

*Poole Family Reunion – Carthage, Missouri**Summer, 2010*

“There is no conclusive evidence of what happened to Hamish Poole.” Beth Poole-McInnis brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear as she looked into the small sea of faces at her family reunion. “What we know is that he had a family near the Missouri-Kansas border. He enlisted with the home guard so he could remain close to his homestead and out of the fighting in the eastern states. Hamish was pro-Confederate although he didn't own slaves. One night in 1864, he told his wife that he was going to play cards with friends and he never returned home.” She smiled at her relatives. “Of course, his boys married and had families of their own, which brings us together, but poor Cordy never got over the mysterious disappearance of her beloved husband. Some say he joined the Knights of the Golden Circle, a band of men from the South and a few from northern states who wreaked havoc against the Yankees and often ambushed Union payrolls to finance their war efforts. Others say he got tired of trying to support his Southern Belle wife and abandoned her by setting out for Texas or even Mexico. We know that the Union payroll was recovered, but maybe he took a cut and decided to live in secret afterward. I doubt we'll ever truly know what happened to him.”

*Western Missouri – Twenty miles from the Kansas border**1864*

Hamish Poole braced his shoulder against the cabin doorway and puffed on his pipe while he looked out into the yard. His wife, Cordelia fought the wind as she hung laundry on the clothesline. The wind, an ever present nuisance to Cordy, provided relief from the oppressive heat savaging the summer crops.

"You might offer some help to the woman who bore you two fine sons." Cordy lifted a miniature shirt from the laundry basket. It waved like a white flag under the glaring sun. Hamish tamped out the pipe and strode across the yard to pin the shirt on the line.

"Yes, ma'am. Always an honor to assist a lady."

Hamish had brought her to Missouri from Little Rock and a fancy mansion where she had whatever she wanted at the tip of her fingers. At the start of their marriage they had hired help, an old woman who prepared meals and cared for the boys while Hamish, a gunsmith by trade, established his business and Cordy arranged sewing circles and church socials in town. In the three years since the war's beginning, Cordy had learned the hard way how to wash, mend, garden and feed her men. Lucky for him, she wasn't a complainer. Someday soon, he promised her silently, she'd be restored to her rightful place as lady of the manor. A woman like her deserved the best, not some sorry dirt farm in wind-blown Missouri. If everything went according to plan tonight, next week they'd be on their way to establishing a new, free colony in Mexico.

"Something wrong, Hammy?" She took a clothes pin from him. "You're here, but your eyes were chasin' rainbows some other place."

"Nothin's wrong, darlin'." He forced a smile. "Just daydreamin' about things once this war is over."

"One day at a time," she reminded him. Some days it seemed like the end would never come.

Their sons, Grover and Terrence, tore over the brittle grass, grins of delight on their thin faces.

"Mr. Stanton is comin'!" Grover, the youngest shouted.

Cordy paused, clothes pin her her mouth. She removed it and turned a sharp look on Hamish. "Did you invite Miles over today?"

Eleven years married to a woman as gentle as butterfly wings on the inside and tough as hardtack on the outside, Hamish hated to lie to her. "Could be it's just a friendly visit. Nothin' wrong with that."

Her hazel eyes narrowed. "You want to go play cards with your friends tonight."

He cleared his throat. For the first time since he was a newlywed, he felt uncomfortable in front of his wife. "That might've crossed my mind."

Miles Stanton rode up in the yard and doffed his hat. "Mrs. Poole. You are lookin' lovely today."

She ignored his greeting. "Butterin' me up so you can steal my husband away?"

Miles grinned. "If you don't mind sparin' him for a few hours. I promise to return him in one piece."

A spark of worry flared in Cordy's eyes. "You missed work today, Ham. Are you sure you ought to go out tonight?"

"Old man Tinsley has a matched pair of bays that would look mighty fine pullin' your buggy, Mrs. Poole," Miles said.

"I haven't got a buggy," Cordy retorted.

"All the more reason for Hamish to win them. He'd be forced to buy you a buggy." Miles put his hand on his saddle horn, an indication that he was ready to go. "We won't be more than a few hours. Everyone playin' knows Ham can't stand to be away from his family too long."

Cordy looked between them as if she could sense the lie and meant to call them on it.

"I'll be home before you know it," Hamish promised.

She stood on her tiptoes and placed a kiss on his face. "You best come back with a pair of bays or I'll be desperately mad at you. Be careful."

With nightfall, the wind vanished. It was both good and bad. The lack of wailing wind let the six men mounted on horseback hear every sound in Bent Creek, Kansas. Sounds that were important in their heist. It also afforded their enemies the same advantage.

The horse beneath Hamish shifted restlessly before extending his neck to snatch a bite of stray grass growing beside the livery.

