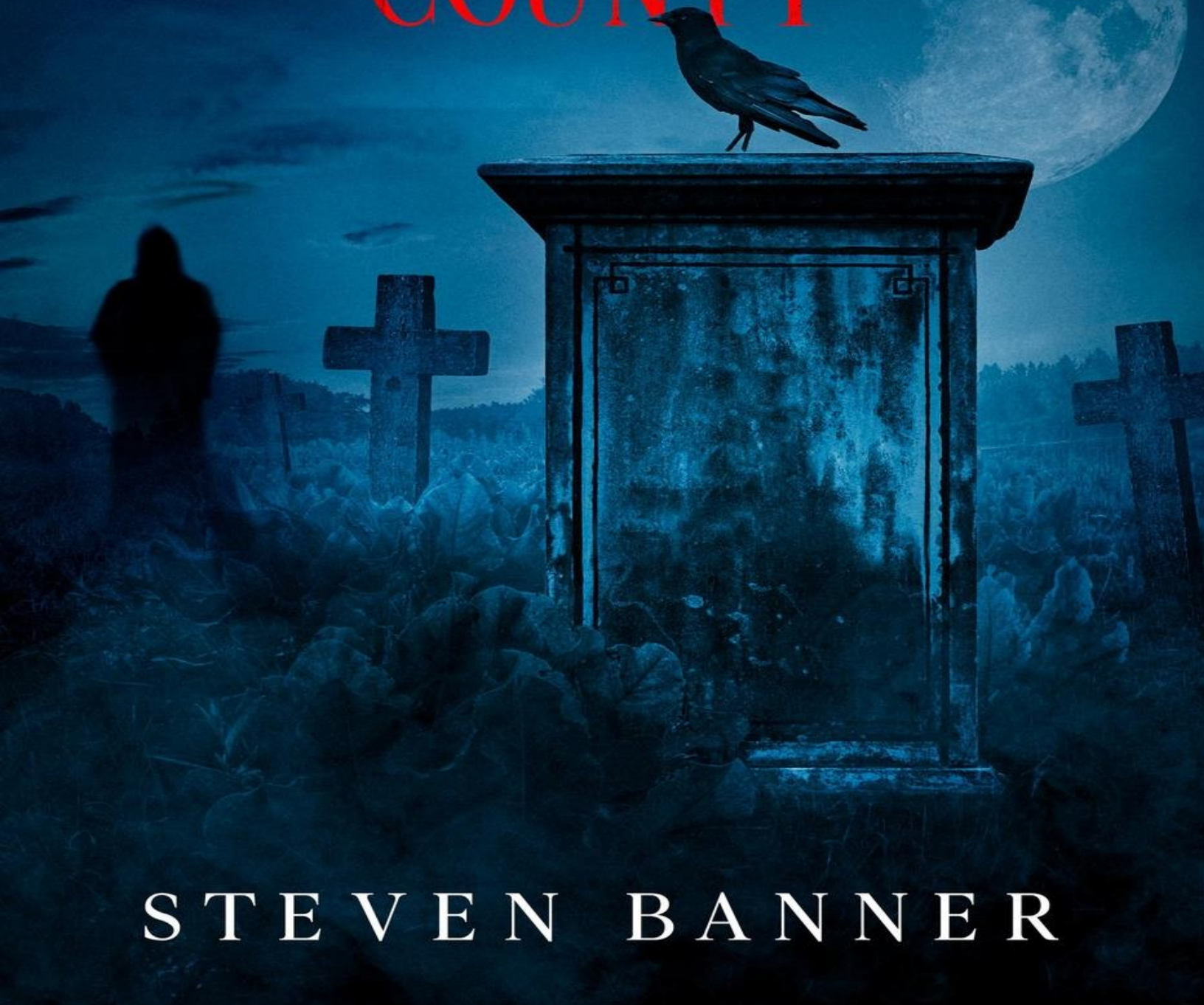


THE
REAPER
OF WASHINGTON
COUNTY



STEVEN BANNER

**THE REAPER
Of
WASHINGTON COUNTY
By
Steven Banner**

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Chapter 1

The Exhumations

Exeter, Rhode Island

March 15, 1892

M

ajor Lancaster was a captain in Grant's army when he was in the Battle of Cold Harbor. There, he was wounded and unable to lead his troops to victory. It became the only serious conflict that the General ever lost during the Civil War. Some say Grant would have won that battle too, if not for a sniper's musket ball that ripped through the captain's shoulder. Towards the end of the war, he was promoted to the rank of Major, and no one had deserved it more. He was, of course, responsible for so much death on the battlefield. But it was Grant who received all the accolades for so many battles won. The North would later go on to victory, yet the Major had only the nightmares of what he had done. Like many soldiers who were in the war, he sadly faded into obscurity. That is, until a young Marshal entered his life.

* * *

"You can yell all you want, all right! There's nothing you can say to get us to cut up any vampires. There's a limit to what we will do. Now I told these men we would help with the digging and that is it." At that moment, the four men turned towards their horses.

"Now, hold on men," the Major said. "You can do the digging if that is all you want. I'll have the rest taken care of if need be. There are three bodies in all. Only two are buried. One is just sitting in a vault for Christ's sake. I'm going to pay you to dig up all three. I would not want you men to think I don't appreciate you all."

The Major was seen as a stern man, aged from the War Between the States. His gray beard shadowed his face with the blackest of eyes. His hair was never a concern to him. These men knew not to run. There was no way these swamp Yankees could be forgiven for this. Crossing the Major at that point would be their end; either they did the digging or they would never be heard from again. "Now, I would have our undertaker take care of this. But he is sick with the rest of them."

The four men began to look at each other. "We have to get paid when the job is done, Major."

“You're damn right you'll get paid. Every penny of it. You can bed down in the blacksmith's barn tonight. I'll give you some money now so you can take in a bit of liquor. I'll have some grub sent down to you men later. Just stay out of sight until it's time. Now get going, he is waiting for you down there.” After giving them some money, he watched them head directly to Ed Benning's place. He was well paid to keep them up for the night.

The Major expected no issues. Unfortunately, that left one person: Doc. Metcalf. That is where he was headed next. Just a short walk down the street brought him right to his office.

“Don't give me that damn look, Doctor. You know I need your help on this one. These are good boys. They are going to do a fine job for us.”

“I know you run this town, Major. And I've never had a problem with that. But this barbaric behavior of digging up graves . . . You did get permission from George Brown — the father and husband of these people you are digging up?”

“He agreed to everything, Doctor. He said he would surely help the people of this community.”

“God help us,” the doctor stated, shaking his head.

The next morning, the weather appeared fair, with no clouds in sight. The daily business of the town was without issue. Last night, the men had bought themselves what they needed to help pass the time. Most just stood out of sight and rested. The Major went about his duties of gathering the tools needed for the job, deciding on two grub hoe picks and four pointed shovels. He chose four shovels because he wanted to make it clear that they were all to do the digging.

He had to go to the general supply store for the lamps. The store was not far off the beaten path, just across the street and a few buildings down. When he arrived, he was greeted by the owner, John Manning. He was old school and had taken the business over from his father.

Most people took to him, as he was a real good fella, and gladly bought from his store. John could be recognized from far away by his bushy mustache and that green apron he always wore. There was a sense of pride about him. His place did extremely well. He made it his business to get everyone in town what they needed.

Directly across the street was the doctor's office. Since the Doc's wife passed, he moved out of his farmhouse and was now living in town. No one asked him if his farm was for sale. Everyone thought he would move back when he was ready.

When the Major entered the store, John was filling the shelves as usual. He quickly turned around and yelled out, “How are you, Major?”

"I'm good, John," he replied. "Listen, I need two lamps — you know, the rugged, outdoor kind."

"You mean those searchlights?"

"Yes," the Major replied.

"I've been selling a lot of those lately; I got them in the back. I'll bring them up for you." The Major stared out the window at the doctor's office. People were always coming and going over there. The doctor, like John, was very popular with the people in town. John then stepped up and placed the lamps on the counter.

"Should I place this on the town's account, Major?"

"Yes, and draw me up two gallons of lamp oil with that. Put everything on the slip."

"You bet," he said. He went to the back of the store again and brought out two cans. "You know John, I didn't see you at the last meeting."

"I just wasn't feeling up to it that day."

"That's too bad. We always like to hear from everyone in the community."

"Major, to be honest with you, I really just go along with whatever the folks in this town want to do. It's not good for business to get in the middle of things, you know."

"Is that a fact?" he said. He then grabbed the supplies and headed directly toward his office.

When he got outside, he could not resist. The Doc's office was just across the street. This crazy thing was going down tonight. He needed reassurance he was not alone in this. So, the Major finished putting the supplies in the back of his wagon and headed over there.

The Doc was a recluse at times, preferring to work alone. When the Major arrived, he had to ring the bell for him to come out. After ringing it several times, he quickly came. "I wish I could say I'm glad to see you," said the doctor. The Major leaned on the counter and gave him a stern look.

The doctor was a tall man of the refined, well-educated type. His diploma was from Brown University and some others the Major had never heard of. He had short black hair and was always clean-shaven. Most said that he was the most handsome man in town, and always a gentleman of sorts. People here wondered why he settled in such a small town. After his wife's passing, many wondered why he stayed. She was a real beauty. The Major didn't think the Doc would ever really get over her.

"Doc, I will be here around seven tonight. We'll jump into my wagon and head up there. Oh, I'm sorry, Doc. Are you with anyone now? Is there someone in the back?"

“No. Relax Major, we are alone.”

“I really need you tonight on this.”

“For the record, Major, I am advising you to call it all off. Leave those graves as they are.”

“No, it's what we all voted on so we are moving on this. I spoke with George, our undertaker. He told me that the youngest has not been buried yet. You know, it is winter and all and the ground is frozen. She was placed in the vault in the back of the cemetery. She is still there.”

“Well,” said the doctor. “It would be the simplest thing to do to just only look at her.”

“Doc, you got to understand. The people are really frightened. They all must be examined to put this to rest. They want answers here.”

“Major, they will not find them up at that cemetery.”

“What would you have me do, Doc? Just let it go? They would just do it themselves. I will be here at seven tonight.”

He turned to leave and Mrs. Emma Parks was just entering the office. She was an old widow who worked a few hours per week at the Country Inn just up the way across the street. “Is that lunch you have Mrs. Parks?” The Major asked.

“Yes, it is. It's for the doctor.” She then nodded with a smile.

“Well, I was thinking of heading that way myself.”

“Oh, Major,” she replied. “When are the activities tonight?”

“Excuse me?” the Major replied.

“Well, you know. When are you going to start digging?”

“Well, Mrs. Parks, perhaps it's best left to the men of this town. This is a rather delicate situation and all.”

“Nonsense,” she replied. “We all voted on it. Therefore, we should all be in on it.”

At that moment, the Major walked over to where the doctor was standing. “Now you understand what I'm dealing with,” he whispered.

He then quickly turned to Mrs. Parks and stated, “The doctor here would be glad to tell you all the details. Good day to you, ma'am.” He tipped his hat, and his departure could not have been any sooner. As he walked outside, he took a deep breath of fresh air. Not that he really needed it. But he wanted to smell what was left of the clean air in this town. He did agree with the Doc on principle.

But crazy superstitions had taken hold here and they needed to be broken. Suddenly, lunch did not seem so appealing to him anymore. He headed back for some much-needed time alone at home. He suspected the Doc was thinking of doing the same.

A little time had passed before he got a knock on the door. "Come on in," he replied.

"It's me, Jimmy, sir. Just wanted to know if you were ready for me to start those fires."

Earlier in the day, the Major had nearly a cord of wood sent up to the cemetery to soften the frozen ground for digging. He had to mark it out well so it would be easy for Jimmy. He was a simple boy, nearly sixteen, and not much for schooling. But he was loyal to the Major.

Scrawny as hell with the heart of a lion, Jimmy followed orders and worked his ass off just as hard as anyone. The Major made sure he was paid well. He came from dirt farmers that were from many generations. His family name was Stetson — a name that went back a hundred years here in Rhode Island. His father was always sick from one illness or another. He never did work much and it was Jimmy who was bringing in all the grub money for his parents and sister. You could not help but like the boy, no matter what he did.

"You know what? You're right, now would be a good time to start those fires."

"That's what I was thinking, sir. Do you want me to stay and help with the digging?"

"No, Jimmy, I don't want you to take part in any of that. Let those men take care of it. That's what I hired them for. I just want you to watch them. Watch them real close. And don't take no orders from them, you hear me?"

"I don't understand it, sir."

"What do you mean, boy?"

"You know my home is just west of there."

"I do indeed."

"I've cut through that cemetery many times sir, morning, noon, and night. I never saw anything. Went by that vault and never did see anyone either."

"Well, Jimmy boy, we are just doing our jobs, you and me. Someone has to. Listen to me — take some lamp oil with you. That will help to get those fires started quicker. Any problems, you head back right away, boy. You understand?" Jimmy nodded his head and with that, he was off.

There was not much left to do. For the next several hours, things seemed very quiet indeed. He looked outside and could see smoke rising over the church that stood in front of the cemetery. It appeared Jimmy had things well in hand.

The Major did expect some sort of fuss with all that smoke and all, but it was very quiet that afternoon. It was so quiet he could hear the crows all the way from the open fields near the cemetery. This was land set aside for more burials. This thing now was as real to him as the change in seasons. He believed it was

what the people wanted. For the rest of the day, he challenged what they were about to do. He even began remembering his days in the war. But this was something very different in nature. The townspeople were completely frightened to death and convinced they were being preyed upon. Although the doctor objected to the fullest degree, he has found himself almost trapped in this. This certainly would be a day he'd be glad was behind them.

He remembered something his father once said to him about there being no rest for the wicked. He was trying to understand it all, but actually, he felt he could not. As the clock struck five, he knew it was time to get the boys moving. He looked up again towards the church and cemetery. His thoughts were with that boy and getting him home. He decided that when he and the Doc got there later, it would be time to cut Jimmy loose.

He'd pay him off and get him out of there. He didn't want the boy to see the open graves. He was hoping the walk over to the stable would not end somehow, and then shook his head in despair. May God forgive us, he muttered. There was just no turning back now.

He arrived at the blacksmith's place, and all were waiting there. The blacksmith came out to greet him. "All right so far," the Major said. "Can't wait to get rid of your diggers."

His eyes then turned towards the barn. "They stink," the blacksmith replied.

"I'm sorry about all that Ed." Just then, the barn door opened and he waved to them to come on. All four men rolled out and got into the wagon. He decided to head east, then loop back around the town and use the old trail up to the cemetery. The undertaker would use it from time to time as the dead bodies would roll out of town. All was quiet for now in town. Each man was thinking of his task at hand.

Just as they got to the church, the Major could see the smoke coming from behind it. Why was it a good idea to keep the church and cemetery so close, he thought. It was simply right in the back of it. The pastor was standing on the back steps just staring out at him. He really didn't want his opinion on the matter again. He and his own daughter Anne were very much against this, calling it wrong and immoral. Perhaps, but he was convinced the townsfolk were going to just do

it themselves anyway. He stopped the wagon and yelled out. "No more wood on the fire, Jimmy!"

The men then started to unload the supplies. As they stood around, one of the men stated, "We will let it just burn out. Then, we'll get to it, Major."

"All right men, you know what to do. Light the lanterns now and make sure they are working."

The men proceeded to fill up the small tanks with oil. Jimmy then turned and looked up. "I can stay, Major, if you want."

"No, Jimmy, you have done enough for today. Let the men take over from here." Jimmy quickly hopped on board. His face was blackened with dirt from the wood laid on the ground. The Major reached out and handed him a rag to wipe it off, then gave the horses a tap with the reins. "I'll be back a little later," he yelled out.

When the Major got Jimmy home, a single light was burning on the porch. It revealed an unkept simple structure. A painted door in front with only one window on the side. They had a small barn out back that had a crooked look to it. It's probably going to collapse with the next big storm, he thought. Jimmy's mom had come outside and the Major quickly handed Jimmy his money. He clutched it tightly in his hand and ran inside. "How are you, Mrs. Stetson?"

"We are managing, Major. How about you?"

"I've seen better days I guess . . . Tell me something. I think you have an idea of what is going on. What's your opinion of it?"

"Well, my husband thinks this may resolve things. Myself, I just don't know one way or another. You could have left this to the authorities to figure out."

"They don't really know anything, and just left us alone with all of this."

"I see," she said. "Well, Major, thanks for bringing Jimmy home. We appreciate what you do for him."

"He's a big help to me, ma'am. Well, I'll see you now."

On the road back, the Major drew his gun and looked in all the chambers just to be sure it was loaded. As he passed the cemetery on his way back to town, he could see the men working. The lanterns were fully lit and all four men appeared to be working at a brisk pace. So far, so good, he thought. This was going to be one hell of a night. The sky was clear and the moon was almost full. The air was cold and thin, with a breeze now and then.

When he passed by the church, the pastor was on the front steps again, just staring out at him. He wondered if he was going to have him in his sermon on Sunday. He looked forward and decided to pay him no mind. He was not going to be intimidated by him. That was a fact!

When he got back, he waited in his office, lighting a fire and making some coffee. Then, he looked out the window and saw his daughter heading home. She opened the door and closed it swiftly, keeping as much heat in as she could. She was a beautiful young lady with long, brown hair and hazel eyes like her mother's. But her ways were much like the Major's and had to be respected. She was always kind when she needed to be. "I brought you a little something to eat," she said.

"Thanks, I have not felt like eating all day."

"Well, Dad, with all that is going on, how can anyone think or feel normal?"

"Anne, let's not get into all that again."

"You could — if you wanted to — just stop all this."

"I'd like to but like I've been telling everyone, they were just going to do it themselves."

"But it would be on them, you know, and not you. Why can't you let someone else take responsibility just once?"

"Because there is no one else. Look, I'll tell you all about it when I get home. I have to go and pick up the Doc soon."

"Eat your food, Dad, before you go, and I'll be waiting for you later."

"I'll be back, Anne, as soon as I can." She then nodded and headed for the door. The coffee was good but he thought some gin might do him better right then, so he opened his top drawer and poured some into his cup.

When he got over to the Doc's office, he waited out front. Sure enough, within a minute, Doc came outside. Then he got into the wagon. "Thanks, Doc. I didn't want to do this alone."

"Leave you alone to screw this up — no way," he said.

As they approached the cemetery, the men began waving them in with their lanterns. The Major could see that they were finished digging and waited for him to come over. "How did you make out?" he asked.

"We are finished," one of the men spoke. "Just give me a hammer and bar and we will get this over with."

The Major went back and got the tools needed. Just then, he looked up and saw a barrage of lanterns coming toward them. Here they come, he thought. The conscience of morality is here. He handed the tools to the men when the lights came upon them. It was Mrs. Bennet, along with Mrs. Howard and a couple of ladies he had never seen before. There was Bob Slain with his two brothers, and a small group of others heading their way, along with two men on their horses in the back.

"Well, all right," he said. "Most of you know me. I guess all I can ask is that this goes over as peacefully as possible. I'm sure everyone knows why we are here." The crowd then grew silent. He called over Mrs. Bennet and asked. "Who are those ladies? They are not from the town."

"No, Major, I brought them in as spiritual advisors."

"What!" he replied.

"Can we get on with this?" one of the workers asked. At that moment, the Doc could not control his grin.

“Proceed gentleman,” the Major replied. The hammers then began striking the steel bars that were angled into the coffins. The sounds could be heard echoing off the church over and over. The noise seemed to go on for some time. Then, abruptly, there was a snapping sound as if two pieces of wood were being broken. It was the seal on the coffin starting to come apart. All eyes then became fixed on the ground before them.

“We are ready over here, Major.” said one of the workers.

“Which one is it that you are opening?” asked the Doctor.

“This would be the mother, Mary Eliza Brown. She died in the year 1883.”

“All right, go ahead and open it.” As the men opened the coffin, a loud gasp could be heard.

“Now, folks, let the doctor do his looking first,” the Major said. “Then, if you want to, in a single file, come around and look.” The doctor took just a minute. What he saw was normal decomposition, much like a dead body should. All he remarked about was that the skeletal remains were intact, which, to the Doc, was absolutely right. She was exactly where they had placed her. The doctor then stepped back so the others could see. “Is everyone satisfied here? Does anyone want to see this before we close this one up?” The crowd became silent. “All right, men, seal it now,” the Major said.

“What about the other one?” said Mrs. Bennet. And with that, the men jumped into the next grave.

“Do what you have to do, men,” the Major replied.

“For the record, which one is this?” said the doctor.

“This is the oldest daughter, Mary Olive Brown. She died in 1890. Open her up, men.” Once again, the coffin made a snapping sound when it came apart — as if it had been glued together somehow. But it was only the wood, after being compressed together for quite some time. The same results were reported to all. A naturally decomposing body was seen, flesh rotting to the bone, with her hair just lying there off her body.

The crowd drew silent once more. They appeared almost bored with what they had seen. Most just glanced and walked away. There could be no doubt these corpses were not rising and torturing anyone. They were just plain dead and for some time now.

“Well, I guess that leaves just one, Mercy Brown,” said Mrs. Bennet.

“We will go down to where she lies and get this over with.” said the Major. With lanterns in hand, they all marched down to the vault. There must have been thirty people by now. There was no way they were all getting in. As they approached, the Major grabbed hold of the lock on the door. “I know I've got the key here.” After a minute, the lock gave way.

The door was made of wood and had solid-metal hinges. Two men pushed heavily on it to pry it open. "Let's get the place lit well first," said the Major.

Several men then entered the darkened space. The room was quite small with wooden boxes on both sides. "I spoke with George, the undertaker, and he said all the coffins are marked." There, at the very end, was a box with the name Mercy Brown, who died in 1892. "Get the hammers and bars, men," the Major said. "It's getting damn cold and I want this over with."

They all stepped outside and let them do their work. All of the men quickly came out with the last one saying, "It's done, sir; you can see for yourself."

"Now the Doc and I are going in. When we are done, you folks can go in. Why don't you go in first, Doc? You know what you're looking at." As the light reflected on the body, it exposed a gruesome sight. The corpse was lying sideways. Her hair and nails appeared very long and had grown somehow. "We're going to have a problem here," I said. "They're not ready for this, I tell you."

"Listen, Major, this girl just recently died in the middle of winter. This is exactly what I would expect to see."

"This doesn't look natural to me, Doc. Why is she lying that way and everything is growing like that?"

"It takes time for a body to decompose in winter. In spite of the position of the body, I really think this is a normal dead corpse."

"Well, Doctor, I'll rely on your judgment."

"That's your call, Major."

They then filed out and stood on both sides of the door. "You may enter if you like. But I want to warn you that the body is quite preserved because of her frozen state. So, prepare yourself for what you see in there."

Suddenly, as they entered, screams could be heard and most were rushing back. Some, though, stood staring. As the last one of the ladies came out, the spiritual adviser shouted out, "She is definitely a vampire all right."

"What do you mean 'a vampire'?" said the Major.

"She wanders at night doing what she will to torment the living, sucking the blood from them."

"Now, hold on," said the doctor. "That is not what's happening in there at all."

"You think what you want," said the old woman. "But if we don't do what needs to be done, that boy Edwin, he will die for sure."

"Just what needs to be done?" the Major asked.

"Her heart and liver must come out. If there's blood in them, she still has powers. The only way to destroy her is to burn both, here and now."

“I’m not going to take any part in this,” said the doctor.

“You won’t have to,” said the old woman. “There is more,” she said. “Edwin must drink holy water mixed with the ashes from her heart. That is the only way he can be cured.”

“That sounds crazy,” the Major said.

“That’s because it is,” replied the doctor.

“Men,” said the old woman. “Get some of those rocks there and bring down what’s left of that firewood. I told the boy’s father I would save his son if I could. And, by God, I’m going to do it!”

* * *

As the years wore on, so did the deaths of the people living in the town, including George Brown’s boy, Edwin. To make matters worse, there were women missing now.

They thought it was possible that they had just run off, but some had left children behind. That idea seemed unlikely now.

The Major had tried in vain to get the local authorities involved in helping to find these women, but they had refused to do so. They could not produce any evidence a crime had been committed, along with their foolish acts of digging up graves. They simply chose not to get involved with it at all.

The Major did have one friend left in this world who could help. His name was Captain James Callahan. He led a group of federal marshals out of the Boston office. He had not seen him in many years since they were in the war together. It would be two more before the Major had the nerve to meet with the captain.

Chapter 2

A Life at Sea

New Bedford, Massachusetts

September 19, 1894

I

had just completed an almost six-month whaling trip on the schooner Intrepid. It was my first whaling job and I felt lucky to get it. My friend Thomas Christian and I were able to persuade his uncle to bring us aboard for the trip. It was exciting and somewhat adventurous being out at sea. Tom had talked about this during our last year at school.

I was not sure if it was even possible for him to come through for us. Tom's uncle (Captain Christian) was a fine seasoned whaler taught well by his father, who was a legend in the business. I did not think much of killing whales but dared not speak harshly of it. This would certainly bring bad luck to our voyage. I also sensed some discontent in Tom. At times he became bored with it. The harpooning of whales was left to more experienced men. Tom and I did mostly deckhand duties and there were plenty of those to go around. I would later come to realize that Tom, after finishing school, was expected to be on that ship no matter what. The trip ended early on a Friday. We were then instructed to report on Monday morning to see Captain Christian at the company office.

It was located just a short distance from where the Intrepid was docked. We were given some advance money before leaving the ship. Tom said if they liked you; it would not be deducted from your total earnings.

I was eager to see my mother and sister again. This was the first time away from home for me. Life at sea is not for everyone I thought. I guess Tom felt the same way as I did. We took off for home as fast as we could and both of us seemed happy again. That afternoon, as I ran past the gas lights, I could feel the cobblestones under my feet. They were familiar to me. And so was Huttleston Street, the place I had spent my whole life — it was my home. A brilliant two-story building, white with black shutters and a black front door to match. It had two flower boxes on the lower windows. Mother loved her flowers and they looked beautiful in spring.

My arrival at the front door was a little different this time. All my life it was an entrance I just walked through. Now, being gone for so long a time, the polite thing to do was to knock. I must admit, I was a little apprehensive about seeing Mother again. She was not keen on my adventure at all. This was not what she

had planned for her son, although I didn't realize it at the time. But change was on the way. She would be persistent in getting me off those ships for good.

When the door opened, it was my sister who was standing there. Her eyes widened and she smiled. "Well," she said, "You made it back alive." She then grinned and gave me a hug. "Mom," she yelled out. "Sean is home."

As my sister turned, I noticed the change in her. Her red hair was much longer now. She seemed more mature. She cried out again, "Mom!"

I went to put down my sack of clothes, and there was my mother walking towards me. She had not changed a bit. Her dark eyes peered at me warmly. "Oh, Sean, it seems like it's been forever," she said. Another warm hug and embrace followed. "Dammit Sean, you are awfully thin. I guess they don't feed you much on that boat."

"Oh Mom, it's a ship."

"No," she stated. "The vessel your father and I came over here on was a ship. That to me is a boat." My sister could not help but laugh. "Your room is still here as it was. Go and put your stuff away. Get cleaned up and I'll feed you," she stated.

"Sure, Mom." I then dashed up the stairs.

As I stood in the doorway for a moment. I paused and just stared at my room smiling. Everything was in perfect order my bed was in a divine state. The sleeping quarters on the Intrepid were not ideal. I put my bag down and then sat on my bed.

Suddenly, I heard the familiar sound of the church bell. It was noon mass and I began to feel at home again. I would have slept there and then if it were not for my hunger pain. So, after a good scrubbing, I jumped out of the bath and was thankfully clean again.

When I got back to my room, Mom had already placed some new clothes on my bed. As I looked out the window, I could see people walking down the street to the church. Boy, I thought, some things have not changed around here. As I dressed, there was a knock on the door. It was my mother with a pair of shoes in her hand. "I saw these on sale, Sean. I know they are just the kind you like."

I could not resist her gift. They were exactly what I wanted: the brown suede type with a soft heel. She knew the perfect size for me. "Thank you so much," I replied.

"Come on now; everything's ready." One look in the mirror and I was off. I then quickly turned towards the stairs for a much-needed meal.

I prepared myself for the many questions my mother would probably present. I knew she did not like the business of me being out at sea. So, I decided not to

elaborate on my future plans. I thought this would cause her even more stress. With that, I proceeded downstairs. "Here I am, Mother."

"Just sit down, Sean. I'll serve you." The kitchen smelled wonderful indeed. I felt quite ready to eat but dared not tell her that I was starving. She would then know of the low supply of food at the end of our trip. I didn't want her to think things were so unpleasant out there.

Lunch was very good and welcomed. A warm meal did me well. My mother seemed relaxed and watched over me as I ate. "Do you want more?" she asked.

"Not right now, Mom." I had become familiar with eating such small meals that I thought my stomach had actually shrunk a little. I was glad she did not mention my last girlfriend, Leslie. She and I were over for good, this time would be the last. My thoughts shifted to going out for the night. I was anxious to meet up with friends and do some catching up. I just wanted to relax and enjoy my time being home. The house was not the same without my father being there. It had been just a year since his passing. He died peacefully in his sleep. One day my mother woke up and he was gone. Since then, she has spent even more afternoons at church, always for a different amount of time. One day, I went in and just saw her sitting there alone. I chose not to disturb her so as to give her the time and space she needed. It was as if I could tell somehow. It was her way of dealing with things.

Living in the city did have its advantages. So many things were happening and they were so close to you. The bank, post office, and restaurants were all here each day. And, of course, the local pub. It was all within walking distance from our house.

Everyone had their place to hang out. That night, Tom and I were going to the pub. It really did not have a name. Most people just called it the pub. Jack was the owner and when asked about the name of the place, he just replied, "I think everyone knows this place by now. I don't need a sign out there. Besides, if I ever wanted to sell it, you know it would be easier that way." A decent fella Jack was to all who came into his place of business. My father and I on occasion would visit and sit for several hours talking about everything. The father and son sort of stuff and of course, when I would become a marshal.

Friday night proved to be an experience indeed. Just about everyone in the neighborhood was there . . . and seemed to be doing their thing. Jobs were plentiful and people had some money to spend. Most worked in the local factories. If they did not like what they were doing, they just went to one of the other factories and got another job. The wages were terrible though, but enough to survive on.

A man who worked hard could not seem to prosper in those places. My father had always told me to stay out of the factories. Once you got in there, he would say, you never get out. But never put a man down for it. It's honest work that needed to be respected, just the same. Father was a deputy marshal like his father before. Law enforcement went back on both sides of my family. Even my mother's father was a policeman. So naturally, it was assumed I would aspire to that in life. When I look back at all the training Dad had given me, I did have some skills that seemed necessary for the job.

He taught me everything: how to use a gun; how to know when a man has a gun; how to never, if you could, keep your back to a door; and how to see and remember every detail in a room. These things a man had to develop in himself. My father was a man hunter and he brought in plenty. I truly missed him, and I know my mother did also.

I arrived at the Pub pretty much the same time Tom did by the looks of everything. As we entered, things were really heating up. Tom was a rather large man — well over six feet and rugged. He certainly looked tough enough and built for a life out at sea. He had large hands, big feet, and broad shoulders. I'll be damned if he was not still growing. Tom loved to laugh and made bad jokes, but was a lot of fun to be around. He was someone I could trust: a good friend. I hoped he saw the same in me.

"There is a table over there; let's grab it. I want to get something to eat," Tom replied.

"Sure," I said.

We sat down and just started to look at all the new faces. This was an old pub, with a long bar with many seats with high-back chairs. There were tables against the walls. It had a billiard room in the back. The small kitchen was open two days a week. Jack would have his wife come in and cook on those days. The only windows were the two large ones that faced the street. Pictures lined the walls with different beers and whiskeys that Jack had for sale. The place smelled like stale beer and cigar smoke. Once inside for a while, you just paid no mind to it. Perhaps you could say it was a 'no place for a lady' sort of bar.

Suddenly, Tom said, "Sean, look over there. I think it's Susie. What is she doing here? I tell you, Sean, by the look of things, I think she is taking in numbers."

"You mean gambling?"

"Of course, there is plenty of money around here for that."

Just at that moment, Susie looked over and grinned. "Well, look at these two Irish puppy dogs over here."

“We are not little anymore, Susie,” Tom said. “We have been out whaling and we made lots of money.”

“Is that a fact?” she replied. She then suddenly reached for a chair from the other table and sat in front of us. She took out her book and stared at Tom.

“Well, all right,” he boasted. “Give me a four spot for tonight and here is two dollars. Sean will pick the numbers.” Susie then turned and smiled.

“Four, twelve, twenty, and twenty-eight,” I said. She quickly wrote it down.

“If you win, I’ll let you know.” Tom’s money then disappeared from his hand. She left us for another sucker or two at another table across the way.

“Tom, I thought you wanted to eat and drink tonight. You just gave all your money to Susie.”

“Not so,” he said, “I still have one dollar left.”

“Great,” I said, “do you want to borrow some?”

“Yes. I would like to eat.”

“Let me go up to the bar and get something for us to drink. Try to stay out of trouble for two minutes.” When I approached the bar, Jack the owner was waiting for me.

“Sean, me boy, how are you?”

“Fine, sir. Tom and I were out at sea for a spell.”

“I know. I heard you went whaling.”

“We actually reached our limit early and came in.”

“Ah, you had a good trip. What will it be?”

“Two large glasses of beer.”

“Right away.” As I waited, I took all my money out and started to count it. Suddenly, I remembered what my father had said about showing money in a bar. I kept a couple of bills out and stuffed the rest back in my pocket. Jack came back with two filled glasses.

“How much?” I asked.

“These are on the house. Seeing as it is your first drink back and all.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied. When I turned to go back, Tommy was gone. I glanced over the room and saw him with Susie talking to a well-dressed gentleman at another table. I had never seen that person before, so I just waited for Tom’s return.

After a couple of minutes, Tom came back. He sat down and took a large gulp of beer. “Sean, me boy. You see that man over there?”

“Yes, I do.”

“He just offered me a job.”

“What kind of job?”

“Well, Susie works for him. He needs a man to collect for him.”

“Tom, you're talking about the numbers racket and that is illegal.”

“Money is money, Sean; come on.”

“The hell it is, Tom, when it's not legal.”

“There is a lot of money on those streets out there. I could make it easy.”

“What you could do is lose your life over it. Why don't you figure out what you want to eat tonight, all right?”

At that moment, Susie came over with two glasses of beer. She placed them on the table and gave Tom a wink. “These are on your new friend.” She then quickly went back to her table. Susie was a thin girl with curly, blonde hair. No one really knew where she came from. One day in school, she just showed up. She mostly kept to herself and spoke to no one. She was a hard one to read. But now, it was clear she wanted to make her way up no matter what it took. We stayed for a little while, ate, and drank our fill. We both enjoyed the time and it passed quickly.

Monday morning finally came and I awoke early. Tom and I met at the Captain's Office on the second floor. The downstairs was the ship's supply store. Tom's family had owned it for many years. The store did well but Tom took no interest in it. The stairs to the second floor were in between two large windows. A brass doorknob shined brightly on the entrance — sort of like a handle on a ship. On the top panel of the door in gold letters read: CHRISTIAN SAIL AND SUPPLY GOODS.

I began feeling nervous as Tom and I headed up those stairs. I knew it was time for my review. I certainly did not want to disappoint anyone. We both sat down on the empty chairs placed on the back wall. I could hear Tom's uncle speaking to someone. Both of us sat quietly waiting for our turn to enter his office.

A few minutes passed and the door then opened. A tall, thin gentleman began to leave. Later, Tom would tell me that this man was a merchant. He bought and sold lamp oil for a living. He had a serious look on his face when he left. I did my best not to stare at him. Unfortunately, the walls were bare, with no place to look except for a small window at the far of the room. Just then, Captain Christian came out and said, “Good morning, lads.”

“Good morning, Captain,” we replied.

“Tom, come inside. I'll be with you in a minute, Sean.”

When Tom got inside, I stood very quiet and tried to listen but could not. The conversation had no moments of laughter and I thought maybe things were not going too well. The door opened and Captain Christian called me to come in. I was feeling a great sense of self-doubt about our meeting. It made me feel even more nervous than I already was. As I entered the office, I noticed what I

believed to be Captain Christian's father sitting at a large desk filled with charts and such. He had on a black suit with a tie of sorts. He seemed to stare at me for a moment, then looked at his son. There was a table to my left filled with model wooden boats. I wondered who had made them but dared not to ask.

"Sean, sit here," the captain said. "This is my father, Benjamin Christian."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir."

"Good morning," he said.

Then the captain spoke. "Sean, you did a fine job out there. Tom spoke highly of you, and for once he was not lying. You have the makings of a real fine whaler someday. I don't know if Tom told you, but we are bringing the Intrepid into dry dock."

"No, sir, I did not hear that."

"My daughter is getting married soon. I thought this would be a good time for much-needed repairs on the ship. As it stands, all of our vessels are out to sea. They won't be back for several months."

"Well, maybe I could work on her. She's a wonderful ship."

"No chance," said the captain's father. "I have already hired a crew for the job."

"Here are your wages, Sean."

Then the captain's father said, "I know someone in Gloucester who may need one more deckhand. It's a large ship and they will be out for over a year. I could send a telegraph. What is your thinking on the matter?"

"Sean, look here. The Intrepid will be ready in a short time." I could sense the captain wanted me to stay.

"I do not want to turn down work. I would be most grateful if you did send that telegraph."

"You stop in by the end of the week. I won't chase you with that captain's answer."

"Well, I guess that is settled. Good luck to you, Sean."

"Thank you, sir."

When I left the office, I told Tom what was said. He told me that he already knew the ship was going in for repairs. Then I told him of the potential job offer in Gloucester. He stated that was something he would get in trouble for if he went up there with me. "They would disown me, Sean."

"Your uncle's father said he would telegraph the other captain."

"That sounds right. He made a fortune up there and knows everyone. He started there going vessel to vessel before getting his own. He spent his whole life out at sea. He probably would still be there if his legs could stay under him."

He's a tough old sea dog. Just what the hell would you tell your mother about this? You may not be back for years this time."

"Come on, Tom — it can't be that bad. Is it?"

"Yes, it is Sean, believe me."

Tom and I then went our separate ways. As I walked back home thinking what my next job would be. I could not help but think of what Mother would say. The possibility of years out at sea did not seem appealing. But yet, it could be a great adventure. I did have a little time to think about it. As I got close to home, a carriage passed me. It was Susie and that mobster friend who ran the numbers racket. She glanced at me and smiled. I guess in her own way, she was moving up in the world. Who am I to judge her? I thought.

As I walked further, I could hear the church bell again. It was noon mass. I thought most people would think I was headed there. When I did get back home, I decided to stay in my room and try to give some deep thought to what my next move would be.

I remained there for the next several hours, napping at times and just contemplating the whole concept of being gone for so long. I knew if I ran it by my mother, it would not go over well. Still, I had a short time to give my answer. There was really nothing for me here anymore. I had to move outwards and upwards. If I did not, I would be trapped here, probably in one of those factories my father told me to stay out of. I did have the option of going back on Captain Christian's ship. Either way, I had to decide soon.

I rested for several hours before my mother woke me. She told me that dinner was ready. She had prepared an excellent chicken and did a fine job with all the rest too. As I sat at the table, we paused. My sister didn't mind saying grace. "You're very quiet, Sean."

"I'm sort of just waking up right now."

"Have you thought of what is next?"

"You mean what I'm going to do for work?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I had several offers. I could go back to the Intrepid, but that will not be for several months. On the other hand, I could go on another ship out of Gloucester. That would probably leave in several weeks."

"So, this whaling thing — you're actually going to pursue it." I knew from her tone that this was the part where I was going to hear the worst of it. "Sean, you're a bright, intelligent young man. Is there not some way you could find some other pursuit? Your cousin Paul wants to go to college. How about you?"

"I think that is great for Paul but not for me. It's not that I am without ambition. But to sit in a classroom all day? No way." I could see Mother's face

begin to tighten. She was not pleased right then. Things drew silent for the rest of dinner. I could tell my mother was thinking of something. It took a little time but eventually, her plan came to light. Something that would alter the course of my life!

* * *

Letter to Captain James Callahan,

Boston, Massachusetts September 24, 1894.

My Dearest Sir,

I know I have not spoken with you in some time. That, I am sure, is my misfortune. I trust you and your family are well. My thoughts and prayers are always with you. I am writing in regard to my son Sean. I believe you know what his father wanted for him. Law enforcement has always been in our families for many generations. Sean was on a whaling trip for six months and has just come home. A mother can only thank God for his safe passage and return. I know you are a man of high standards and hold a position of great responsibility, which is why I am writing to you. I seek an opportunity for my son.

He is without his father here. And as a mother, I do fear the worst. I must speak directly if I may. A life out at sea is not what I want for my son. I also do not believe it is what your brother wanted for him either. It is my hope that his life will not be fulfilled by such foolish pursuits. He is a good young man in need of your help.

I am respectfully asking that my son be considered for a position in the U.S. Marshal's Office, under your jurisdiction of course. I will patiently wait for your reply. All my love to you and your family.

Your Loving Sister,

Mary Jane Callahan

Chapter 3

The Two-Gun Kid

W

hen morning arrived, my mother was off to the Post Office to mail her letter. I would later be informed that my uncle was somewhat moved by it. At the time, I was in deep thought only of my life out at sea. I knew that the skills my father had taught me were going to waste, or so I'd thought. It was later in the afternoon when Tom and I met up. We had planned to go shooting for the day. It was something I had not done in a while. My father and I would practice often and I enjoyed our time together.

He was an excellent marksman by anyone's standards. I think that is why I took to shooting a gun, so well. We borrowed a couple of horses and headed out. It was a beautiful fall day in New England — just right for an afternoon of outdoor stuff. I liked to carry two guns and I eventually learned to shoot with both hands. The Smith and Wesson and the Colt were my two favorite side arms. My father bought me each on separate birthdays. No gift could have been better. Although each had a very different feeling in my hand, that was the way I liked it. I knew exactly what each weapon felt like before I drew it and I could hit what I aimed at.

"Let's get down here, Tom. You see that mound over there? Set up some sticks at the top of it. Push them into the ground and leave some of it sticking up for me to shoot at. Set up a good twenty or so." Tom then ran back over and stood behind me. I looked at both gun chambers to make sure they were loaded.

I then drew them both at the same time, then firing from the hip. I was able to hit every branch with lightning speed. I then holstered the guns and Tom seemed amazed by it. "Dammit, Sean! I've never seen anything like that before. We must be fifty feet away."

"I was lucky, I guess."

"No way, that's not luck. You know how good you are. And you drew them out so fast. That was something to see, I tell you."

Tom and I spent most of the afternoon just firing the guns and riding the horses. It was a fun day and it felt good to be home. There was no one to tell us what to do for a change.

On the ride back, Tom became quite intrigued by just how I had learned to shoot so well. Finally, I told him about the practice that I had done and the person who taught me to shoot.

For a long time, my father was a marshal. He would constantly practice with a gun. That was part of his job. He would always take me with him. "I wish I could shoot like that," said Tom.

"You can, but you have to practice."

"Well, that won't happen. I have to spend my life out at sea. My uncle did not just give us those jobs on board his ship. I was supposed to go. Everyone in my family goes. I thought I would like it more but I just don't. That is why I was ready to jump on any job . . . so I could just get away from that. My family will think there is something wrong with me."

"What is it, Tom? What do you really want to do?"

"I just don't know, Sean."

"Well, let's meet up later and we will talk some more." We returned the horses and went our separate ways. Tom left me feeling somewhat confused because deep inside, I guess, I was a little lost myself. But I surely did not want to show it.

When I arrived home later that day. I did not know at the time that my mother had mailed her letter. She then went directly to the church and prayed all afternoon. It was my sister who had prepared dinner as my mother had instructed her to. She was becoming quite the cook. I sat at the table, watching her cleaning the vegetables and trimming the meat. Then she said, "I think it really bothers Mother, you being away on that whaling ship. She constantly looks out the window for you."

"Come on, Sis, it can't be that bad."

"Oh, it is — believe me. I know Mother, Sean, and so do you. You do what you will. But you know I'm right."

Tom and I had agreed to meet at the pub. As with most nights, it was packed with people. We could not help but notice Susie. She was with that rough-looking fella we had seen before. He didn't look so happy this time. He was always bossing Susie around and was now yelling at her. I could sense Tom did not like it one bit. He then grabbed her arm and pushed her into a chair. I knew if this kept up there was going to be trouble. Just then, Jack came over and spoke.

"Now, boys, I know what you are thinking. You have to remember she is working for him now. You just drink your beer and look happy."

"Can't say I'm happy about all of that," said Tom.

"He is a man not to mess with and all."

"Why don't you throw him out?" said Tom.

"I can't. If I did, he and his friends would only come back and burn the place down."

"I'll bet the cops are looking for him."

"I really don't know any of that. It appears they've left him alone for some reason or another."

When Jack walked away, I began to wonder who this man really was. The local police must let him carry on his criminal activities. We both knew it was just a matter of time before Susie was going to get herself in real trouble. And at this point, she probably didn't know how to get her way out of it either.

We stayed just long enough to finish our drinks and then left for home.

While walking back, Tom and I could not help but talk about what we had just witnessed. "I don't think I like that guy," said Tom.

"Listen to me. That guy, I think, carries a derringer in his top left pocket."

"How do you know, Sean?"

"Well, I can tell by the way his pocket bulges out. Earlier, I saw him shooting pool. He is righthanded."

"I understand," said Tom. "Gun in left pocket drawn out by right hand. How did you know to look there?"

"My father told me to watch out for that. Those small caliber guns, you have to be careful of them. Those men like to get up real close when they do their dirty work. The bullet mostly just bounces off your bones inside you and keeps traveling. It eventually hits a vital organ and kills you."

"So, tell me, Sean, how do you stop a guy like that?"

"You have to put major heat on him. Not the local cops. Too many of them are paid off. What I mean is that you put the feds on him. Someone like the marshal's office like my father worked for. Once they get on you, they will take down the whole organization. His friends will turn against him for just bringing that much trouble on them."

"I know what you mean. Well, Sean, this is my street. I'll catch up to you later."

Once walking alone, I began to think of what my sister had said to me. I realized that my time whaling was not popular around the house. Perhaps I should head to Gloucester and make my own way. It might be best just to leave without the disappointment of Mother. I thought I would wait until I heard from the captain's father first. I did give my word. I would see him by the end of the week.

So, on Friday without delay, I made my way back to his office. I went upstairs and knocked on the door. A delightful young lady came out and said, "May I help you?"

I asked if Mr. Christian was in. She then said, "Benjamin or James?"

I quickly replied, "Benjamin."

"Your name," she said.

"It's Sean Callahan."

"Wait here a moment." She immediately came back out and said, "Go right in."

When I entered his office, he appeared to be writing a letter of some sort. He quickly stopped and looked up. "Yes, young man?"

"I came to ask if you heard anything from the telegraph you sent to the captain in Gloucester, sir."

"I did, indeed. He stated he was not in need of any hands right now."

"I see, sir. Well, then maybe I will head up there to see if there are any other ships needing a hand."

"That is a waste of time, young man. I have sufficient knowledge that all other vessels are out at sea right now. Why not wait for the Intrepid to sail? My son will hold a spot onboard for you."

"Thank you, sir. I will indeed. Good day to you, sir."

"And good day to you," he replied.

Just as I was about to leave, Captain Christian was passing by me. "Good day," he said.

"Yes, sir. Good day."

"Job hunting, are you?"

"Yes, sir, but it seems there are no vessels up there looking for a deckhand."

"I see," said the captain. "Look here, Sean, just wait and I'll have you back aboard my ship."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

* * *

Captain Christian then walked into his father's office. "How did it go with Sean, Father?"

"Well, naturally after what I said, I think he feels somewhat let down."

"It's the best thing for him right now."

"You know, James, in my day I made a good living in Gloucester."

"I know that Father, but you also had the luck of the devil in you. No one could even survive what you have been through up there."

"Huh," he said. "You mean you believe all those stories about me?"

"Yes, I do, Father. Anyway, I want to thank you for not sending that telegraph to Gloucester."

"You must see something in that young man."

"I do, sir. He recently lost his father. I sense he is punishing himself for it. I do feel bad for the lad. He seems a bit lost without him."

“He needs time son. Time to become the man he’s supposed to be. Either he will find his way or he won’t.”

“I’m sure you’re right Father,” said the captain.

Chapter 4

Captain Callahan to the Rescue

Office of Captain James Callahan,
1080 Union Street,
Boston Massachusetts,
September 27, 1894.

“T

ell me what my day looks like today, Katie.”

“You have two marshals coming in this afternoon for debriefing. You also have to sign off on at least six post orders. A stack of mail is in the must-read-today file. And one I have in my hand is from what appears to be your sister Mary Jane. You have a 9:00 a.m. appointment with a Major Lancaster — whom I might add I have never heard of before.”

