a bear off its kill. He’d even heard a family of the demons could bring down a grown caribou. Or if an unlucky trapper like old Jock Holloway got one on his trapline, raiding bait, sometimes the only way to fix things was to give up and move someplace else. About the only reason this one hadn’t come yet was because a live person hanging from a tree probably didn’t look right.

Wait…that was true. It was probably just as afraid as he was. He yelled, “Get away!”

The creature leapt back, snarling.

“Go on, beat it!”

It slunk further toward the trees.

“Get the heck out of here! Go on!”

But this time the yelling didn’t work. Measuring the threat with those unblinking eyes, it pressed against the ground and refused to retreat any further.

Lucas tried again, “Beat it!”

Then the worst of all possible things happened - it got brave. Slowly, cautiously, it came slinking forward again. It crawled on its belly directly under his branch, where it crouched, sniffing. If it jumped, it could reach his head. That’s what it was getting ready to do, wasn’t it…coiling up the courage to jump. This close, the stink was worse than a heap of rotting skunk cabbage. He snapped and twisted against the rope, trying to free his wrists. He didn’t want the last thing he saw in this world to be those yellow fangs coming for his face, but he just couldn’t shake the rope. Terrified of what the next breath would bring, he clamped his eyes shut.

BLAM!

His eyes shot open to see a dark ball of fur cartwheeling to a twitching halt by the dying fire. Then a voice called, “You okay, boy?”

*Holy crap, he knew that voice.* “Yeah…jeepers, am I ever glad you showed up.”

“What in blazes are you doing up there?”

Lucas poked his tongue between his teeth. “Oh, just hanging around. What’re you doing?”

“Heading home. I seen your fire.”

Then he saw him, or more precisely, what was left of him. He muttered, “Constable Hobbs…what…happened to you?”

“Well, a bear tried to eat me. Then wolves.”

“You got a patch over your eye.”

“Not sure which one did that. You want down?”

*What a stupid question.* He said, “Heck, there’s wild animals and crazy bandits. I could stay up here all night.”

Constable Hobbs had always been pretty straight, especially with Lucas’s dad. He didn’t seem to laugh much, so it wasn’t a surprise when he scratched his head and said, “If that’s what you really want. I heard it said a man can get used to hanging if he hangs long enough. Never figured it was true, though.”

“I was joking, okay? I’d like you to cut me down now, please.”

“Oh, a joke, sure…you got a knife?”

“You don’t have a knife?”

“Nope, these aren’t even my clothes. Wolves got them. Doctor lent me a horse and rifle, said I could send the money later.”

Lucas said, “I got a knife over by my saddle. Can you hurry up, please?”

Hobbs headed for the saddle. “Smells terrible around here. You been eating fish?”

“Nope, but I got one in my pants if you’re hungry.”

“No thanks. Why’d you put a fish in your pants?”

“I didn’t put it there, the bandits did. Can you cut me down now?”

Hobbs came back with the knife and stretched upward. He groaned, “This is the hard part. I have to reach with my right arm because my left’s hurt bad. Hope I can catch you okay.”

“Wolves ate it?”

“Nope, that was the bear. You say there were bandits?”

Lucas hit the ground on his head in spite of the lame arm trying to hold him. He offered his wrists to get the rope cut, pulled the fish out of his pants and told Hobbs the entire horrible story. He also told him about his plan to catch up with the herd and take the job he’d been offered. Hobbs didn’t seem too interested in the part about catching up with the herd.

“Was one of the bandits an Indian with cracked teeth and a revolver pistol?”

“Nope.”

“Did they talk about an Indian with cracked teeth and a revolver pistol?”

“Nope, they just talked about hanging me in a tree till a bear came.”

The lone eye aimed a serious stare. “Darn, then I suppose I need to keep looking.”

Lucas said, “If it helps, I know where they’re gonna be tomorrow morning.”

“You do…where?”

“Right here. They said they’re gonna come back and stick my bones in a sack for my horse to take home. I figure that’s why they left Buster behind, so when he skedaddles on back, my folks will know whose bones are in the sack.”

The eye blinked. “Why, that’s just the most evil plan I ever heard.”

“Except they never counted on you. Now when they come, you can shoot them real good.”

Hobbs stared into the dark. “They won’t be far off, probably heard the shot. Might even be on their way already.”

“Great, then you’ll be done quick. It’ll be easy, huh?”

The eye stared with icy conviction. “Son, I can tell you there ain’t a darn thing easy about this job.”

They unhobbled Buster and hitched him to a tree, but led Hobbs’s horse off the trail and out of sight. Hobbs picked a spot uphill among some pine trees and boulders to set his ambush. He couldn’t see north to where he’d come in, but reasoned if the bandits had left in that direction, he’d have met them already. There were still about four hours left until daylight, with the moon in its last quarter, rising late - that offered a degree of weak cold light. Together, man and boy wiggled down into the rocks and stared toward the dark camp. There was nothing to do but wait.

The only problem with that was Lucas had never been much good at waiting; he was more inclined to wiggle around and blabber. “I always wanted to be a cowpuncher, but if that don’t work out, maybe I’ll figure on being a lawman, like you.”

“Shhh…”

“They can’t hear us. They ain’t that close or they’d of come right after you shot that wolverine.”

“That was a wolverine? I thought it was a baby bear.”

“Geez, you’re dumb. A baby bear would’ve had its momma around. You don’t know much, do you?”

“Shhh…”

But a little while later, “My dad don’t like you much.”

“That’s not my fault. Shhh…”

“He says you’re a rulebook waving popinjay and you don’t know nothing about how to handle people. He figures first time you go poking around the new reservation you’re gonna come out with your backside full of feathers.”

Hobbs aimed his eye at the boy. “The rules are the same for one bunch of people as the next. I’m a Provincial Policeman and it’s my duty to deliver the law exactly the same to everybody.”

“Huh…my dad was right, you’re a popinjay.”

Voice rising. “I am not a popinjay.”

“That ain’t what I’m hearing.”

Hobbs clunked his rifle stock down hard on the rock in front of him, staring back toward the camp. “It’s time for you to shut up now, or I’ll tie you back up that tree.” Then he grumbled, “What’re those things on your legs anyway? They look like fluffy pants.”

“These are genuine wool chaps! They’re what the real cowpunchers are wearing these days. If you were from around here, you’d know that.”

“Shhh…”

“…popinjay...”

The moon rose higher. Lucas’s eyes closed, his head drooped to the arm stretched across his rock and slobber started oozing out the side of his mouth. Hobbs was glad for the lack of company. But maybe the boy was right. On this, his very first case, he’d been mauled by animals, lost his rifle, revolver and horse, and until he bumped into this kid, hadn’t come within a hundred miles of catching a bad guy. Who was he kidding? He couldn’t even tell a baby bear from a wolverine; how was he meant to execute a job as complicated as policing half the darn province when he didn’t know what kind of wildmen and beasts lived in the wilderness anyway? It seemed stupid to imagine he was going to arrest crafty criminals and keep a lid on injustice when everything on the frontier was more dangerous than he was. To make things worse, the boy was starting to snore.

“Boy, hey boy…quit snoring.”

*“Kwuu-kuu…phhhh…”*

“Boy!” Hobbs rattled a skinny shoulder.

Lucas jerked upright. “Huh?”

“Quit snoring, you’re wrecking the ambush.”

Lucas wiped slobber from his cheek. “I wasn’t snoring. I wasn’t even asleep.”

“You were snoring. Shut up.”

“Know what? This ambush is dumb in the first place. You should’ve stuck yourself up the trail a ways, where the bandits ain’t gonna get a look at my camp first and figure out something’s wrong. You don’t know nothing about ambushes and I wasn’t snoring.”

A voice like a bear scraping tree bark said, “Kid, you were snoring.”

Lucas spun. So did Hobbs, who got a rifle butt in the mouth, spraying tooth chips into the moonlight. His head snapped back and his weapon clattered down the far side of the boulders, then he fell forward on his face.

It was the big ugly guy and his skinny friend. Big ugly growled, “Who’s this?”

“Uh…he’s…just somebody came along. He felt sorry for me because he got ate by a bear once too. He’s only got one eye.”

“He’s lucky I didn’t kill him.”

Lucas said, “So howcome you gotta kill everybody all the time? You don’t figure maybe there’s something wrong with that?”

“Know what, kid, we were on our way back to cut you down, but now you tried to ambush us, you gotta die for sure. This guy alone?”

“Heck no, he’s got a whole bunch of soldiers waiting up the trail. He’s a general in the army.”

Big ugly growled and spat. “Kid, I never heard nobody talk so much crap. Now get down the hill and get on your horse.”

“Huh?” Lucas looked up, swelling with hope. “You changed your mind, you’re gonna let me go?”

“Not hardly. We’re gonna tie your legs around your horse and then shoot you in the saddle. Shouldn’t of tried to ambush us, y’little turd.”

There went hope. Lucas swallowed and said, “My dad’s gonna be real mad. He’s gonna come after you.”

“Who cares? Lots of people are after us.”

Skinny said, “Yeah, lots of people.”

“Well, my dad ain’t like lots of people. He’s seven feet tall and used to be the policeman for these parts. He’s gonna catch you and stick you in jail, and then they’re gonna hang you for killing me. My dad’s - ”

Skinny said, “He’s a lawman?”

Lucas nodded. “Used to be…so you Jaspers better watch out.”

Big ugly roared, “A lawman - hell, we can’t shoot this kid. That’d be wrong.”

Lucas looked up again. “Yeah, that’d be wrong.”

“We gotta think of something special, something that takes a long time.”

Skinny said, “Like cut out his liver and make him eat it?”

Lucas’s eyes went wide; maybe he shouldn’t have bragged about his dad, after all.

Big ugly said, “Or burn his eyes out with a red hot knife. Then stick him with it right in the throat.”

“No way, let’s skin him alive and wrap his hide around his saddle. Then tie the carcass up there and send his horse on home with the crows pecking him to pieces.”

“Hee-hee…I like that one.”

Skinny grabbed Lucas’s arm and yanked him to his feet. The evil eyes in the pock face gleamed. “Damn, this is gonna be more fun than squashing frogs. I can’t wait for him to start screaming.”

Lucas felt like screaming already. They marched him down the hill and hoisted him all over again into the rotten darn tree, dangling by his ankles. Skinny drew a giant Bowie knife and waved it in his face.

“It’s kinda dull,” he sniggered, “so this might hurt.”

Big ugly said, “First we gotta cut off them fluffy pants. Where’d you get the dumb things anyway, your momma make them for you?”

Lucas said, “They’re wool chaps and you’re the one who’s dumb.”

The knife gleamed in cold blue light. Skinny snarled, “You shouldn’t call folks names, kid. Especially folks with knives.”

“I ain’t scared. I dare you to turn around and look at what’s behind you.”

“Oh, now we got something behind us, do we? Lemme guess, is it a bear?”

“Nope.”

“Aw, I’m dying to find out. Is it your daddy come to arrest us?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I’m tired of waiting so I’m just gonna start peeling your skin off. Hold still now, don’t wanna make a mess of it.”

Lucas said, “It’s some Indian with a six gun. And I think he’s gonna shoot you with it.”

Skinny froze. Big ugly stopped breathing, then slowly started turning.

Lucas said, “I thought you guys were mean and evil bandits. Now here you are about to get robbed.”

The newcomer said, “Not rob. Just shoot.”

“That’s a great idea, shoot them. Then cut me down.”

Big ugly finished turning. He held his hands out, palms up. “Ain’t no gun here, chief. Not gonna try nothing funny.”

The gunman said, “Why hang boy in tree?”

“This baby turd was gonna ambush us. He’s a sneaky runt.”

“Why you follow me?”

“Aw, now…we wasn’t following you, chief. We was just heading up the trail, minding our own business just like before you took off with our horses and left us stuck in that old cabin to die.”

“Cabin man feed, give whiskey. Not need kill. All time you kill no reason.” The gun pointed at Lucas. “Boy, why you here?”

“Mister, I’m on my way to team up with my brother on a cattle drive to the Klondike. These jerks hung me up and tossed rocks at me while they ate my food. Now they wanna skin me alive.”

