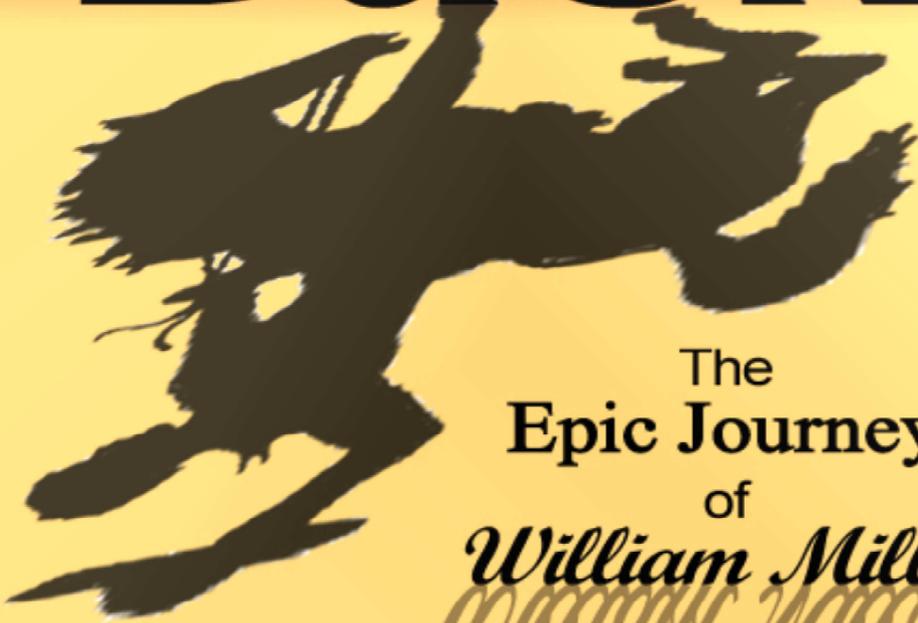


Just Call Me

BUCK



The
Epic Journey
of
William Miller
W.M. Miller

BRENDA AND DANNY BREEDEN

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Prologue

In 1868, Wilsonville was a farming community located east of a tributary of the Greater Miami River in Western Ohio. Most of the surrounding countryside was nothing more than a patchwork of small homesteads; the folks there worked long hours to produce enough food for their families.

Steam locomotives had to refill their boilers and bring on firewood. As a result, a town soon grew around each of these stops. The small town of Wilsonville sprang up almost overnight when the Railroad built a station and a water tower there.

The Midwest was becoming civilized, with doctors, store clerks, teachers and all the other small town professionals. Gone were the Indians and Pioneers. The railroad had brought a new era of law and order to what was once a wild and lawless land. Farther to the west, the country retained more of its raw and untamed state.

The Railroad's steady advance through the heartland was forcing progress into its midst.

However, a few rugged men still lived by their own set of rules, governed not by Eastern laws but by their savage surroundings. Death was their constant companion. Their end could come at any moment, caused by the slightest mistake or hesitation to act. This is the story of one such individual.

Chapter One

“Ashes to Ashes”

As Willie slowly walked down the dark road to town, his thoughts drifted back to a better time. One filled with the warmth of his mom and dad sitting around the supper table with him. He could almost smell the hot apple pies or blackberry cobblers his mother often baked for dessert.

No matter how exhausted his father was from working the land, he always smiled around Willie and his mother. It did not matter whether he had spent the day plowing the back forty, or clearing brush from yet another overgrown section of their two-hundred acres; his father always tried to keep the family's spirit up. Willie was proud to be William Adam Miller Jr.

Willie's cot was in the half loft over the main room, which served as both kitchen and living room. The house had little by way of furniture. As was the case with most of the local farmers, Willie's father had made all the pieces. The exception being Willie's mother's most prized possession; the old rocking chair that had once been her mother's.

After supper his mother often sat by the fireplace, humming softly as she darned a sock or mended a torn shirt. The old rocker made small creaking sounds as she gently rocked back and forth. Mr. Miller would sit by the window on his stool enjoying his evening pipe. This was their quiet time. Those pleasant memories were now the easiest to recall.

The sharp bite of an unseen stone in the road against his bare foot brought reality painfully back into focus, as well as the purpose of this night's mission. One of his new chores was to go into town and fetch his drunken stepfather. Willie then led their old plow-horse Bessie back to the farm, with his stepfather passed out in the saddle.

In the comfort and safety of daylight this trip to town would be an enjoyable stroll. On a dark moonless night, however, even familiar things took on frightening shapes. A child's mind can make monsters out of almost anything.

What usually started as a slow, dreaded, mile-long walk soon became a trot. Each menacing wind-blown shadow increased the level of Willie's fear until the result would be an anxious, all-out dead-run. The thud of his own footsteps sounded as if someone or something was in hot pursuit, and continued until he neared Wilsonville.

The tavern was located on the far end of town. The inside of the tavern always had a funny smell. It was a mixture of fresh sawdust and stale cigar smoke, accompanied by the faint scent of cheap perfume.

The upstairs had two bedrooms, where the two ladies of the evening slept and plied their trade. Sometimes Willie saw a candle burning in the attic, but he never gave this small light much thought.

As he slowed his pace and caught his breath, Willie heard the sounds of laughter coming from the tavern. He edged to a window and looked inside. Seated at a corner table was his new stepfather; drunk as usual. One of the "Ladies" was perched on his knee, laughing at something Jessie had whispered in her ear. He had

one hand around a half-empty glass of whisky, while the other was holding the woman tightly around her waist.

She had once been a rather attractive woman, although her face now had many acne scars; the result of her over use of cheap makeup. Her eyes had the dull look of too much drink as well.

She and the bright red satin dress that clung to her rather generous bosom had both seen better days. The heels of her once expensive shoes also showed the wear of too many trips upstairs.

The tavern owner was a big, red-faced Irishman called "Big Mike." He had tossed many a drunk out the front door. A jagged scar ran down Mike's right cheek from a confrontation with a knife-wielding farmer. Some say he broke the man's back. The big Irishman was standing behind the rough oak bar conversing loudly with a couple farmers and one of the townfolk. The other "Lady" of the house sat at a table in the middle of the room playing poker with three men.

One of the card players was Mr. Anderson, the town blacksmith. The nature of his chosen profession had given Mr. Anderson arms twice the size of other men's. Willie's mother had sent him into town to stay with the Anderson family when his father had gotten sick and started running a high fever. She remained by his father's bed day and night, until his death.

Mr. Anderson had helped bury Mr. Miller on the knoll behind the house. They could not give Willie's father a proper funeral, everyone else feared catching whatever had caused his death.

Willie remembered how frail his mother had looked when she finally sent for him. At the graveside Mr. Anderson had spoken a verse from the Bible, but Willie was crying too hard to hear what all he said. The boy recalled something about, "ashes to ashes", but his bawling had drowned out the rest of what Mr. Anderson was saying. Until that afternoon, Willie did not know his heart could hurt so bad and still go on beating.

Although she tried to be strong for her son in the daytime, he often heard her weeping at night. Her sadness made Willie cry too. She had told him repeatedly that his father's dying wish was for them to keep the farm going. His parents had carved it out of the wilderness with little more than their bare hands and a sharp ax. It was their home, and she was going to do whatever she had to do to keep it.

Her determination to keep the farm was what brought Jessie Tate into their life. Willie's mom had met Jessie at the general store, where he had helped load her wagon. He appeared to be a hard worker at the time, and he treated her kindly. The fact that he was in bad shape financially should have alerted her to Jessie's intentions.

A young widow with land and only one child would be a fine prize for a part-time farmhand. Therefore, after a brief courtship of picnics, along with the occasional church social, he asked her to marry him. Mrs. Miller, knowing that she and her young son could not continue running the farm, accepted his proposal. With a grown man to help they should be able to continue what Willie's father had started. Once they cleared a few more acres the farm should start to show a little profit.