“The Major is an old friend. He was my commanding officer in the war.”

“I see. Well, what do you want to do?”

“I’ll take a cup of coffee and that letter from my sister along with ten minutes of solitude.”

“Coming right up. I have your coffee already on your desk, Captain.”

“Oh, great — then just the letter, please.”

“I’ll shut the door and give you the time you need.”

True to form, Katie gave him the minutes he needed to read his sister's letter. It was somewhat of a pleasant surprise. He responded to a knock, “Yes, Katie, what is it?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were done reading that letter. The Major is here to see you.”

“Yes, I am, and send him in.” It only took several seconds for the major to make his entrance.

“Well, I’ll be damned, Major Lancaster; how long has it been?” The two men shook hands in the center of his office.

“How are you, James?”

“You look good, sir.”

“Are you kidding? I’m an old man now. You’re the one that looks good, James. It’s probably been at least twelve years since we ran into one another — let me look around,” said the Major. “You have a nice office here. Great big desk, and a fancy seat to boot. Real big pictures on the walls. An elegant fireplace over there and a beautiful secretary, too. Damn, I trained you well.”

“Katie,” the captain yelled. “Bring the Major some coffee. Just black, I believe.” The major shook his head with a smile.

Quickly, Katie returned. “Here you are, sir.”

“Thanks, Katie. Could you close the door for us, please? Major, please, have a seat. How is your daughter by the way?”

“Anne is just fine. She’s all I have right now, James.”

“I have not seen her since she was probably five or maybe six years old.”

“She’s a grown woman now. She has her father’s spirit and her mother’s beauty, I tell you.”

“So, what have you been up to, Major?”

The Major paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “Well, James, I’m running a small town in the next state over.”

“Which one, sir?”

“I’m in Rhode Island — at a little town called Exeter. Do you know where it is?”

“I think it’s a small farming town in the center of the state, sir.”

“You would be correct. I took the job thinking it would do me well in retirement. And also, a nice quiet place to raise Anne with her mother passing on and all.”

“Well,” said the captain, “that makes sense to me. What seems to be the problem?”

“It began several years back when people started getting sick.”

“What kind of sick?”

“That is the problem; we just don’t know.”

“Major,” the captain said, “do you have a doctor?”

“We do, and a good one.”

“What does he say?”

“He believes it’s some sort of disease called consumption.”

“I’ve heard of it, Major. It sounds like you have been hit with it pretty hard.”

“We have had plenty of folks die on us down there. We tried to do a little of our own investigating, too.”

“Major, please tell me this does not have something to do with that article I heard about in the Providence Journal. That story as I was told had something to do with digging up vampires.”

“Yes, I’m not going to lie to you. The townsfolk wanted some answers.”

“Well, Major, what kind of answers?”

“Let’s just say all kinds.”

“How many people died down there?”

“Twenty-seven so far.”

“You’re not digging up any more bodies, are you?”

“No, that was a one-time thing.”

“What you probably need is the State Physician down there to tell you what you most likely have.”

“He's been there and gone, James. He conferred with our doctor and left. No specific answers were found.”

“Sometimes these things just have to ride themselves out.”

“I know that was the medical consensus about it. But we have another problem, James. We have three missing women from our town.”

“Is it possible they could have just run away? The issue with a disease that is killing people could have just scared them to leave.”

“I don't believe so, James.”

“Well, why not?”

“One of them had a six-year-old son that she left behind. No sir, I can't believe she would do that. But it gets even worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the next town over in Hope Valley, another woman has gone missing. She had two children to look after. She has been gone for over eleven months now.”

“Have you spoken to the local authorities?”

“They have said this case is unusual. But without a dead body, they are not sure if a crime has been committed.”

“I have to tell you, Major, digging up those bodies and everything did not help your case. You look like a bunch of crazies down there. That article in the paper... It didn't put any of you in a good light.” The captain then shook his head. “I'm sorry I brought that up.”

“It's okay. This old man had it coming.”

“I have known you, Major, for a long time. I remember in the war when you needed a mission done. You would give me that glaring look and start the teeth grinding. I think we have come to that point here.”

“James, I need your help more than ever. I have made some promises to the people of that town.”

“I'm sure you have, Major. But let me remind you: this is the Federal Marshal's Office. We are a criminal fugitive apprehension organization. We track down lawbreakers and bring them in. Murderers, rapists, bank robbers, you name it. But I don't see where we fit in here without more evidence of a crime.”

“I know there are women being killed in my town, James.”

“I believe you, Major, by what you have told me. There is something happening down there. But I need more before we can send the cavalry in.”

"I'm an old man now. I can't do this alone. Lord knows I have tried. I don't think this is going to stop on its own either. The people of the town are convinced there is some type of killer out there.

I need someone to help me investigate this thing. Someone to help me put together some type of evidence here so we can stop whoever is doing this. James, my daughter lives in that town. I'm begging you here. I need someone."

"Major, I swear to you. Every officer I have is out on a case right now. There is not one person I could get on this without risking other people's lives."

"James, I pulled your ass out of the fire so many times in that damn war. I did it so we could both come home as heroes. We never abandoned one another out there."

The captain paused for a moment, realizing he owed his life to him. "You know Major, I might be able to send someone. But it would have to be for an investigation only and for a limited time. Once evidence came into my office, then I could be of more help. The more facts of a crime here, the more men I could send. In the meantime, go back there and keep those people calm."

"Thank you, James," said the Major.

"I'll have my man report to you when he gets there. Give me some time on this."

"Good to see you again, Captain." The Major then stood and saluted. The captain saluted him back. Both men held their emotions respectfully.

* * *

Letter to Mary Jane Callahan,
From the Office of,
Captain James Callahan,
Director, U.S. Marshals,
September 28, 1894.

Dear Mary Jane,

I have received your letter. You have in the past been a person of sound mind and certainly good judgment. So, I must tell you. I was somewhat surprised by what you wrote. I always thought Sean would come to me directly when he was ready. I know this is what a mother should be thinking for her son. However, without his own request into the position of a Federal Deputy Marshal, it does leave me to question his own desire for the profession. I will rely on your recommendation and discretion to provide him with the opportunity.

It is one that comes with great pride and a sense of duty. So, without delay, send Sean to me at once so I can discuss with him his future of being the next Federal Marshal of the United States of America.

Your Dearest Brother,
Captain James J Callahan
Federal Marshal's Office

Chapter 5

A Marshal's Beginning

W

hen I arrived home, Mother had made her wonderful meatloaf. It was certainly a favorite of mine. Just the right amounts of onions and peppers with a coat of ketchup on top. I did not know it at the time, but my days of her cooking were already numbered. When I approached her, she was in a jubilant mood. I thought, maybe she is happy to see me.

"Sean, why don't you go up and wash? I'll have everything ready soon."

"Sure," I replied. I went up and gave myself the usual scrubbing, put on a clean shirt, and headed back downstairs. Mother then asked me to say grace. This was something I had not done in a long time.

It took me a minute to get in the right frame of mind. I had to remember I was not out at sea now. And by the looks of this meal, suddenly I was not missing it either. I said a nice prayer of thanks and Mom seemed pleased. Dinner then went quite well and I ate my meal quickly.

But before I finished, Mother decided to speak. "Sean, I need to have a word with you." At first, I thought she needed some type of chore done or something. It could not be further from the truth. "I have written to your uncle James."

"Really?" I said, "How is he doing?"

Mother stared down at the table and paused. "Sean, I will tell you right out. Your uncle is doing well. The reason I wrote him was because of you. You know, Sean, your father was just about your

age when the marshal's office brought him in. And you know I didn't say anything about your time away sailing on that boat. I really think it's time to meet with your Uncle James. He will talk with you about a job working for him. He would like you to go to his office at once."

"You mean a job as a deputy marshal? Just like Father?" I could see my sister staring at me. It then drew very silent for a moment.

"If you don't want to, I would understand."

"Do you believe I am ready, Mother?"

She reached out her hand for mine and smiled. "Sean, there is a time a mother has to see her children off in this world. If your father were here, I know he would want this. And because I know that to be so, yes, I believe it is time." Her eyes then filled with tears.

"Then, yes, I will be in Boston at once. Now that's settled. Let everyone enjoy this meal and our precious time together."

The next morning, Mother sent a telegraph to my uncle. She thanked him for the job opportunity and also bought me a little time at home. I did what I usually liked to do, which was to go out and fire my guns. I went to the same place I always did that day.

It was a private, secluded part of the city where most people went on occasion to dump the things they no longer wanted. I figured that I'd better be ready. I knew firing a weapon was going to be damn important to my training. Things went well, I began to get my aim and quickness back. Both weapons appeared to be functioning perfectly for me. My father taught me to shoot with both hands. Also, to carry two guns at all times when in law enforcement. Guns can jam, he would say. Without having another gun, you could be killed.

Tom and I agreed to meet at the local pub that very night. I chose that time to speak about the job of being a marshal. I suspected that I would be working for my uncle and he would be working for his. I wanted to show up early so we could get a table and talk. On my way home, I ran into my old girlfriend Leslie. She was walking with a friend of mine, Chris Atwood. Chris and I played sports together for many years. He was never the athlete I was and seemed to resent me for it. Leslie was the most popular girl in school. She had blonde hair and blue eyes and was famous for always getting what she wanted. When Leslie found out I was going on a whaling trip, she immediately dumped me. That is when my good friend Chris saw the opportunity. I was cordial and said hello as they passed.

"Well, hello," said Chris. Leslie's eyes would not look upon me. "Just come back from your trip?" Chris asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Do you like that sort of thing?"

"It's honest work, I suppose."

"Yes, and we all need the oil for our lamps." I knew Chris was patronizing me but I was not going to stoop to his level. He had Leslie now and was going to go to college to be an educated man. I thought right then that I could not compete with that. I looked at Leslie again and she only turned away. My heart was in terrible pain at that moment. A person that goes out on a whaling ship was certainly beneath her. I held my tongue about going to Boston. They would find out soon enough. One could only wish them the very best I suppose. And with that, I bid them farewell.

When I got back home, I went to my room. I then cleaned my guns and waited for dinner. Mother was her usual self and my sister was playing the piano in the living room. When I spoke with her in the kitchen, she informed me that I was expected in Boston on Monday. I had at least the weekend to enjoy things

here. She told me about the telegraph she had sent to my uncle. I thanked her again for it. After dinner, I got ready to meet Tommy at the Pub. I did want to tell him about the new job.

It was six o'clock the next day. When Tom and I met at the pub, Jack, the owner was his usual self — running the bar and such. We sat at a table as the place grew crowded again. Susie was there with her thug boss. I wondered what his name was. I thought she called him Harmen, which was a name I'd never heard before. Later, I asked Jack about him. He also thought Harmen was his first name. But so far no one knew his last name, which I thought was a bit odd. Everyone did appear to be having a good time that evening.

Suddenly, a glass hit the floor in the back room. "Get me another damn beer!" It was Harmen screaming at Susie. He was drunk and yelling at her. She got up quickly and went to the bar. On her way back, she looked over toward us. Tom and I could only watch with concerned eyes as she walked back over to his table. She looked scared and did not seem to like his yelling at all.

"Tom, I've got something to tell you. You know my uncle runs the Marshal's Office in Boston?"

"Sure. What about it?"

"Well, I've got to meet with him next week to discuss being a Deputy Marshal."

"No way. Are you going to take it?"

"If it comes my way, I am."

"That is a good opportunity, Sean."

It was not long before more yelling could be heard. It was Harmen again — telling Susie to shut up. I could tell Tom was growing frustrated over the situation. "Stay out of that, Tom."

"I know, but when is it enough?"

"When he actually breaks the law, I suppose." Jack was now looking in the back room at the noise.

"Well, what do we have here?" It was Billy Hobbs; a guy Tom and I knew from the neighborhood. Billy was not one for school. He never showed up half the time. Furthermore, no one seemed to care either. He was a short little fellow with glasses who was always trying to make a buck, one way or another.

"What are you selling now?" Tom asked.

"Hey, guys, I got nothing going at the moment. You see that Harmen guy in the back? He can get anything."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about drugs, booze, guns — anything you want."

"How does he get it?"

“Hey, who cares? You buy from him and sell to whomever you want to. People love to know you have all that stuff for sale.”

“That is all illegal, Billy.”

“So what? Nobody gives a shit. He has the police around here in his pocket. They will never arrest him. You guys will not get anywhere playing it straight. I tell you.”

“Yes, but we are not crooks or criminals, all right.”

“Whatever. I'll see you around.” Billy made a smart choice just to leave the bar at that point.

As he walked out, I thought, he is going to get himself into a lot of trouble with that Harmen fella. “I'm thinking he must be getting that kind of product from a warehouse around here,” I said to Tom.

“I think you're right. He is also paying off the local police for protection.”

Something has got to be done about this guy, I thought. His crimes were only going to get worse and Susie was just going to get herself hurt. We decided to finish our beer and head home. I knew Tom was worried about Susie. I assured him that I would think of something.

The rest of the weekend was uneventful. Come Monday, I was going to start my way up to Boston. I could only see trouble coming my way by staying here. I was beginning to understand my mother's concern. Either you started to solve the problems that faced your community or you were a part of them. I knew exactly where I stood in the matter.

So, after a few days, I showed up at my uncle's office. I had to stand outside and gather my composure for a minute. Even though he was my uncle, I knew this was a life-changing time for me. His office was a large brick structure on a busy street with many other buildings.

It was marked THE FEDERAL BUILDING. This wasn't hard to miss. I could see the State Capital just at the end of the street. As I entered the lobby, I noticed a rather large man sitting at a desk.

It was just left to a big set of stairs. When I walked over, he stood up. The first thing I noticed was his chrome revolver sticking out at me. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Yes, I'm here to see Captain Callahan.”

“And you are?”

“I am Sean Callahan.”

“Do you have any weapons on you?”

“No, I don't.”

“Raise your hands. I have to frisk you.” He did his search and told me to turn around.

“All right, sign the book and date it. Captain Callahan is on the second floor. When you get to the top of the stairs, you will see the double doors. Go through them and just wait. Someone will assist you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

When I got through the doors, there was a counter that spanned across the room. There were several chairs for people to sit and wait, and pictures of people I had never seen before were on the walls. I stood at the counter watching several ladies race back and forth. Finally, one came over. “May I help you?”

“Yes, I'm here to see Captain Callahan.”

“What is your name?”

“Sean Callahan, ma'am.”

“Have a seat. I'll let him know you are here.” I sat fussing with my hat and coat and just waited. I thought I had better not screw this up. I would have to face Mother and all. I kept saying to myself, “Calm down and act confident.” He was my uncle of course. But I had not seen him in a year — not since my father's funeral.

“Sean,” the young lady said. “He is going to be in there for a while. He's in a meeting.”

“I'll wait,” I replied. Many people walked in, and there were several who walked out. It was almost an hour before she came back.

“Sean, come this way; he will be ready to see you in a minute.” I nodded my head and followed her as quickly as I could. We then went to another waiting area with chairs against the walls. “He will be just a minute,” she replied.

When my uncle came out, I was glad to see him. Of course, he reminded me of my father. He was well dressed in a dark blue suit. His hair was combed back and he was clean-shaven. His strong Callahan jawline pronounced his face.

“Sean, how are you?”

“Good, sir.”

“And your mother and sister?”

“They are well.”

“Good, let's go inside and talk.” My uncle certainly looked the part of a Deputy Marshal. But the real question was, did I?

When I entered his office, I was really impressed. My uncle had started off like everyone else, just a deputy. He had come a long way. After a minute of looking around, he asked me to sit down. “I was wondering when I would hear from you.”

“Well, I was out at sea for a while. You know, just exploring things, I guess.”

“So, you tell me, what is it you want to do now?”

“Uncle, this is the kind of work I thought I would always do.”

“Your father and I were your age when we started. This life is not for everyone. Many begin and never really make it. But those who do, end up with very successful careers. You will go up against the very toughest criminals out there.” I just kept nodding my head over and over. “I also expect you to go above and beyond because you’re my nephew.”

“You can count on me, sir.”

“Now, there will be a rigorous training program. You must pass it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. I won’t let you down, uncle.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’m at the Shakespeare Hotel.”

“Katie,” my uncle yelled out. “Get Bixby here at once.”

“Yes, sir.”

“In the meantime, I’ll show you around and introduce you to everyone. Sean, I will do everything in my power to help you. By the way, do you know of a place called Exeter?”

“I believe it’s in Rhode Island. Just a small town in the southern part of the State.”

“That’s right. Let’s get some coffee and I’ll give you a tour of this place. Bixby will be here shortly.”

My uncle was very gracious in introducing me to all the staff. I did my best to try to seem confident and intelligent. We then came to a wall with many pictures. You could say they were mugshots of sorts. Underneath each, it told you what they were wanted for. I glared at them for a while. There were so many I could hardly remember one of them. Just then Katie stepped over and said, “These are just some of the criminals we are looking for. We have lots of others.”

“All fugitives from justice?”

“Yes, for the time being.”

Just then my uncle pointed to a man with bushy hair wearing thick glasses. He carried a clipboard in hand for some reason. I later found out his father was once a Deputy Marshal like mine. But he could never pass the physical to become one himself. Still, Bixby was very valuable to the organization. “Sean,” my uncle said. “I would like you to meet Frederick Bixby.”

“Just call me Bixby,” he said. He then reached out his hand to shake mine.

“Bixby will be in charge of your training and making sure you get all that you need. Bixby, take him to the Shakespeare Hotel and get his luggage. Then get him settled into the Compound. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Bixby and I then headed out immediately.

When Bixby and I got to the bottom of the stairs, the big, old brute looked at us both. "This is the captain's nephew. Try not to shoot him when he comes in. He is going to be put through our training program here."

"Well, welcome aboard." He extended his hand. "I'm Joe," he said.

"Nice to meet you, Joe. That's a Smith and Wesson model number sixty-seven, isn't it? That has a slow reload, I've always thought."

"That's why I always hit what I aim at. No reloads needed."

"I will remember that." We then turned and headed for the exit.

"Listen, before we go over to your hotel, I would like to get something to eat. There is a tavern right up the street that has a great pork sandwich. We can get there from here." As we were walking, Bixby stated the length of my training depended on my degree of learning. "Some recruits go through quickly — others take longer. And some don't make it at all. I will get to know your strengths and weaknesses. But right now, I want to eat." We traveled two city blocks and came to a sign called Patty's Pub. "This is it." We sat at a booth far in the back. I gathered he wanted some privacy. After ordering, we had time to talk.

"So, Sean, tell me about yourself."

"Well, I grew up in the city of New Bedford — lived there all my life. Never did see much else. Finished school and went out whaling with a friend of mine."

"I take it whaling was not a career choice for you."

"No, but it was fun for a time. My father was also a Marshal in his time."

"The job is changing but tracking down criminals is the same. We now try to get all of the law enforcement agencies involved. It keeps more of us alive," he said.

"My father did it the old-fashioned way. He tracked a man on his own."

"I can believe it . . . but things are different now. A lot of arrests are made with many officers working together. It gives the criminals not much of a chance."

"How long have you been with the Marshal's Office?"

"It's been five years now."

"Have you ever done any field work?"

"Not really. I am mostly training and supply. If you need something in the field, I will usually be there to bring it to you. I keep busy." The waitress then brought over our sandwiches. "If I could have passed the physical, I would be out there. But I got to tell you, without these glasses, I am as blind as a bat. So, I do what I can."

"I understand."

"Let's eat up and we'll get you checked into the Compound. The place does come with a set of rules, you know — all of which I will explain to you. Don't

break them and you will get a fair shot at this.”

When we got to my hotel, we cleaned the place out as quickly as we could. I was, however, quite interested in what exactly the Compound was, and all the rules and such. Bixby, on the way back, started to fill me in.

When we arrived at what everyone called the Compound, Bixby showed me my quarters upstairs first. Then he gave me the grand tour of the place. It was an old police barracks, a half-city block in size. The Marshal's Office took it over when it became vacant, changing everything inside to their needs. Bixby practically lived there taking care of everything. It was equipped with a full stable in the back which had several horses to use when a marshal needed to.

It had a firing range in the basement, a complete gym, and a library for legal research and a classroom. There was also lodging on the second floor. Apparently, it had doubled as a fire station back in its day. It was like a fortress: a red brick building surrounded by barbed wire and metal gates. That is where I would be staying for the duration of my training. Only marshals were allowed at the facility. No one really knew what went on inside.

Later in the library, Bixby began telling me what was expected of me. First was an evaluation of what I already knew. He suggested that I get familiar with the place and only leave if I absolutely had to. He was adamant about only marshals entering the facility. He told me that he would be back tomorrow at 8 a.m. sharp and to be ready. I passed the time during the day just walking from room to room. The facility was quite large and like a fortress. It was the perfect place to train and develop my skills.

I spent most of the night just thinking about how my life was going to change. I did not see a way to turn back now. And I didn't want to; I knew I had to make the best of things. I spent a lot of time with the horses out back. They were fine animals and Bixby did an excellent job taking care of them. They were always in fine shape and ready if needed. I did not get a good night's rest. The old place made a lot of weird noises and fortunately for me. I had both my guns loaded and kept them close throughout the night. I made coffee in the morning and waited for Bixby to come in.

Chapter 6

The Training

I

t was during our morning conversation that he began to tell me what was going to be expected of me. Later in the day, we headed off to Dr. Shubert's office. I was to have a complete physical done. This did not worry me in the least. After six months out at sea, I thought I was in decent shape. Later in the day, the doctor came to that same conclusion. I would also find out that Sergeant Jamison would be coming in to help out with things. He was ex-army and did all the military training when he was in the service. I knew he was going to try and bust my ass with his routine.

Bixby filled me in on how to handle him. He would be a hard one, however, to get a read on. The sergeant did show up the next morning. He looked like a tough son of a bitch, with red hair, a thick mustache, and a broad build. He was an army sergeant all right. His skin looked like shoe leather. Real worn-looking like a saddle, he was. I knew I was in for a time of it.

“You be my new recruit?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Let’s get something straight from the get-go. You do what I tell you to do and when I tell you to do it. Got it?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Good! Let's get some horses; we have a lot of work ahead of us.”

We rode out towards the Charles River. I had a bad feeling about this. But I knew Leather Face didn't know that I just come off a whaling ship after many days out at sea. Tommy and I swam in water colder and more violent than this river. It did, however, present a strong current. I was also very familiar with riding horses and I stayed right behind him stride for stride. He was not going to outride me with a horse — no, sir.

When we got to the river, the sergeant said. “Get off your horse. You do as I say now or you don't get through this program — you understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Do you see that buoy in the water? You have to go out there. Touch that thing and come back.”

“I don't have any swimming trunks, Sergeant.”

“Makes no difference to me. I can fail you right now and you can go back crying to your uncle.”

The current was whipping and I knew I had a challenge on my hands. I would have to strip down to almost nothing so as to not be dragged under. I walked into the water slowly and tried to control my breathing.

I certainly had been in cold water before out at sea. That buoy looks a mile away, I thought. I was starting to not like the sergeant. The first test and he was trying to drown me. What the hell is with this guy? He probably doesn't like me anyway. Just because the captain was my uncle and all. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let some cold water beat me. It was the current that I wasn't familiar with. I realized that I had to swim to the far left of the buoy and let the current bring me to it. Otherwise, I would never get there.

This was not a test of strength but endurance. It did take some time and I labored intensely. But I finally made it to the buoy, then reached up and slapped my hand against it. I was starting to breathe harder now. I could see the sergeant on the shore just staring at me. My muscles were beginning to tighten and I decided to back swim for a bit. Just to try to use other muscles. I knew I could stay afloat longer that way. I kept switching back and forth, becoming more tired. I was in the fight of my life with this. My breathing began to become an issue also. I was nearing the point of exhaustion and I could see the sergeant clearer now. He didn't move a muscle to help me. I knew this was it, either I made it or I didn't. I was not going to call out for help no matter what was happening now.

Suddenly I had reached the point where I could touch the bottom. I began walking slowly towards the shore.

"You're awfully damn slow about it boy." I said nothing. At that moment, I was really thankful to be alive. My first real test and I survived it. Much of the rest of the day went the same way, with me always bringing myself to full exhaustion during each test. "You must learn to get food and water from the land. You're not going to be near a town all the time. I'll teach you what I can. It may save your life one day."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"Rule number one: never expect anyone to provide you with water. That is something you must think of always. When you're on a man's trail out in the bush, he may just run you into the ground, boy. Run you out of water and supplies. Then double back and kill you. Never depend on anyone other than yourself. And remember, the same for your horse, boy. Without it, you die. If you don't survive, then what's the point?"

When we got back to the Compound. Bixby had made us some grub. He congratulated me on making it through the first day. Later I was given several law books to study. Then I was told to read as much as I could. There were

references already marked out for me. Bixby was an excellent resource for legal knowledge I thought. As the day ended, he outlined what I needed to know. The sergeant then finished his food and left. "When does my training with leather face end?" I asked.

"It ends, I guess, when he says so. When you know what he wants you to learn. It really depends on him. He has trained some of the best."

"You know he almost drowned me today."

"You mean that swim in the Charles River?"

"Damn straight."

"He has pulled a few guys out of that river. What most people don't know is that he only brings new recruits there on low tide. Everyone thinks it's so deep when it isn't."

I shook my head. "That's why when I became exhausted, I was able to touch the bottom."

"You really were not in much danger of drowning. The sergeant wanted to see if you could manage the task and not cop out. Whatever you do, don't tell him I said anything of the kind."

"That son of a bitch." I laughed.

"Just do whatever he tells you to do, Sean, and do your best. Without him on board, you won't pass this program."

I was beginning to understand what was really happening here. This was about what could be learned and used out there, and how to survive under the harshest environments and bring the criminals in.

Tomorrow is going to be more of the same, I thought. So far, I had no injuries to speak of. I knew that could end all this for me if something like that happened. I had to be careful and not get hurt in any way. I decided to do some reading and get as much rest as I could. He didn't say when he would be here in the morning. I just knew it would be damn early. There was a pounding on my door, it was so early there was still total darkness in my room. It was leather face again. He had let himself in and started making odd noises as he went about.

When I looked at the clock, it was 5:44 a.m. He said that I had fifteen minutes to get my shit together. I really had no idea what today would bring. We left the Compound running . . . for what seemed like forever. The hard ass was in pretty good shape for his age. But as he was about to find out, so was I. We did not go back to the Charles River. But we climbed, ran, and did every exercise he could think of. Thankfully, it was a beautiful day. The weather was mild, a bit cool, just perfect to be outside. Had it been severely hot, no one could have done what he asked.

Toward the end of the day, he asked a question I was waiting for. “Can you shoot, boy?”

I tried my best not to show a whisper of emotion when I said, “I think so.” I believed he was finished exercising at least for now. The sergeant looked hungry again I thought. We ran as fast as we could back to the Compound. There Bixby was waiting for us cooking something on the stove. Again, he had prepared an excellent dinner for us. The sergeant stuffed himself and said he would be back again in the morning.

Bixby asked me if I had gone over the materials that he wanted me to read in the law books. I told him I’d read most of it but had not put all of it to memory. “Don’t fall behind; you are going to be tested on it. You must pass all these exams, also. Here there isn’t anything you can fail.”

“As soon as that sergeant lays off, I can put more time into it.” I replied.

“Pay him no mind; he has a job to do. I’ll do what I can to get you to pass the exams. That’s my job.”

He would eventually leave and things drew quiet. The Compound was very cold and dark at night. It was an empty castle with plenty of history to it. There was not much to do except to read by candlelight. The nights passed slowly being alone there. I was thankfully tired and started to sleep better, but still with both my guns close by, of course.

There was a whole city out there that I could not partake in. That would be breaking the rules. Mornings always came quickly with a pounding on the door. The sergeant was consistent, of course. But as the days drew on, I became quite ready for what followed. It seemed even he was getting tired of the exercise routine all day. I knew eventually we would have to visit that shooting range in the basement of the building. Like with everything the sergeant did, things were not as I thought. But, nonetheless, I was more than happy to move on from this part of the training. When the sergeant came in, he had with him two guns, both the same.

They were Remington single-action revolvers — .44 caliber with a 5-and-a-half-inch barrel. My father showed me this gun once. He would later sell it, not liking the gun much. He said the weapon was reliable and accurate — but with such a kick to it. The second shot was slow to come. I knew why he had brought this gun. It was one of the hardest to fire.

For most, it took too much time to learn to master this weapon. It had tremendous stopping power. And, of course, it was exactly what I thought the sergeant would use. I didn’t know it at the time, but it became a standard issue for each deputy. I did prefer my Colt Peacemaker over anything else. It was a light weapon, very accurate, and really popular among most folks. I also liked

my Smith and Wesson. We headed out for our morning exercise that day. I must admit I was starting to actually enjoy this. It felt great getting out of the Compound. The city was peaceful early in the morning. Rarely someone would pass us by. All gave us a strange look when they did. We would pass by the morning workers delivering their goods from door to door. The street lamplighters were now turning off the gas lights. This was the time to see the city in all its beauty and innocence. No matter what we saw, the sergeant would never even turn his head.

Not even for just once. He was a well-trained soldier of the past now, and I did respect him for his unwavering discipline. He was like a machine the Union Army had built. I was anxious to see how well the sergeant could shoot that Remington pistol. When we got back, the sergeant told me to take a break. I was now thinking of the Remington gun. I could not get it out of my mind.

I had some small talk with Bixby until the sergeant came back. We immediately headed for the firing range in the basement. It was a long hallway-type room with a wooden counter set up in front. There was a large mound of dirt in the back with plenty of concrete behind it. It was a very dark place with many paper manikins set up to shoot at. A little different from the target practice that I did with my father. This was going to be somewhat of a challenge for me. A different gun to shoot along with many targets that I could barely see. I wanted to get my guns but I knew the sergeant would not permit it. He had the Remington for a reason. He wanted me to shoot this gun specifically for its difficulty in firing. I knew to take my time when shooting this weapon. The sergeant then handed me a set of earplugs and began loading one of the guns.

“Watch me first, boy, then I'll let you have at it.” The sergeant fired off six rounds into a paper target thirty feet away. The gun's recoil was exactly what I had thought. His shots did produce a tight pattern into the target. When he handed me the gun, I reloaded it. Then I took my time firing the weapon. The gun felt heavy and had a big recoil all right. This slowed everything down for me. It took longer to bring the gun back to the target.

It wasn't long, however, before I got the hang of it. I did eventually replicate what the sergeant was able to do. He seemed surprised that I was able to handle the gun so well. He eventually allowed me to retrieve my guns. They were both .38 caliber with less recoil. I showed the sergeant that I could get off almost three rounds to his one. He would later comment that the .44 caliber only needed one round to kill a man. But don't miss, I thought, because if you draw return fire you could be killed. I seemed to pass the firearms test pretty quickly. I would later spend a lot of time in the basement at the firing range. Bixby, who was becoming a great help to me, brought me plenty of ammo for all the guns.

He seemed to be not interested in either of them himself. He didn't fire any of them at all. So, I carried on doing what I did best — practicing over and over. The sergeant began to ease up a bit. I could sense he was beginning to let me pass this part of it. That left really only one issue now. It was passing the law exam of what each Marshal had to know.

Bixby told me I had until the end of the week before I took the test. So, after my time training with the sergeant, I began to hit the books hard. Once again, Bixby came through for me. He showed me everything I had to learn. We spent a lot of time going over law after law in order for me to be prepared. Eventually, my confidence grew. When Friday came, I felt I was ready. I had to go to my uncle's office to take the exam. I walked over to the Federal Building that morning. On the way, I went over every law that I had put to memory.

After getting through security, I met Katie upstairs. "Do you feel ready?" she asked.

"I think I am," I replied. She told me that whatever the results were, they would go on my record permanently. I had ninety minutes to complete it. I took my time. I decided to take all that was given to me. When the time was up, Katie came and took the test from me. "How do you feel you did, Sean?"

"I think that was a difficult test but I feel good about it." She told me to go back to the Compound and wait for the results. When I got back, I waited alone.

There was no sergeant or Bixby hanging around. So, I spent the time taking care of the horses. It seemed to ease my mind a little and the hours went by. When five o'clock came, it was getting dark. I went to my room and just waited some more. Bixby then arrived and appeared for only a short time. He explained to me that he didn't know my test results. I was to show up at my uncle's office the next morning at ten o'clock.

"I'll come by around 9:30 to pick you up. We will go there together." I did not know it at the time, but Bixby and the sergeant had to give my uncle a full report on my training that very morning at eight. They were told not to speak with me about any of it. So, I was really left with no knowledge of anything. I knew that no matter what happened, I would hold myself together and accept the results. The night seemed to go on forever. I got very little sleep. But I was ready for whatever was to come my way the next day.

* * *

That morning both Bixby and the Sergeant were waiting to see the captain. "You can go right in, gentlemen," Katie said.

“Good morning. Please take a seat.” Both men sat directly in front of the captain. “I want to get right to the point. Let’s go over what both of you observed from our new recruit. Now I know he’s my nephew but I want an honest review of him so I know his strengths and weaknesses. Sergeant, would you like to start?”

“All right, sir. To be honest, the lad is not in bad shape at all. He can swim well. Run for miles if he has to. He can handle himself in a scrap. He can shoot the eyes out of a treed squirrel at a hundred feet. He is probably the best I’ve ever seen. And that includes me. But there is one factor that cannot be measured. And that is what a man does when someone is shooting back at him. We will just have to wait and see on that.”

“Do you think he is ready, Sergeant?”

“Are you asking me if I think he should be alone out there?”

“Yes, Sergeant, that is what I am asking you.”

“No, sir, he is not. This is still a young pup here. He needs several months of training with another Marshal in the field to get to know the hang of it, sir. He needs more training on just how to stay alive out there. He’s just too green, sir.”

The captain paused for a moment. “Well, Bixby, what do you think?”

“I agree with the Sergeant. He certainly has potential but to send him out against the worst that society has to offer is very dangerous, sir.”

“You understand that because he is my nephew, I cannot show any type of favoritism.”

“He needs to develop his skills further. I would be glad to take him in the field with me, sir,” said the Sergeant.

“I appreciate that offer. But I’ve got other things in mind for him right now. Perhaps later. Bixby, is that all you have to say on this?”

“He certainly has the physical capabilities, sir. His skill set is high. He learns fast and does what he is told. I believe he knows the law and is committed to it. But no one really knows what he will do in highly stressful situations out there.”

“I agree with both of you men. But things being as they are, I’m getting a lot of pressure to get more Marshals out there. It’s not just the pursuit of criminals anymore.

We need more investigators out there, also. Helping us make more arrests. This department has to change like everyone else. We are not getting enough information from the other law enforcement agencies either. So, we are going to start producing some of our own. And that comes right from the Colonel.”

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. “Sorry to bother you, sir. But you wanted these test results as soon as they came back from the Colonel’s Office.”

“Please, Katie, let me have them.” All stood silent as the men waited for the captain to open the letter. “Well, let's get this over with,” he said. The captain then tore into the envelope. His eyes stared at the paper. “I want to thank both of you gentlemen,” the captain said. “He passed his exam and he was well above the passing grade. It seems you were exactly right about him, Bixby.”

“I knew he could do it, sir.”

“Yes, well then, Bixby, bring him over. I've got to let him know the results.”

“Right away, sir.” The two men left the office. Both knew what was about to happen.

The Sergeant, with an awful look on his face, began to speak. “God help that boy. I can only hope we have done enough.”

Bixby shook his head and said, “I can't imagine what the captain feels right now.” Both men knew the boy was going to be sent out there and he would be alone.

Chapter 7

Harmen Getz Goes to Jail

W

hen the next morning came, I had an early breakfast. Then went down and fed the horses some oats. I was eager to find out my test results. Bixby had come right on time at 9:30 a.m. He did not have much to say except that I would be fine. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant and the ride over seemed to take forever. I was about to find out my fate of course that morning.

When we got upstairs, Katie came over. "Just a minute — he has someone in there right now."

While waiting, I did what I usually do. Just looked at the pictures of the wanted men on the walls. I kept coming back to the same picture and thinking that fella looked familiar.

"Sean," my uncle called out. I immediately walked into his office. "Sit down. Katie, get us two coffees. How have you been getting along over there at the Compound?"

"It's fine, sir."

"I do have your test results. I would have told you sooner but these things come directly from the Colonel." He paused when Katie came in with both coffees. "Could you close the door for me, Katie?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. I suddenly realized that Bixby had run off somewhere.

"First and foremost, Sean. You have passed the exam." I drew a heavy sigh of relief. "And furthermore, you did pass all of the training."

"Thank you, Uncle."

"Don't thank me yet," he replied. "You have to hear the rest of it. In the meantime, do you have a suit?"

"No, sir, I did not bring one with me."

"I'll have Bixby run you over to the tailor and get one ready for you. The Colonel will be here on Tuesday and he will pin your badge on you. You must look your best — understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want to be very clear on this matter, Sean. What we are about to speak of never leaves this office, understood?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Your first assignment will be in that town we talked about, Exeter. It's a small farming community in Rhode Island."

"I remember it, sir."

“Good, because you're going to report to a Major Lancaster. He was my commanding officer when I was your age in the war. There, you will be on a special assignment.”

“I'm not sure if I understand.”

“This assignment is more of a fact-gathering nature. You see, there are four women that have gone missing. We — and I mean the Colonel and I — suspect foul play. We don't believe these women just ran off. We think they were murdered. We need evidence Sean, and the suspect or suspects involved. When you have that information, I want you to telegraph me immediately. You are at no time authorized to engage any suspect whatsoever. I will send as many Marshals as needed to make the arrests. Understood?”

“Yes, sir. I'm to find out who's killing these women and turn that information over to you as soon as possible.”

“I know someone in that town knows something. You must win them over. Get them to trust you. Don't misunderstand me. You are going in as a United States Marshal and you must act accordingly.

Now, when you arrive, you are to report directly to Major Lancaster and no one else. He will brief you on everything you need to know. He's a good man and I want you to work closely with him. The Colonel and I will be waiting to hear from you. Don't let us down, Sean.”

“No worries, sir. No worries at all.”

“There's just one more thing. The crazy townsfolk down there exhumed three dead bodies. They were looking for vampires.” The captain then shook his fist. “Stay out of that whole crazy affair. I don't want any of that coming back on us. That is not your concern down there.” I nodded my head as if it was no problem. But actually, I could not believe what I just heard. Nonetheless, I would do as I was told.

“I cannot stress this enough. We have no official business in that matter. What I do want you to do is to keep a good account of things. Every detail matters. The Colonel and I are considering this a very serious matter. Keep a daily journal and refer to it often. Write down every detail. There may be something you have overlooked from time to time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“None of the local police want to get involved. Their caseload is just too heavy. That's where we come in. We can start to resolve some of these cases ourselves. That's what the Colonel wants us to do. He is willing to go along with this for a time and needs results.

I know that you would like to see your mother and sister and let them know what's going on. I will allow you to stop there and see them. Perhaps stay

overnight. But by morning, be on your way to Exeter.”

“Yes, sir. I would like to see both of them again.”

“I’m sure they will be very proud of you, Sean.”

“How much time do I have in Exeter?”

“That I really can’t say. It depends on what type of progress you make. Remember, Sean, next week that badge is going to be pinned on you. That means when you walk out that door, you are a United States Marshal. You must act accordingly. You are to behave in the manner in which you were trained. That means every minute of every day. Katie will give you the expense money needed. You must see the clerk at the end of the hall. He will issue you your new Remington along with two sets of handcuffs. If something else is needed, contact Bixby. He will supply it to you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be at your metal pinning next week and see you off then. Do you have any questions?”

“Not as of yet, sir. I know what is expected of me.”

“Good,” said the captain. “Remember to get over to the tailor with Bixby. It will need to be done by Monday evening at the latest. Sean,” the captain paused. “Listen to me. I was not totally for this, sending you out there alone. I wanted you to receive much more training. When this is over, I will make sure you get it. But as you can see, there is no one at the Compound I can send. You are all I have on this. I know you are not an investigator and probably don’t even know the right questions to ask. Just do your best Sean, and for Christ’s sake be careful. Stay close to the Major. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir uncle.” I shook his hand firmly. I knew in reality he had to let me go. I was a marshal now and he anguished over his decision. I went down to the end of the hall. There was an enormous room with a large door to it. It was cut in half, leaving the top open with a shelf on the bottom inside part. I stood there for a moment patiently. Then I knocked several times.

An older fella with a blunted cigar came out of his seat. “Can I help you, young man?”

“My name is Sean Callahan. The captain sent me for a gun and two sets of cuffs.”

“Man, either I am getting old or you guys are getting younger.” He then shook his head and opened the drawer and pulled out the cuffs. He took a set of keys from his waist, unlocked a case and brought out a Remington. “Please sign here,” he said with a grin. “I suppose you’re going to need ammo.”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Oh no, not at all. These are a hundred case rounds. I'll give you two boxes. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, sir. Thank you.” I really didn't need the Remington but I could not refuse it either. That was a standard issue to all the Marshals.

As I left, I ran into Katie. I had asked for an extra copy of a mugshot that was on the wall. It only took her several minutes and she came back with it. She said I was going to be the youngest Marshal on the force. I took that as a compliment, of course.

Bixby met me at the top of the stairs. “We have got to move fast. I've got to get you over to the tailor or your uncle will have my butt. Come on Sean, let's go!”

* * *

On Tuesday morning, I met the Colonel and he swore me in, then pinned my badge to my chest. It felt larger than life, like I was someone else that day. I could only imagine what my father must have felt when he became a Marshal. The Colonel was an older fella, not quite what I had expected. He reminded me of the politician type. He was well-dressed and said all the right things, including the part about not letting him and my uncle down. He was a smooth talker all right. Bixby took me back to the Compound. He also gave me a way to contact him directly if I needed something. The Sergeant, he said, was already out on assignment. He had to replace an officer who was injured while on the job. I was not told what happened and thought not to ask. Bixby did say he would be out for quite some time.

He explained that sometimes that's part of the job. I was just hoping not for me. I hopped the first train out of Boston to Providence. What I did not know is that Federal Marshals always ride for free; the trains were owned by the Federal Government. I just had to show my badge and I could go anywhere. I managed to get a little sleep on the train going back. The ride seemed to take forever this time. I was anxious to meet with my mother who had made this all happen. I wanted to see some real joy in her face again. As I sat on the train, I took out that mugshot Katie had given me. I stared at it for a while until one of the workers yelled, “Providence, fifteen minutes.” We were getting close and I could see the houses now. The bigger buildings came into view and the city showed itself. The train began to slow, then eventually stopped altogether.

I managed to catch a ride on a coach back to New Bedford for a small fee. I kept to myself all the way there. It made no sense for me to identify who I was if I did not have to. It was almost three o'clock in the afternoon when I got back. When I knocked at the door, my sister answered as usual. We both waited for my

mother to come. I had put my finger across my lips so my sister would understand to stay quiet. When my mother came out, we both nearly cried. This just wasn't for my mother; it was also what I knew my father wanted. She gave me a huge hug and thanked the Lord. My sister smiled with a sense of pride — something so badly needed in our home with my father being gone and all. Things were right again in the Callahan house. I stayed for several hours and we had dinner together. I let her know I wanted to speak with Tommy before I left. He too was probably wondering if I had made it or not. When I got to Tommy's house, he came to the door.

I then just opened my coat and showed my badge. “Son of a bitch, Sean, you made it.” Tommy made sure everyone in his family came to see my badge and all. They congratulated me and I felt I was on top of it all. Tommy suggested we head to the pub and just have a couple to celebrate. I thought what harm could that do? It had been a while since I had a chance to relax.

When Tommy and I got into the pub, all seemed quiet. We ordered a few beers and relaxed a bit. It was a Tuesday night and all was well at first. In the back was Susie and that Harmen fella. He was yelling at her again and causing a disturbance. It was so loud you could barely hear anyone else talk at times. I was trying to tell Tommy all about my training in Boston. He seemed genuinely interested in the job of being a marshal. I could tell although he was getting pretty steamed up over the screaming going on in the back.

Then, suddenly a slap could be heard from where they were. “No more of this, I tell you.” Tommy then stood up and pushed his seat back. He then went into the back room. “Take your hands off of her!”

“She's my damn property. I'll do what I want with her.”

Tommy then moved in front of Harmen and clenched his fists. The two men then began to stare at each other. “You don't want any problems with me, boy. I'll kill you and your whole family. Back off now.” I knew Tommy was not going to put up with much more and he was not going away either. Suddenly Harmen reached out his hand towards his vest pocket. Tommy realized what was about to happen and stepped back. That gave me time to quickly draw my Colt and place the barrel in Harmen's face.

He immediately froze. “What the hell is this?” he screamed.

“Take that Derringer out and I'll kill you.” I then drew back the hammer on the Colt, keeping the gun on Harmen's face. “Put your hands down to your sides.” Both his hands slowly dropped. “Down to your knees and put your hands behind your head now!” There was no sound in the bar and all eyes were now staring. “Tommy, reach around and get his gun out of his pocket.” Tommy pulled out a chrome-plated Derringer. He then stuck the gun in his pocket. My gun

stood, hammer cocked, firmly on his face. I reached into my belt and pulled out a set of cuffs. "Put these on him, Tommy."

Strange as it may be, just over an hour ago, I had shown Tommy how to use those cuffs. It took him no time before Harmen's hands were secured behind his back. "You stupid asses think a simple assault charge is going to hold me in jail. I'll get out tonight and burn both of your houses down."

I then returned my gun to its holster. "No," I said. "I don't believe this jail can hold you. I know who you are. Your name is Harmen Getz; you're wanted for armed robbery and attempted murder."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm a Federal Marshal." I then pulled out his mug shot. He just lowered his head. "You're going to Federal lock-up tonight. Now get up." Tommy grabbed Getz by the back of his jacket and pushed him towards the door. I looked at Joe, the owner. He seemed pleased with the outcome. When we got outside, I said, "Tommy, you got me into this. Now you have to help me get him to Boston. We have to move fast here. Will you, do it?"

"You know I will, Sean."

"We have to get to Providence as soon as possible, then get on a train to Boston tonight."

"I know someone, for a price of course, who might help us take this scum out of here," said Tommy.

"Well, then you lead the way."

We were able to get a wagon to take us to Providence. From there, taking a train to Boston was going to be a dangerous ride. I gave Tommy my Smith and Wesson. I knew the possibility existed that his friends would follow. So, all the way to Providence we had our guns drawn and waiting.

I have to give the driver credit. He moved those horses well at night. I think he was a Portuguese fella — very short, dark hair with dark skin. Spoke very little English, but seemed to understand every word we said. He sold produce in the city and was very familiar with the road to Providence. He also knew exactly where the train station was. I could not help but pay him well for his courage and swift action in this matter. Getz was kept blindfolded and cuffed the whole time. We did not want him to witness the driver for fear of retaliation. In spite of all the threats from Getz, the ride to Providence went down without a hitch. The time at the station dragged on for some time. We had to keep our weapons out of sight. I had to cuff Getz from the front so he could go to the bathroom. We needed to wait for the one p.m. transport because we had just missed the early morning commute. Perhaps our luck was beginning to run out. Who could tell? Many people passed by us and some just stared. Getz seemed to be growling at

them as they walked by. I knew Tommy wanted to hit him with the gun I gave him. He kept warning Getz that if he did anything, he would split his head open. When we did use the bathroom, we were able to take in a little water. But we needed food — just something to keep us going. Finally, the train began to roll up. It was a sound I was so grateful to hear. We were definitely vulnerable in the open like this. I met with the train foreman and advised him of the situation. He was gracious and let us get on the train first. We sat in the very back away from people. The foreman told the passengers to move to the front for their safety. So far, everything was going our way. The train foreman even came back with biscuits for us to eat. Tommy and I quickly ate them without offering any of them to our prisoner. I knew getting off the train was going to be tricky. If they were going to hit us, it was going to be then. I gave Tommy what I had for ammunition for his gun. I told him that the platform was going to be filled with people. It was best to wait until everyone was off.

Then we would make our move. The train did arrive on time. I stuck my head out the window and could see many people on that platform. My stomach began to hurt, as if I had just eaten those red-hot peppers again. I was scared and began to breathe heavily.

I could not let Tommy or Getz know it. I took a moment and then went to the back of the train. Fortunately, the foreman looked out for us and waved us to come forward. “Let's go, Harmen.” Tommy grabbed him by his coat and shoved him forward.

“You will never get me to that jail.”

“That's all right,” Tommy said. “When your friends show up, I'm going to shoot you first.”