“A few more minutes and we’ll be rich men. Startin’ fresh and livin’ easy in Mexico.” Miles sounded confident, but the look on his face in the pale light of the sliver of white moon looked frightened and harsh.

For a few seconds, Hamish considered turning his horse and leaving town. He wasn’t a thief. All the reasons he’d agreed to help the Knights of the Golden Circle swirled in his mind like buzzards around a carcass.

A bank clerk, a verified sympathetic copperhead, passed information to Captain James Randall about a secret Union payroll passing through Bent Creek. The Knights planned to start over again in Mexico amid other Southerners seeking refuge in a colony where a man could be free and not smothered by Northern aggressors. The only way to fund such a dream—and reap justice on unwanted government—was to rob the bank. Hamish and five other Knights were meant to break into the bank while several other Knights provided a distraction. Robbing a bank went against all the values and morals he’d learned from his hard-working parents, but these were desperate times.

Out of the darkness a high-pitched cry broke the silence of the night. The rebel yell, a bone-chilling scream meant to rouse the abolitionists from their beds. The horses fought their bits and danced at the unexpected noise. Lights appeared in several windows and some windows opened with gun barrels pointed out them.

“Come and get us, you damned Yankees, if you’re not too afraid of the boogeymen!”

The taunts elicited a volley of shots. Shouts from the outraged townsfolk mingled with the sounds of babies crying, dogs barking and snorts from frightened livestock. Hidden in the shadows, the Knights watched the citizens of Bent Creek in various states of dress mount up to chase away the self-proclaimed demons.

Hoof beats pounded out of town, but the sounds of restless women and children still echoed around them.

“Let’s go,” Captain Randall, motioned his companions. They circled around the dark streets and up to the front door of the bank. A plain, clapboard building with a single extinguished lantern by the door, it looked an unlikely place to leave thousands of dollars.

Randall dismounted, motioned for the others to do the same and kicked in the door. Hamish drew his pistol and held his breath, half expecting to be met by law enforcement. John Parson, their copperhead friend, threw his hands in the air.

“For the love of God, Randall, you scared me but good.” He lowered his shaking hands. “All that yelling and the gunshots make me wish I’d taken more time in the privy before this started.”

Randall pulled his bandana down and smirked. “Just unlock the vault so we can start loadin’ the goods, turncoat.”

Hamish looked at Miles over his bandana. His heart was racing like a jackrabbit running from coyotes. The vault door opened, revealing stacks of burlap bags, each stuffed full of money and gold.

“It’ll all be over soon.” Miles eagerly reached for two heavy sacks. He grunted with the effort of lifting them. “To our brothers in the Knighthood. Long live the Southern way of life.” He waddled out of the bank as Hamish tucked his pistol away to take two bags from Randall.

The most gold Hamish ever touched at once was a few coins. It had been years since he’d seen so much as gold dust. The weight of the bags was incredible. He couldn’t get his mind

around the idea that such riches now belonged to him. Or at least part of them. He could buy Cordy store bought dresses and feed his family for years on just a handful of the shining coins. Excitement pushed all the fear out of him.

The Knights strapped the loot to their saddles and prepared to mount their horses. Hamish had one foot in the stirrup when Parson dashed out of the bank.

“Help! Help! The bank is being robbed by Rebels! Get help!”

“You dirty little--” Randall snarled from behind his bandana and pulled his gun. “Go on, boys. I’ll be right behind you.” A gunshot punctuated his words.

The Knights spurred their horses into a gallop. The thunder of rifles burst around them, throwing bullets into the velvety sky. The air was rank with the acrid smell of gun smoke. It seemed like mere heartbeats separated them and their pursuers. Feverishly, Hamish wondered why the townsmen had given up pursuit of their comrades to chase them instead.

Something hit him hard in the side, like a sucker punch. The air whooshed out of his lungs and he collapsed against his horse’s neck.

“Ham!” Miles shouted from a hundred miles away. “Hang on.”

Caught up in the stampede of panicked horses, his own mount didn’t give up the chase, but paced alongside Miles’s horse. The initial shock of the hit wore off and Hamish sat up, stunned, but certain he wasn’t shot. Miles jerked his mask down and smiled.

“Thank God,” he mouthed over the pounding hooves.

They rode until the horses lathered, nearing Indian Territory and alternately firing shots of their own until the Bent Creek group fell back.

“Everyone still alive?” Randall asked, circling the Knights. Rivers of sweat poured down his face, cutting white streaks through the dirt crusted there. “More important, everyone still got their cargo?”

"Hamish is hurt." Miles dismounted and came to Hamish's side.

Every breath Hamish took made the pain burn like devil's fire. He looked down at his stomach and discovered a wide pool of blood spreading over his clothes and onto his saddle.

"Damn, boy, you're shot," Randall said. "Bad by the looks of it."