Willie did not want Jessie Tate in their life. Nor had he any say in the matter. His mother had simply introduced him to Willie a few months after his father's death,

and informed him that she and Mr. Tate were to be married. Willie protested this union strongly, but she assured him that it was for the best. They had to have help, or they would surely lose the farm. With no money to hire a hand, this was their only hope. She also told him that he was to mind Mr. Tate, and not cause any trouble; his father would have expected that from him.

Therefore, Willie decided that if the marriage eased his mother's suffering, and helped protect all that his parents had worked for, he would try to accept Jessie. Willie was still concerned because they knew so little about Mr. Tate. All Willie knew was that Jessie occasionally worked as a hired hand for farmers around the county, but he had not lasted long at those jobs; probably because of his drinking.

He had seen Jessie once or twice around town, but had not paid him much mind, never dreaming that he would end up living under their roof. Jessie had spent most of his days hanging around in front of the tavern, trying to get someone to hire him, or at least buy him a drink.

It soon became evident that working was not Jessie's favorite activity. He worked hard when he and Willie's mother first married, clearing a little brush and fixing a section of fence. However, a month after the wedding, when no one was around, he claimed he hurt his back while working in the barn. He took to his bed for two weeks, moaning as if run over by a wagon. He claimed that whisky was the only thing that made his pain bearable. From that day forward, Willie and his mother had to do all the work.

If Willie's mom asked Jessie to do anything around the farm, he would say angrily, "Have your lazy boy do it. You know my back hurts!"

Willie never understood why his mother put up with Jessie. The man was nothing to look at, and he never offered a kind word to either of them. When his father was alive, he always hugged Willie and his mother, or at least patted Willie on the head. The closest thing to a pat on the head from Jessie was the back of his hand across Willie's face; which he did with little provocation or warning.

A slow response to any of Jessie's demands, or the slightest disrespectful glance in his direction, could bring on his wrath. For someone with a bad back he could hit hard. Jessie seemed to enjoy mistreating them.

More than once, when Willie picked Jessie up from one of his drunken excursions to town, his face would bear the marks of another patron's bad temper. Apparently Jessie did not fare so well when his opponent was a grown man. Willie enjoyed those times, and only wished that he had been the one giving Jessie the beating. Willie wanted him to suffer, the way he made them suffer.

Willie sat outside the tavern for what seemed hours, before he dared chance another quick look inside. The night air cooled his damp clothes. A chill shuddered through his body. Willie wished Jessie would get his fill of liquor soon, so that he might get back to bed. Willie needed all the sleep that he could get to make it through another grueling day of doing Jessie's share of the work.

When Willie looked about the Tavern's smoky interior, Jessie was nowhere in sight. He had not come outside because Willie would have heard the tavern's door creak. That left only the upstairs. He also noticed that the woman who had been at Jessie's side earlier was gone. He had heard the men in the tavern call her Sophie.

As he started to sit back down Willie heard his stepfather's angry voice coming from the open upstairs window: "You will get your damn money just as soon as I sell the farm!"

"Well I better! This aint no charity operation and you are building up a pretty damn big tab!"

"You will get your money soon enough. I have a man coming next week. We done already agreed on a price."

"It better happen soon cause Big Mike wants your bar bill paid or he's going to take it out of your worthless hide."

"Everyone will be paid next week. My buyer is bringing cash money, you'll see. Then we can have us some real fun, just you and me, baby."

"What about that new wife you got yourself? She haint going to just up and give you her farm. She don't strike me as being that big a fool."

"She won't be around to be any problem. I'm pretty sure she and that brat of her's are going to get bad sick and die sudden like."

"Don't tell me any more details! I don't want to know nothing. You just better have our damn money soon!"

"You and Mike will get your money, every last damn nickel! Now how about letting me have one more ride? You can just add it to my bill."

"Make it fast," Sophie replied, not trying to hide her disgust. "I need a damn drink!"

Willie's mother had always told him that when her time came she wanted laid to rest next to his father. Now this lazy, drunken bastard was talking about doing away with both the farm, and them. Willie had to stop that from happening somehow.

He was not certain what to do. No one would take the word of a kid over an adult. If he told someone what he had overheard, Jessie could say it was just the whisky talking. People often say things they don't mean when under the influence of alcohol. He could just laugh it off, and Willie would get the beating of his life for causing Jessie any sort of embarrassment. Still, Willie knew that Jessie meant to kill them both before the man got there to buy the farm.

Willie had to act first and fast. He would be no match for him sober. His only hope would be for Jessie to be passed-out drunk. Once he lost consciousness, Willie could take Jessie's life before he had the chance to take theirs. Willie's stomach tightened into a hard knot, murder was a heady thing for a child to ponder.

Willie sat in the dark waiting and thinking. "Drink up old man; this is going to be your last celebration."

Chapter Two

“A Solid Plan”

“Barkeep, let’s have a round for the house! Put all their drinks on my damn tab!”

He must have nodded off because the sound of Jessie’s voice jerked Willie’s eyes open wide with fear. It took a second or two to remember his reason for being on the hard ground, there in the dark. He was not sure how long he had slept, but it was not long enough to have dreamed what he had heard earlier.

The big Irishman said mockingly, “Let’s see some damn money first, Jessie.”

“I’ll cover it,” Sophie said as she slid her arm around Willie’s stepfather’s waist and smiled up at him, “Jessie here is my new partner.”

“Partner?” the tavern owner asked with a puzzled look. “What kind of no-good you two varmints up to now?”

“None of your damn business just pour the whiskey and be quick about it,” she said, as she slapped some coins on the bar. Big Mike snatched the coins and then placed two small glasses on the bar in front of them.

“No, not those little guys!” “This night calls for the big glasses.”

Mike did as ordered, and filled two of the large glasses that he kept for special occasions.

“Good,” Willie thought. “Get Mr. Tate drunk. That will make what I must do much easier.”

As he watched them through the window, Willie’s anger grew as their laughter increased. He had never seen Jessie show his mother that much affection. Yet he lavished it on this woman. He had not heard his mother laugh since his father died. She seemed to be sad all the time. Willie knew she grieved deeply for his father, as did he. Even so, Willie blamed Mr. Tate for most of her pain.

The last thing his father had said to Willie before he died was for him to take care of his mother. Willie felt that he would be neglecting his duty if he let Jessie hurt her anymore. They would not feel the back of his hand ever again. He would put an end to this nightmare tonight, one way or another.

In order to get rid of Jessie, Willie had to decide on a plan and stick to it. He could not let his mother down. He was the only thing between her and certain death. For all he knew Jessie might be planning to kill them as they slept tonight. Jessie certainly sounded sincere in his promise to his lady friend that he would take care of the matter before next week.

At twelve-years-old, Willie would be no match for a grown man. A drunk adult, on the other hand, might be no match for this twelve-year-old, especially if Jessie could be caught off-guard, and Willie was fighting for both his and his mother’s life.

The minutes crawled by slowly, as Willie tried to think of some way to stop Jessie without leaving evidence of the deed. He concentrated on what he had to work with. First was the element of surprise; which was definitely in his favor. He knew what Jessie’s plans were for them, but Jessie was unaware of Willie’s lethal plans for him. Second on his list was the darkness, an assassin’s best friend. Jessie’s state of intoxication became a big factor as well. Now Willie had to think of some way to

combine all these things so that Jessie ended up dead before this night was over.

To accomplish his goal, Willie needed some sort of weapon. Yet he could not chance stealing anything around town to use that might be missed, and the ride in the cool night air back to the farm might sober Jessie. Willie could not risk losing that distinct advantage.