“I see cows on trail go north. Brother ride with them?”

“You probably heard of him, he’s Victor Hance.”

The gunman stiffened. “Victor brother? You name Hance?”

“Uh, huh…I’m Lucas. Me and Victor are brothers.”

“You father name Tom?”

“Yup, that’s my dad. He used to be a lawman.”

Big ugly spat and growled, “We were just about to send this lawman’s kid on home to him, all skinned out.”

The gunman said, “Father no friend, but brother family, not kill or raven spirit be mad. You cut boy down.”

“Y’know, chief, that’s what I never could figure about you, all that Injun junk. Nobody cares if some bird gets mad. But hell, if that’s what you want, you’re the man with the gun.” Big ugly turned to his partner. “Go ahead, cut the runt down like the chief here wants.” Then he nodded toward the knife and winked. “Careful with that thing…knife’s a dangerous weapon if you ain’t paying attention.”

Skinny reached up and sawed until Lucas dropped with a thump to lay groaning and holding his skull. “That’s twice tonight right on my head.”

Skinny snarled, “Shut up, kid.” And aimed a kick.

It was too much; that’s when Lucas got mad. He grabbed the boot and twisted till the man yelped and toppled off balance, then he jumped on top of him, biting anything that stuck out. The watching gunman rushed toward the pair of wiggling bodies and big ugly saw his chance to take off running. The weapon swerved around and two shots boomed. On the ground, Skinny shoved Lucas off finally to lunge at the gunman’s turned back. The pair toppled together and the gun went flying. There was a deep groan. Then skinny sprang to his feet, the giant Bowie knife sticking straight up out of the other man’s chest. He gave the twitching body a kick and turned to Lucas, “Your turn, runt.”

“No…I don’t think so.”

“I ain’t gonna mess around this time. Just gonna strangle you with my bare hands.” Skinny stalked forward.

Lucas said, “You really oughtta think about being nicer to me, mister.”

“Not this time, kid.”

“Okay, suit yourself. But I told you so.”

A viciously swung stick connected so hard with the back of skinny’s head his eyeballs bulged. He didn’t topple forward, he flew to land by Lucas’s feet, face down and still as a sack of wet grain.

Lucas said, “What happened to your rifle?”

Hobbs stared at the sprawled victim. “Don’t know, couldn’t find it. Found this stick, though.”

Lucas pointed. “The hairy one’s over that way. He got shot, but might still be alive. That Indian guy on the ground is related to my brother Victor.”

“There’s a knife sticking straight up out of him.”

“Yeah, reckon he might be dead.”

Hobbs scratched his head. “Who the devil are these people, anyway?”

“They’re the bad guys, Constable, and we caught them.”

More scratching of head. “Suppose we did…uh, huh.”

“I wasn’t so sure you could do it.”

With his eye patch and bloodied mouth, Hobbs looked like he’d just stepped off a pirate ship. He managed to crack a chipped toothed smile. “Well, us Provincial Policemen always get our man.”

“Is that actually true?”

“For me, I can honestly say it is exactly true…so far.”

“So I guess you ain’t no popinjay, after all.”

“I suppose…no, I’m not.”

Skinny was unconscious and didn’t look to be coming back to the world anytime soon, so they left him to follow a blood trail to big ugly, still crawling through a patch of Saskatoon berry bushes. He’d been shot through the meat of his thigh, but as luck would have it, wasn’t in danger of dying anytime soon. However, you wouldn’t know it from all the moaning when they stood him up and marched him back. Hobbs had Lucas cover both prisoners with the captured six gun while he hogtied hands behind backs and went through pockets. The sight of the silver brooch raised what was left of his eyebrows. Back at Hanceville, Lavinia had told him an item exactly like this one had been stolen from Darryl O’Hare just before the murder.

“Where’d you get this?”

The prisoner spat through his beard. “Present from the last woman I had.”

“You don’t look like the sort women give presents to.”

“Whaddya you know about it? Women like a real man.”

“Okay, so a woman gave it you. Do you remember her name?”

“Never asked. I was busy with other stuff, if you know what I mean.”

Hobbs fingered the brooch. The murderer had taken it and Darryl’s horse, but this wasn’t the man Lavinia described as showing up at the store. The suspect who best fit that description had a ten inch Bowie knife sticking out of his chest. Still, any pair of deviates who’d string a twelve-year-old from a tree were probably guilty of just about anything you could point at in the law books. He nodded toward the body under the knife. “Who’s that guy?”

“Used to ride with us till he stole our horses and left us to die in the bush.”

“Have you seen him since?”

“Couple of times from a distance.” The lips behind the beard twisted. “Just couldn’t get in rifle range.”

“So you were following him to kill him.”

Another smile. “Naw, we just wanted to talk old times. It was him tried to kill us just now. He got what he deserved.”

A thought was pressing on Hobbs’s mind. “Did you follow him to the Chilcotin?”

“We been all over the place. So howcome you wanna know all this stuff anyway? Just who the hell are you?”

Hobbs squinted hard with his one eye. “I’m the man you knocked in the teeth with a rifle butt. Just trying to figure out what’s going on here.”

“What’s going on is I been shot. Now if it ain’t too much trouble, how about a doctor?”

“Or how about I leave you to die just like you’d do to me if it was the other way around?”

“Aw, now…if it was me did the shooting, you wouldn’t be waiting to die. Last man I shot is dead six times over.”

“Really, you shot somebody six times?”

“Not completely. I shot him three and that buttwipe partner of mine shot him three more…like he wasn’t dead already.”

This was going somewhere; Darryl O’Hare had been shot six times, as if he’d been executed by a particularly determined villain. Hobbs said, “Why’d you do that, robbery?”

This time there was no smile. “He was Irish. Can’t stand the Irish and he had a nice horse, I needed a new one. Damn thing took off, though.”

It was all Hobbs wanted to hear. “Right, you’re both under arrest for the murder of Chilcotin rancher, Darryl O’Hare. Now get on the ground before I knock you down there with a rifle butt.”

The prisoner stared. “You’re a cop?”

“That is a fact, and you’re stupid.”

Lucas laughed. “Hey, mister, guess you’re finally starting to figure out who’s the real dummy, huh?”

Hobbs turned to Lucas. “Boy, we’re going to need the rest of your rope.”

“Sure, can we tie them under their horses? I think maybe they should know what it feels like to hang upside down awhile.”

The prisoner growled, “See, I told you this kid’s a scheming little runt.”

“And you’re a murderer. Now drop to your knees, I’m getting tired of telling you.”

The prisoner dropped and Hobbs wrapped his arms and chest, then the partner while he and Lucas held the unconscious man up by his hair. With the first light of dawn creeping into the sky, they located both their lost rifles and poured water on skinny to wake him up. It was not a cheerful arousal. There was plenty of swearing and threats to murder everyone’s children, but with a rifle stuck in his back, skinny made it to his horse, where he was instructed to climb aboard. It might’ve been nearly impossible with his hands trussed behind his back, but for Lucas’s idea to lift him with a rope tossed over a branch and a horse at the other end. Lucas swatted the horse’s rump and the prisoner shot up like a spring loaded *piñata,* where he cracked into the thick limb and abruptly became unconscious again. Lucas laughed. Hobbs growled at him to smarten up and grabbed the bridle to ease the animal back until skinny slopped into place.

Lucas sniggered, “It don’t pay to mess with a real cowboy.”

“Just do the job,” Hobbs said, “and stop acting like a brat.”

Big ugly growled, “Kid, I’m gonna make it my life’s mission to hunt you down and finish that skinning.”

Lucas cocked his head. “You better make it quick, dummy, because the next time you swing from a rope, it’s gonna get hard to breathe.”

Hobbs said, “Help me get him up, then we can both go on our way.”

They loaded the prisoner, pulled the knife out of the body and tied it behind skinny’s saddle. Lucas helped get the parade strung together, then said, “When I get back from the drive we gotta have a whiskey together.”

Hobbs said, “I don’t drink whiskey and neither should you.”

“Huh, good thing you’re a lawman, because you sure ain’t no cowboy.”

Chapter Eleven

With the crossing of the Skeena River came the rain. These were the times Floyd grew homesick for the ranch he grew up on near Pincher Creek, Alberta. Not that it never rained in Pincher Creek, but when it did, it generally flashed some lightning around, maybe whirled a few tornadoes and then got over it. But in this bountiful green province that bordered on the ocean, if the sky took a notion to dump water on your head, it might not change its mind for weeks. That’s the way this particular sky looked, grey as a tin bucket and so close to the top of your head you could reach up and poke it with a stick. Times like this, watching the water roll off his hat, Floyd’s thoughts often turned to his family, and if the circumstances seemed particularly difficult, his dad. If it was possible to cram a man in a jar with a dozen of the things he most naturally resembled in this world, Ewan (Mac) McMathers would be sharing a shelf somewhere with a bunch of pickles soaked sour by vinegar and just as crunchy to the core. Floyd’s mom used to say, “That man wouldn’t crack a smile if you tickled his toes with a turkey feather. He’d just ask if there was turkey for supper.” Which pretty much summed up Mac’s attitude toward most things around him – he appreciated their practical place on earth. In his practical way he also appreciated chickens, cows and all God’s creatures, no matter how they looked on a plate. He’d once saved a skunk from a grass fire. Which is how a child of the Blackfoot Nation came to be taken in by a hard working immigrant family from Ayrshire Scotland. Unfortunately, it was an act which had required a small massacre.

Floyd had been too small to remember, of course, but he’d been told by his mother it was a cold, blizzard scoured winter in southern Alberta. As she put it, “The wind blew so hard and sharp it could split the wood in your arms just carrying it to the house.” Out on the open prairie, if a jackrabbit hopped in the air it would sail thirty feet sideways before coming back down to the snow. It wasn’t the rabbits, though, but the natives who fared the worst. The local Piikani tribe of the Blackfoot Nation hadn’t yet been allotted their reserve land by the Oldman River, along with its handouts of blankets and beans, which was tragic because the enduring buffalo herds had been driven south of the border by a great prairie fire west of the Cypress Hills, straight into the waiting guns of American hunters, never to return. Nor were the settlers on their pre-empted parcels of land faring much better. Cattle froze standing up, horns poking out of snowdrifts like strange bicycle handlebars. It was a time of hardship for all.

Mac McMathers had set out with a neighbour to try and locate living specimens of their herds, when they happened on a Piikani family group on the move west, probably searching for shelter and better hunting grounds among the foothills bordering the Rockies. It was a truly desperate measure to be travelling in the dead of winter with women, children and no other mode of transportation than moccasin wrapped feet. There were no dogs or horses, probably already eaten. They would’ve likely all perished anyway, but this group had the bad luck to encounter a shorthorn heifer frozen in the lee of a willow thicket. They were hacking off chunks of the life giving meat and stowing it in anything they could carry when the ranchers arrived. Mac’s neighbour, Hank Dewitt, didn’t wait to ask questions. He rode in and opened fire. Within seconds, the baby on the back of the woman nearest the cow carcass became an orphan. Mac was so unprepared for the unexpected violence he barely recovered his senses until it was too late. By the time he charged in to knock his neighbour out of the saddle, everyone but the papoose was dead. It was the end of Mac’s good relations with Hank Dewitt, but the beginning of an unusual upbringing for a Piikani orphan by one of the finest, god fearing settler families on the prairie.

“We need to locate some of his people and give him back.” Mac said to his wife, Fiona.

The baby was on her lap by the fire, a copper faced little bundle of skin and bones in a fresh wool blanket. “You’ll roast in hell if you do, Ewan McMathers. You know he’ll be dead before spring like the rest of them. Besides, he’s an orphan, you said so yourself.”

“Well, you can’t keep him. He’s not ours, he’s not even white.”

“And where in the bible does it say to cast out those who be not white?”

There was only one type of person in this world who could alter the course of a McMathers male once that course was set, and that would be a Mrs. McMathers. Fiona would hear no more talk of it; the boy was staying and that was that. In springtime with the coming of the travelling priest, he was christened Floyd, and as for the surname, Billyboy, that was Mac’s invention of something he thought sounded suitably native.