The platform appeared much less crowded now. There were some people still there, but none seemed to pay us much mind. So, we moved as quickly as we could. We flanked the prisoner all the way to a place where we could get a carriage and a driver. The train foreman told us exactly where to go and hire a man. The driver knew where the Federal Lock Up facility was and wasted no time getting us there. When we got in front of the place, I paid the driver. Tommy once again grabbed Getz and this time dragged him through the doors. I identified myself and who the prisoner was. I also left the mugshot with them.

I would later find out that Harmen's so-called friends were really finished with him. He had become a liability and a forgotten man now. His drunken behavior was becoming too much of a risk to them. They were simply glad to get rid of him. By the time we got Getz secured in Federal Lock up, it was getting late in the day.

I decided to just stay overnight. I would see my uncle in the morning. Because Tommy was with me, I could not stay at the Compound. So, it was another night at the Shakespeare Hotel. I worked on writing my report on the whole incident that night and handed it over to my uncle in the morning. There was no way Tommy and I were going anywhere tonight. We certainly had enough action for a while. We were both very hungry and tired.

As I wrote my report, I certainly began to realize that it was not going to put me in the best light. But of course, what was done was done. I couldn't do a damn thing about it now. Tommy and I showed up at his office around eight a.m. Joe was in the lobby, doing his usual thing of shaking everybody down on the way in. We both said our good mornings and he told Tommy and me to go right up. What I didn't know at the time was that my uncle already knew all about what was going on. He's notified immediately when a federal arrest had been made.

So, when I walked up the stairs, Katie came right over and said, "Sean, he wants to see you right now." She had a concerned look on her face.

I knew I was in deep shit here. Before I could close the door, it all started. "Sean, for Christ's sake, you're supposed to be in Exeter right now!"

"I know, Uncle, but a situation just came up."

"I am aware of the situation. What the hell were you thinking, getting civilians involved in federal arrests?"

"I'm sorry, but I was alone. I had to make a quick decision right then and there."

"Negative!" said the captain. "You could have gotten innocent people killed. You're damn lucky his criminal associates didn't track you down and ambush you." My face was then pinned to the floor. I had a feeling last night that things were not going to go my way here. "Not to mention, I have to explain this to the Colonel," the captain said. "Who, fortunately for the both of us, is not here right now. I'll have you know he is thinking of running for public office. Do you know what dead civilians would have done to his career right now? We trained you to think better than this. You could have just walked away from the situation, then telegraphed me. I would have had several Marshals down there to pick him up. Nice and clean. No one would ever realize we even had him. He would have eventually told us everything about the criminal enterprise down there."

"I'm sorry, Uncle."

"Don't you understand, Sean? You are here to gather evidence for us. Not to be out there getting yourself and innocent people killed. This was your first day on the job. The youngest Marshal we have. Killed on the first day! And I don't

even want to talk about your mother here.” He then threw his hands up and started waving them furiously. “Believe me, Sean. If the Colonel was here — and thank God, he is not — this whole deal with you being a marshal would be over. I want your butt over to Exeter and I mean now. This never happens again! You got it?”

“Yes, sir. There is one more thing.”

“What is it, Sean?”

“Sir, I know I screwed up. But without the help of my friend Tommy, I would have never made it, getting Getz in, sir. He would really like to meet you.”

My uncle gathered his composure for a moment, then shook his head. “All right,” he paused. “Send him in.”

I went back and called for Tommy to come. He had no idea of the thrashing I had just gotten. After all, he thought we were damn heroes or something. We both were standing in front of my uncle. Tommy was squeezing his hat so hard, I thought he was going to break it in two.

My uncle was gracious and stood up and shook Tommy's hand. “I'm Captain Callahan. So, you're the fella that assisted in this arrest.”

“Yes sir,” Tommy said.

“Well, I would like to thank you.”

“It was fun, sir.” My uncle could not help but laugh just a little. Tommy's enthusiasm was saving the day.

“Very well,” my uncle said. “Sean, straight to Exeter — you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

Tommy and I parted at the train station. I had to hide my feelings well. There was no way, after what he had done, I was going to let him think we were not heroes in this matter. There also was no way I had time to speak with my mother. I knew she must have been worried sick when I didn't return home that night. I told Tommy exactly what to say to her and nothing else. We just had a routine transport and that's all.

Also, to tell her to forgive me for not letting her know myself. The truth in the matter was far different. I just made a severe error in law enforcement. I gave the criminals what could have been the upper hand. And on top of that, I put many civilians' lives in danger. I was damn lucky, that's all. But now, after the Colonel hears of this, my uncle is going to get it, I thought. I was certainly an embarrassment to him now. If things didn't go well in Exeter, I could lose my badge and everything I thought to be in life. It was all on the line here.

Chapter 8

Off to Exeter

T

he rest of the way to Exeter was without incident. I got off the train and boarded a coach that took me close to the town itself. From there, I was able to purchase a horse and saddle at a local livery stable. The ride was less than an hour, and this time there would be no mistakes. I would report directly to the Major himself. Finally, after a short ride, I had arrived. From a small hilltop, I could see Exeter. It was hard to understand what went on down there. This looked just like any other town. There was a long row of buildings in the center. Some were painted and others were not. It looked like it had its share of businesses, along with many regular houses that were scattered about. There was no confusion about where the center of town was.

That was where the buildings were stacked side by side. A wide dirt road separated them apart. There were people moving about from place to place. I rode my horse down what must have been the main area of the town. I saw a storekeeper helping to load a wagon and decided to ask about the Major. By the time I got off my horse, he had already gone inside. So, I just followed him into the store. When I walked in, the clerk was hard at work with other customers at the counter. I just browsed a minute until he was done.

I could not help but to hear their conversation. "Well, hello there, folks. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, I don't think so. That's about it," said the lady.

"I don't think I've seen you in here before. Are you new in town?"

"Yes," said the man. "We are from the next town over. The Doc came by a while back and treated our son for bronchitis."

"Well, how is he doing now?"

"Much better. The Doc gave him some medicine and told us what to do to prevent any more attacks. He also spoke of this town and your store."

"Well, that's great. His place is right across the street."

When they eventually left, I walked over to the counter. "Yes, young man, can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm just looking for a little information. Could you tell me how to find Major Lancaster?"

"Well, of course; he is across the street over there towards the right. He has a sign on his door saying Town Business. Do you know the Major?"

"No, but I have business with him. I'm a Marshal."

“A new law man in town. That's news around here. Will you be here long?”

“It depends on certain things.”

“I see. You can leave your horse there if you like and just walk over. My name is John Manning.”

“Good to meet you, John. My name is Sean Callahan. Well, I'll be on my way now.”

When I walked outside, I went over and gave my horse a gentle rub. I could almost feel the eyes on me. When I crossed the street, there was the doctor's office all right — alongside the Post office. Next over was the Major's door and it stood out. You absolutely could not miss the “Town Business” plastered across the top of it. I took a good look around again just before heading in. When I walked in, there was a long counter that spanned the width of the office with several desks behind it.

A young woman stood up and asked. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I'm here to see the Major.”

“He will be back in a few minutes. Can I help you with anything?”

I looked around and saw Yankee soldier memorabilia everywhere. “No ma'am. I have to speak with him directly.”

“And you are?”

“My name is Sean Callahan. I'm a U.S. Marshal sent here from Boston.”

“Really?” she said. “I mean you're a little young and all?”

“I suppose. But I'm still here to do a job.”

“Well,” she said, “I'm Anne, the Major's daughter.”

I could not help but just look at her. I sensed I was staring, which began to make us both feel uncomfortable. I paused for a moment then asked. “Do you think I can wait for him?”

As she looked up, she said, “Marshal, you won't have to wait long. Here he comes now.” Suddenly the door swung open. “Father,” Anne called out, “This is Sean Callahan, the Marshal from Boston.”

“Well, I'll be damned,” said the Major. “You're a Callahan all right.”

“I'm the Captain's nephew.”

“You look a hell of a lot like your uncle when he was your age.” The Major's eyes stayed focused on me. The Major then extended his hand and I immediately shook it.

The man did have some years on him. But he was still a distinguished-looking fella just the same. I thought this was the kind of person they made bronze statues for. They must have been waiting for him to die or something. Then they would roll out a serious hunk of metal after him. He had that no-

nonsense look to him. And those piercing, dark eyes meant business. I knew my uncle looked up to him. I saw no cause not to do the same.

“Anne, can you stay a while longer?”

“Of course, Father.”

“Sean, let's go in the back and we will talk.” He sprung up a portion of the counter and walked towards a door in the back. We then entered a large living area. “I live right here in town. It makes everything easier for me.”

“It's certainly big enough.”

“Believe it or not, this was a produce warehouse at one time. Most of the buildings here in town are this size. They extend way back.” The Major pulled out a seat at the table for me. He then struck a match and lit the stove placing a kettle over the flame. He even lit a lamp with the same match. He may have been old, but the Major could still move quickly enough.

“I want to talk to you about the missing women.”

“All in due time,” the Major said. “We have to get you squared away first. I made some provisions for you. You are to take your horse to the livery stable at the end of town. Old Charlie Gomes will be waiting for you. He's a little strange but pay him no mind. He will take good care of your animal for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, as for yourself, I've got you a room at the Country Inn. Just a nice place on the other end of town. They have rooms upstairs and a kitchen downstairs. The food is pretty good. My daughter works there from time to time. It will be dark soon. I want you to get settled in as soon as possible. We will have plenty of time to talk later.”

I headed down to the stable. I knew the Major and his daughter would be at least talking a bit about me, just getting into town and all.

“Dad, he looks awfully young to be a Marshal.”

“That may be true. But his uncle was his age when I commanded him in the war. He was a fine soldier. Followed orders and got things done. He was a brave young man. I suspect the captain believes he's the man for the job. It's not always the dog in the fight but the fight in the dog. We will see what he is made of.”

“I'm sure you are right about that, Dad.” Both stood, looking out the window.

As I walked the horse to the stable, the sun was beginning to remove itself again. It was getting cold and the wind was kicking up a bit. When I walked up to the livery stable, the doors were still open. There inside was an older man with gray hair with a receding hairline. I could hear him whispering something to himself. He wore red suspenders and black pants with large rubber boots. All seemed a little odd. But the Major said he was good with animals. “Excuse me.”

The man then suddenly turned. He seemed entrenched in his work. He walked closer to me to take a look. "Yes, young man. Can I help you?"

"Yes, I need someone to take care of my horse."

"Well, all right. Are you going to be in town for a while?"

"At least for a couple of weeks anyway. I'm a marshal."

"A law man in town. Well, with all the stuff going on around here, it's no wonder. My name is Charlie Gomes by the way."

"I'm looking into the women here who have gone missing."

"Do you want my theory on that, Marshal?" He then started to take the saddle off my horse. "Those women are all in love with that Pastor up there in that church and not just one. Others in town, also."

He then led my horse into the stable and took off the reins and bridle. He filled a water bucket and placed it into the corner of the stall. "I think they ran off — with some expecting him to follow."

"Follow them where?"

"Wherever each one is going to have their baby, I guess."

"You think the Pastor has been with these women?"

"I would watch him close, Marshal." He then threw some hay into the stall. "You can't give them too much food. The damn horses don't know when to stop eating."

"There's three in this town and one from the next town over. You think he has been with all of them?"

"Not all of them. Some probably just ran off. That will be two bits for the horse."

"The Major said just put it on the town's account."

"The Major said. The Major said. That's all I listen to around here. I'll take care of your horse, Marshal, and he will be here whenever you need him."

"Thank you, Charlie." As I walked away, I thought about the old man. Perhaps there was something about what he said. I'd never heard a Pastor talked about that way before. Sooner or later, I was going to need to speak with him. I would later write down exactly everything that he had said to me word for word.

I was going to do as my uncle had asked and keep meticulous notes of everything that went on here. Earlier, when I crossed the street, I saw a sign saying Doctors Office. I wondered if any of the women had been there to see him. He would be someone who would know if any had become pregnant. It's hard to understand, however, why he would keep something like that a secret. When it came to the Pastor, I was going to think hard about what I was going to say. I didn't want to tip my hand to him. Not just yet.

When I arrived at the Major's office, I decided to pick up the things that I had left there and head over to the Country Inn before it was completely dark. The Major asked me to escort his daughter over. He explained that at night he never let her walk alone. He also said he would be there somewhat later to pick her up and escort her back. He told me that a lady by the name of Margaret owned the place and had already spoken to her about me. A room was ready for me at the Inn for the entire time that I needed it. He assured me all my expenses would be taken care of by the town. Anne and I then headed out for the place.

"How long have you been working at the Inn, Anne?"

"It's been several years now. How long have you been a Marshal?"

"Oh, not long."

"I can't help but notice you carry two guns."

"I keep one on my hip and the other in a shoulder harness."

"But why? Most men carry only one?"

"I learned very young to shoot with both hands. It just feels natural to have two."

"Have you hunted down many criminals, Marshal?"

"I've taken in some. I'm surprised a pretty girl like you doesn't have a boyfriend walking you to the Inn tonight."

"Oh, I'm spoken for, all right."

"Really?" I replied.

"The Pastor and I are quite serious about each other."

"The Pastor!"

"Yes, what's the problem?"

"Oh, nothing. I didn't expect you to say his name."

"There's nothing wrong with his name. He is a fine man."

"I'm sure he is."

"Well," she said. "This is it. I will go and get Margaret. Be quick about things. The kitchen will be closing soon."

The Inn looked like a wonderful place to stay. It had a beautiful glass chandelier in the center of the room. There was a long counter in the back to register guests. The floor was hardwood with small carpets strategically placed about. To the right was a staircase that turned as it went up. It had an elegant handrail to match. All the drapes were emerald green with gold accents. To the left was the opening to the dining room. I could see the tables so neatly set. For an Inn that stood in a small town, it was grand indeed. As I looked forward, a lady came towards me with Anne by her side. She was an older woman but not old by any measure. My guess was that she had not reached forty yet. She

had blonde hair, cut to her shoulders, blue eyes, and a perfectly shaped face. She was of average height with a slender build.

I would later find out that she was a recent widow. Her husband who built the Inn had become ill from consumption. He was one of the many who had died here. Having to run the Inn by herself didn't give her time to mourn him, it seemed. She appeared to be most kind and gracious to me. My heart went out to her because she had just lost someone close to her.

"You must be the Marshal."

"Yes ma'am."

"The Major told me you were coming. My name is Margaret. Come over to the counter and sign in. I'll get you your key."

"Thank you, Margaret."

"You must be hungry. Please head up those stairs and get cleaned up. Your room number is on the key. Come down right after you get settled. I'll have your dinner ready."

Margaret also had a beautiful smile. I thought she was quite lovely indeed. I then turned to say goodbye to Anne but for some reason, she had just walked away. When I got to the second floor, there was a long hall with gas lights on both sides. There appeared to be fourteen rooms upstairs, with seven on each side.

I looked at the key and it said number seven on it. This was the room at the very end, above the dining room. When I got inside, there was a single bed, a dresser, and a desk. There were two windows in the room, both faced the street. I looked out and could see the blacksmith shop across the way, along with a number of houses scattered throughout. There was a bathroom at both ends of the hall. The room seemed perfect for my needs. We were in the far-eastern part of town. I did not think the building was that old, everything seemed so new.

I would find out later it was built by Margaret's husband less than five years before. She had reluctantly agreed to help him manage the place. She never thought she would be alone in this. The room had one flaw: being so close to the bathroom. You would hear the door slam quite often. I was surprised to find that half the guests at the Inn were permanent residents. They, for whatever reason, chose to live here. I thought why not? It was a decent and clean place to live. There was an excellent kitchen downstairs and Margaret appeared to be the perfect host. I was told that the food was so good that everyone in town ate there. I was looking forward to the meal tonight myself. I quickly put my belongings away in the drawers that were provided.

I got cleaned up and started downstairs. There was no one sitting in the lobby when I got there. But people were going in and out of the dining room. When I

entered, it was already dark outside. The room was completely lit up with gas lights now and looked spectacular. The light reflected perfectly throughout the room at night. There were many people still eating at the tables. I decided to sit at the counter. It was set up in the back next to the kitchen. There was an older gentleman with dark hair sitting at the end of the counter, eating what looked like some form of soup. Not for me, I thought, not this evening. I wanted something more substantial. I was very hungry and had not eaten in some time.

Just then, Anne came out. "I see you found your way to the counter all right."

"Well, yes. I just walked through that opening there and headed this way."

"My, my, you are a clever one. What would you like?"

"Do you have a menu?"

"We do but I have to tell you. We don't have much left — it being so late and all."

"Well, bring me what you have the most of."

"That would be chicken. We have lots left over from this afternoon."

"Perfect," I said. Anne then darted off. She seemed to be upset with me of sorts. Was it what I said about the Pastor? I really didn't say much about him. But I certainly could have, I thought. I was beginning to think that I had better be extra careful when I speak to each person in this town. I would later write out a list of people that I wanted to talk to, then prepare my questions carefully. Also, I would write down their responses with equal importance. My uncle was adamant about that part of the job. Several minutes passed before Anne brought me back my meal. It was chicken all right, smothered in gravy with potatoes and corn. The older gentleman at the end quickly finished his soup.

He abruptly rose up and just left without paying. "Anne, could I ask you who that person was sitting at the end there?"

She turned her head so slightly. "That was Henry. He's the handyman around here. He pretty much does everything you ask him to. Margaret feeds him every day before he goes home."

"He does not live here at the Inn?"

"No, he has a place just outside of town." Anne seemed to be getting annoyed. "You ask a lot of questions. Eat your food already." I watched another waitress go in and out of the kitchen. This was a busy place just like the Pub back home. I bet Jack the owner would love a place like this. His wife was a fabulous cook. But never liked the bar much. I was almost finished when I noticed the Major come in. He came to the counter and sat directly beside me.

He took off his hat and said, "Well, how's the food?"

"Excellent," I said.

“She's got everyone in town eating here,” the Major replied. “Honey, if there's any of that chicken left, I'll take it.”

“There is, Dad. Coming right up.”

“Major, I noticed other women working here. Are they getting escorts home, too?”

“Damn straight they are. They would not be working here if they didn't. I would not permit it. And if no one comes to get them, I walk them home myself.”

“You're a good man, Major.”

“I'm going to steal a little coffee over there. It's pretty much help yourself around here and there's always a pot brewing.” The Major, before coming back, must have said hello to everyone sitting at the tables. He would eventually work his way back. “Don't like coffee?” he asked.

“I do, but I mostly just drink it in the morning.”

“Speaking of morning, be sure to head over to my office so we can talk.”

“Is eight o'clock all right with you?”

“That works for me, Sean. And remember, like I told your uncle, all expenses are taken care of by the town.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“This seems like a busy place.”

“This is nothing — you should see Friday nights. Margaret sort of turns this place into Pub Night. They break out all the liquor. Everyone in town is here. It's a chance for everyone to let some steam out. Many times, there's music played here all night. The crowd has thinned a bit with the sickness and all.” Anne came back with the Major's meal.

I stood up and excused myself and placed a tip on the table. Anne quickly came over and replied. “You don't have to do that.”

“Oh yes, I do. Major, I will see you in the morning.” As I passed by the main entrance, I thought I would have a look outside. The town was very dark at night and seemed dangerous to walk alone out there.

I thought maybe some gas lights outside would not hurt. It was something I would bring up with the Major later. So much darkness, if there were many people moving about in town at night. That itself, would present a high risk for everyone. Of course, before these women disappeared, the crime rate here was probably zero. Still, I thought some folks believed, even with these women gone, there was no reason for alarm. That false sense of tranquility hung over this place. But to myself, I could feel the danger. I did not see Margaret during dinner. That was a little disappointing. I would later find out that it was indeed she who was preparing the great meals. She would go back and forth all evening.

Registering new guests in — then doing most of the cooking. She was quite a dynamic woman, full of energy and spirit. I thought a lady like that would marry again quickly. I came to admire her kindness and generosity towards everyone in town.

Later, I went back to my room and wrote down everything that happened today: the people I met; where they lived; and exactly what they said. I was not going to miss a single detail. I even started to write down questions I had for the Pastor and later the Doctor. They were both on my list. The kitchen opened up at six a.m. The Major, of course, would be my first stop.

Chapter 9

Hearing the Evidence

A

s my boots pounded down the stairs at seven a.m., I decided to have breakfast in the dining room. I wanted to be in the Major's office no later than eight that morning. I needed to hear all the evidence he had. When I walked into the dining room, it just looked different. The furniture was the same as the night before. There were people sitting at the tables, but the lighting had changed. The natural sunlight made it seem like another place altogether. Through the server hole in the wall, I could see Margaret working. A different girl other than Anne came out. I was hoping to see her this morning. I wondered what she was like at seven a.m. I kept glancing at the dining room entrance to see if she was coming in. I ordered the country breakfast and just waited.

I would later find out that it was the definition of just about everything they had and throw it on your plate. I ate well, had some coffee, and just kept looking around. I finally was able to say hello to Margaret. She looked out through the server's hole after preparing a plate of food. As time went on, the dining room began to fill. This room, I thought, must be the busiest place in town. I had a sinking feeling in my chest. The kind that makes you want to go and hide somewhere and just become invisible. I realized that if there was someone out here killing these women, he probably had been in this room at some point. He had looked into the eyes of Margaret and Anne — not to mention all the other ladies that work here. I left the waitress a good tip because she well deserved it, I thought.

“You don't have to do that Marshal, ” the girl replied. The young lady had short black hair and a perky morning smile. She whipped around that room, helping everyone. I would later find out her name was Sally.

She was the sister of Jimmy, the boy who helped the Major out from time to time. She too, like her brother, was skinny but not wasted away. “No, that is for you.” She then smiled at me graciously. This girl worked hard to keep the room with this many customers happy and satisfied. When I began to leave, my guns and badge were seen by the morning customers. It was hard not to expose myself to the townsfolk. I thought perhaps it was time to stop trying. They would eventually know why I was here soon enough. I left the room and turned right. Went through the double doors that were the lobby's entrance. I headed up the street to the Major's office.

When I arrived, I noticed a small man with yellow thinning hair in a black suit. He walked into a place that was just aside from the Major's. It was the town's telegraph, that also doubled for the Post Office. Perhaps I would send a telegraph to my uncle later. At least to let him know I'm here and working on this. It was an absolute must that I spoke with the Major first before talking to anyone about the missing women. When I pushed the door open, he was already waiting at his desk. I was about to remove from him a heavy burden of responsibility that must have weighed like a giant sea anchor. My job, after all, was to simply pick up where he left off.

"Good morning, sir."

"Yes, please sit down. I believe it's time for me to answer some questions."

I sat down directly in front of the Major. "Are we alone here, sir? I would like for the both of us to speak freely."

"Yes, my daughter is out."

"Well, first things first. I would like to know the names of these women. Where they lived. When they went missing. That sort of thing."

"I had my daughter make up a file for you — she put everything I had in there." He then handed me a brown folder. It was unusually thin for a missing person's record. Not to mention there were four of them. I looked at it briefly.

"This will do as a start."

"I'm afraid that's about it, Marshal. That's all I have."

"All right, I'll look it over later today. There is something I want to ask you, sir. The digging up of the graves."

"That happened before these women went missing. I was under the impression that it wasn't part of your investigation."

"It's not, Major. Just as long as it doesn't tie itself into any of them."

"There were no missing women when we dug up those bodies."

"How long after those bodies were exhumed did you report the first one?"

"It was about six months."

"So right now, it's over two years since the first missing woman." The Major shook his head and just stared out. "I have to tell you something, sir. The chances of any of them coming back alive are very slim."

"I think most folks would understand that. Many believe we have a killer living among us," the major replied.

"That, of course, is certainly possible. Do you have any suspects?"

The Major turned towards his desk. He then took a deep breath, and said, "No. I'm no further along with that than when I started."

"You must have had someone you suspected."

"I'm sorry, Marshal, I do not."

“Major, I'm supposed to be taking over this investigation for you. I have a limited amount of time here. You're telling me you have nothing.”

“I would not have asked for help if I had the killer in my sights.”

“Everything will have to start at the beginning. I must interview all the families first. After this much time, there is so much evidence lost.”

“I'm sorry, Marshal. In the end, I'm just not much of an investigator.” The Major then leaned back in his chair and just stared out the window.

“I don't want to make any promises. But you know, if there was a killer here, he could be long gone by now, Major.”

“I have thought of that.”

“Perhaps there's something you may have overlooked. Something that would tie somebody here to these missing women. Maybe in time with us working together we can draw it out.”

“The people in this town are probably stonewalling me, Marshal. They don't want to talk to me for some reason. That's why I brought you in. You have to find someone who knows what's going on here.”

“I'm certainly going to try, sir.”

I decided to pause my questions for a time to let the Major gather his composure. “I want to read over your report and get back to you tomorrow, sir.”

“Marshal, I will be in this office every morning at eight a.m. I'll make a point of that while you're here.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I left the Major to his own accord. My thoughts were to correspond with my uncle and let him know I was here and well. Seeing the Post Office was right next door, it was a good time to check in.

When I pushed on the door it gave out a jingle sound to alert the manager. There in the corner sat the telegraph machine. There were several desks in the office and a wall with carefully sculptured boxes with different size envelopes in them. I could see through the open door in the back a man sorting packages.

He quickly came out when he noticed me. “Yes, sir, can I help you?”

“Good morning,” I replied. “I need some envelopes and writing paper. Do you think you could help me out?”

“Sure. How much would you need?”

“I think twelve envelopes and about thirty or forty sheets of paper will do.” I decided to just write to my uncle instead. This would keep our correspondence a private affair. As the mail worker walked away, I noticed he was the man I had seen before. I would need his full name and his living address for my report. These things I could surely get from the Major later. I was firm in my belief that everyone was a suspect. Until this was resolved, I was going to keep it that way.

“Are you new in town, young man?” The Postman had no idea who I was and seemed harmless enough. He was a small man of less than average height. I would later find out from the Major that his name was Robert Cummings. He was married with four children. They too lived just outside of town. He hardly seemed like a man of interest to me. However, I would value his opinion on the matter of things.

He handed me the supplies I needed. Then stared at my badge which stuck out from my jacket. “You’re a lawman.” It seems most everyone in town didn’t know I was coming, I thought.

“Yes, I’m here investigating the disappearance of those four young women. I’m a Federal Marshal.”

“Well, my name is Robert and I’m damn glad to meet you.” He then shook my hand most intently. “Marshal. Well, it’s about time. All the crazy stuff going on around here lately. We need the law here very badly. I just don’t understand what took so long for someone to come.”

“That’s hard to say. But I’m here now.” He walked back to his desk and picked up a newspaper he had been saving for quite some time. It was the Providence Journal. “You see this stuff, Marshal, about them digging up graves looking for vampires in that cemetery?”

“I’m not really here for that.”

“I understand, but isn’t it just plain loco to do that? I mean what was their point? Only a child would believe in that stuff.”

“I can’t say. Can I read that article and get it back to you later?”

“Certainly, Marshal.”

“How much do I owe you for the paper and envelopes?”

“Not a thing. That’s the least I can do. If you get the letter back to me before twelve, I can get it sent out the same day. That’s the time he usually comes to pick up.”

“I think I will. I’ll be back here before noon. I’ll bring this article back with me.”

“I’ve been meaning to put that in a frame and hang it on my wall here. Just to remind us all of what foolish people can do.”

“Thanks again, Robert.” I headed back to my hotel room. I needed to write that letter to my uncle. When I got back to the Inn, I could not help but look into the dining room. I saw Anne working at a busy pace serving customers. I tried to smile and say hello but she just turned away after seeing me. I then moved towards the stairs, grabbed for the rail, and began to ask myself a question. Was it just me she didn’t like or something I did? Perhaps both.

I reminded myself of the job I had to do. Whether or not someone liked me was something I was just going to have to endure. What was going on here was far more important than a Deputy Marshal's feelings.

Letter to Captain James Callahan,
1080 Union Street,
Boston Massachusetts,
Dear Sir,

I have arrived in Exeter. Secured Lodging and met with Major Lancaster. Upon my first meeting with him, I was somewhat taken by surprise at the lack of documented information on the investigation as it stands. A proper record of it apparently does not exist. Regrettably, I now have to start from the very beginning. I will be interviewing the families of the missing women first. Of course, I will be keeping an excellent journal of all my meetings with potential witnesses. I will not hesitate to contact you by telegraph if immediate help is needed.

Respectfully,
Marshal Sean Callahan.

I spent the rest of the morning reading what the Major had given me. It was nothing more than the facts that I already knew. I would, however, try to put it all into memory. I knew asking these families to relive the disappearance of their loved ones was going to be painful. Still, I needed to hear from all of them. I knew the next several days were going to be difficult. But I had to begin somewhere with this investigation. I ran over to the Post Office, met with Robert, and got my letter out — then went back to my room for more research. The first woman that had gone missing was Dawn Sparks. The Major had given me her address where she had lived with her mother. She went to town one day and never returned home.

The two others were Karen Abrams and Traci Mahoney. None of these women were related, but I was sure they knew each other. Ms. Mahoney had a son who was six years old and was living with his grandmother just outside of town. The fourth woman was in the next town over. Her being gone might have not even been connected to these three. The first two meetings with the relatives of the Sparks and Abrams families did not produce much in the way of evidence.

These women had been leading quiet, peaceful lives. Then, suddenly, they just disappeared. Nothing in their lives at the time was out of the ordinary according to their families. It did not make sense that they would just run off. Their families expected the worst now. They had all but spoken out and said they were probably murdered somehow. I told them I was there to try to get some

type of resolution in the matter. They seemed grateful someone was doing something to help.

My last stop would be the mother of Traci Mahoney. I would ride out to her home first thing the next morning. I stopped at the Inn, sat in the dining room, and reviewed my notes. I noticed Henry, the handyman, finishing another bowl of soup. He was sitting in his same chair and for whatever reason, I was sitting in mine also.

Sally came over. "Would you like something to drink, Marshal?"

"I'll take some lemonade if you have it."

"Of course." The gas lights were starting to come on again. The room was about to get an amazing orange glow to it. I could not help but look for Anne. I thought if given the chance I would apologize for anything I had done or said to offend her. I saw ham and beans written on the chalkboard as the special today. I gave Sally the order as soon as she came back.

"Well, hello, Marshal." It was Margaret and I was happy to see her. I tapped the chair next to mine and asked her to please sit.

She stated that she had instructed Sally to prepare my meal so we could chat. I told her that she could ask me anything she wanted. She began with something I thought was simple. "How was your day?"

"I started speaking with the families of the missing women."

"Oh." She squinted her eyes. "You're having a rough day. I do think, however, you're going to have a better time of it than the Major."

"He says the people here are stonewalling him."

"They are afraid of a man like that. They believe that if they say one thing it could lead to this whole town falling apart — and their lives with it."

"But do they, Margaret? Do they really know anything?"

"One would think so."

I turned my head and looked around. "This room is so beautiful at night."

"I can't begin to tell you all the good times we've had here over the years."

Henry finished his soup and came over. "I'll be heading home now, ma'am."

"Sure." She smiled. "Henry, this is the Marshal."

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm good, Henry, thanks." He then turned and started to walk out.

"He's a man of few words but awfully helpful around here. He does everything we need. A lot of the stuff my husband would do."

"I see," I said. "How about Anne? I thought she would be working here sometime tonight."

"She worked the morning shift, then went home. Didn't you see her then?"

"Yes, but I didn't get a chance to talk to her."

“You like this girl?”

“Well, I wanted to apologize for something I might have said about her boyfriend, the Pastor.” Just then the waitress brought over my supper to me.

“Marshal, you and I will talk some more another time. Eat your dinner,” she said. “I have plenty of dishes to wash.”

“Thank you, Margaret.”

I decided after dinner if there wasn't anything that had to be done, I would make my rounds around the town. I needed to get a feeling of what was happening at night around here. The town was very dark after sundown and appeared like a place you just didn't want to be.

The buildings were hard to see and the alleys between them were even worse. At times I could not see my hand in front of my face. There was an occasional window with light from some of the buildings but that was it. People walking here at night certainly could fall victim very easily. It was cold now and I could feel the wind blow right through my jacket.

It caused me to shake just a bit. I kept moving from porch to porch staying out of sight when I could. When I got to the livery stable at the end of town, I just leaned up against the barn's corner and stood out of sight. All was silent until the faint sound of footsteps could be heard. My eyes now were adjusted to the darkness and became fixated on the sound. It was footsteps for sure and it was someone moving quickly. Coming towards me was a small figure that looked to be covered in a blanket.

I pulled out my gun and yelled. “Halt, Deputy Marshal!”

The figure came to an abrupt stop. “Sean, is that you?”

“Anne. What are you doing out here!”

“What business is that of yours?”

I side-holstered my weapon. “I'm trying to do my job. And it's dangerous at night. Anything could happen to you out here.”

“Father was sleeping and I went to see a friend.”

“You mean that Pastor fellow again.”

“I don't have to explain myself to you.”

“But if I tell your father you're out here this late, I'm sure you would get a real bad time with him. Come on, I'll walk you the rest of the way.”

“I don't need your help, Sean. And if you say one word to my father, you will get what you have coming to you.”

“I won't say anything, Anne. But you have to be more careful than this.” When we arrived at their home, she quickly opened the door and, of course, abruptly slammed it in my face.

The next morning, I rode out to see Mrs. Mahoney, the mother of the last girl in this town who went missing. She had been on her way in for supplies and never made it there. It seemed no one in town saw her on that day. That was the only reference the Major made of it in his report. Her farm was less than a quarter mile out to the northeast of town. She didn't have much distance to travel that day. The road out to the Mahoney place was just a narrow path mostly — wide enough for one wagon at a time. There were no other houses along the way, just a trail of sorts. Anything could have happened to her out there. When I got to the farm, all seemed quiet. No dogs were barking and no farm animals were in sight. It was a rather small house with a porch set in front.

The paint was fading and peeling badly. Two small barns were to the left with wire set in front. The kind of pen where chickens probably once had been. A great barn was in the back and looked empty. It had many shingles missing from its roof. I wondered how long it had been since someone worked on this farm. I climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. I could hear a woman's voice call out. "What do you want?"

"Ma'am I'm a Deputy Marshal. I'm here investigating the missing women in town." I waited a minute then the door opened a crack.

"Let me see your badge."

"Yes ma'am." I then moved my jacket open.

She stared at me for a moment. "Please wait here, Marshal. I need to get my grandson. I'll be just a second." After a minute, the cracking sound of the door opened the entrance. I could see an old woman and a little boy standing there.

"I just need a little information about your missing daughter."

"I think I told the Major what I could."

"I understand, ma'am. But I'm taking over this investigation. This is my responsibility now."

Her eyes then began to open wide. "Come in, Marshal, please. Have a seat and I will get us some coffee." She then grabbed the little boy and stood him in front of me. "This is my grandson, Billy."

"Hello, sir." Billy was just three feet tall. Face full of freckles with a red mop of hair on top. Mrs. Mahoney turned to get the coffee. The boy in a whisper of a voice spoke out. "Are you going to bring my mommy home?"

I sat on the sofa and looked back at him. "Billy, I've got to find her first."

Just then Mrs. Mahoney handed me a cup. "It's not too hot. You can drink it right off."

"Thank you."

"Billy," she said. "Please go out and sit on the porch just for a minute so the Marshal and I can talk. I will make you your lunch in a bit." The boy slowly

opened the door and walked outside. "Don't worry about him, Marshal. He's a good boy. He will stay on that porch all right."

"Mrs. Mahoney."

"Please, call me Martha."

"Martha, I'm going to ask you some questions and I have to be straight with you as I can. Time is something that has worked against us here. So, there isn't any more of it to waste. I've got to get everything I can right the first time. I'm going to take careful notes of all the information."

"I understand, Marshal."

"Martha, I know the date and approximate time when your daughter disappeared. But could you tell me the events that led up to that day?"

"It was a Saturday when she did not come home. She had gone into town for supplies. The day before she and her son had gone in. They had taken the wagon and got most of what we needed. There were some items that she had forgotten so she went back the next day."

"So, she went into town Friday and Saturday."

"Yes, Marshal. But it was on Saturday that no one saw her. I'm assuming she never made it there."

"The horse and wagon — were they ever found?"

"That's just it. She didn't take them. Because it was only a few items, she walked and took her handbag with her."

"Can you describe it for me?"

"It wasn't anything fancy, just a bag with a shoulder strap. My daughter always loved butterflies so I sewed a picture of one to the side of the bag — as best I could, of course."

"Can you think of anyone who may want to harm her?"

"No. Marshal. She was a quiet person. Kept to herself after her husband died of the sickness. She just cared for her son. No boyfriends or anything like that." The tears of a mother broken by the loss of her daughter began to overcome her.

I decided that, at least for today, the questions needed to stop. "Martha, do you have a piece of clothing your daughter frequently wore?"

She nodded her head and rose from her seat. She then reached into a drawer and pulled out a sweater. "Would this help, Marshal?"

"Yes, very much."

She then paused and sat back down. "Marshal," she said. As she wiped the tears from her face. "I have to tell you." I then looked at her intently. "I've been to Dr. Metcalf. I have the sickness. I don't have much time left." I focused on her pale, drawn face now. "That boy needs his mother."

I then rose and said, "I understand. I will do everything I can."

“Marshal, there is one more thing. There is talk of vampires in that town. You best be careful,” she spoke.

“Mrs. Mahoney, I will keep you informed of everything that happens from here on, and don’t worry none. I know how to look after myself.” As I left the old woman and her grandson, they just stood on the porch looking out at me. Nothing could have motivated me more. It was a picture I would see in my mind over and over again. I knew they were counting on me. While I was riding back, I thought of the dying woman. Her daughter must have known her mother was sick and would probably pass at some point. After all, she had witnessed her husband die of it. There was no way she was going to run off and leave that little boy there with someone incapable of caring for him in the future. If anyone thought this young woman had taken off, they were sadly mistaken. The talk of vampires was something I was not going to accept. Much less to go out there looking for one.

It was becoming clear however that a crime of some sort had happened here. My uncle's hunch that these women just didn’t run off was certainly becoming a more logical explanation. When I got to the Major's office, he was stoking the furnace with wood. When I walked in, Anne saw me. She rolled her eyes and just walked out the door.

The Major looked up and said, “How's everything going, Marshal?”

“Major, I have to ask you a favor.”

“What is it that you need?”

“Dogs, Major.”

“What kind of dogs?”

“I need hunting dogs. The kind that can track down anything.”

“What are you hunting?” said the Major.

“At this point, I don't know. When I was young, I heard stories of wolves being out there. I've got to rule out there's something living out there in those woods, taking your women.”

“If there were wolves out there, I would have known it already, Marshal.”

“Well then let’s just say man or beast. I have to be sure before I start looking elsewhere.”

“All right.” The Major then lit a blunted cigar. His eyes narrowed and he began grinding his teeth. “I have a friend a few miles out. He breeds Redbone Coonhounds. They are the best in the state. I'll get up there this afternoon while the weather is good. I'll tell him we have an emergency here and we need the dogs here by tomorrow. I'll do the best I can for you Marshal. Do you know the area you want to search?”

“That road, of course. The one that goes from the Mahony homestead to here in town. I want both sides searched.”

“Well, if we are going to get him here, Marshal, I better get underway.”

The next morning, there was a pounding at my door. I looked at the small clock on my nightstand. It was 6:45 a.m., barely light outside.

“Yes, who is it?”

“It's Henry, Marshal. The Major and some other man, are downstairs waiting for you.”

“I will be down in ten minutes. Thanks, Henry.” I did the best I could to speed up my morning routine and I headed downstairs. There in the dining room was the Major all right. He was sitting at a table with a rather large man with a long, gray beard. He smoked a pipe — the corncob type. I could smell a sort of apple aroma in the room. It really wasn't that bad and I didn't think much of it.

“Please sit down, Marshal. This is a good friend of mind. His name is John Murphy.”

I extended my hand out and it was met with a huge mitt of a hand. This Murphy fella, although sitting, looked huge. His hands were enormous. “Good to meet you, John.”

“Call me Tiny, Marshal; everybody around here does.” I could not help but see the humor in that. I gave out a sudden laugh. The waitress then brought over a carafe of coffee and a cup for me. The two other men had theirs already half empty.

“Has the Major explained to you the area I want to search?”

“Some,” he said.

“Tiny, the area I want to cover is a road just over a quarter mile long, I would say. It runs mostly north of here to a farmhouse. There are no other roads that run into it. Just some open fields. I'd like to search both sides today.”

“How far out from that road would you like to search?”

“I think two hundred yards or so.”

“If you want to cover that much ground, we would need to do a back-and-forth pattern all the way to the farmhouse. We could start on the West side of the road. Then go across to the East side and back into town. Just what is it you are looking for, Marshal?”

“I don't know at this point. Could I ask you something, Tiny?”

“Sure, Marshal.”

“You have hunted these woods. What is out there that could kill an adult person?”

“Well, I have not seen a bear or mountain lion here for some time now,” he said.

“And if there was one hunting out there, we would have heard about it by now.”

“What about wolves, Tiny? Is it possible that wolves are out there?”

“The wolves were hunted out of the area just at the end of the war. However, before they left completely, some mated with coyotes. We now have what you would call coywolves.”

“I see them once in a while,” the Major said. “But none even close to town. They tend to stay away from people.”

“They are hard to see. Hard to catch and hard to kill. I never hunt them, Marshal.”

“Why not?”

“They tend to run in packs. They will kill my dogs on sight. I can't afford to lose one of my animals. The Major will tell you what they're worth.”

“Of course, there's another element to this,” said the Marshal. “I'm talking about someone and I mean a person out there taking these women.”

“I guess that's certainly possible, too,” Tiny said.

“You will need an armed escort today, Tiny. While we do the tracking. I don't want anything to happen to you or your dogs.”

“I usually work alone and just let my dogs go where the scent takes them. But under the circumstances, Marshal, I would appreciate your company.”

“I will be with you the whole time. And there's one more thing. I would keep those dogs on a leash where we can see them. I can't guarantee their safety without it.”

“That sounds reasonable, Marshal.”

“You men, better eat now. Because it sounds like you have a long day ahead of you,” said the Major. “I'll be in my office later waiting to hear from you. Good luck out there.”

We finished our meals, fed the dogs, and carried an ample supply of fresh water. They were coonhounds, all right — big floppy ears and forty inches in shoulder height, with a rust color short-haired coat on them. They were dancing around in circles, yelping to get started. These animals knew instinctively the hunt was on. They were brother and sister from a small litter. Duke and Duchess were the best-trained hounds the state had to offer. If there was something in those woods, I felt confident we were going to find it. It was about eight a.m. when we got started. I was thankful Tiny did as I asked and kept the dogs on a leash. We headed down the alleyway between the feed and grain store and a warehouse of sorts. “Well, Marshal, shall we start to the west?”

“Tiny, it's your show from here.” He then turned to the left of the road and gave the dogs a good smell of the sweater.

They were salivating now, both of them filled with energy, scratching at the ground. These animals wanted to run. "I don't know if I can hold them, Marshal." Tiny was a real big man — probably six feet, six inches. He must have weighed three hundred pounds. And even he was having a hard time holding those animals. He also had a rifle with him, something I thought he might need. I could see his face straining. There was no way he was going to last the day like this. "I got to cut them loose, Marshal. They have to run. That's the way they were trained."

"Do what you have to do, Tiny." And with that, the dogs were off. They raced ahead with their noses to the ground. It was early November in New England. The leaves were all but off the trees and it was forty degrees out. The woods looked empty now, the ground filled with a brown color. Tiny assured me that these leaves would be no match for his dogs' sniffing skills. Still, I feared they would run into someone living out here. If someone shot Tiny's dogs, I know he would probably use that Winchester on them. We could hear the dogs off in the distance and kept some sort of pace with them. So far, the only thing out here was an occasional squirrel or two. The dogs worked great; they knew the squirrels were there but just went on with their business. By ten a.m., we had covered half of the road to the West. I was somewhat relieved that there wasn't a body retrieved yet.

"The dogs are quiet, Marshal, but they are moving well. They seem to be heading right for the farmhouse."

"How do you keep them moving in such an orderly manner?"

"I've trained these dogs to not get too far away from me. If we stay about fifteen yards from the road and keep moving towards the farmhouse, they will search the area we want them to. If an animal killed this young woman, she would be right off the trail here. A mountain lion or wolf will kill its prey quickly, and then drag it into the woods to eat. Not very far either. There's no way these dogs will miss the scent."

"The remains could be from the past winter."

"Doesn't matter; my dogs will find her. I've seen them come on carcasses a year old."

"How do you know when they have found something?"

"They will start barking like crazy." Just then, Tiny stuck his arm out. "There's something sticking out over there, Marshal." He then extended his finger. It looked like a piece of strap sticking out of the leaves about fifteen feet from the road. I walked up to it. There was just a small impression next to it. I picked up a stick and looped it around. Then pulled straight up. "Do you know what that is?" Tiny asked.

"It's a small bag." When I examined one side. It was completely blank. I paused for a second then slowly turned the bag. There, in the middle of the other side, was a butterfly sewed in with red and yellow thread.

"Mean anything to you?"

"Yes. This is the handbag she was holding when she headed into town. I'm sure of it." Tiny then stuck his fingers into his mouth and let out a whistle for his dogs to come.

"Let my dogs smell that bag. If she is out here, we will locate her for sure."

It was about noon time when we reached the Mahoney farm. I had Tiny quickly cross over to the East side of the road. We searched the area carefully where we located the shoulder bag, then marked it. There was no other evidence found. I was not in a hurry to tell Martha what we had found. And besides, I wanted to finish the search completely. When we got back to town, it was around four p.m.

The sunlight was already starting to dim. We went directly to the Major's office.

When we went inside, Anne was sitting at his desk. "Hello, John," she said.

"Hello. Where's your pop?"

"He's in the back; I'll get him." She then slipped through the back door. Tiny pulled out his pipe and slapped the face into his hand.

The Major walked in and sat down. "Gentlemen, please sit; let's talk. You must be thirsty out in those woods all day." The Major took a bottle out of his desk. "Come on, drink." We all swallowed our shot glasses. "Well, did you find anything out there?" said the Major." I then pulled out the shoulder bag and placed it on his desk. "What is this?" he asked.

"That is the bag Traci was carrying when she came into town that Saturday.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, her mother sewed that butterfly in right there."

"Was there anything else?"

"No that was it. Just fifteen feet off the road."

The Major stood up from his desk and rubbed his beard a bit. "Well, she could have just dropped it. Then ran off. That's still a possibility."

"Major, look in the bag."

The Major carefully opened the bag. His eyes squinted to see inside. He then reached in and removed a small purse. Then took out four Morgan silver dollars and placed them on his desk. "Major, you and I both know this woman or any other woman would never run off and leave her money behind."

"God damn it, Major," Tiny said. "We probably have ourselves a killer out there." The Major then sat back in his seat. He began rubbing his beard over and

over. Then, with a nod of his head, he looked at us both and said, “Where the hell do we go from here?”

“I think you know, Major. These women are probably dead by now. And I mean all of them.”

“I want the son of a bitch who did this, Marshal. One way or the other, I want him.” The Major clenched his fists tightly and began to pound his desk.

Chapter 10

Finding Something of Traci

I

decided to hold on to the bag and later show it to Martha for positive identification. I could tell by her painful expression that it was her daughter's all right. When I pulled out the purse with the silver dollars, she remembered giving Traci the money that day. There was no evidence of blood stains or tears whatsoever. Of course, no one could completely rule out an animal such as a mountain lion, bear, or even a pack of those so-called coywolves attacked her. But I did agree with Tiny. That would have produced some type of carcass the dogs would have come across. Anyone robbing this young woman would have looked into that bag before discarding it with the money left inside. The strongest explanation lent itself that she was abducted.

Her screams from where the bag was found would not have been heard. It was as if the attacker knew the exact location to strike: almost at the halfway point to the town. Throughout the night, I pondered what happened to her. Still, in the end, I was left with many possibilities. I knew I had to get back to interviewing the people of the town. I was hoping someone would give me something. While I was at the Mahoney farmhouse, I asked Martha if her daughter was the religious type. She explained that from time to time she and her daughter would attend church on Sunday. They both knew the Pastor and liked him. I thought a possible connection of some type may exist between these women and the Pastor. I did need to speak with him eventually. But first, I wanted to know what the Major could tell me about him. So, I decided while Anne was working at the Inn, I would stop by and speak with her father.

I saw Anne preparing lunch at noon time so I visited the Major. When I stopped by his office, he told me to please sit. I informed him that Mrs. Mahoney positively identified the bag. He didn't seem surprised. "How did she take the news, Marshal?"

"It wasn't good, as you can imagine."

"We have to run down the son of a bitch who did this, Marshal."

"It's going to take time for that. Until then, I've got to start interviewing people again. And I wanted to start with that Pastor up there."

"What about him?"

"He's kind of new around here, isn't he?"

"He's been here for three years now. He came down from Central Falls. I know he has some sort of following in this town with the women. But I've

always considered it to be harmless. You don't think he knows anything, do you?"