Jessie's death needed to look accidental. Willie would not be much help to his mother or the farm, if he were locked up for murder. Willie had many things to think about, and not much time left to do the thinking. The tavern would soon be closing, then Jessie would come staggering out to his horse, to be led back to the farm.

A thought flashed into Willie's mind, Willow Creek. It was a small stream between the farm and the tavern. Although the creek was shallow, a deep hole of water was just below the bridge. He had fished there many times. His father had always cautioned him to be mindful, because if he fell in he might drown.

Willie's plan was to lead their horse to the side of the bridge, push Jessie into the creek, and then wait until he drowned. Willie would then run back into town screaming for help, hoping that no one would be the wiser as to what had actually taken place.

With a solid plan now in mind, he sneaked another peek into the tavern. All the other patrons had gone home, this left only Big Mike, the two whores and his stepfather. These partiers stood at the bar in a small group, drinking and laughing. Sophie kept slapping down coins on the bar. The group emptied glass after glass of Mike's whiskey.

Soon they called it a night. One woman made it only as far as the poker table, where she slumped into a chair and passed out. Big Mike and Sophie each took an arm, then helped Jessie outside to his horse, and with some difficulty, got him in the saddle. Jessie immediately passed out and slumped forward against the horse's neck.

Big Mike shouted, "You around here somewhere, boy!" He knew Willie would not be far away, waiting to lead the horse and its drunken cargo home.

"Yes Sir," Willie said, slowly rounding the corner of the tavern. He rubbed his eyes, as if he had been sleeping. "I must have dozed off, sorry," Willie lied. He did not want the woman to think that he might have overheard Jessie's plan.

"Get this sack of dung home, boy!" Sophie said demandingly.

"Yes, I'll do just that," Willie replied over his shoulder, as he untied Bessie from the rail. Willie's thoughts, however, were on his own plans for Jessie.

Mr. Tate would not be going home this night. His destination would be straight to Hell. One quick flip at the bridge, then all their worries would be over. With a gentle tug on her reins, Bessie obediently followed Willie down the road out of town.

He had to fight the urge to rush to the bridge. His exit from town had to look normal for his plan to work. Although the town looked as if everyone had gone to bed, Willie could not take the chance that someone might be watching from a darkened window. Willie sauntered along at his normal slow pace, with his head turned toward the ground, as he had done so many times before.

To look at him from the outside nothing seemed amiss, just the sad little Miller boy taking his drunken stepfather home again. Yet his brain was buzzing with activity. Thoughts rushed about, playing out the upcoming deed. His heart rate increased with anticipation, and Willie found it getting harder to breathe with each

step he took.

Getting to the bridge, less than a quarter mile out of town, seemed to take forever. Willie's heart was pounding so hard that he thought he could hear it. He kept looking back to see if Jessie showed any signs of movement. Willie was afraid the cool night air might revive Jessie. Thus far he had not given any indication of regaining consciousness.

As Bessie and Willie walked onto the bridge, the old horse's hoofs made loud thuds on the weathered wood planks. Jessie shifted his weight in the saddle slightly and coughed. Willie thought for a second that Jessie might be waking. Stopping Bessie, Willie held his breath and prayed for total silence. Reassured by the resumption of Jessie's loud snoring, Willie knew his stepfather was still out cold.

Willie led Bessie alongside the rail halfway across the bridge and stopped. He quickly tied the reins firmly to the rail to keep her from bolting when he made his move. Willie eased around to the side of the saddle, and gently slid Jessie's left boot from the stirrup. Jessie shifted his body slightly and gave a muffled grunt, almost as if Willie's touching his boot had awakened him. Then Jessie's snoring began once more, as he drifted back into his drunken stupor.

The snap of a twig, and a slight movement in the bushes near the bridge caused Willie to quickly turn his head, and stare down the deserted road toward town. Seeing nothing, he dismissed the movement as nothing more than a passing deer.

Turning all his attention back to Jessie, Willie just stood there looking up at this dark menacing shape; gathering all his will power and strength. Twice Willie raised his arms to push. Yet each time his hands trembled so, that he had to lower them. Willie then remembered the conversation that he had overheard earlier that evening. Anger boiled once again, deep inside his guts. His hands clenched tightly into two fists, and he thrust them upward savagely into Jessie's side.

It took every ounce of strength Willie could muster to topple Jessie from the saddle. His limp body tumbled into the water beneath. The splash was deafening. Willie ran around Bessie to the edge of the bridge and leaned over the rail; hoping to see a lifeless body floating face-down. To his horror, he heard coughing and sputtering coming from the darkness underneath the bridge as Jessie started to wade toward the bank.

Willie had miscalculated the depth of the water, which would have been more than enough to drown a boy but not a full-grown man. The shock of the cold stream had sobered Jessie enough to right himself in the neck-deep pool.

Now what was Willie to do? Jessie would never believe that he simply had fallen off the horse. No matter how drunk he had gotten before, he had always stayed in the saddle with no problem. Jessie would surely know that Willie was aware of what his plans were for them. He would just move Willie's execution up a bit when he got out of the water. Jessie would know this would be the only way to keep her son quiet until he could murder his new wife as well.

"Where you at you little bastard?" he screamed between coughs. "I'm going to break your damn fool neck!"

When he neared the creek bank Willie had little choice but to finish what he had started. As Jessie made his way up, he coughed up what little water that had

entered his lungs and continued to make threats as he climbed the muddy creek bank.

“You damn, little sneaky son of a bitch! You are a dead man now!”

Willie frantically looked around for some sort of weapon, a rock or dead tree limb perhaps. Yet nothing was nearby and time was running out. Once Jessie cleared the top of the bank Willie would be a goner for sure.

In an act of desperation Willie ran toward Jessie as he almost topped the creek bank. Then just before they collided, Willie lowered his head into a ramming position; as he had seen the Billy goats do when they fought.

In the darkness Jessie never saw him coming, and Willie completely caught him off guard. The top half of Jessie’s body had just cleared bank-level when Willie crashed into him. The force of their collision made Willie see little flashes of light.

He had hoped to connect with Jessie’s midsection, and at least knock him back down the muddy slope, buying some time to find something to use to defend himself. Unfortunately the top of Willie’s head and Jessie’s nose were at the same level upon impact.

Willie bounced back onto the grass, dazed. Jessie fell backward into the water. Willie was still for a few seconds trying to gather his wits; stunned from their violent encounter. Willie fully expected Jessie to top the bank in a fit of rage at any moment to finish him. Willie tried twice to get to his feet, only to fall again. Then the earth beneath him began to spin, and everything went pitch-black.

Chapter Three

“Ashamed”

When Willie awoke, the sun was coming up. A low fog blanketed the valley floor and songbirds greeted the new day. The faint light of dawn hurt his eyes. Even the cheerful chirping of the birds echoed painfully inside his skull. Willie was on his back in the damp grass staring up at the trees for some time before his eyes could focus. Remembering all that had happened; Willie carefully felt his head and discovered a large bump that throbbed painfully. Withdrawing his hand, fresh blood covered the tips of his fingers.

Willie rolled slowly over, and then pushed up on all fours; this action made his head swim. Fighting an urge to vomit, he took several long, slow breaths until his stomach settled. He shook his head and batted his eyelids. This slight movement sent droplets of blood onto the grass. Willie was unsure as to the extent of his own injury, but it did not feel life threatening. He wondered how well his stepfather had survived their collision.

Willie tried to get up, but his body would not cooperate; again he slumped back onto the grass. It took some time before he could stand. He then staggered to the bridge and peeked over its side. There, face down in a pool of water, floated his stepfather. Willie walked a little farther out on the bridge to make sure that he was dead.

As the pain in his head eased and his mind began to clear, Willie realized that he must tell his mother what he had done. His earlier plan of going back into town for help would not work now due to the length of time that had passed since he and Jessie had left the tavern. There may have been some other lie he could have concocted, but his fear and pain would not let his mind work. All he wanted now was the comfort of home and his mother.