Fiona sniffed, “Are you sure Billyboy is a Blackfoot name?”

“I’m sure.”

“It’s my suspicion, husband, you know as much about Blackfoot Indians as you do about your children’s birthdays.”

Mac’s sour face stared into the fire. “Don’t be daft, woman, it’s your job to know their birthdays, not mine.”

“But you’re an expert on Indians, I’m sure.”

“I am. Now let me be and go clean the dust off something.”

“I swear if I cleaned the dust around here, there’d be nothing left but mice.”

“Then dust the mice, but shoosh and let me be.”

The McMathers family was already blessed with twin sons and a fleshy, moon faced daughter, Effie. The girl had been born with an unfortunate condition that rendered her slow of thought, but no one around her mother could squeeze many thoughts in edgeways anyway. Mostly Floyd’s sister enjoyed plodding around in her plain pink dress and tending to the chickens, dropping bugs in front of them from a jar she used as a jail. She also had a special spot in her heart for her brother Floyd, but not the sinister twins, who bestowed upon their vulnerable sibling all manner of torments, like spiders, the one bug she didn’t favour. In fact, it was a particularly ugly spider with legs like a spring willow that made Floyd the sun, moon and stars in Effie’s almond shaped eyes. Blane and Donnan had crept onto the roof of the chicken coop, a place they’d been forbidden to go, lying in ambush for little Effie as she trooped toward her morning chore, jar in hand and squinting with concentration. She was, in fact, such a serious little chicken feeder that she rarely registered anything else, not even rain, when going about her tireless daily routine. The spider, though, landed on her nose.

Little Effie plunked on her bum amid a storm of twirling feathers, shrieking like a scalded magpie and clawing at her face while birds flapped and hurtled for the coop. Sure his sister was being attacked by some chicken stealing monster, Floyd sprinted to the rescue. At the sight of his brothers’ backsides disappearing over the far edge of the coop, though, he realized the more likely source of her distress and grabbed Effie’s hands away to see what manner of evil they’d done. The spider was in her hair. Floyd’s brave boy fingers grabbed the multi-legged peril to hurl it to the ground and tromp it flat in front of Effie’s amazed eyes. It was as if someone lit a lamp inside her. She beamed up at him and squealed again, but this time not in terror. Puffy with dust and feathers, she rose to push her pink arms around him for a giant hug and gushed, “I wuv you, Foy.” Never again would horrible monsters trouble her so long as her amazing brother, Floyd, was around to squash them with his brave feet. He was still thinking about his sister Effie when Melinda Mae rode up in the rain leading her horses and looking ready to fall out of the saddle and cry.

Floyd tipped his dripping hat and said, “No shame in hating the weather. Only a duck could be happy in this rain.”

Despite the little black hat, her hair skidded down her oiled slicker in auburn runnels of misery. She barely looked at him. “These horses have gotta eat. They can’t hardly lift their legs no more without falling over in the mud. I got two won’t finish the next ten miles without solid ground and some kind of graze to fill their bellies. How much farther do you expect before there’s grass?”

When the drive had passed through Hazelton, there was a man back from the gang slashing the trail who’d nailed up a map outside his cabin for the benefit of the passing pilgrims. On it he described in detail the bright spots and pitfalls of the trail ahead: ‘Twenty miles good feed…twenty miles no feed…small lake, little grass.’ Art had drawn a copy, which so far had proven dismally accurate. The only thing the map hadn’t been able to predict was the effect of the weather on the soupy sucking soil.

Floyd stared down the trail. “Speed we’re travelling, we might make small lake, little grass sometime tomorrow.”

Melinda Mae’s face fell. “I got horses with sores on their legs and another with green hooves. They can’t get better without graze.”

“Ain’t none, not according to the map.”

“Well, what about the rain? Can you tell when that’s gonna quit?”

Floyd tipped back his head to stare at the gunmetal sky. “Not today.”

Melinda Mae’s chin sunk to her chest. “We’re all gonna have to get off and walk soon. Packhorses are never gonna make it.”

“We can spread the loads to the spare saddle mounts.” said Floyd. “There’s always a way.”

The girl peered out from under her hat, eyes washed out as the sky. Floyd wished there was something he could do to make her smile, but unless he could figure a way to make grass grow out of an endless forest of hemlock and the sun to poke through like it did in Pincher Creek after a thunderstorm, there was nothing. He knew from experience this wet blanket of cloud over cool mountain valleys could go on for a long, long time.

Not surprisingly, the first horses to give out were the wagon team. Art scanned the pack train for replacements. Whichever animals he picked would almost certainly be handed a death sentence if the situation didn’t change soon. Not a creature was capable of doing what was already asked of it, let alone more. There was no choice but to abandon the wagon. He set about the lamentable task of deciding what could be left behind and what might take the place of something less necessary in the packs. Food and blankets were essential; most everything else was not. They dumped what they could and set off again.

Cheng Wah didn’t like riding horses. He preferred instead to walk, the ever present ladle swinging beside his muddy pants as he trudged his lonely trek through the endless ooze. He wasn’t alone for long. The next day Art made the call for everyone to walk in order to spare the horses.

Skip took exception. “My horse ain’t lame. Where I come from, no man has to hoof it when he’s got a perfectly useful animal under his saddle.”

Art glared up from the ground. “Skip, I am getting sick and bloody tired of you forgetting you don’t make the calls around here. If I have to reach up there and drag you down by your nostrils, you are damn well walking like the rest of us.”

Skip peered down at his boss, who was a good six inches shorter than him and surely not capable of reaching all the way up to his nostrils. He looked to be considering his options. Finally: “You, uh…thought I was serious, huh?”

Art’s eyes said it all. “So help me, this is the last time.”

“I was only fooling...”

Next day, the first of their pack animals had to be abandoned, its load distributed and more cargo tossed aside, including Art’s precious Steelyard scale for weighing his beef at the end of their journey. Parting with this article of advanced scientific measurement produced such a mope in the boss, Floyd whispered to Cheng Wah that maybe they should hold a funeral. Cheng Wah muttered back it might be good practice for the next river crossing.

Their experience wasn’t unique. Beside them in the trees, defeat was strewn everywhere. Riding saddles, pack saddles and rope coils lay abandoned. Axes, cookware, even a satchel of candles and matches. Everywhere now, dead or dying horses appeared out of the drizzle, some of them left with notes: ‘If my horse is fit to travel, bring him along.’ Nothing was ever brought along. Gunshots echoed, another suffering creature fortunate enough to have an owner with a bullet to spare.

They caught up with Everett McCauley, the big man under his sodden Tam-O’Shanter much more subdued than at their last encounter. He trudged beside his remaining string of four pathetic burros, muttering and occasionally reaching to bat a mud caked backside with a stick, the little survivors so rib raw and hollow eyed they scarcely looked alive. It was clear that in a couple more days, they wouldn’t be.

Cattle began to disappear. As Art counted through each evening, more and more animals failed to make attendance. Skip swore he hadn’t seen any drop out on his watch, but Floyd admitted, “Hell, Art, we can’t hold up the whole herd for the one or two that can’t go on. Only way to move them would be to drag them with a horse and then we’d have to shoot the horse. I lost two today and one yesterday.”

Skip drawled, “Then you ain’t no cowboy. Cowboy looks after his animals. Injuns don’t care. Hell, they’d eat their own mount if they was hungry.”

The big Blackfoot turned. “Maybe I could get you to cook that for me, whiteman.”

Skip’s eyebrows jumped. “You got a damn nerve.” His hand fumbled for the revolver that wasn’t there.

Floyd snarled, “That’s right, somebody took that away before they did that other thing to you. How’s that feel, huh?”

“You…you…”

Art grabbed Floyd’s arm.

The big man squirmed under his hat. “He had it coming, Art. You heard what he said.”

“I won’t send you home, Floyd. It’s too late for that, but I will dock your pay if you start anything. We’ve got it tough enough without everyone at each other’s throats.”

Skip said, “Dock his pay, boss.”

“Shut up, Skip.”

The mud got thicker. It would seem that something the consistency of porridge would thin out with more water added to the mix, but this stuff only sucked harder, flowing like a river behind every step, determined to follow and swallow everything that passed through it. On the fifteenth of August, which should’ve been the driest week of summer, they reached the last point on the map before Telegraph Creek at the end of the slashed government trail, a place called ‘The Summit’. They were very near the snow line, but here at last there was graze, not in great abundance, but enough to warrant a rest among fellow beleaguered travellers and a chance to boil their clothes in the first bit of sunshine they’d encountered in weeks. That seemed the only way to loosen the filth, boiling. It also afforded an opportunity to take advantage of the other nickname for the place: ‘Groundhog Mountain’. Following the example of other campers around them and after clearing their laundry out of the pot, they chucked in a few of the local rodents. Groundhogs, it turned out, were a mouth-watering delicacy with rice and tuberous roots, courtesy once again of Victor’s knowledge of bushcraft.

With the hard life of the trail temporarily postponed, Percy recovered from mourning over his brother and fell back in love. His winsome eyes followed Melinda Mae everywhere, worshipping her everlasting beauty and making everyone else uncomfortable in his presence. Uncharacteristically, Skip didn’t say anything, but his yellow teeth under the mossy moustache bared in a doglike snarl every time he glanced the moonstruck lad’s way. With Art somehow blissfully unaware or too busy counting cattle to bother with the situation, Floyd took the habit of standing between the two at the evening campfire and picking his teeth with a twig whenever his protective instincts overcame him. In fact, Art was aware of the situation, but found the idea of a prospective son-in-law who wasn’t already married a great improvement over the Victor situation. Percy could moon away as much as he wanted; if things got out of hand, he’d just take the lad aside and inform him she was only thirteen years old. And if that didn’t put some reins on the youngster’s rutting instincts, there was always the shotgun. Fathers will find a way.

Then Lucas appeared.

The boy looked as though he’d crawled from home on his belly. Wool chaps, shirt and for some unfathomable reason, the bottom half of his face, were encased in an inch thick crust of mud. He must’ve weighed thirty pounds over his body weight.

Art said, “Who the devil are you?”

“It’s me, Mr. Cole, Lucas. Don’t you remember?”

“I remember a Lucas, alright, but I’ve never seen anything that looked like you. Did you fall off your horse?”

“Actually, I been walking the last week. I figured I’d save my horse for when I got here.”

The news seemed to impress Art. “I see…and do your folks know you’re here?”

“Oh, yeah, they changed their minds. They’re real happy with the idea of me being a cowpuncher just like my big brother.”

Art glanced toward Victor. As usual, it was impossible to guess what the dark eyed loner was thinking. He said to Lucas, “Your brother’s busy leading a herd. He won’t have time to drink cocoa with you and tell stories.”

“Heck, I know that, Mr. Cole.” Lucas looked toward the fire and gave a little wave. “Hi, Melinda Mae.”

The girl rolled her eyes and sighed.

Art said, “It happens the drive is one man short at the moment. How are you at crossing rivers?”

Lucas pushed back his hat. “I got here, didn’t I? And that’s with nearly getting ate by a wolverine and helping Constable Hobbs catch a bunch of bandits.”

If anyone hadn’t been paying attention till now, that changed with the mention of Hobbs.

“Bandits…what bandits?” And then: “Hobbs is alive?”

“Heck, yeah, he’s alive. But he’s only got one eye. It makes him look kinda like a pirate. I like it, I think I’m gonna get one eye someday.”

Melinda Mae rolled her whole head this time.

Art said, “These bandits, did Hobbs tell you who they were?”

“Yup, they’re the ones that killed Daryl O’Hare.”

Art’s jaw dropped. “Daryl O’Hare is dead?”

“Uh, huh…but don’t worry, Mrs. Cole’s okay. She didn’t get shot, even though he was on his way home from your store.”

That was more than Art could put together in his mind. With everybody staring like the bug-eyed exiles they were, he made Lucas go back to the beginning and repeat everything that had been happening at home in their absence. When the boy was done, not even Skip could find a word to describe the news other than: “Whoo-eee…”

It was Melinda Mae who put together the first clear thought. “Lucas, you must’ve got mud between your ears. You rode all the way out here with dangerous bandits about and got my mom to give you candy for the trip?”