"I don't know, Major. I've got to talk with him first. How well does Anne know him?"

"Well, she's there every Sunday, of course. Then she goes to Bible Study on Tuesday and she volunteers her time when she can."

"So, I'm assuming she knows him pretty well."

"What are you driving at Marshal?"

"I just don't know, Major. But I'm looking to find out." Later that day, I would head up to meet the Pastor. I needed to ask him straight out about the missing women and just how well he knew them.

I stopped at the Inn for lunch before heading up to the church to see the Pastor. When I walked in, there seemed to be an argument underway between Margaret and two young men.

Their names were Jeff and Evan Corbet. They were brothers and were not much for working for their keep, so I was told. They showed up to scrounge another meal off Margaret. They were good-sized fellas, both of them. They talked like they were accustomed to getting their way and all. They were also very dirty and just plain stunk. Both were carrying pistols in their holsters and trouble seemed inevitable.

"Guys, I've already extended you enough credit. When you get around to paying me, I will feed you."

"Come on, Ms. Margaret, we always eat here."

"And you gentlemen never pay."

As I walked up behind the oldest brother, he turned quickly, staring back at me and telling me, "You don't come up behind me, ever."

"I'm here to eat just as you are . . . but I'm also the Marshal."

"Well, is that a fact?" the other brother said.

"Yes, that is a fact. It's also a fact that eating here today without money — it's not going to happen. So, it's best to move on." I thought that even as stupid as these two looked, it would be nuts to draw on a Marshal in front of all these people. I knew I could outdraw them. But I did not want gunplay at the Inn. The two men stared for a while then thought better of it.

"Let's go, Evan. See you again, Marshal." The two men then headed for the door. I kept my hand close to my Colt all the way.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with that, Marshal. It's my fault. I have been feeding them for six months now. I can't even tell you what they owe me."

"Margaret, you're too kind. You of all people should know you're running a business here."

“Come sit down, Marshal; have coffee with me and I'll get you something to eat.”

“You know, the more time I spend around here, the more I think you need a sheriff of some kind. Without law enforcement, you're just inviting these men to act out.”

“The Major usually handles this sort of thing. But you're right, of course.” She then went over to the coffee pot and poured two cups.

“It seems you do a pretty good lunch business here, too, Margaret.”

“We have people coming here morning, noon, and night. Believe me, the dishes certainly do pile up around here.”

“Margaret, I wanted to ask you about the Pastor.”

“You mean Brian Hebert?”

“Yes, if that's his name.”

“He came here a while ago. Not much to know.”

“How old is he?”

“Well, I would say around forty.”

“Don't you think he's a little old for Anne?”

“Well, that's what this is all about.”

“I guess I'm hearing things. I've got to speak with him this afternoon.”

“Do you have official business with him, Marshal?”

“I wanted to ask him about the missing women.”

“I think he's harmless, Marshal.”

“Your probably right, Margaret, but I have to find that out for myself.”

Margaret shrugged her shoulders. “But then again, Marshal, you never know.” Both of us let out a huge laugh. “We have to be quiet,” she whispered. “Anne is working in the kitchen right now.”

I had finished lunch and decided to get my horse from the livery stable. Charlie was his usual self, talking to whoever was there. I had only met him a few times, but I could see he was good with the animals. What I thought was his talking to himself was just his way of speaking to them. When I showed up, he was doing just that. “Hello, Charlie. I need to take my horse out for a while.”

“All right, sure thing.” He then opened the gate and set the bridle in place. “Do you have a name for your horse, Marshal?”

“No, do you want to give him one?”

“Marshal, this is a really good horse here. He should have a name.”

“All right, how about Max?”

“Max. What made you think of that name, Marshal?”

“I think that is what the guy who sold him to me called him.”

Charlie then shrugged his shoulders. "All right. Max, it is. Where are you off to, Marshal? If you don't mind me asking."

"I'm going up to that Baptist Church to see the Pastor."

"Oh, you're going to see that lover boy."

"From what I hear, Charlie, he's no boy. The man is supposed to be forty years old." Charlie then finished tying the saddle on Max, then handed me the reins.

"I guess you will see for yourself, Marshal." Charlie then stepped back, stuck his thumbs into his suspenders, and showed with a smile what was left of his teeth. "But the church is that way," Charlie yelled out as I began to leave. I decided to take Max for a walk around town. I wanted to make sure that the Corbet brothers had left and that they were not stirring up any more trouble.

Most people were going in and out of the shops and post office, doing their business without a care. Some didn't even notice me. During the day here, everything did seem normal. I then rode to the other end of town and headed north. There was a service road that ran in the back. I had heard that it went all the way up to the church and cemetery. It was mostly used by the undertaker when he would need to roll out the dead bodies unnoticed, or so I was told. As I rode in the back of the town. I expected it to be hardly used but oddly there were deep impressions of wagon wheels moving back and forth. Surely more was going on here than just an occasional wagon with a dead body in the back, I thought. Perhaps the Major later could fill me in.

When I got to the church, I would just take Max around some. It was cold and no one was out there. It seemed the perfect time for it. The church was a large white structure — not different from many others.

It had stairs out front that led to a set of double doors. There was some sort of small square tower on top with a black railing around it. Not a steeple with a cross like most. Behind it and to the side was the cemetery. The land angled and flattened then rose again. It seemed appropriate for its use and perfect in my eyes. When I got to the top, I could see the vault at the very end. It was a small building of stone and mortar. A wooden door was set in the middle, with its rusty metal hinges just hanging there. Simple but efficient for the job of storing dead bodies in winter. The church had a small building attached to it on the side. I suspected these were the Pastor's quarters. It was just a gable roof of sorts that came off the place to the east. There were headstones strewn about at the south and east of the church, which was also like most other cemeteries I recall. But, of course, this one was becoming notoriously famous for the digging up of dead bodies. I remembered what my uncle had told me about vampires and gravediggers.

That this was not our business to get involved with. So, I decided to get on with the questioning of the Pastor. I rode my horse up to the church and tied Max up to the post. There was a small sign present to the left of the door. It read "Chestnut Hill Baptist Church. Worship at Sunday 10 a.m." I decided just to try the door. I was somewhat surprised it was open. I quickly moved inside and got out of the cold. The warm air inside felt welcomed and inviting. I was only hoping that I was also. A glance around at the pews only produced one person sitting up in front. There were four stained-glass windows on each side. Each had some type of design to them that I had never seen. They were, however, beautiful just the same, I thought. As I walked to the front, the man sitting down turned around to see me.

"Hello," he said with a mild voice.

"I'm looking for the Pastor."

The man then stood up. "I am he. To whom do I have the pleasure?" he said with a smile.

"My name is Marshal Sean Callahan." The Pastor reached out his hand. He was dark-haired with glasses, clean-shaven, sort of thin and short in height. Not what I had expected. He seemed like a gentle soul, not a man who was womanizing the town's ladies. I came here expecting to ask him tough questions but started to rethink my position on this. "Pastor, I've been sent to investigate the missing women in town."

"Would you like to sit here or go into my office, Marshal?"

"Well, if we are alone, I guess here is fine."

"I sometimes sit here, Marshal, and just become a person of faith like everyone else. Not above or below any man. Just like yourself. A person who just walked through those doors. It helps to keep everything in balance for me."

"I see. Do you mind if I ask you some questions? I'm trying to learn as much as I can about them."

"Yes of course, please ask me anything you would like."

"Did you know these women at all?"

"Well, the woman from the next town over, I did not. And out of the three that are missing from here, Traci Mahoney was the only one that came to church."

"So, you didn't know the other three women."

"Yes, Marshal, that is correct."

"Traci Mahoney — did you know her well?"

"I wish I had known her better. She would come in with her mother. They were generous people who always gave to the church when they could. I didn't speak much with them. I know her husband died a few years ago and she was

left with a small son to raise alone. Thank God her mother stepped in and helped out.”

“So, you met her son, Billy.”

“Absolutely; he would come with both of them.”

“Pastor, can you think of anyone that may have wanted to harm her?”

“I would have said something to the Major right off if I thought there was someone who I believed might want to hurt her.”

“Did you ever see her with another man besides her husband?”

“No, Marshal, never.”

“Well, if you hear anything, please let me know. I'm going to be staying at the Inn for a while.”

“Sure, Marshal. Service is at ten a.m. Most of the people in town come here. We, and I mean everyone, would be delighted to see you.”

“I will certainly give it some thought, Pastor.”

I left the church abruptly and with an absolutely different take on what I thought going in. This Pastor I'm sure had some type of history. But abducting women and then killing them? No way I thought. He was simply not the man responsible for all that. He seemed just too timid of a person to do such a thing. However, it could still stand to reason he knew something. The Pastor did appear to be a bit odd of sorts. When I got back to the livery stable, I decided not to speak with Charlie about my meeting with the Pastor. I would only remark that he was a ladies' man all right. I liked Charlie and certainly, our opinion of the Pastor was not the same. When I did pull up, I realized I would not have to. The Major was already there waving his hands in the air.

He was instructing Charlie about some horses that he had bought and wanted them taken care of. They needed shoeing and fattening up. I was under the impression he got these animals for practically nothing and was going to lend them out as needed. For a fee, of course. I, on the other hand, wanted to speak with him about my meeting with the Pastor.

“How is it going, Marshal?”

“It's going well. Could I speak with you, Major . . . alone?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Charlie walked over, took Max by the reins, and headed off to the barn. “Thanks, Charlie.”

“Anytime, Marshal,” he yelled out. The Major and I began walking back into town.

“I wanted to talk with you about the Pastor. I don't think he is our man.”

“I could have told you that, Marshal.”

“I think Anne knows him better than you do, Major. She seemed to get very upset even if I just mentioned his name. Are you aware of them two and what's going on?”

“What's going on, Marshal? She spends time with him studying the Bible. Big deal.”

“Major, you know it's more serious than that. He's twice her age. That doesn't bother you?”

“No, not in the least.”

“Well, you're her father; you know best.”

The Major then let out a deep breath and stopped walking. “Listen, Marshal, what I'm going to tell you stays between us.”

“Tell me I'm wrong about the Pastor.”

“You're not wrong. But you don't know the whole story.”

“Should I?”

“Probably not but I'm going to tell you anyway. The Pastor is gay.”

“How do you know?”

“I don't want to get into the details of what I saw. I can't stand it myself.”

“Does Anne know?”

“No, she thinks he is God's gift to the world.”

“You have a big problem, Major.”

“I have a lot of problems right now. She's my daughter — I don't want anything to happen to her.”

“Perhaps, Major, it would be best to contact his Deacon and get him out of here.”

“I've thought of that. But is that going to save her from a broken heart?”

“I don't envy you right now. You're in a tough spot, Major.”

“You're damn right I am and I've got to do something. I'm her father.” The Major and I had coffee. I told him my next stop would be Dr. Metcalf. I needed to know if any of the girls had been to see him. He stated that he didn't think the Doctor knew any of them except for maybe seeing them around town. I told him that a rumor was going around that these women may have become pregnant and who knows what happened to them after that. He assured me that if the Doctor knew anything, he would tell me and be truthful about it. I would see him tomorrow and find out exactly what he knew or didn't know.

I finished dinner and walked down both sides of the main road. My nightly patrol was only producing the occasional alley cat. So, I decided to head back towards the Inn. I noticed the dining room was still open so I headed in. The lights now were set low for the night. All seemed peaceful and I could see

Margaret in the kitchen. I stuck my head through the service hole and said hello to her. "Jesus, Marshal, you scared me half to death."

"I'm sorry, Margaret."

"Come on inside and have some coffee with me." I went through the swinging doors the waitresses were always using. "There's a pot over there — help yourself."

I reached over and grabbed a cup, then filled it as much as I could. The walk around town left me a bit cold inside. I saw an enormous pile of dishes stacked on a shelf in the corner. "Who cleans all those dishes, Margaret?"

"I do, as soon as that water gets hot enough."

"Wow, does this happen every night?"

"You bet it does. We try to keep up with it during the day but we get too busy around here."

"Well, come on Margaret. I'll wash and you dry."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I would help out my mother all the time." I began to take my coat off and roll up my sleeves. "Where's the soap?"

"It's right below the sink."

"Pour that water in and let these hands do the magic." Margaret took the kettle and poured it into the sink. "The trick is to keep a lot of soap on the sponge."

"Really? I never thought of that." It took us about an hour. The job was finally done and over with. Margaret looked tired.

"This is a lot of work all by yourself, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is and it was somewhat easier when my husband was alive."

"That must have been very difficult, keeping this place going and taking care of him."

"In the beginning, I got a lot of help from the people in town. But as time went on, they developed problems of their own. They had to move on, of course. I really think it's time to sell and move on myself."

"Where are you from, Margaret?"

"The same place as you are, sort of. My mother lives in Boston."

"That's where our headquarters is located. But I'm from a city in the southern part of the state called New Bedford."

"I've heard of it but never been there. My mother is not doing well. I think it is time to go back and help her. What I could get for this place could set me up for life."

"I'm sure everyone will miss you when that happens. Well, I guess I will head upstairs and get some rest."

“Marshal, thank you. You were very kind tonight.”

“Margaret, could I ask you something? I have to meet the Doctor tomorrow. I need to ask him some questions. Aside from being a doctor, what kind of man is he?”

“The Doctor was a man filled with energy and charm. But after his wife died . . .”

“What was her name?”

“Carmella; she was a Portuguese woman and a good friend of mine. One day, she just got sick and within a matter of days, she was gone. The Doctor took it extremely hard. We all did.”

“Was it the sickness that took her?”

“No one knows for sure. Most people who got sick hung on a lot longer than she did. Now the Doctor just keeps to himself — mostly living right here in town.”

“Well, thank you, Margaret.” I took off my apron and retired my services for the night. By the time I got to my room, I made up my mind not to speak to the Doctor about his wife's passing. That was not a Marshal's business and was not going to come up. At least not this time.

Chapter 11

A Letter from Robert

I

n the morning when I awoke, I looked out the window. It was cloudy out and a light snow was falling. Later, it mixed with rain and grew even darker somehow. There was a laundry cleaning service across the street along with a barber shop. I quickly realized I knew nothing of them. The Major simply didn't have anything written in his notes for either one. But eventually, I was going to walk over and get my hair trimmed. As for the business downstairs, Margaret's dining room was as busy as ever. I saw Anne down there and as usual, she was ignoring me. The other waitress took my order and provided me with coffee. I pretended not to notice Anne either this morning.

Two certainly could play at this game. I tried to keep my mind on the meeting with the doctor this morning. I didn't know what to expect from him. He was a highly educated man living in a small town of sorts. I wondered what he saw in this place. From the window, I could see the Corbet brothers again. They glanced inside and when they saw me, they just moved on. I ate well that morning and tried to focus on the task at hand. I managed to say hello to Margaret, then went on my way.

I didn't have far to go to the doctor's office. It was just past the office of John Holmes, Attorney at Law. Then the Major's place along with the Post Office. When I opened the door, a voice yelled out. "I'll be right with you."

Within a minute, a tall man came out. He was in a white lab coat with his hands in his pockets. His eyes were squinted together as if he was struggling to see me. I realized later he had been looking into a microscope all morning. He was studying something, of course. "Hello, I'm Dr. Metcalf; can I help you?"

"Doctor, my name is Sean Callahan. I'm a Deputy Marshal sent here from Boston. I'm looking into the missing women."

"Oh, yes. The Major told me you were in town."

"I don't want to take up much of your time. I'm just asking everyone a few questions. For my report to my boss, you see."

"Yes, that is understandable. Please, Marshal, we can talk in back." The doctor then slid open a curtain and passed down a narrow hall to an open area with an exam table at its center. "This, of course, is where I examine most of my patients. I also from time to time go out and do house calls." On the walls were shelves with jars strewn about. They were filled with what appeared to be tissue

samples. "I do my research here as well. When you came in, I was looking at that slide there."

"What kind of research, Doctor? If you don't mind me asking."

"Not at all. That microscope over there shows me the change that different medicines have on diseased tissue. I study the outcome it has on the cells of the disease."

"That's amazing work, Doctor, and you do this in your spare time when you're not saving people's lives."

"It's what I love to do."

"This town is damn lucky to have you."

"You wanted to ask me some questions?"

"Yes sir. Doctor, did you know any of the missing women?"

"I just knew them from around town. I never really spoke with them."

"So, none of them came to see you as a patient?"

"No, they didn't, which is not unusual. It's my understanding that they were young and probably very healthy. Just didn't need my service."

"I hesitate to say this, Doctor, but there's a rumor going around town. Perhaps these women got pregnant and left town to have their babies."

"Well, that is a possibility but none of them came to me for help or any type of care for that matter."

"Yes, that is what I thought, Doctor." I got up from the stool where I was seated and closed my notebook. "Just one more thing. The road behind your office. The one that runs in the back of the town. It's really worn down. I was told that the undertaker used that road occasionally. Do you know why it's worn down so much from wagon wheels?"

The doctor stood up. "Marshal, I absolutely could not tell you. I never go back there."

"That's what I thought, Doctor."

"However, you might try talking to the undertaker himself. He may have your answer."

"Thank you, Doctor, for seeing me. Keep up the great work, sir. I'm sorry I took up any of your time."

The next day brought the postal clerk over to the Inn. "Anne, I have a letter for you."

"Who is it from?"

"They didn't say. I guess they just wanted me to deliver it to you. It was just sitting on my desk at the post office. There was a note pinned to it asking me to bring it to you. There were two bits left with the letter. I suppose that was my fee for giving it to you."

“Well, thanks, Robert. I don't know why they just could not talk to me themselves.”

“We get all kinds of mail in our office, Anne. You must have a secret admirer, my dear. I'm going to help myself to some coffee.”

Anne quickly sat down at the counter and opened it. She could barely contain her curiosity and struggled to think what this could be. She snapped the edge open and slipped out the paper.

Dear Anne,

Please understand. I didn't have time to wait so I had to write. Could you meet me this afternoon at the church around two p.m.? When your shift is done, of course. Just please come right in. I have a lot to tell you and it's so important. I trust I will see you then and explain everything.

Love Brian.

“What is it, Anne? You look red all over.”

“It's from Pastor Brian. He wants to see me this afternoon.”

“I see.”

“Be happy for me, Margaret. I'm sure he has something spectacular to tell me.”

“If you're happy, Anne, then I'm happy. Now, can we get back to serving customers?” Anne's shift was supposed to end at exactly two p.m. She begged Margaret to let her go early. She certainly did not want to be late for her appointment. Of course, Margaret took over all duties at 1:45 and Anne went on her way.

“Thank you, Margaret; this means so much to me.” Anne arrived at two p.m. just as the Pastor had asked. A small cart lay in the pathway so Anne just moved it aside and went to the door. She turned the handle as best she could but it simply would not move. She then went down the path toward the Pastor's private living space.

Thinking she was confused, it only made sense now he was waiting for her there. She could see the Pastor through the window and tried her best to call him. He seemed to be talking to someone inside. She then turned to the rear entrance of the house and knocked on the door. “Brian,” she said out loud. “Where have you gone now?” Not to be left out there, she moved to the side of the house again. There were several windows to view the inside from. She put her hands over the glass to see. Anne's body stiffened and felt she could barely stand. Her face began to tighten, her jaw locked in place now.

Inside, there was pastor Brian kissing and undressing a young man. She could not believe what she saw. She had to look again, only to face the same disgusting image. Her thought now was only to run while she was weeping

uncontrollably. She sat by a tree trying to gain her composure. It began to darken and she had to get back to town now. Her dream was shattered and gone forever it seemed. She only thought of one thing now. Who was the person who sent her that letter? She was sure it was not the Pastor. That only left the Marshal, she believed. The one who was trying hard to shame them both. Her thoughts now turned to burning anger.

“Major, do you have a minute?”

“Sure, Marshal, come right in.” The Major unlocked his office door and the two men entered. “What's on your mind, Marshal?”

“I just spoke with the doctor. He wasn't much help.”

“Yes, he keeps to himself. People say he's an excellent doctor.” The Major opened his desk drawer and pulled out a cigar, then scratched a match off the bottom of his desk.

“I understand but I was hoping he could tell me something.”

“He can't tell you what he does not know.”

“I asked him about that service road in the back.”

“You mean that old road back there?”

“Yes, I was under the impression it was just used by the undertaker in this town from time to time.”

The Major puffed on his cigar excessively. “That would be about right, I guess.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Then, how come there are so many wagon tracks back there?”

“I really don't know, Marshal. You think someone is hiding something?”

“It's probably nothing. This George Cranston — that's the undertaker, right?”

“He is.”

“Well, he probably has an explanation for it. I'm going to go over and speak with him now.”

“Well, you sure don't have far to go.”

I left the Major's thinking I was probably wasting my time but I had to follow up on every detail. The Major was right. The Undertaker's front door was just a minute down the street. After I banged on it, a rather old gentleman stood before me. He had on round glass spectacles pushed down on his nose. A sculptured beard with his chin exposed. Not much hair was left on his shining head. He looked big and round in the middle from eating too much. “Yes, sir, can I help you?”

“Are you George Cranston?”

“I am that, sir. To whom do I owe the pleasure?”

“My name is Sean Callahan. I'm a Federal Marshal.”

“Oh, well, please come in, sir.” He stepped back, and then quickly closed the door after I entered.

When I looked around the room, it was filled with many different size boards. All kinds of them were strewn about. “Come on in the back, Marshal. It's where you and I can talk.” The back room was much larger and warmer. There were several coffins against the walls and on benches. “Hold on; let me get some more wood for the fire.” He picked up what appeared to be discarded pieces of wood from the floor, stared at them for a moment then tossed them into the stove. “You never know what you might need around here but those two can go.” He dusted off two chairs and told me to please sit. “What can I do for you, Marshal?”

“I wanted to ask you about the missing women in town. Did you know them?”

“I didn't know them much.”

“Do you recall ever speaking with any of them?”

“I would say no, Marshal. I had no business with them.”

“Did you see them with someone in town?”

“I can't recall that either. I'm sorry, Marshal. I wish I was more help.”

“I understand. Business has been pretty good, hasn't it?”

“Yes, with this sickness, it's been steady, I tell you.”

“I also wanted to ask you about the service road. The one on the other side of town.”

“You mean the one on that side?” George then pointed to the other side of the street.

“Yes,” I replied. “It seems a lot different than this side. There are a lot of wagon tracks over there. Could you tell me why?”

“I really can't, Marshal. I'm seldom over there. I have an occasional pick up but that's it. I use this side to go up to the cemetery. You would have better luck talking to the blacksmith across the street. He's always got his wagon full of iron that he works on. Perhaps he would know.”

“Well, thank you, George. I will leave you to your work.”

“If there's anything you need, Marshal, don't hesitate to ask.”

After speaking with George for a time. I decided to head back to the Inn, order my dinner at the counter, and finish my notes for the day. I could see people making their last-minute purchases before the sun went down. I noticed the Corbet brothers in town again. Just as long as they stayed out of the Inn, I had no issue with them. It did appear to me, however, that they were intimidating people in order to get what they wanted. I suspected eventually I would have

another run-in with them. The Inn seemed like its charming self again. There were a few people in the lobby, some were just reading papers.

Most of them were permanent guests. I had not gotten around to meeting them. I was, however, going to ask Margaret for a complete list of names and their length of stay at the Inn. In the lobby, there were newspapers that the postman brought every day. They were from New York, Boston, and Washington, DC. They even had the Bangor News from Maine. They all sat on top of the table for guests. I thought I would read some of them after I made my rounds tonight. When I entered the dining room. I noticed my seat was open and I made my usual walk over.

Then Anne rushed out from the kitchen. "You son of a bitch!" She reached out and slapped me in the face. I could see the rage in her eyes. The people eating drew silent now and began to stare.

"What the hell was that for?"

"You know exactly why."

"No, I don't."

"Liar, that's all you really are." Anne then left the dining room. I began rubbing my face and went for my seat.

"Women problems, Marshal?"

"It appears so, Henry. Except I don't know what the problem is."

Margaret sat down and looked up at Henry. "I'll be leaving now, Ms. Margaret."

"That will be fine, Henry."

"Having a rough evening, Marshal?"

"Everything was fine until she slapped me."

"Well, she slapped you for good reason."

"What reason?"

"She says you sent her a letter."

"I didn't send her any letter. And what exactly was in that letter?"

"It was about meeting Pastor Brian."

"Whatever that was, it didn't come from me."

"Well, she went up to the church and saw him with the Simmons boy."

"So, she knows."

"Oh, yes, she knows plenty."

"Margaret, I'm sorry that happened to her. That is something I would just never do. I could never hurt her that way. I was told about the Pastor but I decided not to talk about it with anyone. That's not my business. I'm here for the missing women only."

"Are you sure, Marshal?"

“Of course, I am. What she does is her own business.”

“I see; let me get you your dinner.”

“Thanks, Margaret.” I began thinking of who would do such a thing, sending her a letter to meet the Pastor when he was with his so-called friend.

This town definitely had its secrets. But getting people to talk about them was very difficult. My next logical step was to question the blacksmith. I needed to get his statement.

Also, I could find out about those wheel marks deep into the road. Perhaps he had a logical explanation for it. Tonight, I would write two letters: one telling my uncle of the situation so far, and it was about time I let Mother know I was doing well. I was sure she must have been a little worried at this point. When I woke up the following day, I put both feet on the floor. Then I immediately felt my chin. It appeared the only thing hurting was my pride. I took a look in the mirror and repeated that same thought. When I looked out the window, I could see smoke coming out of the blacksmith's chimney. I thought I would just have coffee this morning and avoid any more trouble. I stopped off at the Post Office first to make sure my letters got out today.

It was a cold morning, below freezing. The ice had formed on the downspouts of the roofs and the occasional puddle in town was now frozen. Although it was only November, winter sure seemed to be pushing hard. The days were getting shorter and the nights were getting much longer. I had not been here for much time, but I was feeling the pressure to come up with something. What happened to these women was weighing heavily upon me. I needed something, some type of lead that would break this wide open. I was beginning to think that I would get no further than the Major did. When I went to see the blacksmith this morning. I had the feeling I was not going to get anywhere with him and didn't want to linger this morning. So, I just had my coffee and left. I was careful to avoid Anne and another go around.

The blacksmith's place was just down the street at the end of town. From my window at the Inn, I could just barely see it. When I got there, the door was slightly ajar. So, I just stepped inside. A man was holding a piece of iron in the fire pit in the center of the room. “Ed Benning?” I called out.

“Yes,” he replied.

“I'm Marshal Sean Callahan.”

“I've seen you over at the Inn. What can I do for you, Marshal?”

“Do you mind if I ask you some questions? I'm speaking with everyone here in town.” The blacksmith was a heavy-set man with powerful arms built for rough work. He was rotating the piece of iron over and over. “That looks like a piece of the railing there, Ed.”

“Yes, you have a good eye. Iron fences are becoming very popular here now. A lot of these houses around town want them. So, it keeps me pretty busy.”

“Is that why that road in the back is so worn out?”

He paused for a moment. “Oh, you mean the service road back here. Well, yes, it's my wagon that wears that out.”

“I take it that business is good.”

“It has been, Marshal.”

“Ed, can I ask you about the missing women?” He pulled out the iron rod, staring at it like an artist on a canvas. Then stuck it close to my face. I could feel the heat coming from it. I then placed my hand on my gun and took a step back. Then in an instant, he plunged the rod into a barrel of water.

It gave out a loud hissing sound and water spat in all directions. “It's all about repetition, Marshal. Being able to make something over and over again.”

“Are you going to answer my questions or not?”

“Go ahead, ask me what you want Marshal.”

“Did you know any of these women at all?”

“I wasn't fornicating with any of them. If that's what you mean.”

“Well, let us start with any type of business at all.”

“Just from around town. I would see that Mahoney girl at church sometimes. But that's about it.”

“So, you saw her at church.”

The blacksmith laughed out loud. “I didn't say I ever stepped foot in that church. I just saw her going there.”

“Can you think of anyone who may have wanted to harm them?”

He shook his head. “Marshal, I can't think of anyone who wanted to hurt those women.”

“I will let you get back to your work, Ed. You know where I'm staying. If anything comes to mind, please let me know.”

“Oh, I sure will, Marshal.” He then rammed the iron back into the coals.

When I walked back, I noticed two shops just to the side of the blacksmith's place. They both seemed vacant when I looked inside. I saw some broken furniture lying across the floor. I checked the doors and they were both locked. Then I went back to my room and made another entry into my report book. Things were starting to look the same from my interviews in town. The evidence gathered from the woods suggested a person may have abducted these women. But when speaking to the people in town, things were not going so well.

I was not getting any suspects out of it. There was absolutely nothing to support an animal attacking these women, either. The only thing out of the ordinary was a Pastor with questionable personal habits. But that in itself does

not make him a murderer. He simply did not strike me as a killer. I went back to my room and quickly finished my notes. I wanted to speak with the Major that morning. I decided not to talk with him about the incident with his daughter. When I got there, little Jimmy Stetson was hanging around. "Well, Marshal, did you meet Jimmy here?"

"I think so. Your sister works at the Inn."

"Yes, sir, she does."

"Jimmy," said the Major, "go over to the stable. Check with Charlie on those horses I bought. Take a good look at them. Make sure he's taking care of them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Major." Jimmy then sprung up and scurried out the door.

"You're fond of that boy, aren't you, Major?"

"I like anyone that knows how to follow orders, Marshal. Your uncle knew how to follow orders. And because of that, we defeated our enemy. He was a fine soldier who went on to become an excellent Marshal."

"My father was a fine Marshal also."

"So, I have heard. It's a shame I never met him."

"There was no reason to. You never broke the law, Major. My father refused the promotions my uncle got. He said he would be no good sitting at a desk all day."

"Your father sounds like he was a good man."

"He was, Major." I then paused. "I came to speak with you about some of the people here in town."

"What about them?"

"No one seems to know much of anything."

"I could have told you that, Marshal." The Major then sat at his desk, opened the bottom drawer, and pulled out a stack of folders. "These are my notes on every person here in town. They are yours now."

"Why didn't you just give them to me when I got here?"

"I didn't want my record of things to influence you. I'm going to give them to you now after you have formed your own opinion. Believe me, Marshal, I know your frustration. But I believe the answer is here." The Major then clenched his fist. "They have got to know something."

"Major, we still do not have definitive proof a crime was committed here."

"Come on, Marshal! You heard Tiny — no animal took those women. They didn't just vanish. I want the son of a bitch who did this. And you're going to get him for me Marshal, and that's an order!"

"Major, I'll finish interviewing everyone here in town. Then I want to head over to Hope Valley. I want to speak with the folks over there. Perhaps someone

knows something. One other thing, Major. Those Corbet brothers. I had to throw them out of the Inn the other day. They were harassing Margaret for food.”

The Major pounded his desk. “I told the two of them to stay out of there if they didn't have money to pay. Those two are lazy excuses for men.”

“How much of a problem are they?”

“There are just a couple of cheap two-bit thieves that don't want to work. Their mother has had to raise them since their father died. He wasn't very good either and always had a bottle on him. They both could use some time in jail to sharpen their wits, I tell you. Be careful around them, Marshal. Their father was a nasty drunk. I suspect they are coming to that themselves.”

“I'll take all of your notes, Major. I will review them carefully when I'm done speaking with everyone here in town.”

“I hope they help you, Marshal.”

When I left the Major's office. I went back to my room and secured away his report on the people he interviewed. At some point, I was going to have to review all of it. But for now, I was still trying to understand what the people in town knew. I walked across the street and just two doors down to the barbershop. When I entered there was someone already in the chair. He was an older gentleman who was getting a haircut. The barber himself was a thin, red-haired man with a neat part of his hair to one side. The man in the chair was a heavy-set fellow.

He talked with a deep, burly voice — the kind that resides in the back of your throat. His heavy beard stuck out over the cloth wrapped around him. I would find out later his name was Joseph Pemberton. He was a local farmer and not a suspect for now. I didn't recall exactly what it was he grew on his farm. He came into town sometimes twice a month to sell his goods at the local market. Some Fridays, he would rent a room from Margaret and drink the night away. It seems Friday night at the Inn was a special time, a chance for just about everyone to enjoy themselves. As it turned out, many farmers would come to town. They would also sell their goods to market regularly.

It was only several minutes before the chair became open. To his credit, he cleaned it well and without a wasted moment.

“It's all set for you, sir. What would you like done today?”

“Why don't you neaten up the hair and give me a shave?” From my view of the street. I watched the farmer head directly toward the Inn.

“Those boys like to come in on Friday and drop a lot of dough over there. Anyway, my name is Russel Banks. My friends call me Rusty.”

“Well, Rusty, I'm Sean Callahan, Deputy Marshal from Boston.”

“A lawman in our town,” Rusty replied. “Marshal, we don't get many of your kind around here.”

“So, I have heard.” Rusty kept putting the comb in water and running it through my hair. “I'll get this back in perfect shape for you, Marshal. Those women. You're here about those missing ladies, aren't you?”

“Yes, Rusty, I am. Did you know any of them?”

“I saw them around town. Never spoke with any of them. There's no reason for them to come in here. I have seen them go into the general market and John Manning's supply store.”

“I see. How long have you been here, Rusty?”

“I've had this shop open for about five years now.”

“These women, were they in town a lot?”

“I guess just as much as everyone else.”

“You must talk to a lot of people, Rusty. Is there anyone that would have wanted to hurt them?”

“Marshal, I cut just about everyone's hair. But I can't think of anyone.”

“Then tell me. What's the general thinking of it?”

“I don't believe anyone knows what's going on. I know the Major was doing everything he could about it.”

Rusty changed out his scissors and started trimming the back of my hair. “I think, Marshal, most people here would rather just keep to themselves.”

“Are you saying that if they knew something, they would just not say anything?”

“Marshal, look at what happened with those graves that were dug up. This town can't take any more of that stuff. I tell you they want this kind of thing to just go away.”

“The problem here is I don't know if it can just go away.”

“This town needs to survive, Marshal. There are a lot of people here who just can't afford to pack up and move on. This town dries up, where are these farmers going to do business? No, sir. It's not that simple of a matter.”

Rusty raised a mirror. “How does it look, Marshal?”

“You did a nice job.”

“Let me mix up some cream and I'll get you clean and shaven. I've got hot towels soaking in water on the furnace.” Rusty then reached over and drew the towel. “This isn't the average mixture for shaving, Marshal.” He then poured the powder into a container. “This comes from the meadows of France. It's a flower of the finest plant called Silk of Gardenia. I mix it with water imported from there also. This stuff is the very best. I spend several minutes every morning

sharpening this razor, too. While I'm having my coffee, you know. There's a reason so many people come here."

"I'm obliged to you, Rusty."

"You just sit right there, Marshal. You're going to like this." He then placed the towel on my face.

"I'll tell you something else, Marshal." Rusty removed the towel and began to brush the lather on my face. "A few months ago, the wind was whipping through the town something fierce. It was in the evening. I don't know why I stayed open so long. I guess the customers kept coming in. It's like that when you're as good as I am, you know.

But anyway. You could hear that wind just howl down Main Street. All of a sudden, I thought I heard a woman scream. I was alone at the time just cleaning things up. I ran outside to see what was going on. I didn't see a woman out there. I never heard it again either."

"Are you the only one who heard it?"

"I don't think so, Marshal. When I went outside, John Manning — you know he owns the supply store — was out there too. We just kind of looked at each other and went back inside. As I said, the wind was blowing something awful. It could have been anything out there. And don't let the talk around here about vampires scare you. Just stay inside at night like everyone else does." Rusty had finished his work. He was right about one thing I thought. I had a smooth shave that left me smelling like a god of a man. I was impressed with his work and tipped him well. But the rest of what he said made me think a little.

Whether or not he was just as good of a storyteller remained to be seen. I had yet to speak with Mr. Manning, the owner of that supply store. It would be interesting to see what he had to say about the goings-on here in town. I was doing what my uncle had asked of me. I was staying out of the vampire thing. I would never admit it to anyone but myself. But I had no idea of what the hell was going on in this town.

Chapter 12

A Boy and a Mission

I

decided to see Mr. Manning tonight at his store. I planned to stop in fifteen minutes before he closed up. I wanted to find out what he actually heard that day. If he had some information, I needed to know it now. He certainly had the opportunity to report that to me earlier. When I first came into town, I believe he knew why I came here. When I went by the dining room, I could see that the place was starting to fill up. It reminded me of our pub back home when everyone would meet on a Friday. I went up to my room and decided to write to Jack, the pub owner. If the Inn was for sale, then he and his wife, I thought, would be perfect for this place.

But before I mailed it, I would ask Margaret if she was sure she could let it go. I went downstairs at about four p.m. for my dinner. I wanted to make sure Anne had left before I went down. It was becoming counter-productive fighting with her. When I sat down, Margaret was kind enough to say hello. The farmer I saw at the barber shop was sitting at a table enjoying what seemed to be some sort of burgundy wine. The bottles just kept coming over to that table. I finished my dinner just before five and that was closing time at the supply store. It was time to head over there and talk with him. When I entered, I was surprised to see two Indians at the counter. They appeared to be the only ones left in the store. “Now, look, chief, that stuff you're showing me, it's not worth anything. I need real money, not shiny rocks if you want to do business.”

“How much are blankets?”

“I have to get at least a dollar a piece for those blankets. They are wool, for Christ's sake. Winter's coming — everybody is going to want one of them.” The Indian then began to pull on the blanket. “Chief, I can't let you take that.” The two men began to struggle.

“John, do you remember me? I am Marshal Callahan. Let him have the blankets.”

“I'll need two dollars for those blankets.”

“I will pay for them. In fact, how many blankets do you have in this store?”

“I have about five more left.”

“Go get them.” The storekeeper stared at the chief and let go of the blanket. The chief turned and looked at me.

“You are a lawman here?”

“Yes, I am.”

“My wife is with child. We need badly.”

“I understand.”

At that moment, the storekeeper came out of the back. “Here are the other five blankets.” The chief then nodded his head for the other Indian to retrieve them.

“Goodbye, lawman.” The two Indians made their way out of the store.

“How much do you need, John?”

“That will be seven dollars, Marshal.” The storekeeper then grabbed the rocks from the counter and threw them into the trash can.

“Those Indians — where are they from?”

“They have been here about ten years now. I guess from somewhere in Massachusetts. They hunted out everything up there and came down here.”

“What do they call themselves?”

“They are Nipmuc Indians and not bad people in nature. Just so poor. They usually bring me hides to trade.”

“So, you're telling me they hunt these woods all around the town?”

“Hunt just about everything around here. Animals and fish in all the streams as well. No one knows this country better than they do. They have a camp about five miles southwest of here.”

“How many are up there?”

“Last I heard, there were about thirty of them.”

“I think you know why I am here. I'm trying to find those missing women.”

“I wish I could help you, Marshal. But they rarely came in here. I would see them all the time at Barney and Linda's place, next store. They would do their shopping over there and hardly ever come in here to my place.”

“How well do you know Rusty?”

“The barber — he is a harmless sort of guy.”

“A couple of months ago he heard a scream, then he went outside. He says he saw you and thought you heard it too.”

John squinted his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. “Marshal, I don't recall anything like that.”

“Rusty told me it was at the beginning of the summer. There was a twister of a wind blowing through town. The both of you were standing out there just waiting for something. Perhaps the location of the woman's scream.”

“Marshal, I can't even recall being out there and hearing any scream whatsoever. You know these barbers tell stories and they hear many things.”

“So, you're saying he is mistaken.”

“I never heard anything like that. I'm sure of it.”

“Well, that just leaves one thing.”

“What is it, Marshal?”

“I’m going to need another twenty-five blankets. How fast can you get them here?”

“I can put a rush on them and have them here Monday morning. I’ll send out a telegraph to my supplier right away.”

“I appreciate that, John. Could you let me know when they come in? Also, I will need them tied together and ready to go.”

“Marshal, consider it done.”

I decided I would make my rounds early that night. The sun was setting fast on the west side of town. I could see its last rays shining on the church and cemetery up the hill. Except for the Inn, the town was shutting down now. There were many horses tied up in front of Margaret’s place. The gas lights were fully lit up now. I went by several times and just looked into the windows. There was plenty of noise coming from the dining room and several waitresses were serving customers. I thought Jack back home would love this place. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves and getting along. I sat across the street in front of the barbershop. Rusty had long closed and it was quiet. I had time to think about what he had said. Perhaps he was mistaken by what he heard. The rest of the night, the men came and went. By ten o’clock it was all over. I then decided to enter and see Margaret myself.

I went into the kitchen where she was just finishing up. “Did you have a good night?”

“It was all right,” she smiled. “Years ago, Marshal, this place was packed until at least midnight. Everyone in town was here. Now, it’s mostly drunken men.”

“It can get better, Margaret.”

“Not for me. I think I am ready to move on if I can find the right person. Someone who would give me what I want for the place.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I know a gentleman back home. They have a pub. But I think this is what Jack and his wife are looking for. It would be a new start for them. So, with your permission, of course, I’d like to write to them and tell them it’s for sale.”

“Do you think they would want this place?”

“I do, Margaret.”

“Well, all right, write that letter.”

The next morning, I sent out the letter and gave my return address to see if Jack was interested. Then I sat down at the Inn and had a late breakfast. Anne again decided to ignore me. After I ate, I proceeded to the market across the street. I was told their names were Barney and Linda Anderson. They had

purchased the market some years past and had done well for themselves. They would later, as the market grew, purchase the building adjacent to them. They were using it as a warehouse. When I walked in, I was impressed. The store was as large as some back home. They were also very neat and well-organized. There were several employees gathering supplies and putting them out for sale.

“Excuse me. Could you tell me where I could find Barney, the owner?”

“Right now, he is bringing stuff over from the warehouse. I'm his daughter. Can I help you with something?”

“I just need a moment of his time, that's all.”

“Well, he goes back and forth all day.”

“Thank you.” I did not want to alarm her if I didn't have to. She was somewhere in her teenage years with long brown hair braided from behind. She was removing any fruit that had gone bad and replacing it with new. I could see what I thought was her mother helping customers. She was placing items in their carts. So far, everything appeared normal. How could this town have such a past I thought? It was hard to understand how things had changed here.

I went outside and around the back. I only had to wait several minutes before a man approached me. “Are you the fellow looking for me?”

“Yes, sir, I am. My name is Sean Callahan. I'm a Federal Marshal sent here about the missing women in town. I would like to ask you some questions.” He was a man of medium build with short hair. He had on suspenders and black shoes. He carried a white handkerchief in his back pocket. He was a working man with plenty of sweat on his forehead.

“Let's take a walk in the back. I don't want my family to hear us. I've been trying not to frighten them with all this.” Finally, I thought there was someone in town who understood the situation. “Ask me anything you want, Marshal.”

“Did you know any of these women?”

“I sure did. They came to my store all the time. I even extended credit to some of them. They were good customers. It's a shame they are missing. I don't let my daughter go anywhere without an escort. My wife either for that matter.”

“So, you think they were abducted?”

“Marshal, not to be crude here. But I think they may have been killed by now.”

“With all the time that has gone by, that is certainly a possibility. What I need, Barney, is information on who might have done this.”

“Marshal, look around. It could be anybody. We need you to solve this thing. I have a business here in town. People stopped coming here because they were too afraid. If they don't start back, well, then I'm through. I wish I could tell you who the hell was responsible. But I just can't. I'm sorry.”

“The best thing to do right now, Barney, is exactly what you have been doing. Don't let your family out of your sight. I'll keep up my patrols at night and pound the streets for information. I'm staying at the Inn if you hear anything.”

“I will, Marshal. Good luck. I've got to get back.” Barney slipped into the side door in the alley. I decided since I was back here, I would take a walk around the service road, then go over and check on my horse at the livery stable. When I got there, Charlie was leading a horse into the corral.

“How is everything going?”

“Pretty good now, Marshal. I had to clean up this horse's hoofs and put new shoes on him. He's moving much better now. This horse came here really neglected I tell you.”

“You're good with animals. Speaking of which, how is Max doing?”

“Go see for yourself.”

When I went into the stable, Max was standing proud. He appeared to be in excellent shape. I went outside and asked Charlie if there were any issues with him. He assured me that Max was a good horse and would be ready when I needed him. I decided to just walk up to the cemetery. I didn't want to get into Pastor Brian's affairs so I just passed by the church. I had to see these infamous graves that had been dug up. But strangely, what I did instead was just walk about and take it all in. I was still confused about how a town like this could let things get so far out of hand. While looking at the cemetery, I thought about what had been done there. It seemed so foolish now. What could have gotten into these people, I thought. The land just rolled up and down so effortlessly. Ever so quietly was the wind that occasionally came through. The headstones of all sizes were scattered about casting small shadows on the landscape.

And at the end of it all, towards one side of the cemetery, was a small vault. Just cement with different-sized stones. In the center was a wooden door with rusted hinges. All this I thought, secured an evil presence that had to be sacrificed. It was hard to believe what had happened here. It seemed so surreal now and just so difficult to understand.

“Marshal! Marshal!” I lifted my hand to show my position. It was Jimmy and he was running as fast as he could towards me. “The Major needs you right away!”

“What's going on?”

“It's the Billy Mahoney kid. His grandmother just came into town and she says he's gone. She can't find him anywhere. She's been looking all afternoon.”

“All right, let's go now.” Jimmy and I began to run back as fast as we could. “Jimmy, go inside and tell the Pastor what's going on. I want that Church bell ringing as loud as you can. And don't stop until I signal you to.”

“Yes, Marshal.” When I got to the stable, I alerted Charlie that I needed Max ready immediately. We had an emergency happening. When I passed by the Inn, Margaret was outside.

“What's going on, Marshal?”

“We have a child missing.” The church bell began to sound out all around us. The people of the town gathered beside the old woman. She had run into town as best she could for help. She was lying in the middle of the street, now exhausted. The doctor was looking her over quite intently.

“She's very weak,” he said. “So weak, I don't want to move her.”

“Put her in my house,” the Major yelled out. I have a spare room, just right in there. Easy, men, she's very tired.” Her eyes closed and her breathing became even more labored. “Men, get your guns and meet me at the livery stable,” The Major said. “We have to throw everything we have at this. We must get out to that farmhouse and work the search from there. We have to find that boy soon.”

“We don't have much daylight, Major.”

“I'm aware of that, Marshal.”

The men gathered in the center of the town. “All right,” the Major said. “Just so we understand each other. We have a little boy missing. His name is Billy Mahoney. He's been gone for the better part of the day. I want most of you men on foot with your rifles with you. We don't know how far he has gone. The Marshal and I will be on horseback on the road back to the farm. The Marshal will work the east side and I'll take the west. That leaves six men on foot. Three of you go to the east and three go to the west. We meet at the Mahoney farm. Stay within sight of one another. We still don't know what's out there. Any trouble or you find the boy, fire two shots. Bring some food and water and meet back here in ten minutes. Does everyone get that?”

“Major, I'm going over to the Inn and get what I need.”

“Be quick, Marshal.”

Just then, Anne approached. “Dad, what do you want me to do?”

“Stay with the Doctor and help that woman. We will be back as soon as we can.”

When I got to the Inn, Margaret came out of the dining room. “Marshal, what can I do?”

“Can you get me some blankets, food, and water? If I find that boy, he's going to need it.”

“Yes, of course.”

I quickly ran upstairs. I had to retrieve my heavy coat and my Smith and Wesson. It was hidden behind my dresser in the room. The Major was right when he spoke about the vast open area around town.

We certainly did not know what was out there. When I came downstairs, Margaret handed me the supplies. "Thank you, Margaret." When I looked at my watch it was almost three o'clock. There just wasn't much daylight left. We needed to find him soon.

"All right, men, let's get on that road and spread out," the Major yelled. "Remember, we meet at the farmhouse. Stay close and fire two shots. Marshal, you stay where I can see you. This may get a lot worse before it gets better. I can't afford any more people missing on me." It took us over an hour before we reached the Mahoney farm. There was no sight of the boy and time was getting on now.

"Major, we are losing daylight. What do you want to do?" one of the men said.

"We have to keep searching. That boy probably will not make it through the night. You three men stay together and you three do the same. You men go east and the others go west. The Marshal and I will go north. You men, after several hours, make a turn and head south towards the town. We will all meet there in the morning. Hopefully, someone will have found the boy. I know a trail, Marshal, that heads straight north. He may be on it."

The Major and I traveled several hours with no sign of Billy. "We have to double back now, Major. I don't think he could have gotten this far."

"I don't think so either. For Christ's sake, it's so dark out here now. Not much in the way of even the moonlight tonight."

"Realistically, Major, what is out here?"

"I told you before we have those coywolves and this is the time they will be hunting."

"I'm going to head east."

"All right, I'll take the west. I'll see you in town in the morning. Good luck, Marshal."