Weakness grabbed Hamish, making the cold, bright stars swirl around his head like snowflakes. "Miles?"

"He ain't gonna last the night, if he even makes it through the next couple o' hours," someone said.

"There's a family along this road, Miles. You best take Hamish there and see if they can do anything to help him. Or if they can fetch a preacher."

Randall's voice cut through the fog in Hamish's head. "I promised Cordy," he started, but Miles shushed him.

His friend grabbed the reins. His voice cracked as he spoke. "One way or another, we'll rendezvous at the cave like planned to split the gold."

"Good enough. C'mon boys." Randall and the others disappeared on the road with only the sounds of shod hooves against rocks announcing their presence.

Time passed in a blur of blackness and pain for Hamish. One second he was slouched on his horse and the next he was lying on a bed in an unfamiliar house with several concerned faces around him.

Miles cried quietly beside him. "I'm so damned sorry, Ham. What'll I tell Cordy? And the boys?"

"Take care of them, Miles. Watch out for... my family," Hamish pleaded.

"What happened here?" A big, burly man demanded.

"We were waylaid by bushwhackers. They shot Hamish and now--" Miles broke off with a sob.

"Bushwhackers?" the big man repeated. "When? Where?"

"Down the road. They--"

Furious pounding came from the front door. The color seeped out of Miles' face. Everyone in the cabin fell still. Hamish tried to raise his head, but failed.

"This is Sheriff Don Barnes from Bent Creek. I demand entry. A group of masked Confederates robbed our bank hours ago."

All eyes fell on Miles and Hamish. Miles rose to his feet. "I'll go. I'll turn myself in. Just don't let them take Ham. He's got a wife and two boys. They don't deserve this."

Hamish reached out to grab Miles, but his fingers barely grasped his friend's shirt sleeve. Like a man without hope, Miles turned his pistol over to the burly man and went to the door with his hands raised. Black spots obscured Hamish's vision and his protests lodged in his throat. He tried to smile as Miles cast one last look back at him.

The Marlin family buried Hamish past their orchard the following morning. They found a battered brass pocket watch in his waistcoat with an engraving on the back stating, *To Ham from your loving wife*. A badly scratched photograph of a dark-haired woman was cut to fit inside the watch. Other than that, there was nothing identifying the man. Despite his grumbling Dirk Marlin carved a marker simply reading *Hamish, 1864*.

Missouri State University – Springfield, Missouri

Fall, 2010

Beth Poole-McInnis tucked her notes in her briefcase and prepared to leave the classroom. She chatted with the history professor for a few moments before making eye contact with a blond young woman at the door. She pardoned herself from the professor and made her way across the classroom.

The girl smiled timidly. "Hi, Mrs. McInnis. I'm Tracy, I was just in your lecture. It was interesting."

Beth was used to all sorts of stories about students' relatives in the Civil War and figured she was about to hear another one. "Thank you, Tracy. Do you have a question about the lecture?"

"Not really." Tracy chewed on a fingernail before looking up again. "It's about that slide from the presentation, the one with the dark-haired lady that you said was your great-great grandmother."

Intrigued, Beth nodded. "Cordelia Poole."

"I know her." Tracy blushed. "I mean, my folks have a picture of her too, except we didn't know her name."

"How?" Beth peered closely at the student. "How did you get it?"

"My dad says that my great-great-great grandfather found it in a pocket watch. Two guys rode up in the night, one of them bleeding pretty badly. He said the guys robbed the bank in Bent Creek, Kansas before the war ended. The pocket watch belonged to the man who died."

Excitement buzzed through Beth. She dropped her briefcase and opened it for a pen and pad of paper. "Names. Do you have names?"

"Um, the watch said to Ham or something."

"Hamish?" Beth prompted.

"Yeah, maybe," Tracey nodded. "Let me give you my dad's number, he can tell the story better than me."

Poole Family Reunion – Hamish Poole Memorial Service

Present Day

Beth placed a mason jar filled with wild flowers between the graves and smiled at the inscription on the tombstone.

Hamish and Cordelia Poole

Reunited at long last

A little under a hundred and fifty years and Hamish was once again at his wife's side. He wasn't a spectacular hero, and probably not much of a villain, only a concerned man who wanted to give his family a better life.

Beth looked at the headstone once more, then headed back to folding tables and chairs set up for the reunion. She smiled at Art Bailey and his daughter Tracy, who were preparing to tell the Poole clan about Hamish's adventure. Beth cleared her throat.

"Remember last year when I spoke about Hamish Poole? I said how unlikely it was that we'd ever discover what happened to him. Well, today I have some people here who can provide the answers we've waited so long to learn. Let's give a warm welcome to Art and Tracy, whose ancestors took in a dying man in his last moments."