“Actually, I ran out of candy two weeks ago. Have you got any more?”

“Jinks, we been eating groundhogs out here. There isn’t no candy for a thousand miles around this place. You can be such a dumb kid sometimes.”

Prickles came padding over to stick his dog snout between the newcomer’s crusty chaps, waiting to have his head scratched. Lucas reached down and rubbed a floppy ear. “You gotta quit doing that, Melinda Mae. You’re thirteen years old now and it ain’t polite to keep calling people names all the time.”

The girl stiffened and snuck a glance toward Percy.

Art said, “Can’t think of anything to add to that.” Then he, too, turned to Percy. “Mr. Stoddard, you come with me and help count through the herd.”

Percy bit his lip and shuffled toward his boss. Art dropped an arm around the lean shoulders and steered the young man out of camp. “Son, you and I need to talk.”

Whatever Art counselled, promised or threatened, Percy’s open faced mooning ended. He didn’t appear particularly comfortable inside his shirt whenever the newcomer, Lucas, sat down beside Melinda Mae and said something to make her laugh, but he wasn’t such a breathless noodle every time his auburn haired Aphrodite stood up or sat down, or reached to scratch an itch. In fact, with the exception of mealtimes, he seemed to be making an effort to be somewhere else every time she was around.

Not so, Lucas. It was difficult to tell whether Prickles had decided he was the new boy’s dog or Melinda Mae’s, because whenever they weren’t working, the three of them were together. As the drive pushed on through the mud toward Telegraph Creek, boy, girl and dog sat together at every meal. While everyone else massaged decomposing feet and dried socks around the fire, the trio snickered in the dancing light, an occasional balled up fist snapping to whack a shoulder, the mock groaning and giggling already more annoying than Percy’s silent mooning had ever been. Then one night in full view of everyone, Lucas leaned in to plant a peck on Melinda Mae’s cheek. Percy looked ready to topple over and dissolve into dust.

The next morning Percy approached Art and asked for the job of backtracking at the end of each day to check for stragglers. Recently, it had been Art’s habit to send Floyd, as he was the strongest on foot, but as much an honour as the added responsibility appeared on the surface, it was clear the big Alberta cowhand was growing sick of the extra work and always being gone for supper, so Art agreed. At the very least, it would allow the not-so-successful Romeo a chance to escape the tomfoolery of adolescent play camp come the end of every day.

The problem was the changing countryside. Pressing this close to the frozen north, there were oddities that didn’t present themselves around home. Even so, no one expected the coming of the monster.

Percy had never been the adventurous twin. The summer when the big grey wasp’s nest appeared under the eave of the barn, it wasn’t him who decided they should whack it with a stick, then run like six legged jackrabbits for the outhouse before the zinging demons had a chance to sniff what was happening. Of course, that hadn’t gone very well, especially with all the knotholes in the outhouse. Nor had Orville’s plan to go underwater exploring in the swimming hole with an upside down bucket of air. There were two problems with that scheme: one, the theory that buckets could be pulled below the surface had not only proven impractical, but number two, the inside of the air supply still caked in the dried blood and chicken innards it had last been used to transport. He blasted from the water, choking and rubbing his eyes to fling the bucket at Percy on the bank.

“You were supposed to clean that thing!”

“No I wasn’t. That was your job.”

“My job was to chuck innards in the river. Your job was to rinse it afterward. Heck, we probably drank water out of that.”

“So what? It was just chicken guts, we eat chicken all the time.”

“Stick your head in there. Go on, I dare you.”

Percy leaned his face over the bucket and shot backward, eyes bulging. After several gulps of fresh air, he wheezed, “You done something in that bucket. You burped.”

“Don’t be stupid, nobody burps like a dead rat.”

“Well, I cleaned it out afterward, I remember.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

They’d dragged on home, poking each other and swinging the bucket which still hadn’t been cleaned, until their mom yelled to pull weeds out of the garden and a bunch of other boring chores. Which usually gave Orville time to think of his next amazing idea.

Today as Percy trudged back down the trail through the lengthening shadows looking for stragglers, it was he who was getting an idea. What if he was to save Melinda Mae’s life? He was a good foot taller than the curly headed little squirrel who’d popped out of nowhere to wreck everything, and probably twice as strong. If something was to attack his sweetheart from out of the dark with fangs dripping death and eyes like a demon out of hell, why, he could just jump on top of it and wrestle it to the ground, then finish it off with his jackknife for her to throw her arms around him and kiss him right there in front of everybody, and even the boss wouldn’t be able to do nothing about it on account of he’d just saved her life. The more Percy thought about his idea, the more he liked it. He just needed to wait for the next dangerous thing to jump out of the bush in front of Melinda Mae. And then he’d be happy forever. Wow, and everybody had always picked Orville to be the smart one.

When he came pushing two recovered steers back into camp with his plan still hard in his head and twilight finishing off the last colours in the hemlock branches, it seemed Percy was having a pretty good evening. So was everyone else. The rain had let up, the woodpile for the fire was stacked halfway to the sky and Cheng Wah had kept aside some flapjacks, bacon and syrup for him. It was the kind of meal everyone loved, breakfast for supper, and could’ve only been better if there’d been eggs. But the most incredible thing was that something out there had read his thoughts and decided to make his dream come true.

When it loomed out of the darkening bush, huge as a horse and so fearsome looking that Melinda Mae screamed, Percy needed only to jump on top of it and start wrestling to make himself the happiest hero in the world.

But that’s not what happened. He stood frozen like everyone else. The beast was enormous…and ugly…with a giant growth on top of its massive black head that could’ve knocked a horse halfway up a mountain. *Whatever the devil was it?* Melinda Mae screamed again and the monster turned to trot off into the bush. Percy’s heart dropped through the bottom of his boots – he’d failed. He wasn’t a hero at all; he wasn’t even a proper man. He’d let his sweetheart face a monster and hadn’t budged to jump on top of it. But it had been so big…ugly too.

It was Art who asked first, “What the dickens was that?”

Victor had his hat pushed back, staring into the bush. “I don’t know. It looked kind of like a mule, but with the biggest antlers I’ve ever seen in my life. At least I think they were antlers - maybe it was a spirit animal.”

Floyd said, “You’re kidding.”

“No,” Art said, “it was right there. You didn’t see it?”

“Well, I’ll be…you really ain’t kidding.”

Art shook his head. “What’re you saying?”

“It was a moose. You never seen a moose before?”

“Moose…that was a moose?”

Floyd said, “Crap, moose are everywhere.”

“No, they’re not. They’re not around home. Have you ever seen one there?”

The big Blackfoot pulled on his chin. “Well, come to think of it, I suppose not. Actually, there never were any moose where I grew up, either, until just before I left. Then they started showing up in the river valleys.”

Victor said, “Maybe they’re a spirit animal come to take the place of the buffalo. They’re strange looking, like I heard the buffalo were.”

“I dunno,” said Floyd, “never seen a buffalo.”

“I heard they’re strange.” said Victor.

“Know what, breed? You just might be right.”

Victor’s eyes flashed. “What’d you call me?”

Floyd looked surprised. “Breed…don’t get upset. It just means you got mixed blood, that’s all.”

Victor blinked. “Well, I don’t like the sound of it. Don’t do it anymore.”

“Hell, it don’t mean nothing, calm down.”

“Look, I’m telling you I don’t like it, so stop.”

“Well I don’t like having to pussyfoot around all the stuff that gets you whining. Worse than a spoilt little baby.”

Art didn’t wait any longer. “Floyd, if a man asks you to stop tapping your feet, would you stop tapping your feet?”

The big man took a moment. “I suppose…depends how he asks.”

“Well Victor just asked you to stop calling him something he doesn’t like. And now I’m asking you too. So would you stop it please?”

“Well…I suppose.” Floyd turned away muttering, “Victor don’t like this, Victor don’t like that…who the hell can remember it all? Never gonna hear me cry about being called a Blackfoot Indian.”

Percy wasn’t in the mood for other people’s arguments. He wasn’t even hungry for Cheng Wah’s supper anymore and moped off alone toward his blanket. Melinda Mae’s monster had been right there for the taking. He’d heard of moose, just never seen one…how hard could it have been to jump on top of the stupid thing? He was a failure. And he just couldn’t help it, no matter how much he tried not to be, he was still in love. And he hated Lucas.

\* \* \*

Hobbs could not have imagined the pure powerful glory of leading a pair of deadly fugitives back into town, captured in hand to hand combat, trussed up and glaring like rabid wolves at everybody who dared to look at them. And oboy, did people come out to look. Everyone, not just Meredith Parker and her flock of brood hens, but everyone, including Tom Hance and his dainty wife watching from the front stoop of the post office. As he rode past Mrs. Hance with her childlike brown eyes beholding the dangerous evil being dragged back to face justice, Hobbs turned and glared at the prisoners.

“Keep your faces forward! You’re not fit to look at civilized people!”

Mrs. Hance clutched her husband’s arm and pull near him, making it all Hobbs could do to stop from cracking a giant smug grin. He was a hero, the lawman bringing back the murderers, and even though he still ached from jaw to giblets like a man opened up with a bucksaw, he knew he must’ve looked rugged, maybe a little legendary in fact with all the scars. And he had an eye patch…*an eye patch*. He tipped his hat at Tom and his wife.

“Evening, folks, good to see you.” The sun was just skidding below the tree line on the western edge of town. It painted the street a dusty orange, warm and welcoming on this late August afternoon.

Tom nodded back. “Good to see you too, Constable. Looks like you had a rough trip, but did your duty and got the job done. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Tom. Uh…think you might drop by the jail a little later and run through the arrest report with me? This is my first homicide, y’know, don’t want to make a mess of it.”

Tom’s stern mouth didn’t change, but the corners of his eyes crinkled warmly. “Well, I’d be pleased to come by, Constable, but from what I can see, I doubt there’s much you couldn’t handle from here on.”

“Good of you to say so, Tom. Just the same, I’d appreciate it.” Hobbs rode past, then twisted around as he remembered: “Oh, by the way, that young son of yours is quite the power to reckon with. He helped me round up these fugitives on his way to meet up with the drive.”

Tom’s face froze, as did his wife’s. “Lucas…he was there when you made the arrests?”

Hobbs studied their shocked faces. “I assumed he was there with your blessing.”

“The devil he was.” Tom looked ready to stalk from the stoop and swing one of Meredith’s chickens. “How long ago was this?”

“Couple of days back, I’m afraid. I’m sorry, folks, but the boy didn’t let on he was running away.”

Mrs. Hance had both hands on her husband’s arm. She was staring up into his face as Tom said, “I’m sure it’s too late to do anything about it now. Did his horse look healthy? Did he have food with him?”

Hobbs halted his mount and the animals on the lead rope followed. “He did, and his horse was healthy. He’s a feisty lad. I can tell you this: somebody’s taught him to set a good camp. I have no doubt he’s with his brother now, sharing stories of life on the trail. If he was my boy, I’d be proud.”

Finally, Nellie Hance said, “Constable Hobbs, thank you. You’re an outstanding policeman and a good man besides.”

But Tom growled, “That boy is going to be the death of me. When he gets back, I’m going to make sure his backside stings till Christmas.”

Nellie still had both hands on her husband’s arm. She tugged him toward the post office door. “Come, Tom, there’s mail needs sorting. And I want to talk to you about something.”

The big man lurched after his diminutive bride, still looking chicken swinging sulphurous. As they disappeared inside, Nellie’s voice snipped, “You made that brave man feel awful. It wasn’t him who shot Lucas’s dog and it isn’t him threatening violence when the boy gets home. Orlando Thomas Hance, it’s about time you…” The door clunked shut.

Hobbs carried on toward the jail, towing his fugitives. *An outstanding policeman and a good man.* The tip of the orange sun spread its warmth across the back of his tired shoulders and he let out a comfortable sigh. It was his dad offering him the last of the cheese sandwiches on a green grass afternoon; it was trout tickling his line and the sweet rich pleasure of warm milk from a Mason jar. It was Harland Hobbs coming home.