The trail was so dark now that I had to get off my horse and lead him. The traveling became quite slow and difficult to manage. But I was definitely traveling due east. As the night wore on, it seemed that the sky was beginning to clear somewhat. The moon began to give off some of its light. But it grew colder — perhaps to a freezing level. Much too cold for a young boy to survive alone out here. Max was holding up well. In spite of the obstacles, we were moving at a good pace now. It had been a while since the Major and I split up. I was thinking perhaps it was time to turn back when I heard a scurrying sound in the distance. We were climbing a hill of sorts. I wasn't sure where it was leading.

When we got to the top, it seemed there were some animals running down a path ahead. Max began to stomp his feet so I turned and tied him to a tree stump.

Then, I peered out into a valley where the noise seemed to be coming from. I had to adjust my eyes in order to see what was down there. I saw what appeared to be four silver dogs just pacing around a pine tree. Some actually jumped up on the tree itself, and then fell off. I moved closer to get a better look. I drew my sidearm just in case I had to keep them away. If they charged me, it would be their big mistake. The animals were so focused on what was in the tree they never even looked in my direction. I stayed as low as I could without being seen.

Suddenly, I saw a hand sticking out from the tree between the branches. I knew now what was happening. There was a person in that tree. And those were not dogs. They were the coywolves the Major had talked about. They were whipping themselves up into a frenzy down there. I could hear them constantly growling at the base. I saw several large rocks around the tree. I decided I would unload all six shots at them. I then stood up and fired quickly. The noise made a thunderous blast out into the night. The bullets hitting the rocks made an enormous echoing sound. The coywolves ran off in all directions. I immediately went back and untied Max and ran him down the hill to the pine tree.

“Billy,” I yelled.

“I’m up here.”

“Can you climb down from there?” I quickly reloaded my gun and holstered it. As I looked around, I did not see any animals. “Come on — they left already.” Billy stepped out onto a nearby branch. “Can you jump from there?”

“I think so, Marshal.”

“Come on then. We have got to get out of here.” The boy leaped from the tree and I was able to catch him, then spin him around and place him in front of me. I gave a kick to Max to get us out of there. We would ride up about a mile or so; then I decided to make camp. I had to get this boy some food and warmed up quickly. I would keep a large fire going throughout the night. I knew that was our best chance to keep those coywolves off of us. They looked to be forty or fifty pounds. Smaller than an adult wolf but larger than a coyote. I still didn’t think they were responsible for the four missing women. But they certainly could have killed the young boy if they had gotten the opportunity. It took time but with a little perseverance, we had a fire going. I moved about to gather what wood, I could. Margaret had given me some pork with beans and lots of cornbread. Billy and I ate well that night. “I want you to stay close to that fire and keep those blankets on you,” I told the boy to stay in my sight at all times. We were in the middle of an opening and there were plenty of trees around us with fallen branches. Some of it was easy pickings for our fire. It certainly was cold enough for it to snow but the sky was still clear. I had some ground-up coffee in my saddlebag and it helped me stay awake through the night. If those

coywolves came back, I wanted to be ready for them. They seemed to have gotten a good scare in them. We would see if that was enough. As the night dragged on, I kept circling the camp picking up firewood and putting it on the fire.

When dawn finally came, I gave Billy what was left of the cornbread and some of my coffee. I then made sure Max was fed and given plenty of clean water. At first light, we were moving west back to town. We still had a lot of riding ahead of us. Now that it was light, it began to warm up a bit. I could feel the sun on my back as we rode. I had to ask Billy why he ran away. He said he had a bad dream and wanted to find his mother. I was taken aback by his answer and it saddened me terribly. It was my job to find her and I felt responsible somehow. The only signs of life that we saw were the occasional squirrels and birds that flew by us. We stopped a few times for some rest and to take in some water. I figured we were only a few miles out now. "I like this horse, Marshal. He is big and strong and he listens to you."

"That he does. We would have to walk a long way without him." When we approached the town, we then passed by the church. Suddenly, the bell began to ring. I was so tired I had not given any thought as to why. A crowd of people began to gather. I had the boy wrapped in a blanket right in front of me. The people came to the center of the street to greet us. All the men who had gone searching were there. The Major ran out of his office waving his arms.

Everyone in town began to cheer. Some of the women, including Margaret, began to cry. The doctor came out and said, "I'm going to need to take a look at him." He reached up and took Billy. "God damn it, son. You did it!" the Major screamed. He then raised his hands in the air and cheered. I could see Anne from her porch just staring out at me. I pretended not to notice her.

"I would like to get some rest now if I could. Could someone take my horse over to Charlie?"

"He's coming right now," The Major said.

"I'll take the Marshal over to the Inn." Margaret grabbed my arm and began to guide me back.

"I just need rest, that's all."

"You get all the rest you need. I'll hold things down here, Marshal," the Major replied. I was later told the Major spent the rest of the day in his office. He was sipping whiskey and smoking cigars. He had many visitors throughout the day. They were intrigued about the boy lost out in the wilderness and then rescued from the beasts of Washington County. The Major knew how to whip up a tale or two when he had a good audience. His leadership in organizing a search party fell second to none. The town with good news to report finally had

something for the Providence Journal to write about. And the Major could not wait to tell the story again and again.

Chapter 13

A Marshal Stands Alone

T

he Major told his story to everyone that day. Word had traveled so far as to reach the newsroom at the Providence Journal. They were sending their top reporter, Sam Burrows, down to cover the story. The inebriated Major had told everyone about how a young Marshal single-handedly fought off the beasts of Washington County to save a young boy. This was news in the small town of Exeter. And for a change, it was something good. The Major was pushing the story and wanted it out badly. Lately, the town had only received bad press.

Finally, something had come to restore hope. Margaret had gone up several times to my room with lunch and then dinner. She would fill me in on the details of what was going on. Apparently, the Major was in the dining room downstairs embellishing the story even further now. The reporter rushed to hear what he had to say but eventually grew tired of the Major's side of things and asked if he could come up. I told Margaret it was not a problem. I figured it was best after all to just meet with him alone.

"Come on in, it's open."

"Marshal," Margaret asked, "are you sure you're up to this?"

"Yes, you can send him in."

"My name is Sam Burrows. I'm a reporter with the Providence Journal. I appreciate your time, Marshal. Do you mind a little background of you first?" The reporter looked to be in his thirties. Tall and thin with thick, black hair. He wore a gray suit and carried a notebook with a pencil.

"No, I don't mind." I then pulled myself up from the bed. He sat at my desk and started writing in his notebook.

The questions went on for at least an hour. When he was done, he knew quite a lot about me and was intrigued by my investigation into the missing women. I told him it was best to leave out some of the details in order to not tip my hand to the perpetrator. He eventually agreed. The story would be solely about a lost boy in the wilderness. I promised him another opportunity if the case was solved. The Major told him they were wolves trying to attack the boy. I realized it would be hard to convince anyone they were not.

He would later go downstairs and drink with the town's people for hours. Everyone was having a good time with the story. I asked Margaret if she heard anything about Mrs. Mahoney's condition. She explained that the doctor was doing everything he could. There were strict orders that she was not to be

moved. Billy and his grandmother had become residents of the Major's home. I was confident Anne would do everything for their well-being. By Sunday morning, I felt rested enough to go downstairs. By this time, things had quieted down somewhat. I sat and drank my coffee. I thought it was best to go and check on my horse. I was going to be needing him soon. I needed to find out what had happened to those women. That part didn't change, I still had a job to do. Margaret had prepared breakfast for me. She was a special person who knew how to make other people feel special too.

The Inn was booked to full capacity. Seems everyone wanted to stop by and hear about the goings-on in town. Later that day, I went out and did my rounds. The weather had changed a bit and became somewhat mild for late November. It would be Thanksgiving soon. They were preparing an enormous feast at the Inn. I had noticed the business directly across the street. They did laundry service for everyone in town. I needed to speak with these people I thought. They were the last folks on my list. On Monday morning, I decided to walk over.

When I opened the door, a blast of heat struck me. I could see large barrels giving off steam. An old timer with white hair and a crooked back was bringing heated water to those barrels. "I'll be with you in a second," the voice yelled. He had on huge wool gloves to shield his hands from the scalding water. There was an old woman in the back folding clothes on a table. I took off my hat to wipe my forehead. I was sweating a lot and very quickly. The old man walked in what looked like baby steps towards me. "Yes, young man, what can I do for you?"

"I hate to bother you with your work and all. But my name is Sean Callahan. I'm a Federal Marshal from Boston. I'm trying to find out about the missing women here in town." I again wiped my forehead. "It seems very hot in here. But somehow, you're not sweating."

"My wife and I have been doing this for a long time." He laughed.

"Did you know any of these women?"

"No, they didn't come in here. Are you staying at the Inn across the street, Marshal?"

"Yes, I am."

"We do all their laundry right here. We do everyone's here in town."

"Where are you folks from if you don't mind me asking?"

"My family is from Atlanta. General Sherman burned it to the ground. We had nothing left. We moved about for a while, then eventually settled here. I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself. My name is Theodore Welch." He extended his hand. "That's my wife Victoria."

"How long have you been here?"

"I would say twenty-five years now."

"That's a long time," I said. "Your wife — she never seems to stop."

"She is my best worker."

"How many workers do you have?"

"Just her, Marshal," he said with a smile. "Little Jimmy comes in and does all our deliveries for us."

"That little Jimmy gets around, doesn't he?"

"Everybody loves Jimmy. He's a hard-working boy."

"I will let you get back to work."

"I'm sorry, Marshal, but we really don't know anything."

Another dead end had developed. When I went over to see Charlie about my horse, he was sitting on a barrel eating an apple. "Hello, Marshal. How is everything?"

"Good, how is Max getting along?"

"He's fine; how about an apple? Charlie grabbed one out of a barrel and threw it to me. "Got lots of them here." Suddenly, I looked around and saw all the horses eating apples too. Charlie just smiled.

"It's snack time, Marshal. I just can't eat alone, you know." Charlie was a simple man with simple needs. No one in town had a bigger heart than his. On the way back, I saw Jimmy Stetson coming towards me. "Marshal, John at the supply store said your blankets had come in."

"Thanks, Jimmy. Where are you off to now?"

"I usually help Charlie with the horses right about now." Jimmy had himself quite the enterprise of business at hand. He worked for everyone in town it seemed.

"Jimmy, do you have a second?"

"Sure, Marshal."

"What do you think about all the goings-on here? I mean the missing girls and all. I know you speak with everyone here in this town." He paused for a moment. I could tell he was thinking.

"Well, Marshal, if you ask me, I don't think it's a beast in the woods like some people say."

"No beast?"

"No, Marshal, I walk home all the time and don't see anything."

"Do you have an idea what happened to these women?"

"I think someone wanted these women for some reason."

"I see. You think someone needs them."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"No, sir, I don't."

“All right, Jimmy; thanks for the information.” Jimmy might have been just a simple kid running around the town making money. But I think he was on to something. What was it that someone wanted these women for? The possibilities were giving me a serious headache. I thought maybe the Indians could at least clear up some of the questions I was asking myself. I was all over the place with this investigation. It was time to try and narrow things down a little. I went over to John's store to pick up those blankets. He was in the back shifting some cans around. I could hear things moving about back there. “John,” I called out. He came out wiping his hands on his apron.

“Marshal,” he smiled. “I just got all those blankets in for you.”

“That's great. Do you have them all tied up and ready to be transported?”

“I sure do. Are you really going to give these blankets to those Indians?”

“Yes, I am. I just need you to tell me how to get there.”

“It's not that bad of a hike actually. The weather is good and it's not that far. You head southwest for about a mile. Then you will see a fork in the road. Stay to the left and head south. You will then come to James Pond. Stay on that road until it turns into Beaver River. There you will see their camp.”

“Thanks, John. Let me ask you, have you ever had any issues in town with those Indians?”

“Quite frankly, Marshal, no. They have never given us any trouble.”

“That's what I thought. Thanks again.”

I went back to the Livery Stable and asked Charlie to get Max ready. I told him I needed another horse for transporting the blankets. “All those blankets there are for the Indians, Marshal?”

“Yes, Charlie. It's going to be cold soon and they are going to need them.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I guess you're right.” Both horses were ready and I wasted no time.

I wanted to get back before sundown. “Marshal, I can go with you if you need me,” Charlie said.

“No, you have too many things to do around here.”

“You know, finally somebody understands what I'm doing in this place. I keep telling the Major how valuable I am around here but he doesn't listen.” Charlie just shook his head over and over. “You watch yourself up there, Marshal.”

“I'll do my best to have these horses back by nightfall.” With a clear sky and the temperature in the forties, it was time to set off to see these Indians that inhabited the Beaver River. I later found out that the trout were incredibly abundant in that specific area. I could smell the pines on the trail along the way. It was now covered with all fallen leaves. It was a pleasant ride for over an hour

on the way there. The horses were moving well and I could sense something was coming up ahead. The forest ahead eventually began to clear. James Pond was an undisturbed large body of water just in front of us.

It had its share of wildlife around it. Mostly ducks of different kinds. It was so big I could not see the far end where the Indians were said to camp. As I moved along the road, I saw no other wildlife and kept myself alert for hostile Indians. I was not here to kill anyone but if they threatened me, I would have no choice. I kept my guns close and my head constantly moving for anything that might come out of those woods.

When I came around the bend to what seemed to be the end of the pond. I could see a clearing and was surprised by what I saw. I had thought I was going to see teepees. But this was something far different. They were living in dome-shaped huts like I had never seen before. Between fifteen and twenty of them were covered in bark or something similar. They were scattered about and several fires were burning in the center. They had meat hanging around them held up by wooden poles tied together. I could smell fish but did not see any. I kept about twenty yards away in order for them to understand I meant them no harm. Some of the Indians had come out and were now looking at me. The Indian I had seen in the store began to approach me with another one beside him. Some Indians wore plain clothes while others had on animal skins. They were not tall and all had jet-black hair. Some were braided and others were not. The two Indians walked slowly towards me probably wondering why I was there. The chief's dark eyes stared at me as if he did not know what to expect. I needed to build some type of trust with these people. I was lucky the chief spoke English when I saw him in the store. I raised my right hand when they approached. They only stared back at me intensely. I saw them only as people — human beings trying to survive. I was glad I had brought the blankets.

“Chief, do you remember me from the store?”

“Yes, what do you want here? Why have you come, lawman? We have done nothing wrong.”

“I have come here to help if I can.”

“What do you mean, help?”

“I have more blankets for you.”

“Lawman, you must know. We are Nipmuc Indians; we could never take from you. That would be forbidden. Later, you would take something from us. Something we cannot give. We choose only to live in peace here and that is it.” The chief then turned. “Please, wait. I would like to trade with you. Lawman, what do we have that you would want? I cannot give what is not mine. I cannot give you what I don't have.”

"I seek information only for these blankets." The Indians stared at the blankets. I knew this was something they needed. When I saw him in the store, he seemed desperate to have them.

"You bring something we need very badly. So, you may ask, lawman."

"Chief, I've been sent here to find out what happened to four of our women."

"Your women are not here."

"I'm aware of that. I need to know if there's anything out here that could have killed them."

"I have heard of your missing women. They have been gone for long time. I am sorry for that. But there are no animals out here killing anyone. Even running dog stays away from us."

"You mean a coyote?"

"Yes, they no come to our camp. It is unlikely they killed your women. We have been out here for a long time now. We would know something like this, lawman." I shook my head and the chief could sense my disappointment. "I will tell you what I believe. This is the white man against his own kind."

"You mean one of us is killing these women." The chief then nodded his head and stared back at me. "If you find out anything, will you see me in town?"

"Yes, I will. I will tell you one more thing, Lawman. This taker of lives. The one who kills. He knows you have come for him. You must be careful."

Both Indians took the blankets back to the people in the village. I could see them all come out now. They were grabbing at them one by one. These blankets were so needed. Many now were smiling back at me. I had raised my hand as a sign of friendship. The chief then did the same. As I got Max to turn, I then grabbed the pack horse. It was time to return to town. The sun was far setting on the pond now. Daylight was coming close to an end. It became quite clear to me now. The women were not killed out here.

There was no beast stalking them in this wilderness. That left one answer: someone in or around the town was responsible. Their bodies had to be disposed of somewhere. I thought it was doubtful if they saw anything at all. I believe the chief would have told me there and then. I saw a few farms on my way back to town. I stopped off to talk with them. They were gracious folks and gave water for myself and the horses. But they could not provide me with any information about the women.

Whoever it was, he was doing a very good job of covering his crime. Four women missing — you would think he would have made some kind of mistake. I also was having trouble understanding what the motive would be. Why would someone kill four women out here? When I saw the town, the sun was all but gone. It was hiding behind the landscape in the back of me. The wind was

beginning to stir and it grew colder. I had to get to the other side of town to get these horses settled in for the night.

When I got there, I could see Charlie's red shirt ever so brightly from the light he was holding. He seemed to be just waiting there for me. "Well, come on, Marshal. You know you have to tell me everything."

"There really isn't that much to tell. I gave them the blankets and they said thank you."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "I'm sure there was a little more to it than that. How about the horses? Any issues with them that I need to know about?"

"They did fine, Charlie."

"Well, let's get them inside. They are already late for their feeding." He quickly grabbed their reins and led them into the barn. When I had gone through town, there was only one light on. It was so brightly lit that it shined on a large portion of the street. I could see inside his office. The Major was talking to the doctor. I wondered how Mrs. Mahoney was doing if she had made it or not.

So, when I finished with Charlie and got Max put away, I headed directly there. By the time I got up to his office, I could see the Doc was leaving. He was heading back to his place. It was dark and he didn't notice me. I could see the Major now through the window. He was pacing back and forth. I opened the door slowly so as to not startle him. "Major, how are you?"

"Just wonderful, Marshal. How was your day?"

"I went to the Indian camp at Beaver River."

"You didn't go up there alone, did you?"

"Yes, I didn't want to alarm them."

The Major grinned. "You're taking chances, Marshal. They are Indians and you never know how they are going to act towards you."

"They seemed open and not hostile in any way. I was able to ask them if they had seen any predators that might be able to kill our women here in town."

"Well, what did they say?"

"They said there is nothing in those woods that could have killed four of our women." The Major sat back down in his chair and stared out the glass window into the darkness.

"We need answers, Marshal."

"I suspect they were murdered for some reason."

"Any suspects at all?"

"Right now, Major, everyone is a suspect. In the next several weeks, I should be able to narrow it down, however. I will speak with everyone again. I suspect one of them is the killer or they know who that person is. I'm waiting for a mistake of some kind when I talk to these people again. They act like they don't

want this resolved. Besides just you and me, I'm getting the feeling no one wants this to come out. Who or what are they protecting?"

"I think it's their way of life."

"What do you mean, Major? They are not going to have any life if we don't get this guy."

"I understand, Marshal. They have businesses here. And a lot invested in this town. If it goes under, these people go down with it too. Just think about your sweetheart, Margaret. What would she do if she couldn't rent out any rooms, and people just stopped eating there? She would be ruined. That's what they are afraid of."

We have another issue, Marshal. The Mahoney woman. She probably will not make it through the night. The Doc said she damaged her heart pretty badly when she ran into town the other day. Her breathing is very shallow and he can barely hear her heart beating. She cannot be moved."

"What about Billy?" I asked.

"He will stay with us. Anne will look after him."

"I want this resolved, Major. I know he is close. I am going to get him. Until we do, no one is safe here. Major, do me a favor. Go easy on that bottle in your drawer there. Just until this is over."

The Major then flung the drawer open. "Here, take it out. It's going to be a long time before we have anything more to celebrate around here." When I got back to the Inn, I could see through the window.

The dining room lights had dimmed for the night. A dense fog had spread across most of the town now. I looked behind me and could barely see anything at all. I stood for a moment and just listened to the silence of it all. During the day, it was a busy Main Street with plenty of people. At night, it became a deserted and haunting place. When I walked into the dining room, Margaret came out and greeted me. She was wiping her hands on her apron. A sure sign she was washing dishes again. "Marshal, I put something aside for you."

"What would I do without you, Margaret?" She then shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "Do you think I can speak with you after I've eaten? I'll help you with some of the dishes."

"Sure, sit where you want. I'll bring it right out."

It did not take me long to finish dinner. Margaret had baked a wonderful chicken pie. I brought my dirty dishes into the kitchen and threw them into the sink by Margaret. "Wash or dry?" Margaret asked.

"Well, since I've only learned how to wash them, then I guess that's my part of the job." Margaret pushed aside. I then plunged my hands into the soapy water. "Margaret, can I ask you something?"

“Of course.”

“Do you ever go out at night here?”

“I can't say I have.”

“I mean, do you ever walk around at night?”

“No, never. I don't think many people at all do.”

“This town, was it always like this?”

“What do you mean, Marshal?”

“Is everyone scared of the night or maybe what's out there?”

“That's just it, Marshal. What is out there?”

“I'm not sure, Margaret. But I believe you have someone killing these women. There is absolutely no evidence that an animal in the wilderness here is killing anyone and please Margaret don't even speak of vampires. These women were taken in broad daylight. I don't want to panic the town. But something tells me there are things not being told to me. I can see that just by the behavior of all of you. No one travels at night — at all. Back home, people move much more freely at night. Here no one moves at all. The coywolves that were after the boy, there is no way they are responsible for four adult women being killed.”

“You're scaring me, Marshal.”

“As I said, I don't want to panic anyone. But we have trouble here. I don't have to tell you, Margaret. Please stay inside at night. Even in the daytime, be where people can see you.”

“You don't have to worry, Marshal. I almost never leave the Inn at night.” Margaret and I were done with the dishes. She then pulled out two tall wine glasses. “I usually have one at night, Marshal.”

“I refuse to let a lady drink alone.” We both smiled.

I would, later that night, write in my journal all that was said to me on this day. I wasn't sure how much time I was going to be allowed to be out here. That certainly would prove to be a factor in this now. The thought of no law in this town with a cunning serial killer on the loose made me sick inside. By day, I had to find the killer. At night, I had to protect them from one.

Chapter 14

Mrs. Mahoney, Rest in Peace

B

y the time morning came, the doctor had gone over and seen Mrs. Mahoney. He gave her a drug called laudanum — an opium mixed with alcohol. It would ease her pain and keep her comfortable. The doctor told Anne she could have it every two or three hours. Pastor Brian came by early and prayed over her. The Major privately started making the arrangements for her burial services. He met with George, the Undertaker, for her services. I stayed in my room where I could be found if needed. I made sure my journal had all the entries it was supposed to. I knew my uncle was going to want to read about everything that was going on out here. “She may have to go into the vault, Major. The ground is getting pretty frozen up there.”

“Don't give me that shit, George! For Christ's sake, I could have little Jimmy, dig that hole.”

“Major, it's going to take time getting through that ground.”

“Listen, you squirrely bastard. You want more money, don't you? Well, all right — how much?”

“An extra twenty dollars ought to square it.”

“Here's your twenty. You better get started now, George, if it's such a difficult job and all.” The Major shook his head. “What is up with these gravediggers around here?” The door pounded on its frame as the Major walked out. It would be almost two o'clock when the old woman took her last breath. I was told Anne had held her hand the whole time. The Major kept little Billy occupied throughout the day. He was learning how to run a town and all. She never regained consciousness that day. She was taken immediately to George's place, then on to the cemetery. Pastor Brian read from the book of Common Prayer. It was taken from the Bible, Genesis 3:19. I remembered it from my father's service a while ago.

“We, therefore, commit this body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life . . .”

At her grave site, Billy stood crying, Anne by his side doing her best to console him. They were both crying when the sky began to darken. She was buried at the bottom of the cemetery, next to a little boy who died from

consumption earlier that year. The wind began to blow all the leaves about, while a light mist fell on my face. Most people turned and began to leave for home. I stood there remembering the promise I made to this woman about her daughter. I told her I would do everything I could to find her. She had held out hope that her daughter would be found alive one day. She kept this with her until her last moment on earth. The Major and I walked back to the livery stable. Charlie was staring out at the darkening sky. "Get Max ready for me, Charlie."

"You're not going out in this? There's a big storm coming."

"I know that but I've got a hunch."

"Where are you off to now?" the Major asked.

I jumped on Max and turned towards him. "Listen to me. If I'm not back by sundown tomorrow, send everything you have up to the Mahoney farm. You hear me?"

"I hope you know what you're doing," The Major yelled as I sped away. I hurried with Max as fast as I could to the old woman's place. I needed to be there before anyone else. I had to make sure someone was not already inside. So, I drew my weapon and stood aside from the front door. I could not believe it, but it was open. The handle had just turned when I tried it. She must have left in a panic and then ran into town.

Once I cleared the house of anyone being there. I took Max down to the barn and got him food and water. Then settled him in for the night. I went back inside and began to put together some kind of plan. This night was going to be a long one. I locked the front door and left a window open in one of the bedrooms. I wanted this to be their point of entry. There was only one road leading to the farmhouse. I took a chair from the kitchen and placed it in front of a window facing the road to the farm. I watched the sunrise and just waited. I was able to position the curtain to make just enough space to see out but not in. By noon time, just when I thought this was becoming pointless. I saw a couple of heads peeking out behind a tree about thirty yards out. There looked to be only two of them. My heart began to race, my hunch was right. I knew they were here to steal from the old woman. As they approached, I could see who it was. The Corbet brothers had come to rob what they could after hearing she had died. I'm sure they thought no one would be here. They walked right up to the front door and knocked. With my weapon drawn, I waited for the front door to be kicked in. That in itself would give me enough to arrest them. It grew eerily silent in the house. I then stepped into a closet and left the door partially open. I knew they were circling the house and looking for a way to get in. I was hoping they saw the open window.

The farmhouse had three bedrooms, all facing west. The kitchen and another entrance door were at the back of the house. I stood still inside the front bedroom closet waiting for them to open the window in the bedroom next to mine. I had my Colt in my right hand when I heard the window slide open. They were doing exactly what I had wanted them to do. I stepped out of the closet and waited outside the bedroom door. I wanted both of them inside before I would make myself known. "Close the window, Jeff." I knew then both had come in.

I moved into the doorway and yelled, "Stop there or I will shoot!" Both men just froze. "Get your hands up. Take those guns out slowly and drop them on the bed over there."

"Dammit Marshal. We didn't know you were going to be here."

"Take those guns out slowly and put them on the bed." Both brothers reached for their weapons. "Both of you use your left hands." The older brother reached for his gun slowly, then quickly hurled it at me, hitting me above my left eye. He started to lunge at me. But when I drew the hammer back and stuck it in his face, he completely froze. "Back up now! Hit the floor — the both of you." The blood was pouring from my left eye now. It was all over my face and shirt. I gathered their guns and told them again not to move. I opened up the dresser drawer and got out some cloth and placed it over my eye. "I should just kill the both of you here and now."

"Don't kill us, Marshal. We were only looking for money for food. That's all," the younger brother said.

"You're both going to answer for this." The blood was running down my face and had soaked the cloth. It was now all over my shirt and started hitting my pants as well. I was able to holster my weapon and open a drawer to remove another piece of cloth. I placed it firmly on my eye hoping to stop the bleeding.

"Let us go, Marshal. We're sorry for what we did and all."

"Not this time. You boys are going in, a judge will have to decide what to do." Both men were cuffed from behind now. "I'm going to make it very clear to you both. You run. You get shot. That's it."

"We won't run, Marshal," the younger brother said. I was done with these two. If I had to shoot them to bring them in, I would have.

"Get on your feet. We're going to get my horse and get out of here." I locked up the Mahoney place, went down, and got Max out of the barn. We started the long trip home. I kept both men in front of me and my Colt on them the whole time. When we got back to town, we came out of an alley next to the livery stable. I called out for Charlie to take Max. When he saw what was going on, he ran back inside and came out with a pitchfork.

“Don't worry, Marshal; they won't run on you.” Charlie then gave the older brother a jab.

“Ouch, god dammit, that hurt, old man.”

“It's supposed to,” Charlie boasted.

“Keep him away from us, Marshal; he's crazy.”

There we were — all four of us marching down Main Street. I was still bleeding somewhat from the gun being thrown in my face. Charlie had that pitchfork pressed up against the oldest brother. People began to come out of their homes and businesses. “Marshal, please let us go,” the younger brother cried.

“You have to understand that this is the way it's going to be when you break the law in this town.”

Just then the Major came out. “What are the charges on these boys, Marshal?”

“They broke into the Mahoney place. They were trying to steal. They must have heard that she was dead and figured it would be an easy score for them. I have a feeling this is not their first time at this. The older one here assaulted me with his gun.”

“Marshal, you look in bad shape. You better go and see the Doc.” I could see Anne looking out at me. I pretended not to notice her. She was standing on her front porch like most others. Margaret had come out her hand partially covering her face when she saw mine. I could see she was bothered by my appearance.

“Major, I'll take him over to the doctor's office now.” Margaret then grabbed my arm. I holstered my Colt and stumbled upon my first step.

The crowd gasped momentarily. “I'll be all right, Margaret. I'm just getting a little dizzy at times.”

“Let's go,” the Major yelled. “You boys have been given too many chances around here. This time you're getting chained up at the blacksmith's barn until someone comes and gets you. You folks can all go back to what you were doing. Everything is under control here.” The Major now had his sidearm drawn along with Charlie pointing his pitchfork. They escorted the boys to the barn. Most people just stood and stared at what was going on. This was a sight to see indeed.

The doctor had been waiting on his front steps. He too was now a spectator in all that was happening. He stepped back and opened the door for us. “Bring him right to my exam table, Margaret. Let him lay down there.” Margaret moved back as the doctor removed the cloth from my wound. “What did they hit you with?” he asked.

“It was his gun.” Then with a fine glass spectacle, he examined my eye. He prodded around carefully for a minute or so.

“Well,” he said, “first things first. Your eye itself has not been damaged. Your vision will not be affected. The bad news is you are going to have a scar above your right eye. I can suture this together but it will never be invisible, Marshal.”

“I guess that's just the hazards of the job, Doctor.”

“I'm glad you're being so cavalier about it. Most young men would not be. I'm going to clean it out, then give you about ten sutures . . . and it's going to hurt quite a bit.” The doctor then covered a piece of rolled-up leather with a white cloth.

“How is that going to fit on his eye, Doctor?” Margaret asked.

“This isn't going on his eye. This is going in his mouth. He's going to be doing some screaming in a few minutes. This is the part where you have to step out.”

“Oh,” Margaret replied. “I'll be at the Inn, of course.”

“Give me about thirty minutes, Margaret, and he is all yours.” Margaret closed the door behind her. “Open wide, Marshal, and try not to move,” the doctor said.

Anne had been waiting outside when Margaret walked out. “Is he hurt bad?” she asked.

“Well, the doctor said his eye suffered no injury. But above it, he will need ten sutures.”

“That was stupid of him to go alone.”

“Oh, really, Anne. Who was supposed to go with him? That's his job. He put his life on the line for us, you know.” Anne stood quiet and lowered her head. Margaret excused herself as she walked past her to the Inn.

“Ed, are you in there? Come on out.” The Major could hear a rapping noise of some kind. The blacksmith slung the door open.

“What is it, Major?”

“I have two guests for you.”

“What do you want me to do with them, Major?”

“Chain them up until we get transport for them to the circuit judge.”

“Damn it, Major. I have all kinds of work to do. What am I going to do with these two?”

“We have no choice, Ed. They broke the law. Tried to rob the Mahoney house today. Then assaulted the Marshal.”

“Major, did it ever occur to you that we need a jail around here? And maybe even a deputy to look after things. You know, like most towns have.”

“I'll pay you, Ed, to hold on to them. I will bring up that very issue at our next meeting. But don't be fooled. Deputies and jails cost money to have.”

“How long do we need to keep them here?”

“I’m going to wire the Providence Sheriff’s Office right now. They should have someone here tomorrow or the next day, Ed.”

“All right, Major, I’ll keep them until then. You just get somebody to watch them at night, that’s all.”

“I’ll figure that out.” The Major shook his head. “Thanks, Ed. The town really appreciates this.”

The doctor moved quickly. In about fifteen minutes, he was finished. “You can sit up now, Marshal. You were a good patient.”

“Thanks, Doctor.”

“You know, you showed a lot of courage going out there alone.”

“Well, I could not get civilians involved. I’m supposed to be protecting them, not putting them in harm’s way.”

“Yes, that does make sense, I guess. Still, I don’t think I want your job.”

“Oh, I come from a long line of law enforcement. My father, my uncle, and my grandfather. This is really all we do.”

“I see. So, you’re here for how long?”

“That’s hard to say. It depends, I think, on what the Colonel wants. Of course, he needs an arrest as soon as possible.”

“Any suspects so far?”

“No, doctor. Things are moving slowly. The truth is, I could be called out of here tomorrow for all I know. What about you, Doctor? I heard you were once married. Lived on a farm just outside of town.”

“Yes, my life was different then. Of course, my work is still the same. I treat the people of this town and when I have time, I study tissue and cellular structure. Like I said before. I see how the disease acts upon both and try to come up with some kind of cure.”

“That microscope on that bench — it looks expensive.”

“I would not know the exact price. It was given to me by my professor when I was in medical school. He was going to retire and he gave it to me.”

“You took over where he left off?”

“Sort of. I do the research but not the wonderful teaching that he did.”

“Your wife, Doctor. I’m sorry to hear that she passed on. What did she die from?”

The doctor paused and began to wash his hands. “It was a rare genetic blood disorder. She formed clots in her blood vessels. There was nothing I could give her. I’m sure medicine at some point will figure out how to thin a patient’s blood out so they can survive. But as for right now, everything we introduce is just

toxic to the body. Anyway, my wife died of a cerebral stroke. A blood clot to her brain.”

“Margaret talks about her often.”

“Yes,” the doctor smiled. “Margaret and she were very close. Just like sisters. They would talk every day and I didn't mind a bit. It gave me time to do my work. My wife was kind and understanding. Her father was a professor also.”

“So, you met in college?”

“Yes, but she wasn't a student there. I would see her when she visited her father. She was so beautiful she took my breath away.”

“Well, Doctor, that certainly sounds like a wonderful story. I have to get back.”

“Knock, knock,” Margaret said. “How is our patient, Doctor?”

“He will be fine. Margaret, the only issue is that we have to keep the swelling down. He is going to need some ice if you can find it. If it swells too much, it could break open those sutures. Is there anything else that ails you, Marshal?”

“No, Doctor, I think everything else is good.”

“Plenty of food for healing purposes. Plenty of rest for the next twelve hours or so and keep that swelling down.”

“Thank you so much, Doctor.”

“Dinner tonight will be roast beef. Can I interest you in some of it, Doctor?” Margaret asked.

“I'll stop in there tonight. You can count on that.”

The Doctor had given me something for the pain. He also said it would help me sleep. The next morning, I woke up around nine o'clock. Margaret was knocking on the door to check on me. “Are you going to make it downstairs this morning, Marshal?”

“Yes, I will be down as soon as I can.”

“All right, I'll be waiting for you,” she said.

I could feel the pain radiate from my left eye. When I got to see it in a mirror, it looked even worse than I thought. It was swollen to some degree. I could barely open or close it. He launched that gun at me pretty hard. It nearly took me off my feet and was lucky not to be seriously injured. After breakfast, I went down to see the Major. When I opened the door, Anne stood there staring. I just looked at the floor and then out the window at times. He was talking to a man I had not seen before. I waited for the gentleman to leave.

“You see that man there, Marshal? His name is James Creighton. He's interested in buying a lot of land here. Can you believe that? He wants to build a country club in our town. I'm going to put together some parcels of land for him.

Eventually, he will have jobs for people here, too. See that suit he was wearing? Why, that old fella is made out of money. Anne, how about some coffee for the Marshal and myself?" Anne then excused herself to the apartment kitchen. "Now, Marshal, I suppose you're ready to interrogate your prisoners."

"Why do I want to interrogate those two?"

"Don't you want to ask about the missing women?"

"Major, they are not mixed up in that."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because if they were killers, the older brother would not have thrown the gun in my face. He would have just shot me in the face."

The Major sat back at his desk and frowned. "I suppose you're right about that, Marshal."

"I think it's time for me to head on over to Hope Valley to speak with some folks there. I'm going to let this left eye heal up first. The doctor just wants to get another look at it later. Did you get a chance to telegraph that Sheriff up there?"

"I did. He said he would have someone down here early tomorrow to pick them up."

"I finished my report on those two. I will hand it over to the Sheriff's deputy. I want to make sure that the judge understands their crimes."

"I can understand that, Marshal."

"I'm going to check on the prisoners now. Then I think more rest will do me good. My head is just pounding right now. I will be in my room later."

"You don't want to stay for coffee, Marshal?"

"I've already had some this morning. Thanks, anyway."

Just then, Anne entered with two cups of coffee in her hand. "Where is the town hero off to now, Dad?"

"He's going to check on his two prisoners. How is Billy doing?"

"He is still sleeping. That marshal has not solved anything yet, has he?"

"Anne, give him a break. He has not failed either."

"How can you be so sure about him?"

"I really can't but my gut tells me something is going to turn up sooner or later."

I went over to the Doctor's office. He told me yesterday to stop by. I guess he just wanted to check on it. When I got there, he had a patient in his office. I sat for a while and just rested my sore head. An old fella with a limp and curved spine walked out. He seemed unaware I was sitting there. So, I just waited for the doctor. I noticed he had pure white hair it was hard to miss. The doctor then came out from the exam room. "I thought I heard someone out here. Come on in, Marshal. Have a seat on the table over here."

“Doctor, who was that old fellow there? I have never seen him before.”

“That's old man Simon. He's been around forever. You know the people who do the laundry across the street? That's her father. He came up with them from the South. He can barely hear now. And his eyesight is not too much better.”

“They never told me about him when I spoke with them earlier.”

“They probably thought he would really have nothing to help with your investigation.” The doctor looked at the wound for several minutes. “Things could have been worse. But yes, it did swell more overnight. How did you feel getting up this morning?”

“I was damn sore, Doctor.”

“Yes, that's to be expected. I've got to clean it. This is going to hurt a bit.”

My teeth came together and I made a hell of a noise when he put the alcohol on the wound. “Keep this clean, Marshal, and I'll take these sutures out in seven days or so. In the meantime, take it easy. You don't want another knock on the head before you heal and all.”

“Nothing sounds better to me than that, Doctor.”

Chapter 15

A New Pastor Comes

A

s I slept that day, the Major got a visitor. It was the new Pastor sent to replace Pastor Brian. He was being sent back for more Christian Faith teaching back home. Only a few people in town had questioned it. The rumors had been firmly planted into everyone's mind about him. It was no wonder this Pastor brought his wife with him to Exeter. It was on that day Anne would be alone in the office when the Pastor and his wife showed up. "Well, good morning, young lady. My name is Pastor Bill and this is my wife, Helen. Is the Major in?"

"He is down at the stable working with his horses. Can I help you with something? I am his daughter."

The Pastor had a slim build with a trimmed beard. His hair was all pushed back, combed very neatly. He wore glasses as well as his wife did. Helen had long, shiny, blonde hair. She was small in stature but stood up straight beside her husband. "Well, we are here to take over the church responsibilities for Pastor Brian."

"Oh, I see." Anne paused for a moment. Her mouth then hung open for a moment. She was surprised by the news. "Please have a seat here. I can get my father. He is just down the street."

"That would be fine. The Deacon wanted us to check in with him before we headed up there. Seeing how he wrote to us about getting Pastor Brian's replacement and all, I wanted to thank your father." Anne then seemed confused. "Is everything all right, my dear?" Helen asked.

"Yes, everything is fine. I'll go and get him now." At the stable fence, Charlie and the Major were watching the horses take their daily exercise. There were four in all — starving run-down beasts that came from a dirt farm.

Those animals were born there but never properly cared for. "They are starting to put on weight, Charlie. They seem to be moving well. I like what I see so far." The Major smiled.

"Their hooves are all trimmed down perfectly. And the shoes I put on — they fit just right. These animals are starting to look decent again, Major."

"You do have a way with them, Charlie. Hard to tell what they looked like just two weeks ago."

"You could get good money if you wanted to sell them."

"Hell, in another two weeks, they will look so good, Charlie, I won't be able to let them go."

“Dad, a Pastor and his wife are at your office. They are waiting to meet with you.”

“You say a Pastor and his wife?” The Major began to smile. “Please, Anne, run back and tell them I will be right there.” The Major then looked up towards his office. He could see the wagon full of their belongings. It had a canvas over it with two horses in front.

“You actually look happy, Major.”

“Right now, Charlie, I am.” He then started his walk back. When he entered his office, the Pastor stood up. “Well, you must be Pastor Bill.” The Major extended his hand.

“Yes, and this is my wife, Helen.”

“I am pleased to meet you both. You have decided to take over for Pastor Brian here?”

“Yes, we have and we look forward to it.”

“That's great. We have a nice, friendly, God-loving town here.”

“Major, I am delighted to hear that.”

“If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know. I'm sure you're anxious to get up there and get settled in.”

“We are; it's been a long trip and all.”

“I won't keep you any longer.” The Major then held the door open for the Pastor to go through. I finally woke up around three o'clock in the afternoon and made some entries in my logbook. As I looked out my window, I noticed a wagon coming through town. It looked like it had furniture under a canvas heading towards the church. Of course, later I learned it was the new Pastor and his wife. Brian's time in Exeter was about to end. The next day, he would be on his way — with the very same wagon and horses. He made no time for goodbyes to anyone. By early morning, he was simply gone. Pastor Bill would have to give his apologies for his abrupt departure.

I made my rounds in town the next evening. When I got to the Major's office, I could see Anne and her father speaking. I decided not to disturb them and just went on to my business. The town signs were blowing from side to side and the wind was picking up, making things colder. Occasionally, I would drop off into a dark alley and wait for a noise to happen. Finally, it became too quiet and I would just move on. When I got to the end of town, I stood at the livery stable and looked out at the church. It was fully lit up like a night refuge of some kind. The thought entered my mind of exactly what they knew about what had gone on in this town. Perhaps, I thought it was better that they did not.

“Dad,” Anne had said, “I need some answers.”

“What kind of answers?” the Major replied.

“Did you write to the Deacon about replacing Pastor Brian?”

The Major stared at his desk. “Yes, I did.”

“Could you tell me why?”

“I just thought it was time for someone else. That's all.”

Anne sat in front of her father. “What did you hear about him?”

“What did I hear? I heard nothing.” The Major grew tense at the questions.

“You knew about him, didn't you?”

“Anne, it's my job to know things in this town — and to look after things.”

“I'm not faulting you for wanting him to leave. You have every right to think what you want. I'm a big girl now, Dad. I could have handled it.”

The Major paused before saying, “Anne, I don't have your mother here to help me, you know. I have to do this alone. As a father, I did what I thought was best for you. For this town, and I guess for me too.” The Major shook his head.

“I need to know if you wrote that letter for me to go up there, Dad.”

He closed his eyes and just waited for the sky to fall in on him. “Anne, he was not right for you.”

“Don't you think I could have figured that out for myself? What about the people of this town? Don't they get a choice?”

“What do you want me to do? Have them take a vote on it?”

“No, Dad, just let them decide on their own. In their own way. Just like me. Let your daughter decide in her own way. In time, it all works itself out, for all of us. It has to.”

The next morning, I had the pleasure of meeting the new Pastor and his wife. They were shopping for supplies at the market. Both seemed eager to begin their new start here. When I turned, Anne came up to me and asked to speak with me for a moment. We walked outside and stood alone on the walkway. “I just wanted to apologize to you, Marshal. I realize that it wasn't you who wrote that letter to me that day.”

“I'm sorry, Anne. I really don't know much about what's going on. I'm trying to understand things. But I can tell you this. I would never do something like that. That's none of my business. I only asked you about the Pastor because he, like everyone else, is a suspect here. I was just trying to gather information. That's all.”

“I understand that, Marshal. Can we start again?”

“You mean, be friends?”

“Yes, Marshal, if that's possible.”

“I think it is.”

“I see your eye is looking a little better.”

“It's really nothing. I'm sure it will heal. How is Billy?”

“He's doing fine. He's spending some time with my father right now.”

“That's great.”

“Well, I'll see you around, Marshal.”

Anne's apology seemed real enough for me to understand her feelings that day. I needed some kind of lift inside and her support. There was still so much left here to do. Just then, I saw a man riding into town. He was coming in from the East and I was betting he was who I thought. He stopped at the center of town and got off his horse. That's when I decided to walk over. “I hope you're here for a pickup.”

“Are you the Marshal here?” he asked.

“Yes, my name is Sean Callahan.”

“I'm Constable Tom Holmes. Good to meet you.”

“Same here, Tom.” The constable was from Providence and was probably in his forties, heavy set with broad shoulders. “I'll walk you down to the Blacksmith's shop.”

“Why are we going there if you don't mind me asking?”

“We don't have a jail so they are just chained up down there.”

The constable just shook his head. “They need to work on getting a jail built down here. Without one, that sends a totally wrong message.”

“I agree. That's part of the reason why I am here.”

“Do these men have horses?”

“Yes, we brought them in. They are down at the livery stable.” I reached into my shirt pocket and pulled out a folded paper. “Tom, give this to the authorities when you get back. This is a complete report on the whole incident and arrest.”

“Thank you, Marshal. I'm sure the judge wants this.” The doors on the barn were shut tight. I struck them several times and called out Ed's name. The door sprung open in a moment and Ed stepped out.

“This is Constable Tom Holmes. He is here to pick up the prisoners.”

“That is good news. It surely is,” Ed replied. “They are all yours.” The men were attached to an iron mount coming from the earth. On top of that was the Blacksmith's anvil. They were both chained firmly at the ankle.

“My name is Holmes. I'm a constable from Providence and that is where we are going. I want to make it clear to both of you boys right now. You run and I will just shoot you. Do both of you understand?” The two boys just shook their heads. “Get your boots on. And put these leg irons in place. I'll cuff you from the front. If you give me any trouble, then the cuffs go behind you.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, Tom?”

“I'd like to get something to eat before I go and the same goes for my horse.”

“On the way to the livery stable, there's an Inn with great food. I'll take these two up there and your horse. Everything will be ready when you're done.”

“I appreciate that, Marshal.”

Tom, then headed off to the Inn. I finished putting the restraints in place to secure them. “All right, boys, let's get going. Thanks, Ed, for all you have done.” There was no mistake, these boys were shackled tight. As they walked, a clanging sound went with them. They had been in that barn for several days now. And I don't think they were ready to deal with what the judge had to say.

“You can still let us go, Marshal.”

“That's not going to happen this time. Just keep moving.” Some of the people in town came out of their shops to see. The Major also saw the commotion and was starting to come out. I could see him putting his coat on as we passed. I stood behind the men and kept my hand on my gun the whole time.

“Did the Constable show up?” the Major asked.

“Yes, he's down at the Inn getting some food in him before they leave town.”

“Charlie,” the Major yelled. “Get those horses ready. Could you see that the Constable's horse here gets proper food and water for the trip?”

“Of course, let me have that animal. You men sit over here.” Charlie said. There were two stools in the barn. I placed them together.

“Sometimes, I think, Marshal, it's best just to whip them here and now. Instead of all the fuss.”

“No, Major, it's time to start to do things the right way here. This town, if it's going to grow, it's going to need a lot of things. A bank, a school, and yes, a jail. But above all, it starts with having law and order, Major. Things have to be done right.” We waited around for about an hour. That was enough time for everything to be prepared when the constable got back. “They are ready to go, Tom. Oh, by the way. This is Major Lancaster. He runs this town here.”

“I'm surprised I haven't met you before, Major.”

“Well, my friend, we don't have many issues here.” The Constable got on his horse. The two brothers then mounted theirs. “Have a good trip,” the Major yelled. “Thanks again, Constable.”

The next day, I decided to drop off some laundry across the street. I wanted to tie up some loose ends before heading over to Hope Valley. I saw Anne this morning and she was nice to me when I was served breakfast. I was glad we were on speaking terms again I thought.

“Ah, Marshal. You have some laundry for us?”

“Yes, I do.”

He dragged the bag onto a hanging scale. “Two pounds — not much, Marshal. Where is the rest?”

"I think I'm wearing it." We both began to laugh. I could hardly believe after all these years of doing laundry, the old-timer still had a sense of humor.

"Is there anything else?"

"Do you think I could speak with your wife for a moment?"

The old guy looked puzzled. "Marshal, she doesn't know anything."

"I understand but I would like to hear from her anyway."

"Well, come on; she's in back — follow me." She was in the exact place where I saw her before. "Victoria." The woman looked up. "The Marshal here wants to talk with you."

She turned and smiled. "Do you mind? Please, I just need a moment of your time." She nodded her head.

"There's a table in the next room where you can talk." A bell was ringing in the front room. "That's another customer. I will be right back."

I followed Victoria to a back room. There was a small wooden table with a bottle of Port wine and glasses. She reached out for it and turned towards me. "Would you like one, Major? I have one, maybe two at lunchtime."