After untying Bessie from the rail, Willie climbed into the saddle and headed straight for home. Although the ride was short, he nearly fell from the saddle twice. If old Bessie had not known the way home, he doubted that he could have made it. Fear kept him unsteadily clinging to the reins. Willie knew that if he fell he would not have the strength to get back on. Someone would be crossing the bridge soon, and would no doubt discover Jessie's body. For now, he just wanted to be far away from there as fast as Bessie could run.

His mother was standing at the front door when Willie rode up to the house. She knew that he and Jessie would be back late, but never this late. Her son returning alone, and in such a rush could only mean bad news. She ran forward and caught Bessie's reins, just as they dropped from Willie's hands.

She pulled Bessie to a sudden stop; Willie fell from the saddle into his mother's outstretched arms. He began to cry, as if he was a baby. She held him tight and let him cry hysterically for several minutes. When his weeping slowed to sobbing, she used the corner of her apron to wipe the tears from his eyes and then had him blow his nose. Not since his father had died had Willie cried so hard.

He told his mother what he had heard at the tavern, then what he had done at the bridge. Willie kept his face turned toward the ground, too ashamed to look at his

mother. He thought for sure that she would be upset with him.

“Son, you did what had to be done,” she said softly, kissing him gently on the forehead. “Your paw would be so proud of you son.”

Receiving praise for doing such a thing made the tears flow harder, but this time from joy. He had done the right thing. He had kept his promise to his father. Whatever happened to him next would not matter. He did what needed doing. Willie would never let anyone hurt his mother. At least now there was one drunken bastard who would never harm her again.

For a long time they just held onto one another and did not speak. Willie could tell his mother was thinking hard on how to fix things. She always got quiet when she was planning something. He wanted to just close his eyes and stay in her arms forever, but they both knew they could not simply wish this thing away; this matter needed immediate attention.

His mother pressed a damp cloth to his wound, and then explained how they were going to handle things.

Willie sat still and took in every word of her plan. He was impressed how quickly she had turned certain disaster into something positive. As he had hoped, she was also happy to have Mr. Tate out of their life. Her only concern now was for her son; therefore, their lie had to be believable.

She told Willie how to tell his story, down to the smallest detail. Knowing they did not have much time, she made Willie repeat it until he told his story the same each time. Even though his head ached something fierce, he kept at it until she was satisfied that Willie knew exactly what to say.

Chapter Four

“Fake Tears”

Willie’s mother had him remove his muddy clothes. She then washed the dried mud from his hands and face, had him put on a nightshirt and get into her bed. She bandaged his head with a strip of cloth torn from an old bed sheet. She picked up the heavy iron poker from the fireplace and walked to the barn. Willie heard a loud crack.

When his mother returned, she shoved the bloody end of the poker into the ashes in the fireplace. That part of her plan he dreaded the most. Willie hated being the cause of Bessie’s pain. That old plow-horse had gotten him safely home, and he felt he owed her his life. However, for his mother’s plan to work, Bessie had to actually be hurt. It was not long before the sheriff’s deputy rode up to the house.

Willie’s mother met the lawman outside as he dismounted. He told her that a farmer had found her husband’s body in Willow Creek just after sunup. He went on to say that it looked as though Jessie had fallen from the bridge and drowned. He also told her that Sheriff Hall wanted to talk to her and her boy, as soon as the two of them could get into town.

Willie’s mother began to cry hysterically, and put on a credible show of remorse. She then completed her act with a fake fainting spell, dropping to the ground. The startled man ran to her side, fanned her with his hat and tried to revive her. That was Willie’s signal to stumble out of the house, and try to help.

The first part of his mother’s plan had been believable. No doubt the deputy would give a full report of her reaction to the sheriff. She then hitched Bessie to their wagon, and went into town for Willie’s report of the night’s activity. Not what had actually happened, but rather his mother’s made-up version.

Once there, Willie’s mother went into another fit of hysterical crying. Everyone was so concerned about her that few took the time to hear Willie’s story about a raccoon spooking Bessie at the bridge. His tale of Bessie rearing up and kicking him in the head went mostly unheard by the bystanders.

Sheriff Hall was proud of his quick assessment of what had happened. Obviously when Bessie kicked the boy, she must have jerked her head back into Mr. Tate’s nose, thus knocking him into the creek, unconscious; where he drowned. The small patch of dried blood over the fresh bump on the back of Bessie’s head made this explanation infallible. The crowd all looked at one another and nodded their heads in agreement with Sheriff Hall’s conclusion.

By the time the sheriff had finished his little speech; old Doc Johnson walked up and asked if Mrs. Tate wanted him to examine her son’s wound.

“No,” she said quickly, as she pulled Willie close to her side. “He will be fine after some rest. I will take him home and put him straight to bed.” She wanted her son out of town as soon as possible, before anyone looked closely at his head. The wound did not look anything akin to a horse kick. Her oversize bandage had helped conceal this fact.

Doc Johnson informed her that Jessie’s body was at his place, and asked what she wanted done with it. It was the time of year when folks put the dead in the ground as soon as possible. It did not take a body long to start to decompose in the

summer's heat.

She used her son's injury to convince the sheriff to handle all the burial arrangements. She again lied and said Mr. Tate had told her he wanted buried in a proper cemetery, next to a church. She did not want his foul remains anywhere near the farm. Having been widowed twice in one year and with an injured child to care for, helped the townsfolk to understand her inability to attend Jessie's funeral. It was unlikely that very many would be in attendance. Few of the locals really cared much for Jessie.

As they rode out of town Willie's mother continued to wail, until she was well out of hearing distance of the concerned citizens of Wilsonville. She then dried her fake tears, put her arm around Willie and said, "You done just fine, son."

Willie felt good about what he had done, although he actually had little choice in the matter; it was either Jessie or them. Still, killing lays heavy on one's heart; even someone as vile as Jessie. For the moment though, Willie just wanted the pain in his head to go away, he would deal with his heart later.

Sensing her son's suffering, Willie's mother pulled him near as the wagon rolled down the dusty road toward home. Exhausted from the ordeal, Willie closed his eyes, and then just before he drifted off to sleep a single warm tear made its way down his cheek.

Chapter Five

"The Wood Shed"

The next morning, angry voices coming from the other room woke Willie. His head still ached, and he could not focus clearly on the words at first. Although he heard only muffled sounds, by their harshness and volume he could tell that someone was very upset. He slowly walked to the door to investigate the disturbance.

Cracking the door just a bit, he peeked into the living room. There, screaming as if she was some sort of insane person, stood the woman he had seen with Jessie in the tavern. As the fog slowly lifted from his brain, her words became frightfully clear.

"I saw what your little brat did to Jessie, and if you want to keep him from the law, you will pay me what I said!" Sophie screamed.

"I told you we just don't have that kind of money," Willie's mother pleaded, wringing the tail of her apron nervously.

"If that thieving husband of yours hadn't stolen the silver brooch from my dresser last night, your boy would have got by with murder! When I found my brooch missing I went chasing after him to get it back."

"Surely, you must be mistaken; Little Willie is just a boy. He could not kill a man as big as Jessie."

"Well, kill him he did and I saw him do it with my own eyes, plain as day. I was just about to the bridge, when I saw your boy tie that broke down old horse to the rail, then push Jessie into the creek. I also saw him finish Jessie off with a head-butt, when Jessie tried to climb the creek bank. I heard Jessie's nose break like a green stick, from where I hid in the bushes."

"The sheriff done said it was Bessie's head what broke Jessie's nose."

"That damn horse had nothing to do with it! That boy of yours killed Jessie and you know it. You are just trying to cover for him. Let's go into town right now and have the Doc take a good look at your boy's head. I bet he won't find any horseshoe print on the little bastard's thick skull."