Chapter Twelve

Tsung Kuan Yew learned early in life the art of adopting camouflage. When his father, a labourer in the port of Tianjin, was crushed to death on the docks at the age of thirty-one, the family abruptly found themselves facing a stark future. Tsung’s mother had no particular skills and facing a life of poverty with three children, saw no choice but to beg the charity of a lone uncle, a merchant she knew only by name who had never taken a wife and immediately recognized the value of the pretty woman so fortuitously deposited on his doorstep. Not for his own house, though, was this rare flower destined but a friend in the New World of America. With the promise of a better life for her family, she and any daughters were offered passage to San Francisco; boys would be better suited to toil at home on the waterfront. An arrangement was reached and she was promptly married on paper to the mystery man across the water, a formality to validate her passage. Then she and her three girls were loaded on a sailing ship to be carried to their new home. What she did not know was the uncle did a thriving business with connections there, connections specializing in the supply of women to the Tongs in San Francisco. With males in bustling Chinatown outnumbering females twenty to one, they would be put to work promptly. Following that, the average life expectancy for immigrants of their gender was five years. The youngest daughter had just turned nine. The family perhaps should have recognized their deception when locked below deck in the stinking hold of a sailing ship with forty other emigrants sleeping on the floor and attending their toilet in buckets. Possibly, though, it was the nature of the family fraud which kept them too preoccupied to anticipate their peril. For the secret which no one else on board realized was this particular family consisted not of a mother and three daughters, but two daughters and a son. Tsung was twelve.

When a lecherous Hui attendant muttered from outside the gated barrier what was to become of them, the boy in girl’s clothing ran straight to his mother and asked what a prostitute was. It took several moments for the stunned woman to recover the state of her fine creamy complexion and while that was happening, Tsung blurted the rest of what the attendant had said. She promptly educated her charge. With eyes swollen round by too much sudden knowledge, the boy realized not only the peril of his family, but particularly his own upon arrival at their destination.

His problem became more immediate when one sweltering afternoon in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the attendant unlocked the steel gate to command him topside on the pretence of delivering tea to the captain. In fact, Tsung had once glimpsed the captain, a hairy lurching creature who looked more likely to eat a boiled moth than drink a cup of tea. At any rate, they were never to reach the cabin. With the sweat dripping pedophile’s hand groping under his *dudou* and tea spilling behind a hatchway, Tsung snatched the only weapon available, a marlin spike from a rope coil. Cornered and desperate, the terrified child killed his first man. With the body draining its red pool of life across the deck, he stood panting - anyone could come at any moment. Desperately, he rolled the evidence of his crime to the edge of the deck. Slender arms trembling with effort, he got the chest onto the gunwale, then with as much backside as would fit across his shoulder, he toppled the whole thing overboard. But what of the thick crimson smear? There was only the tea. That, a heart pounding with panic and a strip of embroidered cloth torn from his *dudou* contrived to smear the deck, if not clean, then at least as filthy brown as the rest.

He ran back to his hold only to find the steel gate locked, its key now sinking with their keeper into the abyss. Frantically, he called into the dark below deck…no answer. Footsteps approached behind - he ran.

Around the back of the ship he found a hatch filled with pulleys to raise the sails. He climbed inside, pulled the top closed and wormed under the tackle. It was summer in the Pacific Ocean. For three days Tsung endured the hell of that hole, until his groggy mind realized he could not live another hour without water. Head swimming, tongue a stick in his mouth, he emerged to stare at his world. The sea had changed from a plate of shimmering jewels to hard cold grey. Wind whipped the waves white and the deck lurched. There were crewmembers forward, orders being barked in a toneless language he didn’t understand and sails being drawn down. He knew it was dangerous to come on deck, but he had to get to his family, had to drink.

Shoeless, he crept forward. Reached the locked barrier. He called into the dark, but his voice cracked, dry as the tongue in his mouth. He forced a dusty swallow, called again. As if by magic, his little sister’s face appeared.

“Tsung, you are alive!”

“Sshhh…water…bring water.”

She ran off, moments later to reappear with his mother and older sister.

“Son, we thought you were dead. Where have you been?”

He told them of his ordeal and they produced water and two dry biscuits his mother had squirreled away. He pressed his lips against the wire to suck precious fluid from a ladle. Pushing her fingers through to his cheek, his mother’s face was dripping tears. He would’ve cried with her, but there was nothing to wet his eyes. She told him a man had come asking about the attendant, another Hui, but no one could offer an answer. They were captives behind a locked gate – how could they know of anything beyond it? She’d said nothing about her vanished child, knew better than to trust their jailers. It was the only time they’d been asked about the attendant; people must disappear at sea all the time.

That was life for a further two weeks, Tsung buried deep in the tackle and visiting his family by night for food and water. When the ship docked at last in San Francisco and the women were taken quayside, he snuck a final peek from his hatch at his mother and sisters disappearing down the gangplank. After nightfall he shinnied like a rat down a rope into America.

Within hours he learned to steal. He also learned it was not safe to be a girl; eyes followed him everywhere. He changed that, borrowed clothes from a windowsill, became a boy again. But still he stood out; everyone everywhere was a man. He was stopped by a bearded Manchu.

“Who is your family? Where are you from?”

He didn’t wait to answer questions, but bolted down the street.

Suddenly he found himself among people who all looked like the ship’s captain, hairy hulking creatures with giant noses and voices like barking dogs. At least here no one bothered to look. That is until he approached anywhere selling food – strange fruit, nuts, bins full of roots unlike anything he’d ever seen. But whenever he got too close, someone was always watching; it was impossible to steal. He crept back the way he’d come, back to people who at least looked familiar to his eyes, and he to them.

Oddly, it was stealing which saved his life. No doubt he would’ve perished, sleeping in the dirt and foraging alone in those foul streets. A world of only men is harsh, with little to spare for a lone child struggling to survive on only cunning and quick feet. When the Filipino grabbed his arm to yank back the stolen steamed bun, he was brought before the owner of the noodle house, who sat smoking a pipe and staring along his nose as if a wild dog had been dragged into his presence. Tsung was certain his fate would be quick and painful, but the man offered back the bun and asked if he was alone in this town. It was time to tell the truth, that he hadn’t seen his mother or sisters since the ship. The noodle house owner studied his grimy starving captive, then instructed the Filipino to take him out back and scrub him with strong soap. He was told he would be given work and for that he would be provided food and a place to sleep. It was the first good news he’d heard since leaving China.

Work around the noodle house proved endless, but never impossible and the Filipino, who was eight years older, quickly became his friend. Like Tsung, Doon was a rare entity on these streets, a brown face among the yellow who had earned a place among a naturally suspicious people. Together they shared the common bond of outsiders. In a twist of international fates, it was this non-Chinese person who began to teach Tsung a tool of his future trade, an ancient Buddhist method to ward off the malicious desires of others using fists, feet and peasant weapons. Sweeping floors and washing bowls in the noodle house was simple when compared to Doon’s training. Still, Tsung proved an eager disciple who progressed rapidly. Favorite were the occasions they trained outside in the sunshine with the ladies from the adjacent house of pleasure watching and giggling behind their hands. One day the owner told him he was to accompany Doon in the execution of a duty. He was fifteen years old. He followed his friend to a *fan-tan* gambling house which had fallen behind on its obligations. At the appearance of the Filipino *boo how doy,* the owner of the establishment, an otherwise stern looking elder, *kow-towed* with such enthusiasm it seemed he would swallow his own feet. He apologized for his tardiness and produced more money than Tsung thought existed in the world. The incident filled the pupil with such admiration for power so effortlessly wielded, there was never any question of aspiring to anything else.

Tsung became a *boo how doy,* a salaried soldier of the Hip Yee Tong, the *highbinder* of which ran the innocent looking noodle house where he’d first found kindness and acceptance in the New World. His job was to collect money and deliver the discipline needed to settle disputes. He enforced the proper order of business when businessmen forgot. He learned to strut rather than creep. Tell rather than ask. And he found his mother.

What was left of his mother.

Among other interests the Hip Yee Tong managed were a number of highly profitable slave girl houses. It was while he was dealing with the proprietor of one of these that a ruckus broke out in a back hallway, luring him to check on the disturbance. He’d almost forgotten her in the glamour of his new life, but when he saw the frail figure slumped against a wall, breasts exposed and a man’s hand twisted in her hair, the memory came powerfully back. He killed his seventh man that day, a lucky number for him, because when it was discovered the hollow eyed whore was his mother, not only was he spared the discipline of the Tong, but she was released into his care and probably by the look of her, not a moment too soon. Sadly, he learned it was too late by almost a year for the last of his two sisters.

As he cared for his mother his respect in the community grew. No longer was he an orphaned outcast gifted only with hatchet and fist. He took a wife, a girl from his favorite house of relaxation. Never mind that she probably did not love him, it was enough that he could parade her like a jewel in public and make other men wish they could live his charmed life. She gave him a son, Chenglei. He was happy beyond belief and considering the way it had all started, probably the luckiest man in all Chinatown. He was happy, lucky and proud right up to the day he killed his wife.

Many times afterward he had cause to consider how easy killing becomes when it’s the code you’ve learned to live by. He could’ve done what other men do and hid the shame of her weakness behind the facade of a perfect life. He could even have forgiven her for reverting once more to the lifestyle she’d clearly not left behind. But when that weakness and disrespect extended to opening her legs for his *highbinder,* in his own house with his infant son at the foot of the bed, the only thing he could think to do was colored a hot burning red, with many flavours of hatred across her throat, then top to bottom, right to left until what had begun as two bodies became blended into one foul salad of meat and purple gizzards spewed on the villainous sheets. Which forced him again to run.

Once again running.

And with that came the camouflage. He became Cheng Wah, the small and unremarkable. The man with no tongue who could barely be seen. He hid himself in the backbreaking labour of the coolie gangs on the railroad, pounding spikes. It seemed the perfect disguise until the American government extended the Chinese Exclusion Act to include residence permit registration for all people of the yellow race. He could be stopped at any moment and asked to see the papers he didn’t have, but if he tried to register he would be caught. He had to leave the country, but not to China; he barely remembered the place and certainly didn’t trust the people. Canada seemed the best place to hide for a railroad builder, murderer and sweeper of noodle house floors.

Cheng Wah – the master of camouflage.

It began with a sore tooth, a squirrel chattering in a tree and a bag of hazelnuts. The sore tooth belonged to Skip, who’d chipped it on a whiskey bottle, trying to bite the cork off after crossing the Stikine River at the town of Telegraph Creek a month after leaving Hazelton. It was the seventh of September under a clear cool sky. From here, the Telegraph Trail ended and the route to the Klondike continued with a hundred mile overland trek to Teslin Lake at the border with the Yukon, a brand new territory created during the second month of their drive. They were about to enter a piece of Canada which hadn’t existed when they set out, some of the first travellers to visit. They were told that from the lakeshore the final four hundred miles to Dawson City could be negotiated by steamboat. It was good news the overland drive was almost finished, but no one was in a hurry to leave Telegraph Creek. The days were getting shorter and colder, their camps the past few weeks less of a considered layover than the site of the latest horse caving in. No one, least of all the cook who had to produce edible fare from a pack saddle filled with a dwindling supply of flour and beans, wanted to leave this last threadbare paradise to get back on the trail.

Cheng Wah had picked hazelnuts back at the Skeena River. He was saving them for an occasion to make hazelnut bread if an occasion ever appeared. The only thing to appear was the squirrel. Skip was stretched against a tree, holding his sore mouth and glaring under his hat at their visitor on its branch. Every time the squirrel chirped, its belly would jerk and fluffy tail flip above its back. Then it would stop to scratch furiously at a flea, then chirp, then scratch…chirp, scratch, chirp...

Melinda Mae was watching too. “They sure are cute.” she said to no one in particular.

“Wish I had my damn gun.” Skip grumbled.

The girl cast a rare look at him. “You sure are one tangled twist of misery, never got nothing good to say about nobody. Why don’t you do everybody a favour and go fall in the river?”

“Shut your mouth, girl, you got no right to talk to a grownup like that.”

“Shut your own mouth, mush face.”

“What?”