"No, thank you, ma'am." The room was so bare, only the color of pale white covered the walls. When we both sat, I pulled out my notebook. This room, even though it was away from the oppressive heat of the boiling water, smelled like an old cellar. The floorboards were equally spaced and staggered, except for cuts made in the center. They looked odd, but I paid them no mind. "Let me ask you, Mrs. Welch. Did you know any of the women? Dawn Sparks, Karen Abrams, or Traci Mahoney?"

"I know those names, Marshal. But I only saw one of them in town here."

"Which one was that?"

"Traci Mahoney. I would see her at the market sometimes with her son Billy."

"Did she have any friends in town?"

"Not that I know of."

"Did she look sad or depressed?"

"If she was, it did not show. I never saw anything unusual about her."

"Did you ever see her with any men at all?"

"Never seen her with a boyfriend, Marshal, if that is what you mean. I'm sorry, Marshal. I don't know much of anything to help you."

"Your father. Is he here?"

"Marshal, my father can barely hear or see now. We only let him go across the street to see the doctor now and then."

"I did see him yesterday at the Doc's place."

“Sometimes, Marshal, he just wanders over there. But he always comes right back.”

“Is he here now?”

“Yes, I could get him for you if you like. He has his lunch about this time, in this room every day.”

“Just for a moment, if I could. I would like to ask him a question.”

“All right, just wait.”

I started to make some entries in my notebook when the old man came up to the table. He sat and just stared back at me, then looked at his daughter. His white hair seemed to frame his entire face. Both of his hands rested on the table and he looked forward. “Do you remember me, sir? I saw you yesterday at the Doctor’s office.” The old man turned and just stared at me. “Dawn Sparks, Karen Abrams, Traci Mahoney. Do you know any of those names?” He raised his hand and then pointed towards the street. “Did you know any of them?” The old man again just pointed and stood quiet.

“I don’t think you will get him to talk, Marshal.”

“Food, food.” The man began to bang on the table.

“I can see he wants me to leave and he wants his lunch. I won’t bother either of you anymore. You were very kind, Victoria, to speak with me.”

I wondered what the old man was pointing at. “I’m sorry, Marshal, that we could not help you,” she replied.

“Perhaps another time I would be able to see him.” When I got to the front counter, I saw little Jimmy. He was here to do another pickup and delivery. He had his cart full of clean laundry.

When he reached for the door, Mr. Welch said, “Jimmy, you make sure these people pay those slips I gave you. And come right back today with the money. I want to know right away if they don’t pay.”

“Yes, sir, I will.” He then scooted out the door.

I watched him leave, then said, “Does he work for everyone in town?”

“Everyone loves Jimmy. He’s been working with all of us since he was really small. He probably supports his whole family up there with the money he makes here. That boy’s mother is a saint for putting up with his father and all. His sister works hard too.”

“Yes, I’ve seen her at the Inn.”

“You didn’t get much from those two in the back, did you?”

“Unfortunately, no, I didn’t.”

“Perhaps you will never find out what happened to those women.”

“I’d like to think this is going to be resolved somehow.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it, Marshal? Sometimes these things never get solved.”

“Yes, I suppose so. That could happen. I will leave you to your work. Thanks again.”

When I left the cleaners, there, sitting on a bench seat holding a newspaper, was an odd sight indeed. I could see his bushy hair at the top of the paper.

I decided to sit next to him. As I casually looked around, I heard a voice. “Sean, it's me — Bixby.”

“Yes, I know. You know you're really not hiding very well, old buddy.”

“I'm really not hiding. I was just waiting for you. Let's take a walk.” The alley was only around the corner. When we got to the end, we both stopped. “How are you holding up, Marshal? You look like you got a nasty cut there. You're not getting into any trouble down here, are you?”

“So far, nothing I can't handle.”

“There's a couple of new developments. Your uncle wants me to give an updated report to you. First, have you ever heard of a man called Francisco Escobar?”

“No, that name has not come up down here.”

“We were tracking him back home in Boston. We believe he may be responsible for several deaths there.”

“You're not sure of his whereabouts?”

“The problem, Sean, is that he doesn't stay very long in any one place. So, it's hard for us to catch him. We know he went south. We just don't know what route he took. It was probably two years ago when he came this way. It's very important we get this guy. We think he could have even been responsible for at least one of those women disappearing. Your uncle wants you to inquire about him. But do it quietly. Surely you know some of the people here by now. We don't want him tipped off that we are looking for him. If he left, we would like to see him come back. And this time, we will be ready for him. Your uncle wanted me to make this point very clear. If you see this Francisco Escobar— the man we are looking for — do not engage him in any way. Telegraph us immediately. And we will send down lots of help. Agreed, Marshal?”

“Yes, you won't have a problem with me on that.”

“How are things progressing here?”

“They are moving slowly, Bixby. Either these people know everything or nothing at all. I still have to get over to Hope Valley and talk to the people over there. Perhaps their take on things will be a little different.”

“I didn't want to be the one to tell you this, but the Colonel is getting a little nervous. I think if he saw that wound on your head, he would pull the plug on this now.”

“What do you mean, Bixby?”

“Well, the old man is getting ready to run for the United States Senate. He wants everything neat and clean right now. This could cause an issue for him, Sean. I need to tell him that we are moving in the right direction. And even with that, there isn't much time for you here. So, this thing needs to come to an end soon. He wants an arrest or we move on from this. Do you understand?”

“I understand — but leaving here with a potential monster down here?”

“That monster, Sean, could be long gone by now. I'm just saying. Be ready for new orders. Good luck with everything. I'll see you back home.”

“I'll be there.” Bixby then headed back out of the alley. I would later follow. Later that night when I finished my rounds. I stopped in the dining room. I wanted to speak with Margaret. The lights had been dimmed for some time now. The guests appeared to be in their rooms. I saw Margaret in the kitchen once again working to get everything ready for tomorrow morning. “How's everything, Margaret?”

“I'm fine. Do you want to help me put all these dishes away?”

“I will do that for you. Why don't you pour yourself some coffee and I'll get to work?”

“Are you serious, Marshal?”

“Of course, get me a cup too. I can handle this.” I began to stack the plates, then sorted the cups.

Margaret came in and sat down. “Boy, it does me good to watch someone else work for a change.”

“You need a break every once in a while.” I then started on the silverware. “Margaret, how far back do you keep a record of the people that have stayed here?”

“I think somewhere, I have all the records for all the years. How far back do you want to go?”

“I was thinking about two-plus years or more.”

“That far back I have right under the counter at the front desk. I must have at least three, maybe four, years of register books there. What are you looking for, Marshal?”

“I'm searching for a man called Francisco Escobar.”

“That name sounds familiar, Marshal. If I recall, he was not here for very long.”

“But you remember him.”

“Stay here. I'll get my book and check.” I then separated all the utensils and started putting them in the appropriate drawers. I had completely finished it all when she came back. “Thank you, Marshal. You really didn't have to do that.”

“That was easy.”

“All right, Francisco Escobar signed in on August 10, 1892.”

“That would be after the grave digging started.”

“Yes, that's right, Marshal. But he can't be your man.”

“Why not?”

“He checked out — paid his bill and left one week later.”

“Are you telling me he left and you never saw him again?”

“That's what I'm telling you. This fellow Escobar, he was a strange one. Asked for a room facing the back road. Nobody wants that. They all want rooms facing the street, especially if they're just tourists. He didn't want his room cleaned either. Always had the sign-up on his door. Never ate in the dining room that I know of. Usually, everyone at least tries my cooking.”

“Margaret, that is odd.”

“I only saw him two times in that week. And the first was Friday night when we brought out the booze.”

“He liked his alcohol?”

“I can't say. Never saw him with a drink.”

“What did he look like?”

“He had black hair. Sort of a Spanish-looking fella. Well-dressed all the time. Medium build. Somewhere in his thirties. He was different — that's for sure.”

“Why was he so different?”

“He just kept to himself. Never really talked to anyone.”

“You have never seen him since?”

“Marshal, he's long gone. He did say at checkout he was heading south.”

“It's amazing you remember that.”

“I do because I was glad to see him go. He gave me a creepy feeling. I don't see how he is your man, Marshal. He was not here at the time those women were abducted.”

“Right now, he's just a man of interest to us, Margaret. I don't know how much more time the boss will let me be here. Everyone in town does not know much. That's not leaving me with any suspects. Tomorrow, I must travel to Hope Valley. I need to talk to the people over there. Hopefully, they are a little more forthcoming and I can produce some kind of lead.”

“You know Thursday is Thanksgiving. We have quite a feast here, Marshal.”

“I should be back by then.”

“I sure hope so,” Margaret said with a smile.

Chapter 16

On to Hope Valley

E

arly the next morning, I decided to head out for Hope Valley. Much of the trip was the same as when I went to visit the Nipmuc Indians weeks earlier. I was to follow the Beaver River further south this time. Then, when the river reached its most narrow point, I was to cross over and head west. My contact there was a man named Nathan Landry. He was in charge of the town's administrative duties and sometimes law enforcement. Perhaps you would say exactly what the Major did for Exeter. Hope Valley was southwest of here and thirteen miles away. It would take the better part of the morning to get there. No one could tell me exactly why it was called Hope Valley. The origin of the name had fallen into obscurity. The woman's name that had gone missing was Melissa Forbes.

She was the third missing person on my list. She left behind a grieving husband and two children. It was hard for me to believe that someone would wake up one day, then just run away, leaving her husband and children. I would have to meet him and hear his account of things. I knew this was not going to be an easy conversation. She had been missing for over a year now. Her family may have given up all hope of her return. I would not know that until I saw them face to face. As I passed by the Indian village, all seemed quiet. These were peaceful people who took nothing more than what they needed to survive. They lived gracefully with the nature of things. I moved slowly past them that morning. I didn't want to disturb their daily ritual. The river widened and then narrowed. I thought I would see many beavers in the water, but I saw only one from a distance. It looked as if it was chasing fish at the river's bottom. The afternoon sun warmed my face and I could smell the pines as I passed. This was Rhode Island at some of its best. A person could start a farm here and prosper.

As I moved further south, away from James Pond, the landscape became even flatter and abundant with many open fields. Meadows filled with straw grass and birds flying all about. Hope Valley would not survive without its industry. I was told it had a busy tannery business here at one time. Then it converted to cloth and textile manufacturing. I wondered what else I would find out here. Of course, this could be an isolated incident that had no connection to what was going on in Exeter. There were so few answers to what happened here out here. I wanted to keep an open mind and let the investigation take me where it would. In a fast-moving creek, I stopped to let my horse take a drink, then

filled my canteen back up again. I hoped the town would not be much further now. I had been traveling for some time and was hungry. Max and I had pressed on. When we had gotten over a hill, I could smell wood burning of sorts. It was from a farm to my left. I could see smoke rising from the chimney of a small home. Hope Valley made its first appearance to me then. It appeared to be a normal town, not much different than Exeter. There were several mills scattered about. Large buildings with the purpose of producing wool and other cloth. There were no straight roads in town. They just seemed to turn and cross one another. I did my best to find my contact, Nathan Landry.

He was a land surveyor by trade. My time in Hope Valley had to be short. There was no way I was going to be able to interview everyone. That task was beyond the two days that I had scheduled for this small town. I first wanted to talk to the family of the missing person. I needed their direct statement for my report. When I asked around for Nathan Landry, folks pointed me to a door in the center of town. It read Nathan Landry – Surveyor of Lands. There were many other shops here: clothing, shoes, and produce of all kinds.

I didn't have time to notice each of them. I glanced inside and saw a man standing over a desk. I was hoping I had found him.

“Might you be Nathan himself?”

“I am, sir. To whom do I owe the pleasure?”

“My name is Sean Callahan. I’m a Marshal from Boston. I wrote to you several weeks ago about stopping by and talking to the family of Melissa Forbes.”

“Yes, Marshal, come right in. I have been expecting you.” Nathan was a man in his thirties with brown hair and a matching beard. He had a roundness to him of sorts — but not so much of the fat kind of way. Just a big heavy-set fellow. There were maps stacked everywhere in that office. Some spread out on the many tables in the room. He had a magnifying glass strapped around his neck and spectacles balanced on top of his head.

There were many gas lights above, hanging from every point in the room. This was a place of great awareness of the details of the countryside around us. I thought he must know these woods and what's out there. Perhaps he could enlighten me as to what he thought the dangers were. “I'm going to need someone to take me out to meet Melissa Forbes's family tomorrow. I also need a place to reside for a few days and my horse could surely use some rest.”

“Well, why don't we start by getting your horse settled in? There's a livery stable just up the road. We don't really have a hotel here in town. But Mrs. Phillips rents rooms out. She was left a huge home when her husband passed. I told her you were coming, so she has a room ready for you.”

“Thank you, Nathan, I appreciate that.”

“Is that whom you would like to speak with first, Melissa’s husband?”

“Yes, I need to get a statement from him. I have to know the exact time she went missing and what she was doing on that day. I could never speak with everyone in town about her disappearance, just not enough time. I was hoping to use your office for a day or so. I wanted to put the word out that I was here and if anyone wanted to speak with me, they could come in.”

“That's not a bad idea. I'm going to warn you, Marshal. Melissa was a very popular lady. She taught school here. Everyone liked her. There could be a lot of people heading this way.”

“Let's hope they have the answers I'm looking for.”

Later, Nathan took me to a large Victorian Home. It was solid white with black shutters. A huge wrap-around porch was set on two sides. It had an enormous barn to the left that matched the house color perfectly. We walked up the stairs and knocked. An older woman somewhere in her sixties answered the door. “Nathan, how are you?”

“Molly, this is the Marshal I was telling you about. He's going to need that room for several days. Is it still available?”

“Of course, come right in. Nathan, help yourself to some coffee in the kitchen. I'll show the Marshal the room. Have you met that wonderful Doctor in your town Marshal?”

“Yes, he seems to be very good at what he does.”

“He took care of my husband when he was ill. We were blessed to have him. I certainly look forward to seeing him again.”

The house boasted six bedrooms and three bathrooms; all but one bath and one bedroom was upstairs. Each bedroom had its own fireplace. It was quite a remarkable structure for its time. The bed was of the large canopy kind with white cloth draped over the sides. I had never slept on something so elegant before. This was probably more than I expected. But I was glad for it just the same.

Later, Molly made us lunch. It was meat pie that was left over from yesterday's supper. Nathan and I enjoyed it very much. This place appeared to be just right for a few days' stay. Afterward, I checked on Max back at the livery stable. Nathan agreed to go with me to Melissa Forbes's home. We set the time for nine o'clock the next morning. I knew it was going to be a surprise to them. But it had to be done.

I spent the rest of the day at Nathan's office. He explained to me that it was a shock to everyone in town when Melissa disappeared. Unlike the women who were missing in Exeter, Melissa was very popular. Everyone seemed to know

and like her. She taught many of the children here, serving as their teacher for several years. It was told to me that she left for school in the morning, then did her shopping in town, and never made it back. I asked Nathan if he ever heard about any problems that she may have had at home. He assured me that there were none.

He then explained that the town didn't have much of a history of crime. Nothing like this has ever happened before. I was hoping her husband could provide me with something to go on. Hopefully, a detail more than what I was getting from the folks in Exeter.

That night I dined at Nathan's table. I met his wife Ellen and his three children. We had agreed that we would not discuss any details about the missing woman in front of them. They were frightened enough by the rumors around town. The conversation centered around the many travels that Nathan had encountered earlier in his life when he was a young man making maps with his father. I enjoyed the stories he told very much. I then spoke of my days as a whaler out in the vast ocean. I left out the part about actually harming the whales for the children's sake. Everyone seemed to be enchanted by their size and gracefulness — how they guided our boats at sea towards the setting sun. Then later we would follow the stars to get home. We enjoyed ourselves and laughed for most of the evening. Nathan and his family proved to be wonderful hosts.

I got back to my room that night around eight o'clock. I slept well and headed downstairs for breakfast. There were other guests there picking at the food. All seemed pleasant enough to me I thought. So, I helped myself to what was laid out that morning — mostly eggs with some toast — then I headed out. No one staying at the house seemed out of place. They were older folks, taking advantage of what Molly could provide. The rooms were quite big in size and the food appeared to be excellent. The grounds were well maintained and had an elegance to them. Later, when I went down to the livery stable, I took Max out of the barn at nine. Nathan showed up a minute later. He was eager to accompany me to Melissa Forbes's place. We both knew this was going to be a difficult interview with her husband. Although I wanted to keep an open mind, something told me he was never going to see his wife again.

The farm happened to be a very short distance from town. Perhaps just under a mile or so west. When we rode up, a man came out of the barn, followed by two boys. He appeared to be in his late twenties, with brown hair, neatly shaven, and quite tall. The boys were his sons of course. They stared at me intently wondering who I was. I made sure my badge stood out for them to see. I didn't know what their reaction would be towards me. The barn they came from stretched out like a long row of houses in town. This was dairy country and I

could hear the cows inside making noises of some kind. Coming from a city, this was not familiar to me. Their two-story house sat in the center of the property. It was painted gray with a small porch in front. We got off our horses and I waited for Nathan to speak.

“John, this is Sean Callahan. He's a Federal Marshal from Boston. He's been sent here to look into your wife's disappearance.” John then took off his gloves and we both shook hands.

“Is there a place we can talk?”

“Yes, I think it's best if we go in the house. Boys, stay outside for a while. Get some water for the men's horses.” The boys turned and ran quickly towards the well. “I was hoping someone would come.”

“I'm sorry it took so long for me to get here. I was in Exeter getting everyone's statements there.”

“It looks like you took a good hit to your head, Marshal,” John said.

“Not everyone decides to obey the law, John.”

“I understand. Please come into the house.” When we entered, we were told to sit at a table on the far side of the room. John then put on some coffee. I asked if he minded my note-taking while we talked and he replied that he did not. He eventually came out with an iron pot and several cups in hand. We drank some of our coffee, and then Nathan asked him how he was holding up. “Every day I wake up, I feel as if this is not real and somehow this can just go away. I don't want to get out of bed most days. Sometimes there are no words. I don't know what to tell the boys. It's painful as a father to watch them cry so much. I do want to thank everyone in town for what they did in order to find my wife. Everyone cared so much for Melissa.”

“It was the least we could do,” Nathan replied.

“Could you tell me what happened the day she went missing?”

“It was a Monday. She went off to school. The boys stayed here with me and helped with the farm. We got ready for our delivery of milk for the next day.”

“So, she went to town every Monday alone.”

“Yes, Marshal. I didn't see a problem with that. She had done it many times before. She taught her class that day. Afterward, people in town saw her shopping. She loaded the groceries in the wagon, then started home. People there saw her do all that. But by three o'clock, she did not show. I became worried at four and started to ride into town. About halfway there, I noticed our wagon. I thought maybe she fell or something. But there was no sign of her.”

“John, was there anything taken from the wagon?”

“No, the groceries were untouched; her purse stood beside it. The money was still there also.”

“Was there any blood or any sign of a struggle, that you noticed?”

“There was nothing, Marshal. All the people in town searched for her,” Nathan said.

“Unfortunately, this is a lot like what's been going on in Exeter. Three women have just vanished there. I'm sorry, John, that this happened. Has anyone tried to contact you about her whereabouts?”

“No, no one knows anything. What do you think is going on, Marshal?”

“I can't be exactly sure. But it sounds like these women have been abducted by someone. For what purpose, I do not know.”

John clenched his fists at the table. “I want this solved, Marshal. I want to know where she is. Dead or alive, I want to know. I want to someday tell these boys what happened to their mother. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“Marshal, I don't care how long it takes. You get him for me . . . you get him.” John's teary eyes stared into my face. I could feel his pain, like a shock wave that slammed into me. It was a feeling I could never forget.

“Nathan, you did file a report?”

“Absolutely, Marshal. The very next day. It went off to the Providence sheriff's office. They sent a man out two days later. He stayed for a while, found nothing, and later just left.”

“How about any problems with people she knew?”

“She had no enemies. No one was stalking her or even bothering her in any way. Marshal, if there was anyone I suspected, I would tell you right away. But I can't think of anyone who would want to hurt her.”

“John, I'm going to do everything I can to find out what happened to her. In the meantime, do you mind if I look at that wagon?”

“No, it's in the barn out back.”

The wagon did not show anything to help with what had happened. It was clean of any evidence. Not wiped clean with a chemical cleaner, as there was no odor of that. Just empty.

Nathan and I started back, neither of us saying much. We were both feeling the pain of what that family was going through. I had asked him again if their marriage was going well. He assured me it was. I immediately ruled out her husband. There was just no evidence that showed he wanted to harm his wife. Still, there had to be something I was missing. This woman appeared to have a good life, a loving husband, and children. No one just walks away from that. I spent the rest of the day in Nathan's office. Unlike back in Exeter, people were waiting for me there. Most just wanted information on what was taking place in finding her. Some saw her that day and didn't think anything unusual about it.

Some offered money to help find her. This was certainly different from what I had experienced before. She was well thought of and loved.

There were many angry people that showed up, along with those that just cried as they spoke about her. The town was full of emotion over this. I felt exhausted from all the interviews. But the next day, I had to leave. I said my goodbyes to Nathan. But I assured him I would be in Exeter working on this thing. If anything did turn up, I would be there if he needed me. When I crossed the Beaver River, I found the chief waiting for me. He was flanked by a couple of other Indians. I chose to dismount and talk with them. After several friendly exchanged hand gestures, he spoke. "Many people told me that you passed by our village."

"I needed to visit with people in Hope Valley."

"The blankets you brought were very good. We thank you again." The chief then took on a look of concern all about him. His face drew dark and he stared into my eyes. "I had a dream. In this, there was a man of great sin. He will come for you — try to take your life, Lawman. You must be careful. You must shoot quickly." The chief then snapped his hands. "If you stop for a moment, you will die. This I am sure of. Do not think he will be slow in this. You must be swift like never before."

"Are you saying this person and I are on the same path, chief?"

"No, not the same path. One will live. The other will die."

I could see the urgency in the chief's face. He believed without reserve this encounter was going to take place. I didn't like someone talking about my death. But I understood what was happening. It must be making someone very uncomfortable by my being here. Whatever was going to take place, I was sure it was going to happen in Exeter. I thanked him and went about my travels back to town.

Chapter 17

A Marshal Takes a Timeout

W

hen I got back to town, it was late in the afternoon on a Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving. I stopped by the Major's office to find out if anything had occurred while I was gone. Anne was inside taking care of business when I got there.

"Good afternoon."

Anne looked up and smiled. "How did it go in Hope Valley, Marshal?"

"Truthfully, Anne, it was very sad. The woman that went missing there, well, she was loved by so many people in that town. She was a teacher who had done a lot of things for the folks over there. Her family is devastated by what happened."

"Were there any new leads?"

"I wish I could say I had something more to go on but I don't. I don't think there's someone over there snatching up women, either."

"You mean you think it's someone here?"

"Yes, I do. But don't ask for any more than that because I really don't have any answers. Remember Anne, the last woman went missing six months ago. So, whoever did it could be long gone by now. I'm sure my boss is eventually going to come to that same conclusion. And when he does, I'll get pulled out of here. Speaking of out-of-here, where are your father and Billy?"

"They are at the stable. I think Billy likes my father."

"Likes your father? Never would have guessed that. I suppose you will all be at the Inn for dinner tomorrow."

"Yes, I will be helping Margaret prepare everything. Why don't you sit with us?"

"I'm sorry. I made other plans. But thank you for the invite anyway. I guess I will be going, Anne."

"My father will be disappointed you are not going to make it to dinner tomorrow, Marshal."

"There's no one more disappointed than me."

"Sean, wait." Anne rose up out of her chair and looked directly at me. "You're feeling bad about things and you think you're going to fail," Anne said.

"I think I have not done enough if that's what you mean."

"Everyone in town knows you're doing your best for them."

"Right now, Anne, everyone knows that except me. Can you fire a weapon?"

“You mean can I shoot a gun?”

“Yes, that's what I am asking.”

“Well, I've never shot one but I'm sure I could.”

“I'll keep that in mind for the future. I'll see you, Anne.”

I had doubted if Anne knew how to shoot a gun and now, I was sure of it. I thought perhaps it was time someone showed her how. Her life could depend on it, with her being all alone in that office so much. When I was over at the hardware store, I saw an 1877 Colt double-action Lightning. It was a .38 caliber gun. I thought it would be perfect for Anne. I decided to speak with her father, then buy it for her. She could keep it in the desk drawer, just in case. The women had been missing six months apart each time. It was six months since the last missing woman. So, either something was going to happen or it wasn't. And with my being here, he may not be so inclined. There were a lot of possibilities still present. So far, no one in town had been caught lying to me and it could stay that way. Somehow, I had to turn the pressure up — shake the tree and see what falls out. Some of these people may not like me after that.

But this thing was all going down too easily. There had to be something here, something I was not seeing. When I got back to my room, I had to log a complete record of my time in Hope Valley. It was going to be another account of no leads or suspects again. Actually, it was much like before. Just a missing person's report. There were no enemies of this woman. No blood evidence on or around the crime scene was ever recorded. A lot was similar to what was going on here in Exeter. Whoever was doing this was either very smart or very lucky. I hoped for the latter, knowing that luck always runs out eventually. I made sure my journal was as accurate as it could be. I was certain my uncle was going to review it carefully. Whenever that time was that I had to return.

The next morning, I slept late and wrote letters to my mother and uncle. Both told slightly different stories of what was going on here. I will send them out promptly tomorrow following the big feast. I was hoping to be with them during this holiday. But that would not be the case. I remembered the times when my father was not there either. I knew the life I had chosen and what the demands would be. I at least wanted them to know I was doing well. I stopped in the morning just for coffee and some supplies. I could see Margaret and Anne going back and forth in the kitchen getting things prepared for the enormous dinner gathering. They would all be coming together soon, for this was a time for celebration.

All I could think of were the families of the people that had gone missing. Those four women . . . who were probably dead by now. It all began to weigh heavily on me. I thought it was best not to attend the festivities.

I wanted to give the people of the town their moments of peace. I decided to take Max and get out of town until the next day. We could camp out high on a hill that looked out over the town. I would simply say I had other business to attend to. Truthfully, I needed time alone. I wanted to gather my thoughts. The idea of leaving here without an arrest was becoming a real possibility. When I got down to the stable, Charlie had a shovel in his hand and he was cleaning the barn, placing what he could into a wheel barrel. "Charlie, do you think you could pull Max out for me?"

"Going somewhere, Marshal? We're going to be having dinner soon."

"I know that; don't wait for me. You folks have a great time." Charlie brought Max out of the stall. I took his blanket and placed it on him. Charlie handed me the saddle and I finished the job. We said our goodbyes and I rode Max out of town. It did not take us long until we came upon a clearing on a hill. I could see the town well from here. The many rooftops bellowed smoke from their chimneys. I wished them all well that night. I did my best to make a decent campsite. Fortunately, it was not a freezing night, not as cold as it could be out here. I made a fire from the wood that had fallen from the trees. I put together a good pile so as to last the night. I got Max his oats and plenty of fresh water, and we dug in for the night. I wondered why I had rushed back from Hope Valley so soon. Perhaps I was uncomfortable being away, knowing there was a killer here. Right now, I could not be a part of any celebration. Not while those women were still missing without any answers.

Eventually, the sun faded and the town only showed the scattered lights from some of the homes. As I stared down at the darkness, I went over in my mind what I had for evidence, in both Exeter and Hope Valley. It only left me frustrated and with more questions. I had a decent fire going. Plenty of coffee and Max to keep me company. The night air grew colder as the minutes turned into hours. I searched for answers throughout the night. Slowly, I saw each light in town go out. I came to eventually think I may be searching for something that didn't exist here anymore. Whoever did harm these women could be gone by now. My father once told me that there were so many murders that go unsolved. People just eventually give up but never forget. They just seem to live with what happened. I shook my head because I could see that all happening here. I understood that we may never know the truth.

When dawn came, I realized I had only gotten a few hours of sleep. I drank what was left of the coffee and prepared to get us back home. When we got to the barn in town, Charlie was not in yet, so I put Max away by myself. I wanted to get some more rest before resuming my business. It was almost noon before I came downstairs. I sat at the counter like I usually do. Anne noticed me and

came out right away. "Well, there you are, Marshal. My dad and I were a little worried."

"I'm sorry. I just had some things to do."

"You know the Doctor was looking for you. He wanted to take out those sutures he put in."

"I'm going to stop by his office later. Thanks for reminding me. I just forgot all about it."

"Do you want to eat?" Anne said.

"Yes, that would be fine."

"We have plenty left over, Marshal." Anne left and I could hear her talking to Margaret but could not make out what was being said. I knew Margaret would understand my not being here yesterday. When lunch came, I enjoyed it very much.

I wanted to get over to the Post Office and get my letters out. I had missed my family and thought of them when I was on that hill. I knew my mother was probably thinking of me, also. So, I made my way there before something else came up. I hustled over and swung the door open. The clerk looked startled. "Marshal, good afternoon to you."

"Robert, I need these letters out as soon as you can."

"Marshal, you're in luck. He's on his way right now." Just at that moment, the door opened. "What do you have for me today, Harry?"

"Just a few today, Robert." I handed over the letters to the clerk. He exchanged them with the courier. I started to leave but Robert stopped me.

"Hey, Marshal, you have a letter here. I think it's from back home." When I looked at the return address, I was surprised. Joe, the tavern owner, had written back to me. He was responding to the letter I had sent him.

I wanted to open it back in my room and read it carefully before I showed it to Margaret. I went straight there to do just that.

Letter to Marshal Sean Callahan,

Exeter, Rhode Island,

November 20, 1894.

Dear Marshal,

Your letter, which I quickly showed to my wife, has us both intrigued. I am grateful you thought of us when this opportunity came up. I know in the past I have spoken to you about such a place. I have several buyers interested in my Tavern. This could prove to be something my wife and I would be willing to consider. It could also work out for our children as well. We both have agreed that this warrants a closer look. We will be arriving in Exeter on Monday afternoon. (November 28th). Could you please have Margaret reserve a room for

us at that time? My wife and I would like to take several days to see the Inn and the town also. We again thank you for your thoughtfulness.

Your Friend Always,
Joseph T. McDonough.

After I finished reading the letter, I was extremely happy that Joe and his wife were interested. By all accounts, this seemed like a good investment for them. I immediately went downstairs and sat at the counter. The lunch crowd started to show up. I could see Margaret setting up plates in the kitchen one after the other. I had brought the letter with me and wanted her to read it herself. Eventually, things slowed down and I went in. I called her over and asked if she could spare a moment.

“Hello, Margaret. Do you have a minute?”

“Where have you been, Marshal? You're missing all the fun around here.”

“Margaret, I have to show you something.” I then handed it to her. As she began to read it, her eyes opened wide. She stared back at me.

“I hope this is what you want, Margaret.”

“It really is, Marshal. I would love to go home and be with my mother again.”

“I think you will know soon enough. They are looking for a place where they can work together and make a good life for themselves. They will be here on Monday. Is there a room available for them?”

“I only have one facing the back road.”

“Well, I'll just have to move into that one, Margaret.”

“I would have to have it cleaned for you. There has been no one in there in quite some time. I'll get right on it tomorrow. Marshal, thank you so much for this.”

“Margaret, I'll be so glad if this works out. Let me know when the room is ready and I'll move my stuff out.” Margaret seemed happy. She spent the rest of the day smiling over and again. I hoped soon it would be her day to celebrate.

Later, I went across the street to see John Manning, the store owner. I wanted to make sure the gun that I saw was still there. I was hoping to make some kind of deal on it so I could give it to Anne. I did want to talk to the Major at some point. Just to make sure I was not overstepping my boundaries. I was sort of surprised she didn't have one already — her being the Major's daughter and all. “Marshal, how are you?” John had been standing at the counter. He was filling an order for some nails. While he stuffed the bag full, I asked him If I could take a look at the guns he had in the case in the back. “Sure, you go right ahead. I'll be over in a minute with the key for you.” In the center of the cabinet sat the Colt .38 caliber Lightning. Underneath it read 1877, the year it was

manufactured. "Well, I see something has caught your eye, Marshal. Let me open the case for you." John pulled out a key attached to his waist and opened the lock. I reached in and pulled out the Colt. "I'm surprised, Marshal, you're interested in that gun. You seem to have a couple of fine guns already."

"This is not for me, John. It's a present for Anne. I want her to have protection."

"You know something, Marshal? That's damn good thinking, I tell you."

I opened the cylinder to see if it was empty, then spun it several times, and looked down the barrel for any markings. I made sure the double action worked properly. "This gun appears to be in decent working order. What is it going to take to own it?"

"I'll tell you what, Marshal. Since it's a gift, I'll let it go for \$15.50."

"John, if you throw in two boxes of shells, you have a deal."

"All right, you bought yourself a gun."

"Put it aside for me. I'll pick it up tomorrow."

My next stop was the Major's office. I could see him smoking a cigar again. He was sitting at his desk looking adamantly at something. I hated to disturb him. But it was time we caught up on things. He needed to know what my trip to Hope Valley had turned up. The similarities were alarming, to say the least. "You really ought to cut down on those things, Major."

"What, these cigars? No way to that. By the way, where the hell have you been, Marshal?"

"I told you I would be in Hope Valley for a while."

"My daughter told me that she saw you yesterday when you got back. Why didn't you have dinner with us?"

"With everything that is going on, Major, it just didn't feel right."

"What are you talking about? You have to eat, don't you?"

"Perhaps it was best to give everyone a day off from the interrogation."

"I understand, Marshal."

"I wanted to ask you something, Major. Your daughter, has she ever fired a gun?"

"No, I've never shown her."

"I think it would be good while she's in this office. Anne should have one."

"You think it's that serious, Marshal?"

"Yes, I do. I think we have a killer here on the loose, by all accounts. Whatever happened to the women in this town, the same happened to the woman over there — although this killer could have moved on by now. Have you ever heard the name Francisco Escobar?"

"I've never heard that name, Marshal."

“He passed through here several years ago and disappeared. We are still looking for him. I want to know, Major. Can Anne have a gun?”

“Yes, all right, Marshal. Just make sure she knows how to use it.”

“That's something I can do.”

The Major then ran his hand across his forehead. “I want to tell you something, Marshal. We appreciate everything that you're doing here. I know it isn't easy figuring out this kind of thing. And the work you put in keeping everyone safe here. I can't tell you how grateful I am that you found Billy. You know that little son of a gun was out looking for his mother. Six years old and out there alone. It just can't end like this, Marshal.”

“If I had it my way, the investigation would only be just starting. But I cannot control my uncle or the Colonel. They may pull me out of here at any time.”

“We have to solve this. Listen, meet me at the Inn for a drink tonight. We will talk some more down there.”

“After I make my rounds tonight, I will stop by.”

“You know, Marshal, under the circumstances, I should have probably shown Anne how to use a gun already.”

“I was thinking the same thing, Major.” When I left the Major's office, I knew I had waited long enough. These sutures had to come out. I walked into the doctor's office and called out for him. “I'm in the back,” he yelled. “I'll be right with you.” I waited several minutes, then he came out. “Well, Marshal there you are. Let's take a look at that eye.” The doctor then stared at the wound. “Yes, it's time to take these sutures out. Step into the back and we will get them out for you.”

“Just have a seat over here, Marshal.” The doctor opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of scissors, rinsed them in a container, and slowly cut on the suturing. “Any suspects yet?” the doctor asked.

“As of yet, Doctor, no one. I wish I could solve this thing for you folks. But there's a good chance the person responsible is long gone.”

“You think they were murdered?”

“Because so much time has elapsed, it's getting hard to believe they are alive.”

“I'm going to pull on your sutures now. They are going to sting a bit coming out.” The doctor tugged on each one. Some were painful, yet others didn't hurt at all. “It doesn't look bad. It healed up well. Keep it clean and you should have no issues.”

“You don't get out much, Doctor. I don't see you around town.”

“No, I usually never leave here. Margaret brings over my meals for me. I wait for my patients to come in. Then, when I'm not busy, I do a lot of research. I enjoy it, Marshal.”

“Well, what do I owe you for this?”

“Nothing. I could not take your money. You are out here helping us all. What you did in finding that boy was outstanding work, Marshal.”

“Thank you; I appreciate it.”

“Good luck out there, young man.” When I got back to the Inn, things were already getting busy in the dining area. It looked as if the room was occupied to the fullest. Many tables were full of men drinking. Others with people eating. Everyone seemed at the time to be getting along well. Before I started my nightly round, I went upstairs to get a little cleaned up. When I did, I noticed Anne coming out of one of the rooms. “Is that the room I am going to be moving into?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I've just finished cleaning it. Leave the windows open and let some fresh air inside for a while.” The room was no different in size. It merely faced the back street. That was all. “You're being awfully nice giving up your room for this one.”

“Well, Margaret has been very nice to me also. So why not? Listen, Anne, you will like Joe and his wife. They are good people. And by the way, what are you doing tomorrow?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I wanted to take you out tomorrow and teach you to shoot.”

“Why do you think I need to do that?”

“Anne, everyone should learn to protect themselves.”

Anne shrugged her shoulders. “Well, I suppose so. But I don't even own a gun, Marshal.”

“As of tomorrow, you will. I'm going to buy you one.”

“I just can't walk around with a gun and all.”

“What I'm advising is this. Keep it in a drawer at your father's office — just in case you need it. You are in that office a lot all by yourself. And remember, we still don't know what's out there. I'll be there by nine o'clock for some target practice. I'm going to show you how to use your new gun.”

“How much did it cost? I will pay you.”

“You can pay me back by being a fast learner tomorrow.”

From what Bixby told me, I was glad Anne had never met Francisco Escobar. It was uncertain as to who in town knew him at all. I did write to my uncle and told him he had stayed here at the Inn. Gave him the exact date he arrived and the time he left. Margaret was certain she never saw him with

anyone. He always kept to himself hardly speaking to anyone. Therefore, his business here was still a mystery. There were so many unanswered questions here in this little town of Rhode Island.

I began to think that perhaps there would never be an answer to any of it. Graves were dug up just to look at their corpses. Four women had gone missing, completely vanished in broad daylight. And now a strange man with seemingly no purpose had come to this town. A man who was probably on our most-wanted list. How did this all come to be?

What was the connection? Just exactly what was it, that I was not being told? I pondered this mercilessly in my brain. I moved my belongings into the other room and gave Margaret the key back. Then later made my rounds of the town. All seemed quiet and in its place. I was to meet with the Major later. I was hoping for a peaceful time of it. I was hoping for a lot of things now.

Chapter 18

Curtis Corbet Comes to Town

“M

arshal! Could you come downstairs? We’re having a problem in the dining room. There's a fight breaking out. Be careful, it's Curtis Corbet — he has a knife,” Margaret yelled. I ran down the stairs as quickly as I could, entered the dining room, and saw a man wielding a large knife at other guests.

“Come on, you son of a bitches, nobody screws with a Corbet in this town!” The man appeared to be in his fifties, with gray hair and a long beard.

He was heavy set and wore clothes stained with soil. Unsteady on his feet, he turned and faced me as I entered. I drew my Colt from my shoulder harness. “Federal Marshal. Put the knife down right now!”

“You're the bastard that locked up my nephews. You had no right to do that.”

“They broke the law and a judge will decide what happens to them next. Now I'm telling you for the last time. Put down the knife!”

“What are you going to do, Marshal, shoot me?”

“Don't make me do it.”

Just then behind me, the Major approached. “Curtis, goddamn it. Put that pig sticker down right now. You're drunk again.”

“I'm protecting myself, Major.”

“From whom, Curtis, yourself? Put it down.”

“This bastard locked up my nephews.”

“Curtis, like he said, they broke the law.”

He then lowered his arm and placed the knife on the table. “These people here in this town,” he cried out. “I would not have hurt anyone. I'm going to walk out of here now.”

“You just hold on a minute. Does anyone here want to press charges against Curtis here?” I replied. The crowd of folks now all backed against the wall, nodding their heads no. “All right, Curtis, back away from that table and head towards the door.”

“Another time, Marshal, you and I will meet.”

“I'm sure of that.”

“Go home, Curtis; sober up for Christ's sake,” the Major replied. I kept my Colt on him the whole time as he exited. Curtis stared back at me as well. I could see the resentment in his eyes. We were now bitter enemies. And he, of course, was a real danger to the people of this town. After Curtis left, things began to

calm themselves again. The Major sat at a table and began to talk when Margaret came over. "How much did he have to drink?"

"I could not tell you. I didn't serve him when he came in. But from now on, he won't be given anything here."

"Margaret, could you get us two beers?"

"Right away, gentleman."

"Who is he, Major?"

"Well, as he said, he is the Corbet boys' uncle. He owns a pig farm behind the Mahoney place."

"You mean to tell me he is a neighbor of Traci Mahoney? The woman I am looking for."

"Yes, his place is just down that cutoff road in front of their house."

"Why didn't you tell me about him before?"

"He really doesn't come into town that much."

"That makes no difference to the investigation. You just don't think he is our guy, do you?"

"No, Marshal, I don't."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that."

"He does come in from time to time to sell some of his animals."

"Does he go over to Hope Valley to sell any of them?"

"Well, I suppose so."

"Major, this is something you should have told me right off. He certainly is a suspect in this case. He has to be fully investigated."

"I've known Curtis for a long time. I've never really suspected him."

Margaret then came over to the table. "How much did you say he had to drink?" The Major said.

"He didn't drink that much here. I think he already came in that way. I didn't serve him as I said. I was preparing food in the kitchen. After this, he can take his money elsewhere," Margaret replied.

"You and I, Major, must have a long talk about him. I don't like the way he handles himself when he drinks. Also, he lives so close to the Mahoney farm and all. I've got to check him out completely. Who else lives on that farm, Major?"

"Now that his nephews are gone, he is all alone up there."

The Major and I finished our beer. No one in the dining room wanted to press charges against him. Although no one wanted him back there either. Curtis had an awful smell to him and certainly was a nasty fool. I did not want to arrest him for being a public drunk. I wanted much more than that. He was now a suspect in the missing women's case. He certainly had the means to harm them. I

just needed some type of motive. Also, could I connect him with Hope Valley? I was going to send a telegraph to Nathan over there to see if he knew him at all.

I wanted to wait for a while until I questioned him further. I needed time to gather more evidence. Old Curtis must calm down a bit before we go at it again. The Major did not directly investigate him. Perhaps that's where he made a mistake.

The next morning, I headed over to the supply store. I saw John and started to complete the purchase of the Colt for Anne. I did like the gun and it was a Colt of course. But I thought it was a little small for me — which made it perfect for Anne. It did not take long before everyone in town was talking about the incident last night. I could hear folks talking about it on the street and in the store. Apparently, Curtis was not a well-liked fellow in town.

“Damn it, Marshal,” John said. “You almost had to kill Curtis last night, I hear.”

“He was waving a knife around at the Inn. Anyone doing that is putting themselves along with everyone else in danger.”

John just nodded his head in agreement. “Well, everyone is talking about how you stood up to him and all. You disarmed him and got him out of town. That's what we need around here, Marshal. Good work.”

“John, I want that Colt that we talked about.”

“Absolutely, Marshal, consider it yours. I mean, I hope Anne likes it.”

“I think she will.” I waited a few minutes for John to come back. There were people at the store smiling at me. Word is traveling fast, I thought.

“Here it is, Marshal, and let me get you your shells.” I picked up both bags and headed out the door. It was a Saturday and people were busy doing what they needed to do. I thought this would be a great time to get away for a while. Many of the people in town now greeted me as I walked towards the Major's office. I was becoming very popular here in town. I needed to send that telegraph to Nathan Landry.

I wanted to know if he knew Curtis Corbet. Also, if he was there at the time Melissa went missing. And since I was asking, I put in the name Francisco Escobar also. I wanted to know if he ever showed up in that town at any time. I was anxious to hear his response. As for Curtis, he had just become my prime suspect. I was going to watch him closely now and, when the time was right, meet up with him again. I was hoping Nathan could place him there at the time Melissa vanished.

“Please Robert, can you make sure this telegraph goes out today?”

“That's no problem, Marshal. I'm still waiting for the line to open.”

“Could you see to it that any telegraph coming to me is sent over right away? I’ll pay extra Robert, if I have to.”

“Marshal, you don’t have to pay one penny more. Your mail from now on is a top priority.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

I entered the Major’s office to pick up Anne. He was sitting at his desk smoking again. “Well, I guess you scored yourself another big hit here last night. You managed to run that old drunk out of town. Saved everyone from a catastrophe,” the Major said.

“You don’t think that old man is dangerous, do you?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“Well, Major, I think he’s a suspect.”

“Why? Because he lives behind the Mahoney place on a pig farm?”

“I have to investigate him, Major. Just like everyone else.”

“Just make sure that because he is your only suspect, you don’t get convinced of what’s not there.”

“Fair enough. We will let the evidence play itself out. You’re not one for heroics or accolades for that matter, are you sir?”

“That will be the day,” the Major replied. “Marshal, I don’t have to talk about the things I did for my country. I just did what I had to do to win. I never wanted the metals they gave me. It came from the blood of other men. I have to live with that. You’re still young. Understand that if you have to take a man’s life, it will live with you for the rest of your life, whether you want it to or not. If you would have shot Curtis last night, it would have stayed with you till your flesh rots, as his would have. I mean your whole damn life. And remember, discretion is always the better part of valor. If you want to live the longest, think about that, son. Just think about that.”

The Major stared at the floor. His past seemed to be bothering him. I could see how remorseful he was. His feeling of being alone with it all defeated any praise he may have been given. The war for some never ended. That had nothing to do with who won or lost. I realized we needed to move on. I was not going to try to disparage his emotions. I sensed no one could take that away from him.

“Major, take a look at what I got in the bag.” I placed it on his desk. His large hands quickly pulled out what was inside.

“A Colt Lightning. This is what you think Anne should have?”

“I like that gun, sir.”

The Major twirled it in his hand. “I suppose this will work, Marshal. You always get your money’s worth out of a Colt.”

Anne came through the door. “Are you both talking about me again?”

“We were talking about this gun the Marshal picked up for you.” The Major handed it to his daughter. Anne just stood there staring. “You can hold it. It's not loaded,” the Major replied. Anne reached out for the gun and shook it back and forth.

“It feels a little heavy,” she said.

“That's the way it's supposed to feel. You have to work with the gun for a while — then you will not think like that. You two get out there. It's a great day to be outdoors. Just tell me which direction you're planning to go.”

“I figured we would go north, Major. Head into those hills. They would make a good backdrop for shooting.”

“That sounds good. I'll see you both at lunchtime.”

As we walked to the stable, the carriage with the Pastor and his wife passed us by. They both smiled and waved to us. “It looks like everyone is coming to town this morning.”

“Yes, Saturday can be a very busy day here,” Anne replied.

“How about my old room? Is it ready to go for Joe and his wife when they get here?”

“You must know Margaret by now, Marshal. Of course, she has everything set for them. What about these folks, Marshal? Who are they?”

“They own a tavern back home where I live. But it's not like the Inn. It's just mostly a bar. They want something that they can work on together. They also want a fresh start.”

“I can see why you thought of them. The Inn is a good business . . . for the right people, of course.”

When we approached the stable, Charlie had most of the horses out. He was making sure they got their exercise in while the sun was shining. It was another day when the weather was mild for this time of year. We found him in one of the stalls cleaning up while the horses were outside. “Charlie,” I yelled.

“I'm over here, Marshal.” He came out of one of the stalls with a shovel in his hand. “Now you folks can see all the glamor in this job. I let those horses out every day for at least two hours and where do they go to the bathroom?” Charlie smiled and shook his head.

“We want to take out Max and Anne needs a horse also.”

“Her father just bought a horse that I think would be perfect for her. Come on with me outside — I'll show you.” We approached the gate and looked out. “You see that mare that Max keeps following around? She came in as thin as a rail two weeks ago. She now is on her way to being a beautiful horse again. And she is ready for a short ride. Not too far out, mind you.”

“Could you get Max and her ready for us, Charlie?”

“You bet I will. Go inside, Marshal, and get your saddle along with one for Anne.”

“She's a beautiful horse, Marshal. Her black coat on her almost matches your horse's perfectly,” Anne said.

“Perhaps you should speak to your father and persuade him to keep that horse for you.”

“If she likes me and the ride goes well, I'll buy her myself, Marshal.” Anne then stared back out at the mare. Charlie placed both Max and the mare towards the gate. After they were saddled, I helped Anne to her mount. The horse did seem just right for her. I put the gun away in her saddle bag along with two canteens of water I brought.

“Now remember,” Charlie spoke. “Go easy with her. She's just getting back into the swing of things. She needs time to be just right for you.”

“Thanks for everything, Charlie.”

Anne and I headed out. Several miles outside of town, we came upon a clearing with a hill backdrop. I ran up to it and looked as far as I could see.