"Where am I supposed to get a hundred dollars?"

"Your old man said he had a buyer for this place coming next week. We can settle up then. I am sure this farm will bring no less than two, or three hundred, maybe. Whatever you get, I'll take half and you get to keep your boy alive."

"How do I know that you will keep your end of the bargain?"

"If you and your boy get put in prison, then the state gets the land or the money and I don't get anything. So it looks like we are going to have to be partners, if either of us is to get anything out of Jessie's death."

"And just so you don't get no fancy ideas about selling this place, then running off with the money; the boy stays with me until the sale goes through and I have my half," she said coldly, looking straight at Willie through the crack in the door. He instinctively took a small step backwards, as if the evil stare this creature just gave him might snatch the soul from his body.

"I'll lock him in the wood shed behind the tavern until we conclude our business. The night of the sale, we meet on the Willow Creek Bridge at midnight. You give me my half and I give you back your boy."

“No!” Willie’s mother screamed. The thought of this woman locking her son away horrified her.

“It’s either that, or I go straight to the sheriff right now and tell him what I saw! So, little Missy, you want to have the sheriff to lock your brat up, or me?”

“Won’t the tavern owner wonder what you are doing locking my son in his shed?”

“I’ll just tell Big Mike I’m holding your boy as collateral, for the money your old man owed me and that you are going ahead with the sale of the farm cause you got no man. Your husband owes Mike too, I’m sure he will go along with it.”

“But you said this buyer won’t be here until next week. Why can’t my son stay with me until he arrives?”

“Cause you might just decide to try to kill me like your boy did Jessie,” Sophie said, as she leaned closer toward his mother. Then in one sudden movement she drew a small derringer from her handbag, turned and pointed it at Willie’s head. He shut his eyes tightly, expecting the piercing pain of a bullet.

“One thing my line of work has taught me is that you don’t ever trust anyone if there is money involved,” she said, as she now pointed her gun at Willie’s mother. Sophie had the look of a cold-blooded killer in her eyes.

Willie and his mother had little choice but to comply with her demands. They had much more to lose. Sophie would only lose money if things did not go as planned. They, on the other hand, could lose their life. Willie’s father would understand them having to give up the farm under these circumstances. In fact Willie was sure that he would have insisted that they save themselves, at all costs. They could always start over somewhere far from here. Willie would work extra hard to make up for the loss of the farm.

Willie’s mother gave him a blanket and his father’s old coat to wear. Unseen by his captor, she slipped his father’s hunting knife into the inside pocket. If things went wrong with this deal she wanted to give her son the opportunity to try to save himself.

“Please feed him,” His mother begged, as the woman and Willie started down the road toward town.

“You just make damn sure you show up at the bridge with my money, or I’ll feed your brat alright, I’ll feed him a bullet,” Sophie said harshly. From her angry tone they both knew she meant it.

When Sophie and Willie neared the town, they got off the road, and cut through the woods to the back of the tavern. As she roughly pushed him into the woodshed, Sophie told him to sit down and be still until she returned. After slamming the door she propped a big stick against it to prevent his escaping.

Willie did as she ordered and sat on the damp, dirt floor. The shed smelled of old wood and mildew. A large spider web occupied one corner near the roof. The being still part was easy, because as soon as she left, he curled up in his blanket and fell asleep. He was still exhausted from the happenings of the night before, and in sleep he escaped the reality of his situation.

Little Willie slept all day, and did not awaken until after sundown. He might have slept longer, but hunger and thirst woke him. His mouth was so dry that he

could barely swallow. Willie hoped that his captor returned soon with something; at least some water.

He stood, and then stretched. Through the cracks in the door he could see the light coming from the back window of the tavern. The sound of people talking meant that customers were still inside. He was sure Sophie would not risk anyone seeing her bringing him anything until the last one had gone home. Willie felt around in the dark and surveyed his prison.

Then he remembered the knife that his mother had slipped him, and used it to dig a shallow depression in the dirt floor of the shed. Willie then placed the knife in the hole and covered it. He could have easily used it to tunnel his way under the shed wall, but now was not the time to be thinking only of himself. If he ran away his mother would be at this woman's mercy, alone. No, he had to stick it out and see how things developed. Maybe everything would still work out fine.

Around midnight Sophie returned with some food and two buckets. One contained water and a dipper; the other was to be his toilet.

"Make that last, boy. I won't be back until this time tomorrow night." She then slammed the door and repositioned the stick. Through one of the cracks in the door, Willie watched her go back inside. Soon the tavern became completely dark, and he felt all alone.

He slumped to the dirt floor of his prison and cried softly for several minutes. Remembering her order for total silence, Willie muffled his sobs with the sleeve of his father's old coat. The strain of choking back tears made his throat burn. Then he remembered the buckets Sophie had left him. He was so thirsty that he drank several dipperfuls before he could stop. The cool water tasted good and helped soothed his irritated throat. He had never paid much attention as to how water tasted before. Water was just something he took for granted. Now he had to conserve his supplies. These meager rations and the remaining water in the bucket had to last him twenty-four hours.

Chapter Six

“The Exchange”

Willie awoke the next morning to the sound of the church bell calling its flock. Some of these members had been in the tavern most of the previous evening. He had a fitful night of tossing and turning, trying to find a soft spot on the hard-packed dirt. His sleeping most of the previous day made the night seem longer than usual. When he did drift off, he relived his encounter with Jessie and woke with his heart pounding. Willie wondered if he would ever get that horrible night out of his mind.

Church services started at ten sharp, but the bell began ringing at nine thirty. Once the preacher had let him pull the rope. His mother always attended church. He wondered if she would go today. No one would blame her if she missed; just losing another husband and all. Being a devout Christian, Mrs. Miller never missed church. She always made Willie and his father go, even if the snow was knee deep.

The Irishman’s rough voice just outside the shed door cut short Willie’s daydreaming. Sophie had caught up to Big Mike as he was about to open it. He needed wood for the kitchen stove to make his morning coffee.

“What do you mean don’t open the door, it’s me own damn shed!”

“Let’s go inside,” Sophie pleaded with Mike, in the soft voice she used to charm her customers, “I can explain everything, honey.”

“You had better have a good reason why I can’t go in me own shed,” Mike said, as he stormed back inside.

Apparently Sophie convinced the tavern owner that keeping the Miller boy hostage was the only way that she could get the money owed her from Jessie’s widow. She lied, and said that she would see to it that the widow paid Jessie’s bar bill as well. Therefore, Sophie had not really kidnapped the Miller boy; he was simply being held as collateral until the widow’s farm sold. The Irishman knew about Mr. Henderson, the buyer, therefore he played along. Not often can you collect a debt from a dead man.

The early arrival of the buyer Monday morning cut short Willie’s imprisonment. Jessie apparently had made this Mr. Henderson such a sweet deal that he did not want to give Jessie the opportunity to sober up and back out. Mr. Henderson was shocked to hear of Jessie’s death, and even more so, when his widow agreed to honor the underpriced arrangement he had brokered with her drunken late husband.

The only difference being the small plot of ground where they had buried Mr. Miller. This was to have a separate deed and remain as the Miller’s family cemetery. Mr. Henderson protested this change a little, but the agreement was still too good to pass up.

The farm was easily worth twice the two hundred dollars he had offered, even with that part set aside. Willie’s mother just wanted her son back safe, and to get them as far away from Wilsonville as possible. Only the matter of the exchange remained.

Mr. Henderson had told Mrs. Miller that she could keep Bessie and one wagonload of personal items. At midnight Willie’s mother, and all they now owned, was in the wagon on the Willow Creek Bridge, waiting for her son.