With a flick of the wrist so smooth it disappeared in the sunlight, Cheng Wah tossed a small cloth bag at Melinda Mae’s feet. She looked down, temporarily distracted. Skip was distracted too.

Cheng Wah said, “Give friend nut, make happy.”

She picked up the bag. “Why, thank you, Cheng Wah. Do you like squirrels too?”

The cook turned away. “Like squirrels better than listen mush face.”

Skip jumped to his feet. “Look here, China, you take that back!”

Cheng Wah poked his ladle at the cookpot.

Skip growled, “No pint sized runt gives Skip Tanner lip like that. Howcome you got that pigtail anyway? You a damn girl?”

Pot stirring, queue dangling.

Skip started stalking toward the cook fire. The girl with the hazelnuts hurled the bag. It slapped Skip’s mouth and split open, hazelnuts sailing in the sunshine. He howled and grabbed his face. “My tooth! My busted dang tooth!”

“Oh, quit acting like a sissy, mush face.”

Skip charged at Melinda Mae. But as he passed the cook pot, Cheng Wah’s ladle whipped across the tooth and knocked his hat flying. All Skip could see was the girl. All he could feel was pain. He charged again. He never made it.

The problem was that every member of the crew besides Art had been watching – the boss was away in town trying to buy horses – and nobody, not Victor with his flat stare, or Floyd in slack jawed wonderment, or pining Percy or loverboy Lucas knew quite what to make of the sight they’d just witnessed other than a blinding flash of fist, a strangled gurgling sound and a cowpuncher clutching his throat to collapse like a sack of melted lard under the squirrel tree.

That Skip was actually dead became apparent when Floyd leaned over him to listen for breath. He poked an open eye. “Damn…he is all the way completely done for.”

Everyone turned to stare at their tiny cook.

Cheng Wah appeared uncustomarily agitated. He didn’t even try to pick up his ladle. “He try hurt girl. He bad.”

Floyd nodded. “Yup, he’s bad…dead too.”

Of all in attendance, Lucas was probably the most amazed. “He’s…dead?”

Floyd said, “Yup.”

Melinda Mae said, “You been able to do that all along, Cheng Wah, kill a man with your hands and you never told us nothing about it?”

The little cook bowed his head. “I only do to save missy girl.”

It was a difficult concept to grasp, death on account of her. “Well, thanks…I think.”

Cheng Wah stood before them, head bowed, saying nothing.

Surprisingly, it was Floyd who first grasped the seriousness of the situation. “Well, what the hell do we do now, hang the cook?”

But it was Victor who shook his head and said, “The man choked on a piece of bark in his beans. That’s bad, but no reason to hang the cook.”

Floyd’s brow furrowed and he scratched under his hat. “But he didn’t choke. He got…punched or something…in the throat.”

“I didn’t see that.”

“You didn’t? It was right there in front of us, there’s no way you never - ” The big Blackfoot stopped suddenly, leaned back. “…oh, I get it...”

Victor sniffed and turned away.

Lucas said, “You’re sure he’s actually dead?”

Melinda Mae said, “Lucas, if you wanna be a cowpuncher, you gotta learn to look at dead people. It happens all the time out here.”

“On the way I seen a dead person with a knife sticking straight up out of him. That was scary, but this…this is different…” The boy’s voice trailed off.

Floyd said, “Okay, so he choked on a chunk of bark. That’s good enough for me - the rest of you too?”

They all nodded, even Lucas, who couldn’t take his eyes off the body.

The squirrel inched down its tree, then dashed across a cowboy boot to snatch a hazelnut. It squatted on its haunches and chirped at the outstretched body. Nut in its cheek, it scrambled back up the tree.

Melinda Mae said, “So that means we’re a man short again. My dad’s gonna be real mad.”

When Art got back to camp, something didn’t smell quite right and it wasn’t the bubbles coming from the cookpot. Everyone seemed to be busy picking at something on their shirt and blinking like sun-struck chickens at their feet. He studied Cheng Wah with his copper ladle.

“Smells good, what’s for supper?”

Floyd answered, “Bannock and beans.”

They’d been eating bannock and beans since the last potful of stewed groundhog on The Summit. “Sounds good.” Art spotted the hazelnut bag empty on the ground. “Weren’t you saving those nuts for something special, Cheng Wah?”

Floyd answered again, “He gave them to the squirrel.”

Art sucked through his teeth and said to the big cowpuncher, “Floyd, if I ask what day is Cheng Wah’s birthday, are you going to answer?”

“I don’t know what day his birthday is, boss.”

“Good, so it’s alright if someone else talks?”

“Okay.”

Art turned to his cook. “What’s going on, Cheng Wah?”

The pot stirring stopped. “What mean, what go on? Only Skip die, that all.”

“Oh, hell...” Art swung to stare at the others, three out of five still not daring to look at him. “Skip’s dead? How?”

Floyd said, “Can I talk?”

“Dammit, Floyd, how the hell did Skip die?”

“Uh…he choked on a chunk of bark.”

Art turned back to Cheng Wah. “What was he doing eating bark? Is that true, that’s what happened?”

Big nod, queue flapping. “He die from choke, that true.”

“Well, dammit, now I’m a man short again and still over a hundred miles to the lake.”

Melinda Mae said, “I told them you’d get mad.”

Her father blinked. “Look, I go away for a couple of hours and when I get back someone’s dead, that’s upsetting.” He pulled off his hat and shook his head. “Bloody hell…was he in any pain?”

Floyd said, “Wasn’t no time to ask. He just choked and fell over.”

“Well, there’s a town here, they must have a graveyard somewhere.”

“Oh, we already buried him.”

Art snapped. “What? You don’t even wait till I get back before sticking him in the ground? That’s a switch for a bunch who won’t pick up a dropped rope unless I tell them to.”

Floyd’s bottom lip sunk to his chin. “I pick up dropped ropes, Art, all the time.”

“I didn’t mean you, Floyd. Of course I can count on you. But I get the feeling everyone’s trying to hide something, like maybe a knife sticking out of Skip’s back?” His eyes fell on Victor.

The point rider’s hand reached to the sheathed weapon on his belt. “Last time I bloodied this, a wolf lost his hide. Skip choked, boss, we all saw it.”

Art’s eyes fell on his daughter. “Melinda Mae?”

“Dad, he grabbed his throat and dropped over dead. It’s the truth.”

“Lucas?”

Eyes squinting at the ground, hands squirming in pockets. “I, uh…only seen one other dead person before, Mr. Cole, and it wasn’t nobody I knew. This time it was scary.”

A final sigh, “Alright, I suppose if a man drops over dead it’s cause for discomfort.” He glanced one last time around the camp. “But anyone else dies, I want to see the body first. Is that clear?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Absolutely.”

“For sure, Dad.”

Lucas said, “Do people die out here all the time?”

It was Floyd who shook his big head and said, “Driving pokies ain’t all glory, son. It’s a tough life on the trail.”

The boy looked unsure. He turned to his friend, Melinda Mae.

She shrugged. “Told you.”

Driving pokies was indeed not all glory. In fact, even without any further rain, the trail to Teslin was a quagmire of muskeg churned by hundreds of feet and hooves gone before them, pilgrims and their pack animals arriving earlier in the spring by steamboat to Wrangell, Alaska, on the coast. From Wrangell, the adventurers marched, mushed or rode up the frozen Stikine River to Telegraph Creek. Although hundreds of miles shorter than the trail from Quesnelle, the route sometimes proved a lethal shortcut when sled and animals dropped through the rotting spring ice into the river, leaving the owner standing. Or it might be team and load left, owner disappearing back to the ocean under the ice. For those who made it, there was still the trail to Teslin Lake, which they left remorselessly ruined in their wake, one hundred and twenty miles of it. And the others hadn’t been driving a herd of cattle.

The trail went on and on.

Finally on October third, to the inglorious sucking sound of hooves plodding through mud, it was over. Teslin appeared and the overland drive was finished. What remained of men, cattle and horses stumbled to a halt, while Art went into town to ask about the steamboat plying the waterway to Dawson City. Some chuckled drily, but most people shook their heads and looked away.

“Went downriver once, couldn’t get back…low water.”

Numbed stare. “You mean there’s no boat?”

“Nope, not unless you build one.”

Art said, “But I’ve come over a thousand miles with a hundred and seventy head of cattle I have to get up to Dawson. What am I supposed to do?”

“Well, I guess you need to build yourself a boat, pilgrim. A big one”

In fact, there were many boats being built, all shapes and sizes along the shoreline among a rash of shabby looking tents. Nothing, though, approached the dimensions of a vessel capable of transporting one hundred and seventy animals.

Art’s shoulders sagged. “After all this way…I can’t believe it.” For the first time since starting the drive, the light was dimming in his indomitable eyes. “When does it start to freeze up around here?”

“Oh, anytime soon, I reckon. Depends on the weather. Don’t look too bad today, might hold awhile longer.”

Art turned away. “…I just don’t believe it…”

“If you need timber, mister, there’s a sawmill. Does good work, but costs plenty, if you know what I mean. You planning to keep that jacket?”

He turned back, squinting under his hat brim. “Jacket…you like my jacket?”

“It’s buckskin, is it not?”

“It is, and I need it to keep this icy wind off.”

“I’ll trade you this fine coat I’m wearing and seven dollars for it.”

Art stared.

The offer went up. “Ten dollars.”

“You say the sawmill’s expensive?”

“Pilgrim, everything in this town is expensive. Twelve dollars.”

The buckskin jacket had been made by Kakitesun’s daughter after Art admired the workmanship of the one presented to Melinda Mae. But unless he planned to chop and saw the logs himself – which would take far longer than he could afford to wait - he was going to need lumber. There was no doubt the man was speaking the truth about prices in this godforsaken gateway to the north. He said, “Are you in need of fresh beef, by any chance?”

The man shook his head. “Sir, this town is full of beef. Every time an ox makes it here, its load comes off and its throat gets slit. Now if you’ve got a chicken…”

Art said, “Alright, the coat’s yours for the one you’re wearing and twenty dollars. Take it or leave it.”

“Done.” Art’s buckskin jacket went away.

The new jacket didn’t fit. Its arms dangled past his thumbs and the belly area buttoned together large enough to fit two men his size. But the architect-rancher-cattle driver was getting another idea. He headed down the street, studying the passerby.

Eventually: “I say, good sir, that jacket appears a tad small on you. Now this one I’ve got won’t be much use to me anymore. I’m heading back south on the morrow and such an item of heavy winter wear would be of more use to a man travelling north. You wouldn’t be going north, would you?”

“Why, yes, I would.”

“And would you have need of fresh beef?”

“No.”

“Five dollars?”

“Well…”

“Sir, I’ll offer you five dollars and my jacket for the one you’re wearing plus that bottle of whiskey. Look at this quality stitching. Exactly like the one in the Sears catalogue this year, quite the item of men’s fashion.”

“Five dollars?”

“And the whiskey. That’s my offer, take it or leave it.”

“Alright, deal.” Art’s new jacket went away.

He had a jacket that fit, plus fifteen dollars and a bottle of whiskey. He took a couple of swigs from the bottle and sold it to a thirsty looking pilgrim sitting outside a tent. He began asking people on foot if they needed a horse. He went back to camp, rounded up every horse but the cowpunchers’ personal mounts, led them into town and sold them for anywhere from seven to ten dollars a head, tack included. It was a terrible loss on their original value, but the animals were barely alive and he knew it. It turned out that one of the buyers was a boat builder by trade. When asked if he could build a craft suitable for transporting one hundred and seventy head of cattle up to Dawson, the man said, “You don’t want a boat, sir, you want a scow. And given the shallow water, I’d suggest two scows to lessen the draft.” A deal was struck and the man commissioned to build two scows to transport beef, which Art had already decided to slaughter on site. He had to hunt down some boatbuilding essentials like oakum, rope and pitch, which of course cost dearly, but given the furious nautical atmosphere around the lakeshore, all were eventually to be had. He headed back to camp, smiling to himself over the way things were working out.

His fine mood disappeared fast. The first face he encountered was that of a young man suffering the ravages of too much cowpunching on foot.

Percy said, “Mr. Cole, I wanna go home.”