There appeared to be no houses for miles around. “Anne, I think this spot will do nicely.” I took both horses and tied them up far from the shooting. I did not want to spook them with gunfire. It was a small open meadow with a hill that sprung up to one side. We could use that hill as a backdrop. “Before I even load this thing, let me see how you handle it.” Anne stood quietly and put her hand out. After I gave it to her, she began to wave it around. “Wait a minute, Anne. First things first: you never just wave a gun around. This is a weapon that could go off at any time.” Anne's eyes widened.

“Oh, you are right, Marshal. What was I thinking?”

“Point the gun to the ground when you don't want to shoot it. That's where a gun is pointed when it's in a man's holster. Only raise the gun when you want to fire it. Now stand and face that hill. Put your hand up and take aim. Just point it at that small tree in front of it. Don't worry. The gun is not loaded. Just squeeze the trigger.” Anne made the gun give off a clicking sound. “Good; you have just fired your first shot. Now the gun needs to be pointed at the ground.” Anne placed her hand by her side. “I'm going to draw my sidearm. It has the same double action as yours does. So, both of these guns fire the same way.” I drew my Smith and Wesson and fired three shots into the tree.

“I fired three shots to show you how quickly with practice you can get three rounds out of a gun. You may need to fire more than once and sometimes you must do it quickly.” For over an hour, Anne fired the Colt. She was getting better each time. I could see she was going to be able to handle it. And with more practice, she could become quite good, also. I did show off a bit. Anne was

amazed to see someone shoot a gun with both hands so accurately. “Had enough for today?”

“I think my hand is getting sore now.”

“That's all right; you and the gun are getting to know one another. I would like to see you keep it locked in one of the office drawers. I wouldn't want Billy to get his hands on it.”

“You seem worried, Marshal.”

“I am — until I know for sure what's going on around here or I can place someone in custody for these abductions. This is a dangerous place to be.”

“Maybe that person has run off to avoid being caught.”

“That certainly could be the case, but something tells me he is still here.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Your town, Anne, just doesn't have many people coming and going. It's really just a small farming town if you will.”

“Yes, that would make sense,” Anne replied.

Anne and I walked our horses for a spell. The day grew colder and we got on them and started to ride. “Why don't you come for dinner tonight, Marshal? I'm sure Billy would like to see you.”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

We were just outside of town when a wagon came into view in front of us. As we got closer, I asked Anne to ride ahead into town and I would meet her there. She kept riding as I stopped suddenly. The person in the wagon was Curtis Colbert. He stopped and began staring back at me. So, I kindly returned it back to him. “Taking your pigs to market, Curtis?” I kept my hand as close as I could to my sidearm. I knew there could be a confrontation here at this moment. I was glad Anne had ridden ahead and got herself out of harm's way. Curtis was dressed in the same soiled clothes he had on yesterday. I could see five hogs loaded in the wagon rustling about.

“Marshal, my business is none of your concern.”

“The problem, Curtis, is that I'm asking you a simple question and I think you're being evasive.”

“I don't give a rat's ass what you think.” Curtis had his rifle in an upright position beside him. If he made a move for it, I would have to kill him.

“I asked you if you were going to town to sell those pigs. Why can't you answer?”

“If I was going into town with these pigs, I would be going the same direction as you are. And since I'm going in the other way, what do you think is happening?”

“What's the matter — can't get anyone to buy your animals here in town?”

“Boy, you got to be the dumbest son of bitch I ever looked at. Everybody knows Hope Valley has an animal auction on Saturday.” He then shook his head at me.

“All right, Curtis, be on your way. We will talk again another time.”

“Not if I can help it.” Curtis whipped the horses into a gallop.

I spun Max around and kept a good eye on him as he rode off. I had gotten exactly what I wanted. He openly admitted that he travels to Hope Valley on a consistent basis. All I needed now was for Nathan to place him there on the date Melissa went missing. I would then question him again and this time catch him in a lie. That could secure me a search warrant for his property. I rode back into town as fast as I could and caught up with Anne. She was just waiting for Charlie to put her horse away. “Marshal,” Anne said. “I didn't know what to do. I was going to get my father if you had not come.”

“Don't worry about me. He would never shoot a Marshal. For that, he would spend the rest of his life behind bars.”

“Don't be too sure of that,” Charlie yelled out. “That man there is drunk out of his mind every day. If you ask me, he could shoot anybody. Why do you think he lives alone? And about those pigs. He has to go all the way to Hope Valley to sell any of them. He cannot do that here. The problem is he only sells the sick ones. That bastard already stole from everyone around here.”

“So, what you're telling me he has no choice but to head over to Hope Valley?”

“Sure, we have a slaughterhouse right here. They would take those animals, but not from him.”

“I think Charlie's right, Marshal; he seems dangerous to me,” Anne said.

“Charlie, let me ask you something. Do you think it's possible that he had something to do with those missing women?”

Charlie paused for a moment. “Marshal, when he's drinking, he's a very dangerous man. You best watch yourself. And the answer to your question is yes, I do.” He walked Max into the Stable. Anne and I walked back to her home. The streets were starting to clear now and the sun began to fade.

“You are coming by for dinner tonight?”

“Yes, of course, just tell me the time and I'll be there.”

“Does six o'clock work for you?”

“All right, I'll do my round early and then I'll head over to your place.”

The Major was at his desk when we arrived at the front door. “Do you want to come in, Marshal?”

“No, I've got a couple of things to do before dinner tonight. I will see you then. Oh, wait Anne. Don't forget this.” I handed her the paper bag with the Colt

inside.

“Thank you, Marshal.”

“You did well today, Anne. You will be shooting that gun like a pro in no time.” Anne smiled, then walked into the office. I went immediately to my room, which was now across the hall. The same furniture as before and it worked out well for my needs. All the upstairs rooms were the same. I sat at the desk and prepared my notes on the events that had occurred today. It certainly was looking like Curtis Corbet was becoming my prime suspect. I would speak with the Major tonight about this man. I didn't care what he thought of me because I put his nephews in jail. That is where they belonged. What mattered now was his involvement in these missing women. I would gather all the information that I could before speaking with him again.

I wanted to know what Nathan had on him also. Curtis was trying my patience. But what I needed was a search warrant for his farm. To get one, it was going to take a bit more than what I had on him now.

Chapter 19

Margaret Decides to Sell

I

started my nightly rounds early. Aside from the town signs swinging back and forth in the wind, all appeared quiet. As the darkness came quicker each day, the nights also drew colder. Winter, of course, would soon be here. The air that night was dry, but if it had to, it could have snowed without question. I promised Anne I would be at her house by six o'clock and that time was fast approaching.

When I entered the Major's office, he was at his desk smoking a cigar again. "Good evening, Major."

"Marshal, I hear you're joining us for dinner tonight."

"You would be right about that, sir."

"Can I interest you in a little brandy?"

"No, not tonight."

"Anne is just fixing everything up for us. She is making ham along with meatloaf tonight. Take a seat and relax, Marshal," the Major said.

"I wanted you to know that Anne and I ran into Curtis this afternoon out on the road. He didn't bother Anne at all. But he's bucking for trouble with me."

"Well," the Major said. "He's pissed off about his nephews going to jail and all. He needs them on that farm to help him with all those animals. Other than that, he doesn't give a damn. I mean for either one of them."

"He has a real nasty way about him, Major."

"That's because he is drunk for most of the day."

"At some point, I must question him about what he knows about these missing women." The Major rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"I really don't think he's your guy, Marshal. Sure, Curtis is not right in the head. But abducting women — I don't see that. Anyway, when you do question him, it would be a lot easier if I were there."

"I'm just waiting for Nathan in Hope Valley to get back to me. I wanted to know if Curtis spends much time over there."

"I can already tell you that. He does. He's always taking livestock to the auction. He gets a better price for his animals over there. That doesn't mean he's breaking any law, does it?"

"No, of course not. But he has to be eliminated as a suspect just the same."

"I guess you're right about that, Marshal. What about your uncle? Has he been in touch with you?"

"Not directly, but I'm sure he would like to know something by now."

“Well, we would all like to know something, believe me. The people of this town still don't walk the streets at night. Nobody knows what is going on around here. I just hope he gives you the time to sort this thing out.”

“Let's not forget the Colonel himself knows I'm here. He could pull the plug at any time.”

“I'm aware of that also.” The Major rubbed his fingers over his temples. “Damn these headaches at night. They keep me from getting the sleep I need.” At that moment, Anne came in. “Well, I think I can smell something coming along in there,” The Major said.

“Just a few more minutes and it will be ready.” Anne walked back into the apartment. The Major opened up the drawer and poured himself another drink. He downed the shot quickly and stared at the bottle.

“Why does good brandy have to cost so damn much?” Then leaned back in his chair and took one more puff of his cigar.

“I wanted to tell you. People are coming in and looking to purchase the Inn. They will be here on Monday afternoon.”

“Yes, Anne told me. These friends of yours from back home — what sort of people are they?”

“Well, Joe is an Irishman like myself. But his wife is Portuguese. They own a tavern back there. They are looking to sell it. Joe's wife is an excellent cook. She would bring different kinds of foods from her homeland here. I've tried them myself and they're fantastic. Joe, having experience owning a bar, would probably keep the place serving alcohol on a lot more nights.”

“You mean he would start running a full bar up there?”

“Yes, I think Joe and his wife would make that an excellent hotel that brings in lots of people. They have two children, twelve and fifteen. They would benefit from living in this town. It's really important, Major, we resolve this issue we have here once and for all.”

Anne then stuck her head in. “It's ready; come in when you want. Marshal, Billy is fast asleep. I hope you don't mind but he gets up at dawn and sleeps when the sun goes down. I already fed him earlier.”

“No, not at all, Anne. I will see him tomorrow at church, I'm sure.”

“That you will, Marshal.”

After the Major said grace, we all enjoyed dinner together. Anne did a fine job preparing everything for dinner. I looked forward to the church services in the morning. I had not heard the new Pastor speak before. I was glad Anne seemed to be over Pastor Brian. His name did not seem to come up once all evening. However, a small debate over Curtis Corbet still existed.

“I think it's best to just let him be.”

“That's easy for you to say, Major. But I think the man is dangerous.”

“Perhaps, but if you leave him up there, I think he's harmless.”

“You may be perfectly right, Major. But again, he has to be ruled out as a suspect. Once that is done, my business is finished with him.”

“Just don't go up there alone, Marshal. Let me come with you. He'll probably go nuts if he sees you on his property.”

“These women, Major, have to be somewhere.”

“The problem is, Marshal, they could have been taken and sold off somehow.”

“Not likely. With that sort of human trafficking trade, they are taking much younger women. So, I don't think that's the case here. Also, someone would have tipped us off on that kind of thing by now. Someone would have seen or heard something.”

“I think he's right, Dad. Maybe they are afraid to speak out.” Anne circled the table, pouring coffee for us. The Major looked at his daughter. I could see the concerned look on his face.

“Anne, he said how are you coming with that gun and all?”

“I'll get them, Dad, before they get me. That's for sure.” The Major then smiled.

“There is one thing that remains clear here, Major. They were taken either coming to town or leaving it. That part remains the constant in all of it. That is true in all four cases. It all surrounds this town and not so much the other. That's how this person strikes.”

“What's your point, Marshal?”

“My point is that you have someone stalking the women here. I've tried to figure out the purpose of it. But I can't come up with anything. Whoever it is, he is very good at hiding himself. Or he's just damn lucky like I have said before. Most would have made some type of mistake by now.”

The Major began to rub his head over and over. “Marshal, whatever it takes, you have got to get this son of a bitch.”

“I will see you both in the morning. I'll meet you at ten sharp. Anne, you did a great job. Thank you so much.” I then walked back to the Inn. The town was closed down for the night. I could smell wood burning from each of the homes. It was late November and at times seemed much too cold. An occasional swirl of snowflakes gathered in the corners of buildings. When I arrived, I stopped off and met up with Margaret. I had not seen her in several days and thought it would be good to catch up on things.

“How are you tonight?”

"I'm doing fine, Marshal. I'm just finishing up with things here. We had a really good day today."

"Is everything all set for Joe and his wife?"

"I think so," she said with a smile.

"You will like them, Margaret. They will bring a lot of culture to the place. Are you sure you're ready to let go of things here?"

"Yes, It's time. My mother is waiting for me."

"Has she ever been here to visit you?"

"Oh, yes. She has been out here several times. But she always goes right back because that's where her home is. Marshal, help yourself to what's left of the coffee." I went over and poured myself a cup. "How do you like the room you're in now?"

"You were so right about the view, Margaret. It really makes the place."

"Come on, Marshal, I'll show you my living area in the back. You can see what your friend is getting for his money."

"All right, I'll take a look."

Margaret locked up the dining room. We passed by the lobby and counter. Then she unlocked a door that read PRIVATE, and we made our way down a hall. The first room was a small office that could only fit a desk and chair. The hall also had other rooms for storage and such. At the end of the hall was another door marked PRIVATE. Margaret took out a set of keys and unlocked it. It opened to an elaborate room, a large area with a dining room to one side and a kitchen to the other. A gas chandelier stood in the middle of the room. Through an archway appeared a living room with modern striped wallpaper throughout. In the center of the far wall stood a fireplace with diagonal-shaped stone. Margaret quickly started a fire going. It appeared Henry had a nice neat pile of wood stacked to one side for her also. "There are four bedrooms here along with two bathrooms. Your friend should have plenty of room."

"Yes, this is a big place indeed. I'm sure his wife will love this."

"Marshal, have some brandy with me. I like mine chilled a bit." She looked up at me.

"All right, make mine the same way." I could see Margaret didn't want to drink alone. For the first time. I sensed her loneliness.

"This apartment back here was so nice when my husband was alive. Now, it's just a place for me to hide. No one comes here anymore."

"Margaret, forgive me for saying so. But you could marry again."

"I know, but this was my husband's dream, not anyone else's. It just wouldn't feel right. It's time for another person to take over here completely and besides, my thoughts are with my mother now. I'm looking forward to returning home."

“Margaret, about the graves that were dug up here. I mean it’s not that you are running away from something are you?”

“The town had some fool notion that there were vampires here. That certainly seems foolish now of course. But at the time people here wanted answers for their sickness.”

“It seems, Margaret, no one even wants to talk about it. Are they hiding something? Has someone seen a vampire here?”

“Marshal don’t be silly, that’s just nonsense. Let’s talk about something else. Perhaps it’s you who needs a person in your life. Come on now Marshal. What about you? I see the way you look at Anne. I think she would be perfect for you.”

“Anne is very pretty. But I don’t know how much of me she could take.” Margaret laughed. “What time does the dining room open in the morning?”

“It opens at seven a.m.”

“I’ll be there first thing, Margaret.” We said goodbye and she let me out. When I went back to my room, I realized why Margaret needed to sell. She got caught up in this place and felt she didn’t belong anymore. When I saw her working at the Inn, she seemed like she had it all. But when she was alone, she just lived with her memories. She also seemed not interested in making new ones here either. I was hoping Joe and his wife would take the place. The Inn did offer the right opportunity for them, so I thought. For myself, I still had a job to do here. I had agreed to show up at church tomorrow. It would be an opportunity to meet more people in the town. And perhaps someone knew more than they were willing to tell. I also wanted to hear this new Pastor speak. I hoped he and his wife were finding the small town a good place to start over. The situation with these missing women hung over this place. Everyone here felt afraid of what was to come. There needed to be answers for what was going on here. I desperately wanted to make things right. It was going to be difficult leaving this town in the same mess in which I found it.

It was so cold in my room that I could see my breath when I exhaled. I immediately lit a fire with the wood that was left for me. Henry did a great job of stacking it in my room. He was an odd man and didn’t talk much. But seemed harmless and of no bother. Mostly, I paid him no mind. I stared out the back window and into the darkness. The shadows I saw appeared to be lots of trees moving back and forth. I thought of the danger here — the woods being so close to the town and all. Just a short walk down the alley and you were gone.

Below my window stood the empty service road that could have made a person disappear for good. Margaret certainly said it best. The views were what made the rooms here. This one had an ominous feeling attached to it. Certainly

not the place where I would spend much time. Or at the very least, request it as my choice of stay. The name Francisco Escobar kept stirring in my thoughts. And the strange set of events when he was here. Am I crazy to think this man had something to do with these missing women? The thought of vampires kept creeping in my mind at night. Then in the daylight hours, I would push it out again. I did wonder if this was the very room, he stayed in.

It took some time but the place began to warm up nicely. I was able to sit at my desk and write in my journal. I wanted to make sure every interaction with Curtis Corbet was exactly recorded. At this point, he was my only suspect. I was just waiting on Nathan's reply so I could question him again. I would also like to see if he would cooperate and let us search his place. That would quickly eliminate him as a person of interest in this case. I finished my notes for the night, stuck what I could of wood into the furnace, and tried to bed down for the night. I found that I could not sleep. So, for several hours I just thought about my next plan of action. I knew time was working against me. I needed results here and I needed them quickly. When I awoke in the morning, the fire in the stove had all but burnt out. I placed what I could of the chopped wood inside. The room was not as warm as it had been before. I started to shiver as I moved about. I looked out the window only to see a deserted road again. Now I knew why no one wanted to live back here.

Margaret said only one person had requested a room back here in five years. It did seem odd that it was the same person the Marshal's office was looking for. This Francisco Escobar evaded us by staying out of the public eye. Perhaps that was his plan when he passed through here. When I got back to Boston, I would ask my uncle to shed more light on him. When I arrived downstairs, all the fireplaces were lit and kept things reasonably warm. The dining room was roaring with flames. Many people were already filing in. I went and sat at the counter as usual. Jimmy's sister came over and put a cup in front of me and said, "Good morning."

I went and filled it up and saw Henry sitting there by himself again. "Thanks for that wood in my room, Henry. I slept well because of that." Henry seemed surprised. Someone had actually spoken about his work at the Inn. I don't think he knew how to respond. "Henry, do you have a moment?"

"Sure, Marshal. What do you need?" I took a seat next to him.

"Henry, you know these tenants here — probably better than anyone. You could save me a lot of time if you could just answer some questions about them."

"I'll try, Marshal."

"Has any of them come off as suspicious in any way?"

"You mean, are they capable of criminal behavior, Marshal?"

“That's exactly right.”

“Most of the tenants that are permanent residents here, Marshal, are old. John and his wife have been here the longest. They are in their seventies. Mr. Hopkins is a retired school teacher. He's a harmless soul. Then there's Paul — he's so sickly. He hardly ever leaves the Inn at all. No, sir. There's just no one here that could do such a thing. The rest have not been here for that long.”

“How about a person by the name of Francisco Escobar?”

Henry paused. “I remember him, Marshal. He was an odd one. No one was in or out of his room. Didn't want or need any wood ever. Never seen him during the day. I told Margaret he was a strange fella. He checked out awfully quickly one night. Never did see him again.”

“Did you ever speak with him or hear where he may be going?”

“No, Marshal, I did not.”

“You saved me a lot of time, Henry, with the knowledge you have of these people; thanks.”

“Marshal, I see you here every morning. If I knew something, I would tell you right away. But I just don't know.” He then picked up his coffee and drank it till the end. “I'm going back to my work now. I'll be sure to bring more wood to your room, sir.”

“Thanks, Henry, I appreciate your time.” Just another dead end. Among many that have come to me in the last two weeks. There was no doubt in my mind that I was not being told everything. I felt certain of that now. At exactly 9:55 a.m., I was sitting in the dining room. When I heard the church bell ring, it reminded me of when I was at home. We lived so close to our church. It was such a familiar sound. I finished my coffee and began to walk up towards the bell that rang out again and again. I had seen the Major, along with Anne and Billy, walking up a few minutes earlier. Outside the entrance, the Pastor stood waiting. I could see him greeting people as they entered. He shook my hand firmly and seemed genuinely happy to see us all. I could hear an organ playing inside. There, to the far left, was the Pastor's wife playing a hymn.

It was one I had not heard before. I saw the Major and Anne in the center pew. I moved quickly to sit with them. When I approached, Billy gave out a yell, “Marshal!” He was sitting beside Anne and I knew I had to sit next to him. The little boy reached out and held my hand. His eyes were fixed upon me. He seemed to have awakened to the joyous event. I could see the sun shining through the stained-glass windows to the east. Many colors of blue, red, and green were illuminating throughout the room. When I glanced behind me, I saw the pews filling fast. People were filing down both sides now. The sound of muffled chatter filled the room. Then suddenly, the doors swung quickly and

made a grinding noise when they closed. As the Pastor came towards the altar, the music faded as well as the people's voices.

Then all drew silent and everyone's eyes focused upon him then. His hand pushed his hair to one side. The wind had made it appear out of place. He turned to his wife and smiled, giving her a nod of approval. He looked out, casting his eyes back and forth. "I just would like to thank everyone for coming here this morning. My name is Pastor Bill and that is my wife at the organ. Her name is Helen." That morning, we listened to the Pastor quote from the Bible. We sang many hymns and he even answered some questions from the townsfolk. His service appeared first-rate. I thought he and his wife did a fine job. Anne asked me what I thought. I told her they were lucky to have him. The town should feel good about the new Pastor and his wife. At the end of the service, he shook everyone's hand. The Major oddly enough stood silent the whole time. We walked back to town like most folks did. Billy held Anne's hand the whole time.

When we got back to the Inn, the Major said he wanted to get more coffee. I decided to join him while Anne and Billy headed back home. We sat at the counter and began drinking. The Major slipped out a bottle and poured it into his cup. "This stuff warms my old body up in the morning, Marshal."

"I'm not saying a word, Major. You're old enough to know what works for you."

"I was thinking about what you said last night about the new owners and all. Perhaps it is time for some change around here."

"You will like them, Major. They will bring good things to the Inn and all."

"I'm looking forward to meeting them. Make sure you let me know the minute they arrive. I want to welcome them."

"I will, sir, and right away at that."

The Major took the bottle out and took a swig directly. I pretended not to notice his indiscretion. His hair may have been combed in place this morning, but his mind appeared to be in constant turmoil, as if he was somewhere else other than beside me. He stared into the kitchen and did not utter a word for some time. Perhaps the Major just had his own way of steadying his nerves. I spent the rest of my day writing in my journal. Being in one of the rooms that faced the back of the Inn did have one positive attribute. If it was anything, it was quiet. Henry had delivered on his word and placed more wood in my room. I was beginning to understand how valuable he was to the Inn itself. His days appeared long and must have tired him.

It seemed he was doing something all the time. I thought about what Henry had told me about Francisco Escobar — never seeing him eat or drink in the dining room. Not wanting to be disturbed for any reason, even for fresh water up

to his room. Who was this person? What was this person for that matter? He went to elaborate measures to keep himself hidden. I wondered what he did back in Boston to have our organization so interested in him.

The next day was to be a big one. I was waiting to hear from Nathan and also Joe and his wife were coming in. They should be here by the afternoon sometime. I had a feeling they were going to like what they saw and I hoped Margaret would like them as well. Time was getting on now by all accounts. I had to step up my investigation and show some type of results soon. I was either going to get replaced or the investigation would be over completely. I slept that night uneasily looking at the clock each hour. So many times, I arose to fill the furnace with wood. The only lead I had was Curtis Corbet. I began to fixate my thoughts on him. We needed to finish our business. One way or the other, he and I were going to meet again.

Chapter 20

Nathan's Reply

N

ovember 28, 1894 – the morning started like any other. I went downstairs and enjoyed a large breakfast. Something told me this was going to be a big day. Anne was working and she seemed in high spirits. The weather was mild for this time of year today. There was talk that it could reach fifty degrees this afternoon. With a bright sky, it had the makings of a good one. I thought I would stay in town just in case Joe and his wife arrived early. Margaret had the Inn looking marvelous. Everyone had been cleaning all week.

The chandelier in the lobby just shined so brightly, that it seemed to glow at night. There was a smell of purple lilac throughout. With fresh flowers brought in from local farms that grew them year-round — I was told they were African violets, hibiscus, and orchids. They were all placed around Spanish moss in large vases. The Inn was a sight indeed, surely ready for a new owner's inspection. By ten o'clock, I had two letters drafted, one for my uncle and the other for my mother. I wanted both of them to say that things here were going fine. I did mention to my uncle about Curtis Corbet. He needed to know that he was a suspect in what was going on. I wished my mother well for the holidays. I told her that I would be home soon. I just didn't know when of course. I went over to see Robert at the Post Office. He informed me that I just missed the pickup for today's mail but a telegram had arrived for me. When I looked at the paper, I could see it was from Nathan over in Hope Valley. This was the response I was waiting for. I paid the postage for my outgoing mail and headed for my room to read the letter.

Dear Marshal Callahan, in response to your inquiry about the person named Francisco Escobar, I have asked many people here in town. They have never heard of him. I suspect he has not passed through here. But I can assure you that Curtis Corbet has. As you probably already know, he is a pig farmer up your way. I am told he visits us twice a month. Sells his hogs privately sometimes. Other times, he sells them at our auction here on Saturday afternoons. I am also told he does stay overnight. He gets drunk at the local Tavern, then stays the night sleeping it off in one of the barns here in town. People here mostly do not like him. They say he is a nasty drunk who has a bad habit of assaulting people. I cannot confirm whether or not he was here in town when Melissa went missing. I suspect he will need to be investigated even further. If I can be of any service to you in the future, please let me know. Good luck to you, Marshal.

Respectfully, Nathan Landry.

After reading Nathan's letter, it left me with no doubt about what I had to do next. I needed to question Curtis further. I also wanted to meet with Joe and his wife today. I certainly did not want to ignore them when they got here. I went downstairs and saw Margaret. I immediately complimented her on how everything looked. She appeared a bit nervous — her hand shook as she reached out to thank me again for the introduction. This kind of thing I knew was important to her. I assured her these were good folks and she was going to like them. Anne came over when she saw us talking. She smiled at us both as she drew near.

“Do you think they are coming today?” Anne said.

“The letter said that very thing. I have no reason to think otherwise. They actually could be here any minute, I guess. I want to wait with your father so we can both greet them together.”

“How is the investigation going, Marshal?”

“I'm going to leave it alone for a while. At least until Joe and his wife are done with their tour of the place. I don't want them to think this is a bad investment, not at this point.”

“Yes, I can see how that could complicate things,” Anne replied.

“At the end of it all, I've got to resolve this thing as quickly as possible. People here need to get on with their lives and the families need closure on the issue.”

When we got to the Major's office, Billy was sitting at the Major's desk. He was spinning in the chair round and round. “Billy,” Anne said. “You have to slow down or you will end up on the floor.”

“Hi, Marshal,” Billy called out.

“Hello. Where is the Major?”

“He is getting us something to drink.” Shortly after, the Major came out with two cups. He then placed one in front of Billy.

“They should be here any minute, Major.”

“That's good. I'm looking forward to meeting them.”

Billy then stopped spinning and concentrated on his cup. He then reached out with both hands and took a sip. “Thanks, Major,” he said.

A carriage with four horses was passing by. The driver gave us a smile when he saw us. Then waved his hand as he raced through town. “That's Dave Prescott from Central Falls. They are probably in that carriage,” the Major said.

“It looks like you're right, Major. They are stopping at the Inn.”

“Why don't we give them a little time to meet Margaret first? Then we will head over there.” From the window, I could see Joe step out of the carriage, his

wife following him. There were two men unloading their luggage now. Henry came out and started taking things inside. I wanted to run up there but decided the Major's plan was better for the both of us. He seemed content to relax and finish his coffee. Anne and I stared out the window. She looked directly into my eyes as she turned. We both stared at each other for a moment.

"Ah, hum," the Major said. "I guess it's time to get up there now. Anne, could you please watch over things here while I go on and meet these nice folks?"

"Of course, Dad. Take your time."

"Billy, I will see you later."

"Goodbye, Marshal." The boy waved to us as we left.

The Major finished his coffee, combed his hair, and decided to look important for our new guests. "Well, shall we?" He swung the door open and waved toward the exit.

"You look like a man on a mission, Major," I said.

"I want them to like it here. Let's welcome them with open arms."

When we arrived, all were waiting in the lobby. Margaret was speaking with them directly. She turned towards us as we approached. "I think you know these folks, Marshal."

"Yes, of course. Joe, how are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Hello, Mrs. McDonough."

"Hello, Sean; it's good to see you."

"It's good to see someone from back home down here."

"Yes, I was talking to Tommy. He said you had some type of legal issue going on down here."

"Yes, nothing I can't handle. I would like you both to meet Major Lancaster. He is the Town Administrator. The Major pretty much runs everything around here."

The Major extended his hand to them. "I'm pleased to meet you both. The Marshal's right. Anything I can do for you, just ask."

"Well, I was going to show our guests their room. Why don't we let you get settled in, then please come down to the dining room so we can have lunch together," Margaret said.

"That would be very much appreciated," Joe replied.

"Henry will take your bags up to your room and we will all meet a little later."

"Thank you so much," Mrs. McDonough said. The couple smiled and turned for the stairs. Henry was in front of them leading the way. He held two bags

beside him. The Major sat in the dining room drinking coffee as I went back and forth from the kitchen, talking to Margaret as we waited. Later, Joe and his wife entered the dining room. I came out and greeted them. "We can sit at any table you like."

"This one here is just fine, Marshal."

The Major came over. "I hope you folks didn't have a rough trip down here."

"No, Major, it wasn't bad at all," Joe said.

We immediately sat down and waited for Margaret. "What do you think so far, Joe?"

"This place is really nice, Sean. You did good letting us know about this business being for sale and all."

"I remembered we would talk a lot about a place like this back home. And how much you wanted to own a hotel with a bar and sorts. When Margaret talked about selling, I could not help thinking about you, Joe." He smiled at his wife.

"We eat here all the time. Margaret is a wonderful cook," the Major said. She came from the kitchen.

"I hope everyone is hungry. I made a roast for us all." She sat down. "After lunch, I will show you around."

"And when Margaret finishes showing you the Inn, tomorrow morning, I'll show you the whole town," The Major said. "The weather, I think, is going to hold out one more day. We will get a carriage and go all over this place."

"Thank you, Major. My wife and I appreciate that."

"Does ten a.m. sound good for you folks?"

"That would be perfect."

"Well," the Major grabbed his napkin and put it in front of him. "Let's enjoy this food we are about to receive."

That afternoon Margaret had outdone herself again. She made roast chicken that just pulled apart as you ate it. Joe's wife was certainly impressed. I could tell they liked everything so far. They would later spend several hours with Margaret privately. I imagine they were going over the books and all. I knew the Major would keep them busy tomorrow showing them the rest of the town.

They had agreed they would return home the day after tomorrow. Joe still had the bar to worry about back home. He did not want it closed any longer than it had to be. I never did ask Margaret the price she wanted for the Inn. I simply decided that it was none of my business. That night, I was asked to meet Joe in his room. Since I was only just down the hall, it was an easy task. I met with him at 7:30. I sort of knew what his concerns would be. I knocked on the door and

was let right in by Joe himself. His wife was sitting at the desk closest to the lamp for light.

“Sean, please, sit down. We need to ask you some things if we could.” I pulled out the chair from the corner of the room and sat down. “We hear you are investigating what happened to four women down here.”

“I’m not going to lie to you both. That’s right. About two years ago the first woman went missing. Then three others in a year and a half time. I was sent here to find out the cause of it all.”

“That is our main concern here right now, Sean. Is it safe here? We have small children and all,” Joe said.

“I’ve got several leads working right now. I hope to have this thing wrapped up soon.”

“I’m sure the Major is going to show us a beautiful town here tomorrow. But under the circumstances, we would have to put this on hold until we know it’s safe for our children here. I’m sure you understand that.”

“I do Joe, and I will be working hard night and day to wrap this up.”

“This is a large investment for us. We want to be able to tell Margaret something before we go. We are leaving Wednesday morning, Sean.”

“Listen to me, Joe. Go home and wait to hear from me. Tell Margaret that you need a little time to think things over. That’s only natural for a person with this kind of large investment. Then, when I get everything settled, you can let her know.”

“All right, Sean. We will go back home and wait to hear from you.”

“Joe, I promise you this place is a gold mine here. You won’t be disappointed.”

“All right, then. My wife and I are counting on you, Sean.” The next day, the Major took them everywhere. They appeared to be even more impressed. That left the issue up to me. They needed closure on the problem that plagued this town. They would go back to New Bedford and wait to hear from me. I saw them off early Wednesday morning. I assured them again, that I would do my job and catch this guy. I told them I would telegraph them as soon as I could with some news. I asked him to tell Tommy I was alive and well. Joe again looked me in the eye and spoke. “I’m counting on you, Sean. Get this guy out of this town and behind bars where he belongs. And for God’s sake, be careful.” Later I spoke with Margaret assuring her the very same thing.

I then went directly to the livery stable. Charlie was there giving out feed to the horses. He was carrying a bucket filled with oats. “Good morning, Charlie.”

“How are you, Marshal?”

“I’m fine; is Max ready to go out this morning?”

“Well, of course he is. I'll get him out if you want me to.”

“Yes, Charlie. I've got to see Curtis Corbett this morning.”

“You're going to see that old bushwhacker now. I tell you, Marshal, I'd better go with you.”

“No Charlie. This is official business. I could not ask you to get involved in this.”

“Are you sure, Marshal? I could get my gun and all.”

“No, Charlie. Please, could you get Max out here?”

“Well, all right; have it your way.” Charlie brought Max out of the barn, then retrieved his saddle, and tied it off. “You be careful with that fella, Marshal. He's one mean son of a bitch, I tell you.”

I shook my head and rode out quickly. I was just riding past the Mahoney place when I spotted what I thought was a young girl sitting on the front steps. She was dressed in white and red just sitting there looking out towards me. I turned Max and entered the farm. It was my understanding that no one was supposed to be out here. I tied Max off and watched her run around the side of the house. As I looked around, I saw no one else. I followed the little girl to the back side of the house. I saw her slip under the stairs and sit in a darkened corner. As I approached, I heard a voice call out. “Sophia, where are you?” As I turned, I saw a woman with a scarf covering her dark hair. She had a shawl around her shoulders and a bright red dress underneath.

“I think she is over here,” I called out.

A man came around from the barn, walking behind the woman. He was dressed plainly in coveralls and a jacket. He too had thick black hair with a thin beard neatly trimmed. The woman extended her hand and spoke. “My name is Maria. This is my husband, Ethan. You are the law here?”

“Yes, I am. Is that your daughter in there?”

“Yes, it is. She must be frightened. Sophia, come out of there.” The little girl came out to her mother. She held onto her skirt and just stared at me. “We were looking for Mrs. Mahoney,” the woman replied.

“Well, folks, I regret to tell you that she passed away several weeks ago. There is no one here at this farm anymore.”

Their faces seemed saddened. The man then spoke. “How about Traci? Is she somewhere?”

“That's what I'm trying to find out. She has been missing for a long time.”

“We are sorry to hear that. We come every year to see them. We are migrant workers if you will. Gypsies of sorts. We travel all over picking crops. Mrs. Mahony would let us camp behind the barn overnight.” Just then the little girl

looked up and smiled. To my disbelief, I saw two sets of upper teeth. I could not help but stare.

"I'm sorry but I've never seen that before. A person with that many teeth."

"Sophia grew two sets of upper teeth. Traci and I brought her to your doctor in town last year. He said one set would have to be removed. But she would need to be a little older to tell just which ones could be taken out."

"Yes, the doctor here is very good. Perhaps when you get back, he could call in a specialist to do what needs to be done. I don't want to disturb you further. I know you would be welcome if Mrs. Mahoney was here. So, please stay for a while if you like. I'm looking for a killer out here. Someone who might have harmed these women. If you have a gun, keep it close. It's dangerous out here alone."

"We got off to a late start this year. We usually visit Mrs. Mahoney in October. But this time, we got here many weeks later. Our wagon is behind the barn as we said. That is where we always camp when we come here."

"Well, I'm sure no harm was done. And I think, if Mrs. Mahoney was here, I believe she would want you to stay, of course."

"Have you folks seen anything out of the ordinary out here?"

"Not at all. Do you think we are in danger?" Ethan asked.

"Well, like I said, Traci and some other women have gone missing. We are not clear as to what happened to them. I want you folks to be aware of what could be out here. Again, if you have a gun, keep it close and don't trust anyone. Not until you get out of this county."

"We will keep our eyes open, Marshal. And because we are so late already, it's probably best we go now." Maria said.

"I've got to be moving on myself. If there's a killer out here somewhere, I've got to find him. I'll see you, folks. Please, be careful."

When I started to leave, I could see Ethan taking his horses out of the barn. I didn't blame them for wanting to leave so abruptly after what I had told them.

Curtis's farm was just a half mile down now. I really didn't know what to expect from him. I just knew I had to clear him as a suspect.

Chapter 21

Curtis Is Dead

“H

ello, folks. How are you?” The Major asked when he walked that morning towards the livery stable. As he looked up, he thought it was going to be a good day today. The sky was clear and the temperature was mild again. When he got to the Inn, he looked inside and just kept walking. No more coffee for me this morning, he thought. I've got to see what Charlie is doing about getting those horses ready for sale.

“Hey, you old buzzard, where are you?” Charlie came out from a back stall.

“Jesus, Major, can't a man take a tinkle around here in peace once in a while?”

“All I want to know is, genius, did you wash your hands afterward?”

Charlie just stared at the Major. “I don't know why I should have to answer that.”

“Where is the Marshal's horse?” the Major asked abruptly.

“The Marshal went up to Curtis's place this morning.”

“What did you say!”

“He took his horse and went up to Curtis's farm this morning.”

“How long ago?” the Major yelled.

“About a half hour ago. He was going to ask old Curtis some questions,” he said.

“Christ almighty, I told him not to go up there without me. Dammit, Charlie, get my horse out here at once.”

“I asked him if he wanted me to go with him and he said no.”

“Come on, Charlie.” the Major yelled. “Get my saddle out here quick too.” Charlie handed the reins to the Major and ran back inside. When he came out, he slung the saddle over his horse as fast as he could. He then tied it up firmly. The Major mounted the horse and booted the animal hard. “Ya,” he yelled. The horse then quickly started its gallop.

“God almighty,” Charlie said. “This thing is going to end badly up there. I can just feel it.”

The Major raced his horse at full speed towards Curtis's farm. As he passed by the Gypsies, he slowed for a moment and looked them over, then gave the horse a good kick in the side to keep running. When he arrived at the Corbet farm he could see the Marshal knocking at the front door. Suddenly, Curtis appeared from around the house with a rifle in his hand.

The Marshal was blind-sighted by the screen door he had just opened. He could not see Curtis taking aim at him. Curtis then pulled down on the lever action rifle. At that moment, the Major screamed out "Curtis!" He then pulled his pistol and fired one shot. The bullet barely missed him. It slammed into the side of the house. Curtis turned to face the Major racing on his horse. He raised his rifle again but this time aimed at the Major. The Major got off a second shot, the bullet ripped through Curtis's chest, causing him to fall. He landed face-first with his rifle underneath him. The Marshal then ran over to Curtis who was now twitching from the gunshot wound. The Major came up on his horse and jumped off. "He's not breathing, Major; it's all over for him."

"Dammit, Curtis," the Major yelled. "I did not want to do that!"

"I don't see how you had any other way. I would have never been able to get my gun out in time, Major. He would have killed both of us if he could. You did the right thing. No one will fault you for that." The Major then grabbed Curtis's rifle out from underneath him and pulled the lever down several times, emptying the bullets from the gun.

He walked over and sat on the stairs next to him. Then gently put down his gun. "Well, that's over with," he replied.

"I'm sorry, Major; it had to end that way. You know he was going to kill someone this morning. Either you or me."

The Major just stared at the ground. "What the hell was wrong with him? I've known him for many years. I looked the other way so many times in order for him to do his own thing up here. And this is how he repays me."

"He would have shot you, Major, or someone else for that matter."

"I guess you want to search this whole entire place now. Do you need a search warrant, Marshal?"

"No, there's no point in that. You cannot serve it to a dead man."

"Marshal, could you stay here for a while so I can get George the undertaker up here to take him out?"

"Yes, I'll make sure he's not touched until you get back, Major," I replied. "I'm sorry it ended this way."

The Major got to his feet slowly. "I'll see if there's something inside to cover him up." He came out of the house holding a large, brown blanket. "Christ," he said. "It's a real mess in there and it smells too."

"Give me that, Major. I will cover him. You had better get going."

About an hour had passed before George arrived on the scene. Charlie was now with the Major also. Curtis was placed in the wagon and the blanket draped over him. "Major, could I have a word with you?" The two men walked off together. "I'm going to stay here tonight. I drafted up a letter to my uncle back in

Boston, explaining everything as best I could. Could you see it gets into the outgoing mail for me? The local authorities will be contacted when I get back. Or you can contact them if you like. I really wanted to get our search done and over with before anyone else comes here. Can you get Tiny and his dogs down here soon? If those women are buried here, we need to know now, not later.”

“All right, Marshal, I'll hold off a couple of days before the locals are told about this. But I can't stop people from talking.”

“I understand but we need to get going on this right away. You better get me some food, Major. I can't leave this farm until we are completely done searching here.”

The Major shook his head. “I'll get Jimmy Stetson to start taking over feeding these animals also. I don't want them starving to death. I'll be back sometime in the morning.” The Major, along with Charlie and George, then hurried off. The main house would have to be searched along with the many barns on the property. Every inch of the soil here would have to be sniffed out by Tiny's dogs. With Curtis taken off the property, I wanted to search the main house before dark. I still had a few hours of daylight left. I made the best of my time just walking around looking for anything obvious. I would later concentrate on the house itself. The walk around the property provided me with little clues. When I actually went inside, the smell was like that of a trash container. Garbage was just thrown everywhere. A large living room was the first room I entered. I did my best to search through it all. When I entered one of the bedrooms, I could not even see the bed. It was so full of useless junk.

I did what I could with the daylight I had left. When I went down to look in the basement, cobwebs were everywhere. It appeared no one had been there for many years. Besides the filthy mess it presented, there were no signs of any missing women. Just a house with garbage strewn all about.

The next morning, the Major arrived with Jimmy Stetson. His job was to feed the hogs until we could figure out what to do with them. The Major gave him a strict assignment of coming twice a day to provide food and fresh water. When Tiny showed up, we had a meeting to organize the search of the farm. “Tiny, there's about three-and-a-half acres here. I need it all gone over. We are looking for dead bodies again. How long do you think it will take to cover all of this?”

“Major, you give me three days and if those women are buried on this farm, my dogs will find them.”

“Some of them might have been down there for a while now.”

“Doesn't matter, my dogs you can't fool. They have been trained well in cadaver hunting. You will have your answers soon.”

"Let me know if you see any old wells or caves. We have to check them also," the Marshal replied.

"Major, do you think you could work with me? I've already covered the main house. Just didn't get anything out of that. But there are quite a few barns here. I think seven in all. Each one of them will have to be searched. A lot of these hogs have to be moved away just so we can see inside."

"After we are finished, Marshal, I've got to start to arrange for these animals to be removed from here. They will have to be sold off. Then the proceeds will be given to his nephews in jail. I'm fairly sure that's all the family he had."

"Tiny, before you set off, could you check the basement of the main house here? I just want to make sure there's nothing down there."

"Will do, Marshal."

"I don't have to tell you, Major, but we need the results of this search to provide something. After all, a man was killed here."

"Do you have to tell me that! I mean I'm the man that killed him."

"It was self-defense, Major. Yours and mine for that matter."

At that moment Jimmy Stetson approached. "Well, what's the feed situation look like?"

"Major, he has two days of feed on this farm at the very most."

"All right, we will bring some tomorrow. We will try to get at least a week's worth down here. Get back there, Jimmy, and get those animals fed. I don't want any of them dead before we can sell them. Well, Marshal," the Major yelled out "What barn do you want to start with?"

Later in the day, as we were searching the entire farm, a wagon drove up. The Major quickly recognized who the visitor was. At first, I thought it was someone visiting Curtis. But he quickly made his reasons for coming known. Burt was an older fellow and without reserve. He was bald on top, with a long white beard. His stomach stretched out over his soiled pants. They were held up by a pair of dirty suspenders. He was traveling with his son, who for whatever reason, looked nothing like his father. He stood straight and tall with a full head of dark hair. Clean-shaven and with a perfect smile. He must have been somewhere in his teenage years I'd say. His name was also Burt, so I had heard. But I dare say again, looked nothing like the man.

"Major, I need to talk to you." Burt had come running up to the barn where we were moving the hogs out. "I heard that these pigs were up for sale. Is that true?"

"That might be the case. Who told you that?"

"George the undertaker. He told me what had happened up here. That damn Curtis. He got himself killed for nothing. Well, I'm here to buy hogs, Major."

“What's your offer, Burt? There are about 75 of them. All different sizes and shapes.”

“So as to not argue with you, Major, I'll give you five dollars a head.”

“Did I introduce you to the Marshal, Burt?”

“No, I have not had the pleasure.”

“This is Marshal Callahan.”

“How do you do, sir.” Burt extended his hand and I shook it. “What do you think, Major? Can I have them?”

“The problem is, Burt, I think they are worth more than you're offering.”

“What is your thinking on it? I want to take all of them.”

The Major paused as he looked around a moment. “Burt, I'll tell you what. I won't take these animals to auction. But you have to give me at least seven dollars a head. And I need them out of here right-quick-like.”

“All right, Major.” Burt then grinned. “I'll have them out of here in two days. Is that satisfactory?”

“Burt, no hogs leave this farm unless the money is in my hand. You got that?”

“Yes Major; that's a deal.” Burt quickly looked over his new hogs, jumped into his wagon, and yelled, “I'll be back in the morning, Major. I'll see you then.”

“I guess news travels fast in town, Major.”

“It does when George has a body in his wagon. He probably drove right down Main Street with old Curtis in the back. By the time he got to his place, there were probably a whole lot of people asking questions.”

“You seem to know your town quite well, don't you?”

“I should but I don't know everything. Anyway, anything in those barns at all, Marshal?”

“No, and they all seem to be cleaner than that stinking house that he lived in. That Burt fellow, tell me he's not someone I should be investigating.”

“No, Marshal, his family goes way back. He has a lot of mouths to feed on his farm. He's just a man too busy for that sort of thing. Besides his son, the other two children are adopted.”

“You know something, Major, you bring up a good point. For all this to go down without anyone speaking up about it, that person — I mean the one who did this — would have to be a loner.”

“That was my thinking on it, Marshal.”

For three days we searched the place. Each and every hog was removed from the farm. Burt had purchased all seventy-four animals. He removed them in two days as he promised and paid for each and every one of them. Things suddenly grew silent on the farm. At the end of the day, Tiny reported that he had come up

with nothing. Our search came up empty also. I realized I had a difficult telegraph to send to my uncle. He's not going to like what he reads, I thought.

"Unless Old Curtis fed these women to these hogs, Major, we have nothing."

"That's something we will never be able to prove one way or the other," the Major replied.

I decided that the best thing to do was to get that telegraph out to my uncle right away. I needed to keep him informed of our search at the farm. I'm sure he was interested in the results. The outcome here was less than a favorable one I thought. One man was dead and we had nothing to show for it. It certainly was not going to go over well back home. I also was out of suspects again. Shortly after I sent the telegraph out, I waited for his response. I received it the next day and it was exactly what I was expecting.

To Marshal Sean Callahan, we are terminating the investigation in Exeter henceforth immediately. Please report back to our Boston office by Tuesday, November 30 at 8 a.m. At that time, you will be briefed on your new assignment.

Captain James Callahan

The telegram was short but to the point. I only had the weekend here, then I would have to start back home. I would take the evening train on Monday back into Boston. I had to let Anne and her father know I was leaving. I didn't even want to think about what I was going to say to Margaret. I was running out of time rather quickly. I did not have any other suspects nor a single lead to follow up on. My thoughts were on the mess I was about to leave behind. I felt I was abandoning these people out here. A sense of worry and guilt soon followed.

That night, I stopped off at the Major's office. I had to tell him what was going on. "They are calling me back, sir."

He lowered his head and began to speak. "I figured that much. Curtis was our best shot at resolving this thing."

"I have to say, Major. I still question if he was our man. It's pretty much as you said. A very disturbing guy. But there is reasonable doubt that he was the person who took those women. He does fit the profile. A man living alone and keeping to himself," I said. "That part does make sense."

"I will never understand why he drew down on us. There was nothing at that farm. However, Marshal, I've seen hogs eat a body right down to the bone. He could have murdered those women and then just disposed of them by feeding their bodies to his animals."

"I believe you're right about that, Major. It appears he was a very dangerous man, just waiting to kill whoever stood in his way. Perhaps we will never know the truth of what really happened up there."

"I had so many close calls with him in the past. Something was bound to happen sooner or later. Maybe you did get your man after all. We will never know for sure." the Major replied.

"When I get back to Boston. I will advocate for them to send someone else here, Major. Perhaps someone better than me. Our killer could still be out there."