Her wait was short. Willie's captor was eager to collect her prize. Sophie had gotten him from the shed around eleven, and then they started for the bridge. She had tied a short rope around the boy's neck to prevent his escaping in the dark. In one hand she carried a lantern; the other held her two-shot derringer along with the other end of Willie's restraint.

When they got to the bridge, Willie could see his mother's silhouette in the moonlight as she sat in the wagon. What he could not see was his father's loaded shotgun at her feet. Nor did he know that his mother had not trusted Sophie to keep her end of the bargain. Willie's father taught his wife how to use this weapon in case a bear or some other wild critter attacked her while he was away from the house.

Sophie stopped when she and Willie first walked onto the bridge. She tied the rope from his neck to the rail. "Stay right here boy, until I get my money."

As soon as her back was turned, Willie slipped the rope from his neck. He was not some dog she could tie as she pleased. His mother would give this evil woman the money then he and his mother would be on their way. At any rate that was what was supposed to happen. However, Willie's actions in the next few moments would shape the rest of his life.

As Sophie approached the wagon she pointed her gun at Willie's mother and asked, "You got my money?"

"Yes, one hundred dollars, as we agreed."

"Been a slight change in plans, honey, I figure my cut should be a bit more."

"How much more do you want?"

"All of it!" Sophie shouted, as she pulled the trigger.

The valley echoed the blast and Bessie nearly bolted. The bullet ripped through Mrs. Miller's right shoulder just above her heart. The shot knocked her over onto her side in the seat of the wagon. She let out a scream of agony as she tried to pick up the shotgun with her left hand.

Sophie stepped calmly forward and pulled the hammer back again on her weapon. As Mrs. Miller fumbled for the shotgun at her feet, Sophie pointed the gun straight at the widow's head. She was about to squeeze the trigger when she stiffened abruptly. Her eyes widened in shock.

Little Willie had stabbed his father's hunting knife as hard as he could into Sophie's back. In her haste to kill his mother, she had completely forgotten about the boy. Nor did she know about the knife his mother had given him. He was just a kid to Sophie, and not considered any threat.

With her last bit of life, she turned toward Willie with an astonished look on her face, and then dropped dead at his feet. He stepped over the whore's lifeless body and rushed to his mother.

Mrs. Miller was slumped sideways on the blood covered seat. Willie eased her to an upright position and was relieved to find that she was still breathing, although she now started to cough as blood filled her lung. The bullet had passed through it and exited her back, leaving a large hole.

As he held her gently in his arms she asked softly, "Where's Sophie?"

"I killed her, Mother," he said, and started to cry. "I'm sorry, but she was going to kill you."

"I'm afraid she has, son," his mother said, then she coughed again, and fresh

blood ran down her chin.

She continued, "Don't you be sorry for doing what had to be done. She would have killed us both for this." She then handed Willie the money from the sale of their farm; a small leather sack containing ten, twenty-dollar gold coins.

"It's yours now, son. It aint much to show for all the hard years we put in on the farm but maybe this money will get you a fresh start somewhere."

She then started coughing and could hardly catch her breath. More blood streamed down her chin and Willie wiped it off with his shirt-tail.

With her last breath she said, "I need you to do one last thing for me, son. Place me next to your paw." With that, she closed her eyes, and then quit breathing. Her body went limp in his arms, and she was gone.

Willie sat there for a long time holding his mother and crying. He then realized that he needed to get far away from there. First there were things that needed doing. He pulled the knife from Sophie and rolled her lifeless body off the bridge into the creek. He then gently laid his mother in the back of the wagon, and headed for home.

It took him several hours to dig his mother's grave next to his father's. Willie had to stop several times to wipe the tears from his eyes. He promised that one day he would return and place proper headstones to mark their final-resting place. He said a prayer and then started west, just as the sun was rising.

Willie was unsure how much Sophie had told the Irishman about what he had done, but Big Mike knew that Sophie was to meet his mother last night. With Sophie now dead, he was certain Mike could figure out who had killed her. The Law would surely be after him soon.

Chapter Seven

“The West”

A broken down plow horse, pulling a loaded wagon, was not the best means of escape. With everyone looking for him, Willie would have to travel at night. He pulled the wagon off the road, deep into the surrounding forest, and then hid the wagon tracks with dead leaves. After unhitching Bessie, he collected the items from the wagon that might be useful on his journey.

His mother had packed things more for their sentimental value than for their practicality. She had even loaded her mother's old rocker. Willie's need to get out of the county before stopping to buy supplies, left few useful items in the wagon.

The sack of coins would be of little value now, but certainly would be later. He would have to hide them well. His father's shotgun and six shells could feed him, and the hunting knife was always a useful tool. Its scabbard had a small side pocket that held a piece of flint; useful in starting fires. Willie would not need a lot of clothes, not that he had many. Sorting through the unneeded junk, he selected a blanket, fork, cooking pot, salt and some oats for Bessie; trying to keep his load as light as possible for now.

His mother had packed them a small lunch, two apples, some bread, a chunk of cheese, and two thick slices of smoked ham. She had also filled a two-quart canteen with water. He would have to make this food last as long as he could. Willie dared not shoot any game until he crossed the county line; about two days ride due west.

This boundary was just the other side of the Greater Miami River. Traveling at night to avoid meeting anyone; meant a slower, more careful trip. Even with these extra precautions he should be able to make the county line in three days. All he could do now was rest, and wait for nightfall.

When the light began to fade, Willie loaded his gear onto Bessie, and then led her back to the road. He and the old horse stood motionless by the roadside until blackness covered the valley. Once he was positive that no other riders were on the road he jumped on Bessie, and then headed toward the county line.

Willie had cut the wagon reins to a shorter length for bareback riding. He used the remaining strips to fashion a backpack from his blanket. He cradled the shotgun in his lap as he rode; the hunting knife fastened to his belt, with the case tied tightly to his thigh. He would not go back to Wilsonville without a fight. He had killed twice already. If what the preacher said on Sundays was true, he was going straight to Hell. Would it really matter how many more he killed? Folks had best just leave him be.

The pain in his heart was quickly turning into hatred. Losing both parents just did not seem fair. His father had worked so hard, and all it got him was an early death. His mother had tried to save Willie, and her bravery had cost her life as well.

The madder he got, the harder he rode. The West was calling. That far-away land was where he belonged, running wild and free. Not caring for anyone, and not wanting anyone caring for him. From this day forward he would not shed another tear. His childhood was now over. At not quite thirteen years old, life was forcing Willie to become a man.

Chapter Eight

“Eat Here”

Although he felt grownup inside, Willie was still just a kid. People were not going to treat him as an adult. He would have to use his wits until his body caught up with his mind. Willie’s first test would be how to get out West without a parent. If folks thought he had no parents, they might try to put him in an orphanage. He was determined not to let that happen.

After three nights of hard riding, poor old Bessie could go no farther. Once Willie was safely across the river, he stopped at a farm and sold her for two dollars. She deserved a good long rest, and he assumed a town would be located near the river. He hid the shotgun in the brush beside the road, along with the rest of his camping gear. This left him with a change of clothes, the hunting knife and the sack of coins. He cut a piece of his blanket big enough to hold all these items. He then tied this homemade luggage onto a stick, for ease of transport.

In the distance, he heard the sound of a train whistle, as he neared the town. Willie had to find a way to get on a train that would be heading west. Being young and alone created a problem. After his long hard ride and the days spent sleeping in the woods, he had the look of a runaway. Willie needed to get cleaned up and something to eat, before trying to get on a train.

This town was twice the size of Wilsonville; another kid on the street should not draw much attention. In a small patch of woods at the edge of town, Willie stashed the knife, his bundle and all but one of the twenty-dollar gold coins.

The twenty-dollar coin needed to be exchanged for smaller coins, somehow. This was too much money for a dusty farm boy to have. Willie was in no position to be attracting any attention. One small slip on his part might very well cost him his freedom, or life.