“Well, son, we’re not quite done yet. There’s beef to be butchered, scows to build and I can’t pay out your wages until I get to Dawson for the sale.”

“You really think you can sell those sorry critters, Mr. Cole? They ain’t nothing left but hide and bones.”

“Well, if they’re standing up, they must have meat under there somewhere.”

“I wanna go home, I miss my mom. My brother’s dead and I don’t wanna go to Dawson City.”

Art studied the sunken eyes in the narrow face. “Alright, Percy, I suppose we can handle the rest without you.”

“You want my horse?”

“You don’t want your horse?”

“Ain’t nothing left of him either. Hardly any graze up here, he’d never make it back.”

Art realized what Percy was saying was true for all the horses, even his own and Melinda Mae’s. It was four hundred miles on the scows to Dawson. Without hay, no horse could survive that either, particularly the wasted creatures they’d become.

“You take your horse into town, son, and sell it. You’ll get ten dollars, I’m sure, then you take that ten dollars, all the food you can carry from the packs and head toward home. We’ll see you back there and I’ll pay out your wages then.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cole. What do you reckon is the best way to go?”

That was a good question. There was another trail from Teslin Lake to the coast, via Atlin, to Skagway, shorter than hoofing it all the way back to Telegraph Creek and then downriver to Wrangell. Art looked the young man square in the eye. “How much money do you have?”

Percy shrugged. “Well, if I sell my horse, ten dollars.”

“Son, I doubt you’ll get a steamboat down the coast for ten dollars. And I can’t help you out with anything but food. My guess is your best bet would be to walk back the way we came.”

Percy’s face fell. “Really?”

Art laid a hand on the bony shoulder. “You should come with us to Dawson, son. I’ll look after you, I promise.”

The sorrowful eyes looked up. “Mr. Cole, I just wanna go home.”

“Of course, Percy, I won’t stop you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cole.”

“Art…the name’s Art.”

Percy nodded. “Bye, Art.”

Nobody ever saw or heard from Percy Stoddard again.

The next thing Art knew he’d have to deal with would be equally unpleasant. It was time to inform his little girl that her horse couldn’t come with them. He was on his way to find her when she came running to meet him.

“Dad, there’s something wrong with Frisco.”

“Oh, I was just…what is it, he’s taken on a limp?”

“He won’t get up, Dad. He’s laying on his side and looks to be breathing funny.”

Art followed her to the horse. It didn’t take a veterinarian to see the problem. He shook his head. “Melinda Mae, he’s got discharge from his nose and his breathing’s shallow. He’s covered in mud and half starved…actually, I’d say mostly starved. My guess is it’s pneumonia and he’s not going to get any better.”

Her eyes were already streaming. “Dad…”

“Honey, sometimes we have to let go of the things we love, even horses.”

“But he came all this way. He’s my birthday present.”

It was harder than Art expected, although since becoming a father a lot of things were harder than a man would expect. All he could think to offer was something he hadn’t done, it seemed, in a long time, certainly not in the last dreary month of slogging toward the border. He reached his arms around his daughter and hugged her, pressing his cheek under her hat. “You go for a walk, honey. Take Lucas and the dog to look at the lake. It’s pretty in the morning.”

“What’re you gonna do?”

He held her and murmured, “Sweetheart…go for a walk.”

She was on the shoreline with the fresh breeze in her face, trying to lose her thoughts in the sunlight off the ripples, when it came rolling across the water like a thunderclap. It was impossible to ignore what it meant. She burst into tears.

Lucas was there too, tossing rocks for the dog. He stared. “Melinda Mae…”

But she didn’t want to be with him, not now, not with the memory of that horrible sound still booming in her ears. She took off running along the beach, away from town, away from everyone.

He called after her, “Wait, where are you going?”

All she could think to do was put the horror of that place behind her, until blind with tears, she collided with Victor sitting on the gravel shore. She cried out and tumbled, pushing, grunting, shoving to free herself from more arms than she thought either of them had. Finally he pushed her off, and then cool as ever under that black hat, just sat studying her as if nothing at all had happened.

She mumbled, “Uh…*sniffle…*sorry.”

“I might’ve been a bear. You should look where you’re running.”

“Right…you’re right…I’ll do that.”

With an uncustomary squint, he said, “You’re crying.”

“…sorry…”

“Your horse is dead, I suppose.”

Of course he always knew everything going on around him, but why did he have to say it? She almost burst back into tears. Instead she stared the length of her outstretched legs and muttered, “He…couldn’t get up. He had pneumonia.”

“I saw. I expect I’ll try to sell mine, but I better do it soon or he’ll end up the same.” He straightened his hat. “That’s why I’m here. I’m asking the water for help.”

“The water?”

“The ancestors live in the water.”

“Right…you’re Indian.”

“Not completely, but it’s enough.” He turned to stare back over the lake. “I’ve had that horse awhile. Got used to it.”

She was sitting on her backside, facing the lake like him. She rocked forward suddenly. “Wait a minute, you’re asking the ancestors to help you let go of your horse...” She paused, peered hard at the side of his stony face. “Because you *like* him?”

She might as well have asked if mud was brown. “He’s been a good horse, but the most use he can be to me now is if I sell him.”

She tried again. “So, you’re gonna *miss* him?”

“Can’t take horses where we’re going.”

“You *like* your horse and you know you’re gonna be *sad* when *-* ” She stopped, stared. “Wait, why can’t we take the horses? We’re building two big boats.”

He didn’t turn. “What are they going to eat?”

“I dunno, hay?”

“Seen any hay around here?”

“There must be hay somewhere. There’s gotta be.”

He stared silently over the water.

Of course there wasn’t any hay, barely any grass to cut it from and she knew it. “So…you’re saying we weren’t never gonna take the horses from here?”

He turned to her. “Let me tell you what I know about this place. In the winter people use dogsleds to get around. You can carry food for dogs, they eat meat. But there isn’t any hay and it’s already getting cold. This is the end of the line for horses.”

Goodness gracious, he was right, wasn’t he? He’d brought his horse to a place he knew it would never return from. *And he liked the horse, was out here asking the ancestors to help him let go of it.* She jumped to her feet. “I hate you!” Then she turned and ran back toward camp.

Her father was talking to Cheng Wah. She didn’t wait to reach him. “You were never gonna take the horses! You knew they couldn’t come with us!”

He finished saying whatever it was to Cheng Wah and turned to her. “Honey, I didn’t know that until we got here. If the boat was big enough and there was hay, we could’ve taken them.”

“There is no boat! And there hasn’t been any hay since forever!”

“Melinda Mae, nobody knew anything about this trip from one end to the other. There was supposed to be a boat.”

She stomped in front of him, fists balled. “Well, now we’re gonna have two boats! Why couldn’t we make them big enough for the horses?”

“There still won’t be any hay.” He added, “There’s no use for them from here on anyway…even if we had feed.”

“So you decided you were gonna sell Frisco.”

He took his time. “I was going to *suggest* that you sell Frisco. And if you didn’t want to sell him, we might’ve been able to find someone to look after him.”

“Until we got back, you mean.”

“Well…if we come this way.”

Girl eyes are not always soft eyes and sometimes when her mood darkened, Melinda Mae’s were like granite, green granite. “You mean there’s another way home?”

This time her father had difficulty looking at her. “I’ve heard there’s another trail along the Yukon River through Alaska to the coast.”

She boiled over. “So howcome we didn’t come that way? Howcome we had to come the way where everybody got killed and the horses died and it rained and rained and rained?”

“It didn’t rain that much.” Art glanced toward Floyd, who was staring at him. “Alright, it rained. But we couldn’t drive the cattle the other way, it’s all by boat.”

“I like boats! I like them a whole lot better than this place!”

Art reached to his daughter’s shoulder. She shoved the hand away. He said, “Melinda Mae, honey…you’ve never been on a boat.”

“I don’t care! I like them!”

Lucas muttered, “I like boats too…I think.”

Art said, “We’re wasting time standing here and arguing about it now. We’ve only got one way up to Dawson City from here and if we don’t get at it, we’re never going to make it before freeze up. Now we’re two days away from the last of the butchering and about three from finishing the scows. The sooner everyone gets back to work, the sooner we’re out of here. And then everyone gets paid and we start heading home.” He filled his chest and peered at each person in turn. “Now is not the time to be wishing things might’ve been different. Now is the time to get the job done and move on to where we’re headed, Dawson City. That’s why we came and that’s where we’re going to finish what we started.”

Prickles wriggled forward and stuck his snout between Art’s knees. The boss of cows, scows and worn out mud trudgers reached to scratch an ear. “There, you see? The dog wants to get there too. Maybe there’s porcupines.”

Chapter Thirteen

They set out north toward Dawson City on the seventeenth of October with a fresh wind driving them down the lake. Word in town was they faced one hundred miles of open water, then another three hundred by river. Art captained one scow, just manageable with its tiller aft and creaky sail toward the bow, while Victor piloted the other. To avoid any inter-ethnic difficulties, Art carried Floyd, Melinda Mae and Prickles on his craft. Victor, Cheng Wah and Lucas rode the other. It was agreed that each adult would take turns at the tiller, affording the best progress possible for as long as they could stand it. Both vessels were equipped with stoves so cooking could be done on board without having to go ashore. The northern fall days were still bright but short. Nor did a favourable wind mean a warm wind, as the icy tip of winter cut behind every crack of clothing on the open decks, sending whoever wasn’t steering to huddle beside the stove. By the second day they were still making excellent time, but it was beginning to look as if they should’ve loaded more firewood. On the third day, the wind freshened and the sky turned to lead. By noon, ice pellets pinged off the stoves, waves cresting in whitecaps, the shoreline racing by. Floyd came to the tiller, ready to replace Art, but was waved away.

“Couldn’t be better!” the boss yelled. “We’re bloody well racing! I’ll stay awhile longer, you get some rest.”

Floyd said, “I don’t like these waves. They’re starting to come over the sides.”

“It’s a raft, Floyd. It can’t sink.”

But the scow wasn’t quite a raft. It was more like a shallow wooden bathtub, heavily laden with butchered beef and hides.

“You sure?”

Art grinned into the ice pellets bouncing off his teeth. “The harder the wind blows, the sooner we’ll get there. Relax and enjoy it, man.”

Floyd wrinkled his proud nose. “I’d enjoy it better on shore.”

“Put some more wood in the stove. Start thinking about all the money we’re going to make in Dawson.”

The big man tugged his jacket tighter and hulked toward the flimsy warmth. He squatted beside Melinda Mae and Prickles, shivering.

The girl said, “The floor’s starting to wiggle.”

It was true; swell surging under the craft was twisting the deck planks, filling their world with a sound like the purple slabs of meat were coming to life, groaning over wind, water and waves. Spillage over the sides sloshed around the cargo, staining the water pink with blood, then rushing toward the feet of the crew. Prickles lifted one paw as the icy soup swirled around him, then another, trying to dance his way to dryness.

Melinda Mae muttered, “Floyd, I can’t swim.”

The huddled cowpuncher stared at the waves. “I think I can, but not much.”

“You *think* you can?”

“Tried a few times when I was a kid. Never drowned.”

“Well, I just about did drown, me and Lucas. Victor had to save us.”

He blinked. “That one saved you?”

“On his horse in the river. I doubt he can swim either.”

Floyd looked over the wild water to the trailing scow. “Hell, I thought he could fly, he’s just so darn amazing.”

“I wish I could fly now. I’d take off from this boat.”

The deck groaned, the wind howled. A shout came from behind them.

Melinda Mae stood to stare through the ice pellets. “It’s Lucas, he’s waving and pointing at something in the water.”

“Reckon he’s scared.” Floyd said. “Wants to turn around and go home.”

“I think it’s Victor! He fell in the water!”

“Huh?” Floyd stood.

“Out there, see?” She pointed.

The big man squinted into the weather. “Damn, I reckon you’re right. The stupid idiot went overboard.”

Melinda Mae swung around, hopping in front of her big friend. “Save him, Floyd! You gotta save him, you’re the only one who can swim!”

“Huh? I ain’t going in that. It’s crazy out there.”

She grabbed his big hand. “Hurry, he’s gonna drown!”