"They won't send anyone. You are all they're going to bring into this. Why do you think your uncle has you record everything? Yes, I see you writing in that book all the time. They are going to use that documentation to close the case down. That lets them off the hook. That book proved they did all they could do."

"I never thought of it that way, Major. But you have a good point."

"Sit down, Marshal, I want to tell you something." I immediately sat in front of his desk. He paused for a minute, then looked me straight in the eye. "Don't ever think you didn't do a fine job here. Because the truth is, you did. I think it was just going to be a matter of time before this thing blew wide open. They took that away from you. You have to follow orders. That's all there is to it."

"I have to tell Anne."

"Give her a few minutes. She's across the street getting Billy a haircut."

"I'll stop by later then, sir." The Major then waved goodbye.

When I got back to my room, I decided to make some last entries in my journal. I gave a full description of the way Curtis was killed and how a complete search of the property was done. My thoughts were with Margaret now. I had to tell her what was happening. I entered the dining room in the late afternoon. It was already filled up with people who wanted to eat and drink. Henry was turning the gas lights on as I entered. I went over and motioned to Margaret and asked her to come to the kitchen door.

"Marshal, what can I do for you?"

"Do you think we can have a word later?" She cleaned her hands on her apron.

"Of course, but right now I'm starting to get really busy. I don't have Anne to help me today so I have to keep moving."

At that moment, I heard Anne's voice. "Could you use a hand, Margaret?"

"Yes, my dear, I sure could. You know what to do; just start anywhere."

Anne said hello and started into the kitchen immediately. "Marshal, why don't you wait upstairs? When I get a moment, I will head up there?"

"Thanks, Margaret. I'll see you then."

Margaret darted back to the kitchen. I went outside for a moment to get some fresh air and just clear my head. The sun was now setting and it was getting colder. Only the people that were headed for the Inn seemed to be on the streets now. I saw Charlie locking up the stable for the night. He turned and waved my

way while standing at the entrance. I thought about how much I was going to miss these people. I turned and walked back slowly to the stairs in the lobby, then down the hall to my room.

Margaret knocked on the door several minutes later. "Please come in."

"Gee, Marshal, what is going on?"

"Please sit down. I don't want to take up too much of your time." I then pulled out the chair at the desk facing the window and closed my journal.

"You write everything in that book, don't you?" Margaret asked.

"Yes, it's a detailed description of my investigation here."

"May I see it?"

"Of course, you're probably the only one to look at it. Margaret, I know you heard that Curtis Corbet was killed."

"Yes, but I also heard that it was self-defense."

"Yes, that is true but what happened up there didn't help our cause here in town. We searched that entire farm. Every inch of it and found nothing. I had to immediately contact my boss and let him know. He replied pretty quickly right back. He now wants me to return to Boston for reassignment."

Margaret's eyes then lit up and at their widest. "But you're not finished here. It's probably been what, a month at the most? We need you here. Things in this town have never been better. I'm sure the Major is pleased with all that you have done."

"He does not control the Marshal's office. He did all he could to just get me down here this long. They want me to close this out as soon as possible. Now it may be that they will send someone else, but I can't say it will happen for sure. That part is not up to me. I know Joe and everyone else wants me to resolve this thing. In fact, he's counting on it. But I must do what my boss wants me to do. I'm sorry, Margaret."

"You did everything you could do, Marshal. And we will always be grateful for that. Have you told Anne yet?"

"No, I was going to tell her a little later. I just got done letting the Major know. He took it pretty well, I guess. Of course, you never really know what that man is thinking."

"When exactly are you leaving, Marshal?"

"I've got to be out of here at three p.m. Monday afternoon."

"Please, Marshal, come down to the dining room so I can feed you."

"I will, Margaret, and thank you for everything."

"I guess I'll see you later." She then handed me back the journal. I could tell Margaret was deeply disappointed. I couldn't help but feel I was letting her down. I would have given anything for things not to end this way.

Later that evening, I went downstairs and sat at the counter. I ordered dinner and waited for Anne to come out. She sat next to me after I had finished eating. "There's something bothering you, Sean. I can tell by the look on your face. Is it about Curtis Corbet?"

"I can't say I'm happy about that but I'm afraid it gets worse."

"What can be worse than that?" She squinted her eyes at me.

"I've been reassigned, Anne. I've got to head back to the main office on Monday."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've just come up short here. I have to go back," I said.

"Do you really, Sean? My father could see to it that you have a life here. This town needs law and order too, you know."

"No, Anne, it's best that I go back and face what I have to. They may send someone else. I really don't know. I need you to do me a favor. I want to speak with everyone at that church on Sunday. I need to ask them for their help one last time before I leave."

"Do you think that will make one of them come forward with the truth?"

"Anne, no one is going to convince me that all this happened and no one knows anything. That can't be the case. I don't know why they won't talk to me. But I'm willing to give it a try and convince them of what's right here."

Anne stared directly at me. "I'll speak with the Pastor for you. I guess that's the least I can do," she replied.

I was thankful for Anne's support. And I was sure I wanted to address them one more time before I left. There had to be someone willing to help. Someone that knew it all had to end. I was willing to give it one last chance.

What I wanted was an old-fashioned shootout in the street, to face down the person who had done this, and the winner takes all. Him or me — that's it. The Indian told me that the man of death would challenge me. What made him so sure? Perhaps he was wrong and I was looking for something that was long gone. I was quickly running out of time. That night outside, in the darkness, I waited for anything that was out there. But I just stood alone until the sun rose. I didn't want to accept it was over. Soon I would be going home and had to put all of this behind me. I knew my uncle would say that very thing when I got back. This was about following orders now. I began to think about what I would say when I got in front of all those people on Sunday morning. I didn't want to sound like a desperate man. But the truth be told, I was out of options. With no sleep the night before, I was at wit's end when I heard the bell ring for Mass to begin. I went down to the Major's office and just waited for all of them to come out. It was a cold morning standing alone outside. I could feel the chill through my

jacket but it made no difference to me. My mind was focused on the task at hand. I saw many folks walking up to the church. Some looked at me and said hello as they passed.

Others just walked on by without a care of even noticing me. Anne and Billy came out and then the Major. "I hoped I could walk up there with you folks if that is not a bother."

"Of course not," the Major replied.

"Do you know what you're going to say to them, Sean?"

"I haven't got it all thought through, Anne. I'm just going to tell them the facts. The rest, I'll just have to figure out when I'm up there."

When we arrived at the church, the Pastor was at the door greeting people as usual. I waited to be the last to go in. "Pastor, if I could have just a word with you?"

"What is it, Marshal? I have a service to do."

"I need just a few minutes to speak with these folks when you're done."

The Pastor looked nervously at the people in the pews. "Is it that important, Marshal?"

"It is, Pastor."

He paused for a moment. "All right, Marshal. Anne told me you really needed this. So, I will give you the time you ask for. But be mindful. This is the house of God."

"I will indeed, Pastor."

I then went over and sat next to Anne and Billy. I waited patiently for the service to end. After his sermon was over, the Pastor waved his hand for me to come up to the podium. Suddenly, the organ stopped and the church became silent. All eyes became fixed on me as the Pastor stepped back. I could see Anne staring at me. She then nodded her head with a look of encouragement.

I looked around at the others for a moment. I realized many of these people I had never spoken to before. I thought that it was not their responsibility to meet me. It was mine to meet them.

"I would like to introduce myself to those of you I have not met. My name is Marshal Sean Callahan. You see, it was my job to come here and meet with you all. I'm afraid that is just about the beginning of my selfish time in your town. For those of you who do not know, and again I apologize, I was sent here on a special assignment about a month ago. Major Lancaster has a lot of pull at the Marshal's office in Boston where I am from. He made the effort to get help because he is concerned for the good people of this town and has a deep commitment to all of you. No one else wanted to come and investigate what had

happened to the four young missing women. The Major alone made it possible for me to be here and I'm trying my best not to let everyone down.

Now I don't want to confuse anyone in the least. They didn't send me because I was the best they had. They sent me because I was all they had. Everyone else was out on other cases." I then stood up straight, paused for a moment, and gained my composure. "I have been sent here with only one goal in mind. And that was to find these four young ladies. Their names are Dawn Sparks, Karen Abrams, Melissa Forbes, and Traci Mahoney. Traci's son Billy sits with you here today. He's just six years old. He and I have something very much in common. Every day we wake up and want to know what happened to his mother." I then cleared my throat and looked around the room. "But the truth is I'm not only here just to find these women. I've come here seeking justice. Not just for them and their families but for all of you. You see, this is something that could happen within any of your families. All of us have a responsibility in this — no matter how small it may be. I have to believe in my heart that someone here knows something. Just that one piece of information that would help me do what I was sent out here to do." I paused for a moment and looked into Anne's eyes again and then into the others.

"My father was a Marshal for many years of his life. I certainly looked up to him and what he did for so many people. He spent much of his time hunting down the bad guys that were out there. Many nights, he was not home with us and I wondered why. I'm sure my mother sometimes thought she might never see him again. I don't know how she dealt with all of that. But now I understand why she put so much love and faith in one lawman. My father was doing something of great importance for the people who needed him most. He had brought the hope of justice to so many who had none. People who had it so hard they couldn't live one more day without his help. I swore for so long things would be different for me. What kind of person could live that way I thought, or even find someone else to understand it? But as you can see, I am a Marshal today and there isn't anything I rather be in this life."

I paused again and looked out at the many faces making eye contact when I could. "I just want to say one thing more about him. He was a very brave man. I thought if there was one day, I could be like him, it would be tomorrow. You see, on Monday at three p.m., that is the time I must leave. They are calling me back to Boston. I am being reassigned. If there is anyone here who can tell me something about what happened to these four women, please come and do so. I promise you I will have the strength inside to do what's right for you all. With your help, I will bring justice to Exeter and face down whoever did this. I will be

waiting on the street to talk to anyone who can help.” I looked back at the Pastor and nodded my head with thanks.

The organ then started again. Most of the women bowed their heads, partly from their shame of letting such a thing come to this point but also their sympathy for their families. Those who have suffered so much. Most just stood and waited for me to leave. The Pastor began an open prayer. I thought it would serve all of us well now.

“Wait, Marshal,” the Major spoke. “I’ll walk with you.”

“How did I do, Major?”

“You’re no Abe Lincoln but I thought you got your point across. Let’s see if it gives us any answers tomorrow.”

I spent the rest of the day in my room resting. Then suddenly, there was a knock on the door. When I opened it, Anne was standing there. “I brought you some food. I thought you may need to eat soon.” She placed the tray on the desk. “May I sit down?”

“Of course, sit anywhere.”

“I brought you some soup and a beef sandwich.”

“That is most appreciated; thank you.”

Anne looked around the room. “Not that great of a life living in these small hotels for so long.”

“No, I miss being home from time to time.”

“I thought what you said at church was very thoughtful and well-stated. I understand now why you can’t stay. There’s a sense of duty that comes with your job. You cannot be swayed in any direction. Except for the one you swore to do. My father lived that life as a soldier. I realize now just what all this means to you.”

“I’m glad you think that way, Anne. I knew if anyone could, it would be you. I suspect when I get back home, they’re just going to tell me to move on to the next case. Or better yet, team me up with another Marshal. Re-educate me on the finer points of this job.”

“I think you did a wonderful job here, Sean.”

“Thank you, but that would mean I caught the bad guy. And as you can see, I’ve got nothing.”

“I’ll bring all your meals to your room if you like.”

“It’s probably best, Anne . . . so everyone knows where to find me.”

After Anne left, I began to think about what I would say to my uncle back home. All I had was my journal. Weeks of work and I had nothing else — not even a suspect to relay to them. As the time drew near, I drafted a letter to Margaret. What I could not say to her, I wrote in words. I had a deep

appreciation for all the help and friendship she had given me. I left it on the desk in my room addressed to her. Then I took out my journal from the desk drawer and placed it in my bag. As for Anne, it was best for us just to part. I felt undeserving of such a person as her. It was time for me to move forward and face what was back home. And so, at exactly 2:45, I headed for the livery stable to retrieve Max. I walked down the stairs as quietly as I could, not wanting any attention to myself. I headed out the main entrance of the Inn, then turned towards the livery stable. Charlie was there waiting for me outside with Max.

He was saddled up and ready to go. "Thank you for everything," I said.

"Marshal, it's a damn shame you have to leave."

"I'll see you around, my friend." I took the reins from him and decided to just walk Max down to the Major's office. Glancing up at his window, I could see the Major and Anne looking out at me. He then raised up three fingers. That was the signal that the clock had struck three p.m. I waited for at least ten minutes. In those moments, I stood alone — failing again to reach a single person in town. I jumped up on the saddle, then rode Max out onto the long trail back to the train station. I took Max back to the livery stable — the same one that I had purchased him from a month ago. I had hoped to keep him. But with a train coming to take me to Boston, it was time to let him go. I received payment and headed for the station. It was over two blocks away or so.

It appeared very quiet for this time of night. Either I was very lucky and the train was about to come in or I had just missed it. In the distance, I could see the lanterns all lit up around the terminal. It was a cold night but with no wind. I felt that the walk was pleasant enough but started to feel alone and empty. When I went up to the counter, a man in a black vest and hat moved towards me. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I need one ticket to Boston."

"You're a Marshal, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, you must know Marshals ride for free on federal trains. You don't need a ticket."

"Yes, it just slipped my mind. When does the next train leave?"

"Marshal, unfortunately, you just missed it. The next one is in three hours."

"Well, that's the way things appear to be going for me. I'll just have to wait."

"I've got some things here to read if you're interested in them."

"No, thank you. I have a book here. I have to work on it."

"If you change your mind, just ask."

I decided to use my time preparing for the interview with my uncle. I thought I would completely review my journal. This seemed like a good way to pass the

time. I sat down under a bench near a gas light and took my journal out of my bag. Then I started reading back to when I came into John's supply store. From the beginning, when the couple boasted about the Doctor doing such a wonderful job taking care of their son in the next town over. I knew that this was exactly what my uncle would do when I gave it to him.

I did what he wanted and took precise notes of my time in Exeter. I turned the page and a note fell out. I thought it was odd, I didn't remember placing one there. I reached out to pick it up and saw writing I had never seen before.

Chapter 22

The Reaper Has a Face

“F

ather,” Anne said, “Billy has been coughing for over an hour. It's eight o'clock now. He doesn't seem to be able to sleep either. I'm wondering if I should take him over to the doctor.”

“Anne, it's late. Does he have a fever?”

“No, he's not burning up or anything.”

“Well, then, why don't you head over there and just ask him for something for his cough. Then, in the morning take him over if it doesn't stop by then.”

“All right. I'll just run over there quickly,” Anne said. “I hope he answers the door this time of night. Dad, just keep an eye on him.”

“Everything will be fine here. Just get going. It's getting late.” The Major opened Billy's door. He wanted to make sure he had eyes on him. He just sat back in his chair and waited for Anne's return.

Anne reached for her coat and headed toward the doctor's office. The walk over was only a short distance. But the darkness made it seem much longer. Anne moved slowly, extending her hands when she could not see. She crossed the alley between the two buildings and tripped on the stairs. When she arrived, she looked into the window but could only see a darkened room. She then knocked on the door without an answer. The first knock was soft but the second was even louder. She decided to turn the handle and the door opened. She was confused for a moment and just leaned in, then called out to the doctor. She waited and heard only the noise of the wind coming from the street behind her.

Cautiously, she entered wanting to make little sound. From the back room, a faint light appeared. When she got to the entrance, she held onto the door and just peered in. She could see the exam table in the center of the room and was relieved to see it empty. She decided to move forward, her eyes fixed now on the source of the faded light. Another door on the opposite side of the room was open. It certainly looked odd — as if the wall just opened up.

As she moved closer, all she could see was a set of downward wooden stairs. When she moved closer, she examined the door which was disguised as a bookcase. Nothing she thought, was what it appeared to be. She stuck her head in even further to see where the stairs led. Her mind was not able to make any sense of it. She saw cages and blood smeared on the walls. She screamed out in a state of panic. Suddenly, there were footsteps coming from the stairs below and

they were getting louder. Anne became frightened and moved backward against the exam table.

Into the room came Dr. Metcalf. "Anne, how did you get in here?"

"The door was open so I just walked in. I need your help with Billy."

"Billy? Why, what is wrong with the boy?" The doctor reached out and picked up a cloth from the counter.

"He's been coughing for some time now."

The doctor suddenly reached out and grabbed Anne with all his might. She struggled in his arms but could not move. The cloth filled with ether was placed over her mouth and nose. "Relax, Anne," the doctor said. "It's best to not struggle and let the ether put you to sleep."

Anne became very weak from the ether. Her eyes closed and she went unconscious. The doctor placed her on the exam table and closed the door to the basement itself. With a strike of a match, he began lighting the two lanterns above the exam table. The room became brightly lit. He could see Anne resting peacefully and breathing on her own. Then he reached over and shut the secret door.

"We are just going to make the best out of a bad situation," the Doctor replied. "It was better to not come in here, of course. But you did and that's a shame." He began to inspect Anne's arms, looking for the perfect vein to draw blood from. The doctor, satisfied by what he saw, turned and grabbed a needle and rubber tubing. As he started placing his supplies together, he could hear Anne moaning on the table behind him. He reached out and put more ether on the cloth. He once again placed it over her mouth. Anne immediately fell unconscious a second time. Then the doctor turned away to retrieve his supplies.

"Put everything down, Doctor."

The Doctor turned around and saw the Marshal's gun pointing at him. His eyes widened with surprise. "Marshal, I thought you left town."

"I had to come back, Doctor; it was you in Hope Valley when Melissa Forbes went missing. The boarding house widow, Molly Phillips saw you there. You lied about knowing Traci Mahoney. The gypsy women told me that."

"Why do you have that gun on me? I'm trying to care for this girl. She fainted, that's all. Put that away so I can help her."

"No, Doctor, I'm telling you to stop and back away. Don't make me shoot you."

Quickly, the Doctor's hand slid over and picked up a scalpel. He lunged at me, cutting my neck. I managed to fire one round from my Colt. We both fell to the floor suddenly at that moment. One of the overhead lanterns was swinging back and forth from the sudden impact that the Doctor made as he fell. Blood

began to pour out from out of my neck as well. I did my best to put my hand over it to make it stop. As I lay there, somewhat stunned by what just had happened, I noticed a sliver of light coming from the base of the bookcase. I arose to see the Doctor with a slug taken directly to his chest. I made my way over to find that he was dead. He was slumped in the corner of the room against the base of the cabinet.

I looked at Anne who was still breathing but not conscious. Then removed a piece of cloth from the cabinet drawer and tied it around my neck. I then thought about the strange light I had seen. Realizing there must be something behind that bookcase.

The Major next door heard the shot and rose to his feet quickly. He then went to his desk and pulled out his gun. He immediately went into Billy's room. "Listen to me. You stay in this room until I get back. Let no one in. You hear me?"

"Yes, Major." The boy watched as he went out the door. When he got outside, he could see the Marshal's horse tied up in front of the Doctor's office. The Major ran over and tried the door. As he entered, he drew his sidearm and immediately went to the back room. There he noticed Anne and the Doctor with a bullet hole in his chest. He turned to his right and saw the opened door.

Confused, he called out to the Marshal. "Marshal, are you down there?"

"Major, you better get down here," I yelled.

The Major again looked at his daughter resting on the table. He muttered something to himself and headed down the stairs. "Where the hell are you, Marshal? And for God's sake, what's going on around here?"

The Marshal came into the light and stood in front of the Major. "Why is my daughter lying on that table up there?"

"She must have walked in on him, Major. He then gave her ether to put her to sleep. He was trying to cover up his crimes."

"I think we know now who killed those women and he's lying dead on the floor upstairs, isn't he, Marshal?"

"Yes, he was going to kill your daughter next."

"What!" the Major replied.

"That's not all; you better come and look at this." The two men walked towards a set of bars. They were the entrance of what appeared to be a tunnel. "Take the light, Major, and look inside. Don't get too close to those bars." The Major took the light from the Marshal and shined it into the tunnel. He froze in disbelief at what he saw.

"I'll be damned. That's the Doctor's wife!" There she stood — dressed all in black as she was at her funeral, he thought. He called out her name. "Carmella is

that you?" The figure only glanced over and did not respond.

"Major, shine that light on her and keep it there." The Major then raised the lantern higher. Both men stared at what they saw. She then hissed at them, showing her teeth. "You say that's the Doctor's wife, Major?"

"It was his wife. She's a vampire now, Marshal!" the Major screamed out loud. "I don't know how that is even possible!"

"I see her too, but I just can't believe it either Major."

"It seems she's been fed human blood by the doctor all this time," the Major said.

"She's been kept alive by the blood of the abducted women," I said.

"That son of a bitch," the Major replied. "He took the lives of those women to keep that thing alive."

"The question is what do we do with her? I know of no law, Major, that tells me how to handle something like this."

"That's because there is no law. These things are not supposed to exist at all," the Major said.

"Look around you, Major. He has tunnels and all kinds of cages down here. What the hell was this place anyway?"

"If I had to guess, I would say this was part of the Underground Railroad."

"You mean they would hide the blacks from the south down here."

"Yes, I heard they came this way. But it was a very secretive thing. They would come to Exeter first. Then they would go to Central Falls. Onto the next state until into Canada."

"We can't let her out of there; she will hurt someone."

"I'm sure the doctor knew that and kept her hidden."

"Then, Major, she did not die after all."

"Oh, she died, Marshal. Then she came back as this thing. She would kill the both of us right now if she could get out. See how she moves around in there. She can see in the darkness. There's no telling what else she can do. I doubt very much even if your gun would be effective against her."

"I agree, Major; there's no telling what would happen if we set her free." Then, in the darkness, a faint noise could be heard. It was far off to the left in one of those tunnels with a cage door in front. "Don't tell me, Major, he has more of these things down here." Then again, a whimpering sound of pain could be heard. "It's coming from over there, Major. That tunnel against that wall." I walked to the other side of the room and shined the light on the tunnel that had a locked door. I could see a small woman lying on the floor inside. She was huddled in the corner shaking. She looked filthy and not cared for like the vampire. "Major, there's a woman in here. She looks in really bad shape. Not

like that one over there. I've got to identify who this person is right now." I then shined the light into the other cages on each side. Both appeared empty. "I think she's the only one, Major. It's just her over here and no one else."

"Well, then, Marshal, let's find out who she is."

I then bent over and shined the light back into the darkened cell again. I immediately called out to her. "Can you hear me in there?" The figure only turned and stared at me for a moment. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Please help me," a weak voice cried out.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Traci Mahoney."

"Are you Billy's mother?"

"Yes, please help me."

"I'm a Federal Marshal. Can you crawl over to this door?" I turned to look at the Major. "It's Traci Mahoney in there. She's alive."

"Just make sure, Marshal, she's not one of them." The woman struggled to move but was so weak. She only fell backward.

"I've got to break this lock off here. If I shoot it off, that tunnel may cave in. Major, can you gather any stones so I can smash this lock?"

The Major searched the room with the lantern. Then picked up a boulder. "Here, start with this." Striking the lock as hard as I could each time. I could see the screws begin to work themselves out. I just kept hitting it over and over again until finally, a piece of it fell to the floor. "You better be right about this Marshal. Or we are both dead when she gets out of there."

"I'm going to take that lamp in and get her myself." I set the lantern down so it could keep enough light on us both. Crawling on my hands and knees I finally reached her.

When I tried to talk with her, her words were the same: "Please help me." I took her into my arms. I could feel her bones through the rags on her body. She was extremely cold and dirty. We made our way to the door some ten feet away. The Major peered in at the entrance. He could see she was no vampire. It was Traci Mahoney all right. Used as a lab rat and left to die. I knew we didn't have much time. I placed her into the Major's arms when I reached the door. When I got out of the tunnel, I found myself wanting to get Traci out of there as soon as possible.

"Major, give her back to me. I've got to get her out of here now. She needs medical care, food, and water."

"Get going now," The Major said. "I'll make sure no one else is down here. And get my daughter out of here, too," he yelled.

"What about that thing over there, Major?"

"Don't worry about her. I'm going to do what the doctor should have done a long time ago." The Major began collecting all the lanterns and started unscrewing the covers on the fuel containers. When I reached the bottom of the stairs with Traci, I dared to look back. The Major was throwing lamp oil on the vampire. I could hear the hissing sounds made by her. There could be no doubt of his plan. "Get out of here!" he yelled once more. I began to move up the stairs as quickly as I could. I took Traci outside, then went back in for Anne. I took her back to her home and placed her in her room. Billy had come out and watched me lay Anne down.

"Stay with her, Billy. I've got to go get someone else." I then ran back to where I laid Traci down. She was conscious but could not walk. As I was placing her in my arms, the Major ran out.

"Where's Anne?"

"I already put her into her room."

"Stay with the women, Marshal. I'm going to get Doctor Curry in the next town over."

"I'll do what I can for them, Major. Please hurry."

"Listen to me. Give Traci all the food and water she can take. Watch my daughter's breathing. And for God's sake, let Billy stay with his mother. I'll be back as soon as I can." The Major ran to the stable to get his horse.

I checked on Anne first. She was resting comfortably and breathing well. I let her be with the idea of looking in on her again. I put together what I could for Traci to eat and drink. I gave her some time to prepare her for the rest. "I think it's best if you eat and get cleaned up." I let Billy in to see her. He was hugging his mother as if to never let go. Both mother and son were crying. I stood and just thanked God for what was happening. I wasn't sure if I could really believe it myself. "The Major is going to get a doctor here. He wants to make sure you are going to be all right. I'm just going down the road to get Margaret. She will help you get cleaned up. Just keep eating and take in as much water as you need. I will be right back."

"Marshal, please don't leave us." Traci's eyes began to show fear.

"Listen to me. The man that hurt you is dead. He can't harm you anymore. It's all over now. Just give me a moment. I'll get help for you. Billy, hang on to your mother until I get back."

"Yes, Marshal," The boy replied.

I pounded on Margaret's door.

"Who is it?" she called out.

"Margaret, it's me, the Marshal. I've got to speak with you."

Margaret opened the door. "What is it? What has got you in such a fuss? I thought you were heading to Boston."

"I need your help, Margaret. We have found Traci Mahoney. She is at the Major's place right now. She's in a bad way and I need you to do what you can for her. The Major went to get Dr. Curry. Can you help?"

"Oh, my God. Just give me a minute. I'll be right there." Margaret's face looked stunned by the news. I ran back to the Major's place as quickly as I could to check on Anne. She looked peaceful and was still breathing well. I went into Traci's room to tell her Margaret was coming. When Margaret came, I took her directly to Traci. "Oh, dear, you are in a bad way. Marshal, can you get some water heating up on that stove?"

"Yes, right away."

It took some time before Margaret could get Traci cleaned up. It was several hours before the Major showed up with Dr. Curry. He was an old Physician with plenty of experience. After he examined Traci, he told us bed rest for several weeks would be best. He explained that with this type of abuse and neglect, it was hard to gauge the damage to her internal organs. Time would only tell that story he spoke.

I stayed by Anne most of the night until she opened her eyes. Her memory of the events was sketchy at best. The most she could recall was heading for the Doctor's office. I was not disappointed in knowing that fact. She was asking for even more answers about what happened. I thought it was right, at least for now, that they came from her father. When the morning came, all seemed well under control. The Major took Billy so his mother could rest. It was a very tearful and heartfelt reunion. Anne was now on her feet and helping to make breakfast. The Major and I were sitting in his office later when the Doctor came out.

"Let me take a look at that neck wound, Marshal." I then sat in a chair and removed the blood-soaked bandage. It only took him a moment to inspect what a sharp scalpel had done. "You're lucky — that just missed your artery. If that would have sliced it open, you would be dead right now. Stay put. You need several sutures to close that. And it's got to be done right now."

After the doctor finished, he told me that eight was the number of sutures I needed. I thanked him and started to head out the door. I needed to get a telegraph out to my uncle. I'm sure he would want to know what had happened here.

"Marshal, before you go, could I just have a word with you, please?" The doctor then went back into the Major's apartment.

"I've got to ask you, Marshal, to keep it a bit short."

"What do you mean, Major?"

“I'm talking about what we saw down there.”

“I know what you're driving at, Major. I could not possibly mention something like that over the wire. No, sir, that would be too much of a shock for them. I will tell them, however, that the case has been resolved and the killer died while being apprehended. Of course, Traci Mahoney was recovered alive as well.”

“Thank you, Marshal, I appreciate that.”

“What about the Doctor's body?”

“I've already taken care of that. I got George down there early before the sun rose. He took the Doctor out of the back door and over to his place. No one saw a thing of what was going on. Traci already told me that graves are down there. She saw those women die. She also saw where he buried them. There's no doubt in my mind he would have killed her too. Then start the cycle over again by abducting more women.”

Margaret and Henry appeared at the front door, carrying baskets of food. “I've got plenty, gentlemen, and I would like to share it with you,” she said.

“Margaret, I'll be right back. I just have to let my boss know I'm still alive. He gets funny about those things, you know. Henry, can I have a word with you?” He and I stepped outside for a moment. “Thank you, Henry. I know what you did for the people of this town.”

Henry's eyes looked up at me. “I don't understand, Marshal.”

“It was you, Henry, that wrote me that note about the Doctor.”

“I'm sorry, Marshal. I wrote no such note. I can't read or write.” I then felt confused and somewhat shaken by the fact someone had gotten into my room. Nonetheless, I was grateful for the much-needed information. I suddenly remembered I had to get a message out — to let my uncle know what had happened. When I got to the Post office. I immediately sent out a telegraph. I kept my word with the Major and told the basic facts of it.

Message to Captain Callahan,

Dr. Metcalf was found to be the culprit in all four abductions. Three of them were killed by the Doctor himself. In the coming days, their bodies will be exhumed and identified. Traci Mahoney, the last person that went missing in Exeter, was found alive and is now in stable condition and receiving medical care. Doctor Metcalf was killed during his apprehension. Other suspects are unlikely. Will be returning to Boston as soon as possible. Requesting that the case in Exeter, RI be officially closed.

Respectfully,

Marshal Sean Callahan

My work in Exeter, as far as I was concerned, was over. There was just a matter of finishing my business with the Major. When I got to his office, he was sitting at his desk as usual, smoking and drinking. "Come on in, Marshal. Let me get you a cup of coffee." The Major then dashed back into his apartment and I took a seat. I knew we had things to talk about. When he came out, he handed me a cup, then picked up his brandy bottle and offered me a touch.

I looked into my cup and said, "Why not, Major? I think we earned it."

He smiled. "You know, sometimes this stuff is like mother's milk — it keeps you alive and well."

"I'll try and remember that, sir."

The Major tilted the bottle to his mouth once more. "All right, Marshal, did you get your telegraph off to your uncle?"

"Yes, I did. I'm sure in a few minutes, he will be aware of what happened down here." The Major stood, puffing on his cigar. "When I get his response, I can be moving on from here."

"Marshal, you did a fine job. Your uncle can be very proud of you. There's just that nasty issue of what we saw in that basement."

"You mean that vampire woman?"

"Please, Marshal, don't be so loud." He waved his hand. "I don't want anyone to hear. I was hoping you and I could just let that be left out of everything. You know that sort of thing could really hurt this town. I mean, think of your friend Joe and all, making such a large investment in the Inn. The only people that would come here would be freaks looking for something that was long gone. This is a sensitive issue here, Marshal."

"What about Traci, Major?"

"I've already talked to her. You saved her life. Hell, you saved her son's life. She's going to go along with whatever you say, Marshal."

"Do I really have a choice, Major? I came to help this town. I thought that's what I was doing. Now, if I speak of what really happened in this place, I will destroy it."

The Major shook his head. "You see why everyone is on board with this, Marshal. This can never be told to anyone." It would only take a few hours before my uncle responded back to me. The telegram was sent over to the Major's office immediately. When I read it, I knew it was time again to leave.

"Well, Major. He congratulated me on a job well done. But he insists that I head right back this time. So once again, I have my orders. I'm going to say goodbye to everyone in town. I just need a ride to the train station."

"What for?" The Major asked. "You have your own horse."

"Not anymore — that damn horse ran away and I can't find him."

“What the hell are you talking about? He's in the stable right now.”

“No, that's Billy's horse in there now. Mine just ran off. That's what I'm going to tell my uncle, Major. He just plain ran off.”

“All right, I understand,” The Major said with a smile. I then went in and knocked on Traci's door. She and Billy were talking while sitting on her bed. “I just wanted to say goodbye. I have your statement and will turn it over to my boss. The local authorities will take over the case from here. The bodies of the women will have to be exhumed and identified by their medical examiner.”

“Marshal, thank you for everything.” Tears filled her eyes. “I can never repay you for what you did,” she said.

“You know those others I wish I could have saved them, too. I will always think of them. I'm sure we will see each other again. I spoke with the Major. Are you sure you are okay with everything?”

“Yes Marshal, and I understand it all, too.”

“Goodbye, Billy. And take care of Max for me, will you?”

“You're not taking him, Marshal?”

“No, I'm giving him to you. You're going to need him to take you all into town. Take care of your mom and the horse. Do you hear me? Tracy, about your mother. I could never put into words what she did to hold all this together. She always believed one day you would come home.” I handed Tracy back the purse she lost that day. She saw the butterfly once again, then tears filled her eyes. “I believe this belongs to you.”

When I turned to leave, I saw Anne standing in front of the stove in the kitchen. She turned slowly to me. “I guess this is it. You're leaving.”

“I've been called back again. Only this time, I'm leaving on a different note, I guess. I hope you don't mind. I asked your father to give me a ride to the train station.”

“No, why would I mind that? I feel all right now. I can handle things here by myself.” There was a moment of silence and gathering of thoughts. “Do you? I mean, have nothing else to say, Sean?” I walked toward her. My heart was pounding and I took her in my arms.

Looking directly into her eyes, I kissed her. “I will be back, Anne. You know I will. You have my word on that.”

“Don't take forever, Sean. I mean, I only have so much time and all.” We both smiled and kissed again.

I went outside and started loading my things in the wagon, then said goodbye to Margaret and Henry. “You're sure about that note, Henry?”

“I wish it was me, Marshal, but someone else deserves the credit.”

“Goodbye, Margaret, I know I'll see you again.”

“We’ll talk then, Marshal. Please go before I start crying.”

Charlie just waved as the Major got the horses moving on the way to the train station. The Major talked about my uncle and about how many times he faced death in the war. He told me that in the Battle of Cold Harbor, 7000 Union soldiers died in less than an hour. My uncle barely survived it all. “You Callahan’s are a lucky bunch when it comes to life,” he said. My thoughts were on Anne now. I closed my eyes, thanked the lord above, and somehow began to believe.

Chapter 23

Professor Zurich and the Truth

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he Major and I parted ways at the train station. We shook hands and said our heartfelt goodbyes. We both knew I would return to Exeter in a short time. He thanked me again for a job well done. And in an instant, I was alone, and on my way back home. I spoke to the very same person I did last time — only he had better news. The train would be arriving within the hour. It didn't seem to matter that much now and a sense of calm came over me. I was no longer apprehensive about what would be next. I did my job and only looked at it with reflection now.

I was glad the people of Exeter were able to live in peace. For the families of the women killed, at least they had some kind of closure of what had happened. Perhaps they received some type of justice after all.

I wish I could have brought them all home. That part of the job will stay with me. Always thinking something more could have been done. When I thought again about the note I found — the one that told me about what the Doctor had done — I now knew in my heart who put it there. I chose to spare her of any further humility. She had made the right decision in the end and that's all that mattered to me now. When I boarded the train, I was later told that the steam locomotive was going to be traveling thirty miles per hour for our entire trip. Our expected arrival time in Boston would be seven p.m. The trip home was a somber experience, talking to no one the whole time. I looked out the window and saw no one either. Only the darkness of night was out there. Then the air grew colder and my time alone seemed to just drag on. I stayed at the compound that night. By the time I got to Boston, it was just too late for an office visit. I tried to prepare myself for the meeting with my uncle. I was returning to where it all began, I thought.

Certainly, things about me were different than when I had left. The Compound was empty and gave me time to think. When I woke up the next morning, I was able to scrounge some coffee from downstairs. Then I went back and visited the horses. Time passed quickly and I had to make my way to the Federal Building several blocks away. I walked slowly, trying to enjoy my last moments of peace. When I entered the place, Joe was sitting in his usual chair just beside the stairs. As I approached him, he stood up and gave me a brief look.

“New rule, Marshal. All weapons are to stay down here. Nothing is taken upstairs anymore.” I removed both of my guns and handed them over. “They will be safe in a locker when you need them,” he said. He waved his hand

without a care for me to go up. As I walked up the stairs. I thought to myself, well at least the man is consistent at what he does. When I got to the top of the stairs, I went over to the counter and waited.

Katie came over and said, "Take a seat. I'll let the captain know you're here." After several minutes, she reappeared. I followed her to the lobby outside my uncle's office. She went inside and spoke with him for a moment. She then came out and told me to go in.

"Come on in, Sean. I have a lot of things to do today and I don't want to drag this out. Take a seat. Did you bring your journal with you?"

"Yes, sir. I have it here."

"Good. I will review it and get back to you as soon as I can. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yes," I said awkwardly. "I was wondering. Who do I give the expense slips to?"

"Just give them to Katie. She will see they get where they need to go. Anything else?"

"Well, I wanted to know about my next assignment."

"The Colonel wants me to give you some time off so you can reflect on your duties and responsibilities here as a Marshal."

"Yes, sir."

The captain pulled a sheet of paper and began to read it. He looked up. "That's it, Sean. You may leave."

"Yes, sir." As I arose from the chair, his words seemed to cut through me like a knife. I again began to doubt myself and my abilities. I felt empty as if I had no more to give.

"Goodbye, Uncle." My voice crackled with pain and sadness. He then simply nodded his head.

When I turned, there was a knock at the door. Katie stuck her head in and said, "Professor Zurich is here to see you, Captain."

"Send him in, Katie." The door opened suddenly and an older gentleman entered. He was in his late fifties, I would guess. He had gray hair with a matching beard. He was thin and about my height, six feet. He had on a dark suit with a black tie. "Professor, it's good to see you. This is my nephew, Sean. He's just starting with us."

"How are you, young man?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"Well, good day to you, Sean," my uncle replied.

I reached for the door, opened it, and was startled by what I saw. There in the lobby of the room were at least twenty-four marshals. They were standing on

each side of the room cheering for me with applause. My uncle and the Professor came out as well. Everyone seemed to be clapping and praising me. Bixby and the Sergeant came over and shook my hand.

“Fine job you did, my boy,” the Sergeant said.

Bixby grabbed my shoulder and said, “Sean, everyone is proud of you. I don't know how the hell you pulled it off. But you did it.”

Then the Colonel came over and shook my hand. “Go ahead, Sean. Shake all the Marshals’ hands. You deserve all the recognition for what you did, son. They are here to honor you.” They quickly introduced themselves and congratulated me. I could barely hold back my tears of joy. I knew I was lucky things turned out as they did and I didn’t deserve any praise. I was just so happy that I made it back home and was able to be with my family again.

I looked back at my uncle, who could hardly contain himself. I could see the pride on his face and it meant the world to me. The Professor stood by his side and kept applauding. Each secretary came out and stared and smiled. This was my day, I thought. The one I believed would never come. Somehow, I could feel my father standing beside me.

The Colonel then asked us to step into my uncle's office. “Sean, I can't tell you what you have done for us. The youngest Marshal we have, on his first assignment, takes down a serial killer in Rhode Island. What are they calling him, Captain?”

“The Reaper of Washington County.”

“Yes,” he smiled. “I'll be damned. Wait until the Providence Journal and the local newspapers get a load of this story. You know gentlemen, I'm running for Senator.”

“Yes, sir. My uncle told us.”

“I hear you kept a journal of all the events that happened there.”

“Yes, I did. My uncle has it.”

“Perfect . . . because I'm going to read every word of it. There will be lots to talk about on the campaign trail now. This is an office that gets things done. That will be my slogan. A man who gets things done. Just tell me what you want. What can I do for you?”

I paused for a moment and looked directly at my uncle. “You remember Tommy Christian, Uncle?”

“I seem to recall meeting him.”

“He would like a shot at becoming a Marshal like myself.”

“Well,” said the Colonel, “get him in here. If he can pass our program, he's in. Make it happen, Captain.”

“Yes, sir. I'll speak with him right away.”

“All right, that's settled then. I'll see you men.” The Colonel left with a smile and a story to tell.

“Gentlemen, let's sit for a moment,” the captain said.

“Thank you, Uncle. You really had me going there.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise. I hope it was.”

“It was indeed, Uncle.”

“Sean, I want to introduce you again to Professor Zurich. He heads up our International Crimes Relations Bureau.”

“What that means, Marshal, is that I have been known to hunt criminals all over the world. As it stands, I'm looking for a man named Francisco Escobar. I was told he passed through the Town of Exeter quite some time ago.”

“Yes, sir, he did. Kept to himself. Then just left.”

“Left for where?” the Professor asked.

“I was told he was heading South. That's really all I know.”

“This man, was he traveling alone?”

“As far as I know, he was.”

“Did anyone describe him to you?”

“I heard them say he was in his late thirties, maybe forty. He had pale skin with dark hair and a medium build. Always a sharp dresser in dark clothes. Does that seem familiar, Professor?”

“Possibly. How long did he stay there?”

“I was told two weeks. He stayed in one of the back rooms and was not to be disturbed for any reason. I asked about him visiting Hope Valley, but no one saw him there. I tried to connect him with any type of crime but I could not.”

“I've got an idea,” the captain said. “Why don't the both of you have lunch on me? I've got a Marshal out there that I need to brief. So, look, take your time. I'm sure Patty's Pub is open. Enjoy your lunch and the both of you men can talk some more.”

“Thanks, Uncle.”

“Sure, why not?” the Professor replied.

We left my uncle's office and headed downstairs. Joe extended his hand and gave a smile. “So, you were in on it too?”

“Your uncle wanted it this way. We all had our roles to play this morning, Marshal.” He handed me both my guns. “Have a great day, gentlemen.”

“They must like you, Marshal. Everyone seems to be having a good time when you're around.”

“I think they are happy with the way things turned out in Exeter. As the Colonel says, it will probably make the newspaper and that makes us look good.”

We left the main entrance, turned right, and walked several blocks until we arrived at the corner of Commonwealth and Court Street. There, above the gas lights read a sign: Patty's Pub. "Have you been here before, Professor?"

"Oh, yes. Several times with your uncle. We would come here to talk about certain cases and eat our lunch." When we got inside, a long bar was to the left, stretching almost the whole distance from front to back. It was already full of patrons. "Come this way, Marshal. We usually sit in the back where we can talk privately." There were tables of all sizes spread across the room. On the far wall were several booths. That's where we sat down. The waitress soon followed.

"Do you men want something from the bar?"

"I'm thinking some type of ale would do nicely," the Professor said.

"I'll take the same, please."

She placed the menus on the table and then pointed to the specials on the board. "I'll be right back with your drinks."

"So, tell me, Marshall. You sustained some injuries. What exactly happened to you? If you don't mind me asking, of course."

"Not everyone has respect for the law, Professor."

He shook his head in agreement. "Marshal, do you mind talking about what went on in Exeter?"

"No, sir. I have no problem speaking about it at all. I mean it's not public information but you're one of us — so why not?"

"Good, I hoped you would say that. I requested to meet with you when you were in Exeter. But other issues came up and I could not get down there. I'm quite curious about some details that went on."

"If I can be of help, Professor, I certainly will."

"Thank you, Marshal."

"I wanted to know why they dug up those graves. I read an article in the newspaper. But I thought perhaps there might be more to it than that."

"You know, sir. That's a subject I left alone. My uncle told me not to pry into that — it wasn't what I was there for. But I will tell you this. It was something they regretted because it gave them an awful image to others who heard the story. Something they just didn't consider when they started."

"I see. They didn't think they should have done it after all."

"No Professor, they let superstition get the best of them. Later it was something they didn't even want to talk about."

"I need to know something, Marshal. At the time when Francisco Escobar was there, were there any unexplained deaths?"

"You think he may have killed someone when he was in town?"

"It's possible and that may be what drove him off in the first place. Please think very hard. This is a very important point." I paused for a moment and just looked at the Professor. "There was one that comes to mind. The Doctor's wife passed away at that time. I thought it was just from natural causes. You know with him being a doctor and all. He would have knowledge of that."

"After what has happened, Marshal, we cannot assume anything like that anymore. What was her name?"

"Carmella Metcalf. I was told she was a most beautiful woman."

"What did the doctor say was her cause of death?"

"When I interviewed him, he said it was some sort of blood clot. I thought it bothered him a great deal, so I didn't talk much about it."

The waitress then brought over two glasses. "Could we just have several more minutes to decide?"

"Of course, just call me over when you are ready."

"Thank you, dear," the Professor said. "Marshal, were you able to speak to the woman you found alive?"

"Yes, her name was Traci Mahoney."

"Did she speak about what she experienced when she was held captive?"

"Not much, Professor. She was kept in a small, locked tunnel in the basement — under horrible conditions."

"Was it always kept dark in that chamber where you found her?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I must be straight with you, Marshal." The Professor paused. "Have you ever heard the term Vampire?"

"Yes," I said. "I think it's mostly just folklore, isn't it, Professor?"

"Back in the old country, I assure you, it is not. These are people that must constantly kill in order to drink their victims' blood."

"You mean like Francisco Escobar — a Vampire?"

"Yes, exactly like him."

"You think he killed the doctor's wife?"

"Either killed her, Marshal or turned her into a vampire. If that happened, the only way to kill her would be to cut her head off, then drive a stake through her heart, pinning her to the earth."

"That seems like an awful lot, Professor. Can't you just set her on fire or something?"

"No, Marshal. You see, Satan on his most powerful day of the year could just resurrect the Vampire from her ashes, therefore, bringing her back to life again. You seem perplexed about something, Marshal. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

I paused and placed my hand on my forehead. “How much time do you have, Professor?”

“How much time do you need, young man?” he asked.

Epilogue

I

n the weeks that passed, Professor Zurich and I became good friends. He was a man I knew I could trust. I had to tell him what had transpired in Exeter. He understood my hesitancy to divulge the actual events of what happened. He would later convince me that it would be best if we both spoke to my uncle on this matter. I was relieved to find that they already suspected that something unusual had occurred there. Later, under great duress, my uncle reported it to the Colonel. He was grateful for the information. But he also realized we had another huge problem on our hands. We could no longer deny what we had come to know as fact. Tommy would later join our organization, becoming a United States Marshal. He was a natural and became a valuable member of our organization. The Colonel wasted no time in figuring out what to do with our situation.

An alliance was formed by myself, Tommy, and Professor Zurich. A special unit was put together to hunt vampires. They were to be eradicated from the United States completely — all under the secrecy that they didn't exist at all. Those adventures would be told in another story. Margaret moved back home with her mother. I do occasionally see her and understand even more why she had to leave. I know now that she was the one who placed the note in my journal. I think of her often, sometimes passing by her home just to say hello. I will always be grateful to her. Joe and his wife proudly took over the Inn, which is going as strong as ever. His entire family seemed pleased with the change. The people of the town enjoy their time there and it remains a happy place. As for the Major, I learned of his passing the following year. But before he did, I asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. It didn't matter that I only knew her for a short time. I loved her with all my heart. And with her father's approval, of course, she accepted.

Anne would later move into my house with my sister and mother. They were planning a spring wedding at the church where my mother prayed every day. We later moved into a small cottage just down the street. Anne had found a letter inside the Major's desk. It was addressed to her. I cannot speak of the last words a devoted father writes to his daughter. Nor would I dare to ask her.

But what she did say is that the Major wanted to be buried at the Chestnut Hill Cemetery in Exeter — the town he gave so much for and loved. He requested that his headstone be unmarked, leaving no evidence of where his final

resting place would be. But Anne and I knew — as did all those who attended his funeral that day. His name was Major Jeremiah Linwood Lancaster and it was not on his headstone. It didn't need to be. Because everyone knew who he was.

An incredibly courageous man who took down the Reaper of Washington County.

THANK YOU

T

hanks for reading **The Reaper of Washington County**. I really appreciate the fact that you took the time to read my book, and in a way, go on this journey with me. I am hoping one day in the future we can do it again. You know there is no better way to compliment an author than to write a review. Good or bad, I'm sure Amazon will post your comments. Also, if you enjoyed this book, please consider reading the sequel **Reaper II The Knights of Darkness**. It is now available on Amazon. This is an exciting story where the action never stops as the marshal's team fights organized crime and vampires all across New England at the end of the 19th century. With all sincerity, thank you so much.

<https://www.amazon.com/Reaper-Knights-Darkness-StevenBanner-e-book/dp/B0D334LFPX/>

Best Regards,
Steven Banner.