After walking around town for a while, Willie thought of a way to get his coin changed without arousing suspicion. He went into the general store, marched straight up to the counter, and ordered a bottle of toothache medicine. This so-called medicine was nothing more than cheap whiskey with a fancy label. The short, slightly bald store owner just looked at him. Willie slapped the coin on the counter as he had seen Sophie do, that night in the tavern. He then told the man that his father had a bad toothache, and wanted him to hurry back with the medicine.

“I don’t recollect seeing you around these parts before, boy,” the man said, as he sized Willie up and down. In a small town like this the locals knew all the faces of the children, even if their names did not readily come to mind.

Willie froze for an instant, and his thoughts raced. He had not planned past his opening remarks. Now his life may very well depend on the next words out of his mouth.

“We aint from around here,” Willie lied. “Me and my paw are camped down by the river. Maw died last spring birthing my baby sister, so paw sold our farm and we are heading west to start us a new life.”

“So you three going to be ranchers?” the store owner asked, with a distrustful smirk on his face.

“No,” Willie said with a sad, downcast look. “Little Mary didn’t survive but three days, sir. That’s when paw started needing his toothache medicine so much.”

Many good church-going folks would never think of going into a tavern for a drink, but using medicine was acceptable, even if the ingredients were one in the same. Jessie had sure used a lot of alcohol as medicine for his bad back.

The pain in Willie’s voice was convincing, partly because he was getting good at lying, but mostly it was the fact that his own loss was too fresh to conceal. Willie’s lie worked, and a twelve-year old walked out of the store with a dollar bottle of toothache remedy under one arm, and twenty-one silver dollars in his pocket. Now he had coins he could use without question.

As he started down the street, Willie saw someone sleeping off last night’s drinking in the shaded alley next to their tavern. It had been Willie’s intention to simply discard the whisky once he was out of sight of the store. He had thought for a moment about giving it to this man in the alley, but decided that this medicine might come in handy later. He had heard whisky was good for snakebites and other injuries. Besides, something that cost a whole dollar was a lot to just up and give away.

It had been several days since Willie last ate a good hot meal. At the end of the street, stood a two-story hotel, with a sign out front that read, “EAT HERE.” That was exactly what he planned to do. Willie had little experience in eating somewhere besides home; he was glad the place was almost empty. Apparently, he had arrived between regular meal hours.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, unsure as to the proper way of ordering a meal. The aroma of fresh baked bread and other delicacies assaulted his nose. His stomach responded with a low growl of anticipation. Willie’s mouth started to water, and he had to swallow to keep drool from running down his chin. Just then a heavy-set woman wearing a white apron approached him, and asked sternly, “What do you want, boy?”

“I’d like something to eat.”

“It costs to eat here! You know that don’t you?”

Willie’s earlier shyness now became anger. This woman had judged him penniless, due to his shoddy appearance. He jammed his hand into his pocket, pulled out a few coins, and then said, “As you can see, paw said I could buy whatever I wanted.”

The sparkle of the silver coins reflected in the woman’s eyes, and her attitude toward Willie quickly changed. She could not seat him fast enough, and served him as if he were royalty. Having never had any, Willie was amazed at the power of money.

When Willie finished his meal, he asked if there was somewhere in town that he could get a hot bath. The lady told him that the barbershop had a bathhouse out back. After paying his bill, Willie thanked her for the information and the food. Her response was a warm invitation for him to come back anytime. She also stated that the supper menu was going to be chicken and dumplings. Willie told her that he might stop back in, if he had the time.

Before he bathed Willie checked at the station, as to the departure time of the next train west. He knew two trains each day passed through Wilsonville; one

heading west, and the other east. At the station, the agent told Willie that the train west had already left and the next one would not be through until nine the next morning.

Acting as though he had little money, Willie asked the agent how far he could go on three dollars. The man told him that would get him as far as St. Louis, but he would have to sleep in his seat. That would not be a problem; Willie was accustomed to sleeping sitting in a wagon as it bounced along. A train would have to offer a lot smoother ride.

After counting Willie's coins, the agent made out a ticket. The man also advised Willie to pack a lunch, because the train only made two meal stops.

Willie then went to the barbershop, had a good long bath and received his first professional haircut. His mother had always cut his hair, and it had been a while since his last one. Feeling that he needed to look more respectable for the trip, Willie returned to the general store; bought a small suitcase, new shoes, pants, shirt, light jacket and a small blanket for the train ride.

For his lunch the next day Willie had also purchased some beef jerky, a large wedge of cheese, a box of crackers and a small bag of rock candy. Loading everything into the suitcase, he returned to the woods. To avoid detection, he dared not risk building even a small campfire. After the sun set, Willie sat in the fading light and ate a little of the cheese. He then moved aside all the branches and stones from under a big pine tree. Raking up several handfuls of dried pine needles, he fashioned a soft spot on the ground, covered himself with the new blanket and used the small suitcase as a pillow. Fishing a piece of rock candy from the bag and popping it into his cheek, Willie slowly sucked its sweetness. Sleep was not long in coming.

Chapter Nine

“Willie’s New Name”

At eight forty-five the next morning, dressed in his new clothes, Willie was standing in an alley near the station. Right on schedule, the train arrived. While the engineer and his helper filled the boiler from the water tower, the conductor placed a small stepstool on the platform and helped several people from the train. The passengers hurried to the two outhouses just beyond the tracks.

Willie waited until everyone else had boarded, then walked up to the conductor and handed the man his ticket. Apparently it was not uncommon for a boy Willie’s age to be traveling alone. The conductor just casually glanced at the ticket, and then punched it in the appropriate spot. After Willie boarded the conductor picked up his stool, waved to the engineer, then the train started moving. As they neared a crossing just outside of town the train’s whistle let out a scream; warning any track-crossers of its approach. Willie had heard that same sound yesterday about this time. Had he made it to town a little sooner, he would be a day farther west by now.

The ride to St. Louis was uneventful. Willie kept to himself, and did not talk to anyone. Most of the passengers seemed contented just to slump in their seats and sleep. While others sat up straight and stared out the windows. Willie watched as the miles rolled by effortlessly, compared to how hard his travels had been thus far. Now he drifted along on two smooth ribbons of steel; as if he was a bird soaring on high. The gentle swaying of the train car, and the rhythmic clacking of its wheels, made sleeping a pleasant experience. It was as if his mother was rocking him to sleep in her arms.

He missed his parents, and thought about them the whole trip. In weaker moments these memories caused so much pain, that his vision blurred from the potential tears welling up in his eyes. Each time he fought them back with a new surge of hatred. “No more tears!” He would tell himself sternly. If he was to make it on his own, his life now had no room for such weakness.

Willie wondered if the sheriff was still looking for him. Big Mike would have certainly told the sheriff of Sophie’s intended rendezvous with his mother. Willie had no way of knowing that while he was killing Sophie on the Willow Creek Bridge, Big Mike died trying to break up a fight in his tavern. Mike had never gotten the chance to tell anyone anything.

Nor did Willie know that the sheriff had chalked up Sophie’s murder as simply the result of a displeased customer, and had not investigated her death further. It was common knowledge that Sophie had a nasty habit of stealing from her passed-out clients’ pockets.

His not being a wanted man did not change the fact that Willie had indirectly caused his mother’s death. Had he not reacted to what he heard at the tavern, perhaps none of this would have taken place. Some of what Jessie said may have been just idle boasting on his part, to impress the whore.

His mother said he had done the right thing. Yet neither of them could have been certain that Jessie would actually have followed through with his murder threat. He absolutely had intentions of selling the farm. This fact became evident by

Mr. Henderson's arrival. Yet his plan may have been to force Willie's mother to agree to the sale with just another beating.