Art was waving too. “Floyd, get here! Grab the tiller!”

Floyd looked down at Melinda Mae. “Can your dad swim?”

“I don’t know, don’t think so. Why, you want my dad to jump in?”

Floyd was already down on the deck, pulling off his boots. “Naw, you’re right, I probably got the best chance. But grab me some firewood off the pile.”

She fetched the wood and he stuffed three pieces inside the front of his big jacket. “Shove some more up my back. Go on, hurry.”

She shoved.

He lurched to the stern and grabbed the mooring rope coiled there.

Art yelled, “What’re you doing? You take the tiller, I’ll go!”

The wind burned Floyd’s fumbling fingers as he worked to tie the loose end around his waist. Already he was colder than he’d ever been in Alberta, spray from the following waves sharp as the ice pellets. He tossed his hat to Melinda Mae and yelled at Art, “Don’t worry, I can swim!” Then he jumped.

But he couldn’t swim, not one stroke. He could only wave his arms and shout, “Damn…oh, damn!” The water felt more like fire than something on the verge of freezing, but the wood inside his jacket held him high enough to breathe. He wasn’t getting any closer to Victor, though, if that really was Victor’s head bobbing like a dark bubble in the swell.

Art yelled, “Kick your legs! Move your arms like this!”

Floyd tried to copy. It was clumsy, but he seemed to be pulling closer to the bubble in the raging swell. Thirty feet away, he knew it was Victor. The cowpuncher was staring with eyes the size of horse apples, long hair drifting around his head.

Twenty feet: the horse apples were rolling upward in their sockets. Floyd yelled, “Hang on! Kick your legs!”

Ten feet: the head slid under a wave and didn’t come up again. Floyd cursed, “You stupid damn mongrel!” He reached inside his jacket and pulled the wood from the front, then ducked forward and tried to dive. It was no good; the wood at the back still held him high.

He muttered, “…wish I’d learned to swim…” Fingers like sticks, he fumbled with the buttons on his jacket. It fell open, but the rope held it tight around his waist. Gasping with each wave that swamped his head, somehow, magically, he was starting to feel warm. His fingers didn’t hurt anymore, but he couldn’t move them either. Hands like clubs, he wormed the knot free and shoved the jacket away. He dove. It was the most sinister place he’d ever been in his life. After what seemed like forever in a grey hell without air, he had the limp body in his bunched hands. He kicked up toward the light, lungs burning. He broke the surface and sucked sweet living air by the lungful. *Where was the damn rope?* He spotted it, let go of his load and lunged. *Got it.* He reached back and snagged the sinking victim with hooked fingers. He pulled the two together. Head barely above the surface, he wrapped the rope around the bundle and tried to tie the knot. Finally he got a half hitch like a piggin string and shoved the loose end under the cowpuncher’s belt. He yelled, “Pull!” The rope went tight. He wrapped his arms around Victor and squeezed to hang on. *So warm…but so, so tired.*

Dragging behind Victor with his head swamped under every wave, he barely found the energy to cough out what he swallowed. The scow was still so far away. His eyelids drooped…*so tired*…he closed them to imagine a place in the sun. Back in Pincher Creek it was a shining summer day and there was his mom with Effie. They were on the porch eating fresh baked biscuits off one of the special china plates his mom kept in the old cabinet. Effie had her bug jar; she smiled as he climbed the steps. “Mom make bikky…you want, Foy?” She held out a biscuit and he took it. Her little moon face grinned like it might crack in half. “I wuv you Foy.” It was the best biscuit he’d ever eaten and he’d never felt more loved in his life.

At the back of the scow, Melinda Mae was a crazy person. She jumped up and down and stamped her feet. “Floyd! Floyd, come back!”

But the big Blackfoot couldn’t hear her. He was in the sunshine grinning and eating biscuits with his sister.

Art hauled on the rope with its single dragging bundle while the abandoned tiller flapped loose, slapping the stern and threatening to snap from its mount. He yelled, “Melinda Mae, grab the tiller!”

But the girl was staring into the water where Floyd disappeared.

He yelled again, “Melinda Mae!”

Finally, she looked around.

“The tiller…grab the tiller!”

She shuffled to do what he asked and the scow came back under control. He pointed toward shore. “Aim in!”

She swung the handle.

“Other way! You’ve got to aim the handle opposite the way you want to go!”

“Huh?”

He pointed. “That way, point it that way!”

She turned the tiller and they began to swing toward the rocky shore just as the dark bundle they’d been dragging reached the scow. Art held the rope with one hand and leaned with the other. He hooked a handful of collar and hauled hard. The sodden body at the end of his arm felt like a forkful of green hay soaked in swamp mud. He let go of the rope and lunged with both hands to drag the body to the ledge. Victor’s head banged the side. Then the chest. At last the victim toppled aboard and flopped at Art’s feet.

Melinda Mae called, “Is he okay?”

Art stared; if the man was alive it was a miracle. He squatted next to the body and turned the rubbery face toward him, leaning to listen for breath. He couldn’t hear a whisper…until a geyser of fluid erupted and he hurtled backward, face, hat and hair dripping with cold slime.

Melinda Mae yelled, “Hooray, he’s alive!”

Art wiped the mess with his sleeve. “Here, you like him so much, you be the nurse. I’ll take the tiller.”

Not a moment too soon. With waves pounding the rocks, the scow was hurtling much too fast into shallow water. The thing was a tub, barely responding. Rocks…waves…CRRRUUUNCH. They slammed the beach.

The second scow ground ashore forty yards behind them. Cheng Wah, a doll at the tiller, dropped to his knees and didn’t move, staring forward.

Art called, “Melinda Mae, go check on the other boat. I’ll tend to Victor.”

The girl jumped over the side and ran down the beach with Prickles at her heels.

With the bow beached, waves crashed so hard over the stern Art could barely breathe between walls of water. Planks groaned and writhed, the creaking deck lifting and falling at every surge. Victor was in danger of drowning again if he didn’t get him off the boat. He hooked the victim’s armpits and lurched around their cargo of meat. His precious load was already spoiling with wetness and he knew it, but they had to get to solid ground. He was almost there when a determined mountain of water picked up the stern and hurled it sideways, twisting the deck under his feet. He crashed backward, threw his hands down to catch himself and felt the boards part between his fingers – the scow was coming apart. Victor groaned and coughed. Art yelled, “Can you help me, man? We’ve got to get onto shore!” Victor groaned, but twisted his arms under his body and wormed to all fours. “C’mon,” Art yelled, “it’s breaking up!” Together they crawled the last few feet to the bow. Art helped get the man’s chest to the edge, then planted his shoulder behind him and pushed. Victor toppled over with Art directly behind him. Side by side on the rocky beach, they lay panting. Victor coughed and retched again.

Art said, “What happened, how’d you get in the water?”

Victor’s hair plastered his face like a coal black mop. He gasped, “Boat breaking up…went forward to yell at you. Big wave…knocked me overboard.”

Art’s head dropped back to the rocks. Wind, ice pellets and spray lashed his cheeks. “I guess it just wasn’t meant to be. A bad idea gone about as wrong as it possibly could.”

Victor said, “Sometimes you have to listen to the water. Sometimes it doesn’t want you there.”

“Well, it didn’t want you, I guess. It wanted Floyd. He’s out there somewhere under it.”

“Floyd…so that wasn’t a dream?”

Art pushed up to his elbows, turned to him. “No dream, he saved your life. And he didn’t even like you.”

Victor said, “I didn’t like him either. I’m half white, he was all Indian, like it’s something special.” He took a moment and then said, “…but he saved my life…”

“If it helps any, Floyd wasn’t completely Indian either.”

The copper faced cowboy stared. “You mean he lied? He wasn’t pure Blackfoot like he said?”

“No…he was Blackfoot, it’s true. But he was raised by a white settler family. You know more about being an Indian than he ever learned in his life.”

Victor leaned back and let go a laugh. “White…he was white?”

“He was a good man. He was my friend.”

Victor was smart enough to shake the laugh away. He stared at the purple sky and changed the subject. “I wonder where the raven went?”

“What?”

“I haven’t seen the raven since Hazelton. Maybe he went home.”

Art said, “Well, if he’s a bird with any sense, that’s what he’d do, alright.”

“Funny, I never thought I’d miss him.”

Art didn’t care about the missing raven. He had more lamentable regrets to digest. “That was our last chance to make Dawson. It’s over and I’m flat busted.”

Victor pushed up to his elbows. “You don’t have to pay me if you’re out of money, boss. I can live through the winter, hunting and trapping.”

Blue eyes met brown. “My name is Arthur Cole and I pay my debts or die trying. So it would be in your interests to help me get home.”

Victor’s lips were still half frozen. They twisted into a thin blue smile. “Long as it’s south.”

Art listened all night to the sound of his boats breaking apart. He didn’t sleep a wink. The next morning they rescued what little food they could and left the cargo for whatever scavengers happened by. Then the ragged bunch of survivors set off walking down the shore to Teslin. Around midday they stopped in the lee of a large boulder to rest with the first flakes of snow swirling around its sides and sticking to their damp clothes. Art slumped with a defeated groan against the cold granite and said, “Well, at least we found the brand new Yukon Territory.”

Melinda Mae said, “And Prickles, too.”

Cheng Wah said, “How far home?”

The boss turned to his cook. “You’re fired.”

“Who care? Nothing to cook anyway.”

They were one thousand, one hundred and fifty miles from the Chilcotin, with winter already pressing around their rock. Something dark swooped over their heads. It was a raven.

The End

After the End

Well after Christmas, Norman Lee, the man who lived the real life Klondike cattle drive, arrived back down the coast in Vancouver with personal assets amounting to ‘a blanket, a dollar and a dog’. He was pounced on by reporters who’d heard of his odyssey, alas resulting only in: “Mr. Lee was among the passengers from the north. He declined to speak for publication.” In fact, the long retreat to the coast and its sporadic winter steamboats had involved snowshoes, backpacks and hand built, hand drawn sleds. He and his party were rescued at one point by the Northwest Mounted Police and fed when on the verge of starvation. Back in Vancouver, he borrowed money, caught a train to the end of the railhead at Ashcroft and began walking the two hundred miles home to the Chilcotin before a sympathetic friend loaned him a horse. With typical stick-withitness, he did not return to England and architecture, but replenished his herd and went on to become one of the area’s most successful cattle ranchers. The original trading post of course is gone, but Lee’s Corner Gas, with café and store, still exists at the turnoff to Hanceville on Highway 20, the name Lee legendary in the area. To Norman’s personal journal, published by Touch Wood Editions under the title *Klondike Cattle Drive,* I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for providing the inspiration and detail necessary to bring this story to life. Norman died in 1939.

His wife, Agnes, the inspiration for Lavinia, died in 1958 at the age of 86.

Norman and Agnes did not have a daughter, but an adopted son Daniel, who died in 1979 and is buried at home in the family plot.

Tom Hance (presented here in cameo) died in 1910 at the age of 66.

Nellie Hance (also in cameo) survived her husband until 1935. She is buried beside him at Hanceville.

Of Annie Tlilkwa, Tom’s Tsilhqot’in mistress and the inspiration for Rose, I could find no reliable date of death.

Alice Hance (Tom and Annie’s daughter) married at sixteen. There is no record of her death.

Little Willie, their son, leaves no record other than his birth.

Eugene Hance, the inspiration for Victor, lived until 1954.

Grover Hance, the inspiration for Lucas, went on to realize his dream of becoming a first rate cowpuncher and matured into a colourful and respected Chilcotin rancher, outfitter and guide. He was known for his distinctive wool chaps and died in 1960.

Constable Robert Pyper, the inspiration for Harland Hobbs, fell in love with the Chilcotin and after leaving the British Columbia Police Force, ran a trading post at Chilanko Forks, where Pyper Lake is named after him. He is buried in Alexis Creek cemetery.

Of Norman’s enduring cook, the inspiration for Cheng Wah, I could find no record beyond his occasional mention in period reminiscences. He remains, like many of the significant Chinese community of the time, a vanished pioneer documented only in the memories of those who knew him.

All other characters were fictitious.