Circumstances now left Willie no choice but to make a new life somewhere, beyond the reach of the authorities. The West was a big place. A man could stay hidden there for a lifetime, and that was what Willie intended to do.

Getting there was his first objective. The money his mother had given him was enough to give him a good head start, but he would still need to find a job. Becoming a cowboy would be his first choice, but Willie was too young for that line of work. Perhaps some rancher would hire him to do simple chores. He could start out working for his room and board, then slowly work his way up to cowboy. Willie would be thirteen in two months, but could easily pass for a muscular fifteen-year-old thanks to all the hard work he had done. It was also fairly common for fifteen-year-old boys to leave home. Some even married at that age.

Since the law was probably looking for William Adam Miller Junior, Willie needed a new name; something easy to remember. After much thought, he finally decided on "Buck Adams." This new name retained part of his old one, and would better fit his western destination.

En route to St. Louis, a man dressed as a cowboy boarded the train and took the seat next to Willie. After a bit of casual chitchat he started telling stories about his adventures out West. Willie hung on every word.

Apparently this cowboy had come back East for his sister's wedding, but he was anxious now to get back to "God's Country," as he called the West. The East was too damn crowded. He preferred the wide-open spaces of the West. According to him a person could ride for days and never see the smoke of another campfire. That emptiness sounded good to Willie.

This rugged looking fellow drove large herds of Longhorns from Texas to the railhead at Abilene, Kansas. This was the most dangerous of all cowboy professions. You had to be a real man to do it.

William Adam Miller Jr., fugitive farm boy, had gotten on this train, but Buck Adams, soon to be cowboy, would be getting off in St. Louis.

Chapter Ten

“Eggs and Potatoes”

This story-telling cowboy's name was Hank Rhodes. He went on to relate a tale of the bad luck that had befallen his last cattle drive. A lightning strike had caused a stampede, costing him two good outriders and his chuck wagon. He had lost most of the steers before his crew could regain control of what was left of the herd.

This trip back east was not just to see his sister get married; it had also been an unsuccessful attempt to persuade his new brother-in-law to finance his next drive. What few cattle that he had gotten to market barely covered the ranchers cut, his men's wages, and the cost of this wasted trip. Hank went on to say that for a measly one hundred dollars or so, he could have made his sister's new husband a thousand, easy.

With his disgust somewhat vented, Hank settled back into his seat, pulled his big cowboy hat over his eyes, then nodded off. He had assumed his little rant had accomplished nothing; although it had made him feel a little better. Best not to keep that stuff bottled up inside all the time.

He did not know that his conversation had stirred the imagination of an eager kid, or that a plan was coming together in Willie's mind as they rolled along into the night.

This might be his only chance to become a real cowboy; a dream shared by most boys his age. Although he had little experience with cattle, Willie had the one thing that Hank was now missing; money. Hank seemed trustworthy, but not so much that Willie could tell him of his past life. Those bad things had happened to William Miller, he was now Buck Adams.

In Hank's current sad state of affairs, Buck doubted that his past would make much difference to Mr. Rhodes, once Buck showed him the money. Still, it would be best not to take that chance. Buck knew that if he put his mind to it he could come up with a lie that sounded truthful. The boy worked on one all night, and when the train stopped at a small town around dawn for a meal break; Buck was ready to make his move.

As the train slowed to a stop, the conductor told the passengers that they had thirty minutes to get something to eat and to use the facilities. The bathroom was foremost on Buck's mind. In this matter he was apparently not alone. Once outside, the lines formed at the two outhouses beside the station. It was obvious from their stench that these facilities were well past due for fresh-dug holes. To achieve a little privacy, Buck took the position last in line.

With the call of nature satisfied, most of the passengers walked to a small, nearby restaurant. This was the only building with any light showing at this pre-dawn hour. The breakfast menu was simple. You could buy hard-boiled eggs and a biscuit, or fried eggs along with fried potatoes on a biscuit. Because of the brevity of the layover the proprietor wrapped all the orders in butcher paper for the train. The establishment also offered a to-go lunch that consisted of an apple and a thick slice of smoked ham on a square of cornbread, still warm from the oven.

Noticing that Mr. Rhodes opted for only a quick cup of strong black coffee,

Buck purchased two of each of the meals; thus making for a fair-sized armful. Shortly after Buck regained his seat the conductor shouted, "All aboard!" The train lurched forward, and they were once again heading west.

Buck sat still for several minutes trying to think of the best way to offer Mr. Rhodes some breakfast without offending him. As the other passengers started eating, the train car soon took on the aroma of fresh eggs and biscuits. The smell reminded Buck of his own hunger, and he started eating a biscuit as he mentally rehearsed several ways to make his offer, without hurting this obviously proud man's pride.

Gathering his nerve, Buck boldly leaned over and tapped Mr. Rhodes on the shoulder. Hank spun around to confront his attacker; in his line of work one must be on guard at all times.

He looked down at Buck, relaxed, then asked, "What the hell you want boy?"

"I thought you might be hungry, sir," Buck said with a shaky voice, as he offered Mr. Rhodes a biscuit.

"Whether I am or not aint no concern of yours," Hank snapped back, then he turned toward the window.

"I didn't mean to offend you, sir. But after hearing your story about your bad luck, I have a business proposition that might be of interest to you."

"Now what can a kid like you have to offer that could be of any interest at all to me."

"Money," was Buck's one word reply.

Mr. Rhodes turned, then stared at the boy long and hard for what seemed an eternity. He then surprised Buck by saying, "Well, don't just sit there let's talk. And I'll be having that biscuit you mentioned."

It was obvious Hank could size up any situation quickly. He had nothing to lose by listening to this young man's proposition. It was a long way to Texas, and Hank had to use what little money he did have sparingly. If listening to a kid for a few minutes got him a meal, this was a fair trade. It was not as though he was asking for a handout. The kid was the one who had made the offer. Besides, those eggs and potatoes sure smelled tasty.

After making short work of his biscuit, Hank started the discussion mockingly, "So how much money you got saved up there little pard, ten, fifteen dollars maybe?"

Buck was disappointed with the lighthearted way Hank was approaching their deal. So he put an end to the conversation with a grunt, and moved to another seat a row back. After a few minutes Hank turned around and said, "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings there boy, I guess I didn't think you were sincere."

Buck looked up at him and said, in the manliest voice he could muster, "I have enough money to finance your next drive. I will loan this money to you on two conditions. First, I expect to be paid back and second, you must take me along and teach me how to be a cowboy."

"A cattle drive aint easy, son. You might just get yourself killed, lots of ways to get hurt on a drive."

"I'm tougher than I look. Besides, if I get killed you won't have to pay me back the money."

"Damned if that don't beat all. You got sand boy, I'll give you that."

“So you ready to talk real business now?”

“Hell, why not, bring yourself back up here,” Hank said with a big grin. “You got any more grub?”

Chapter Eleven

“The Mighty Mississippi”

The rest of the train ride went by quickly. After the mention of money Hank got serious; up until that point he was just humoring a kid to pay for his breakfast. Buck was a little reluctant to show Hank how much he had. Although he felt he could trust Hank, Buck did not really know this stranger. He did put Buck in mind of his father in many ways. Nevertheless, when they got off the train, Hank could simply overpower him and take all his money. Therefore, Buck split his coins into two equal parts and hid half in his shoes. The rest he kept in the small leather pouch around his neck, under his shirt.

When Hank asked how Buck came to be on the train alone, he was told only part of the truth. The facts that Buck was an orphan and the selling of the farm were true enough. However, Buck told Hank that the fever had killed both his parents. Buck also failed to mention that he was on the run from the Law. Hank might think less of Buck if he knew that he had killed two people. Although, from the looks of Hank, Buck was sure this old cowboy had killed his share.

Buck asked Hank so many questions about the West and his life there that Hank grew tired of answering them. He told the boy to just be patient and he could see for himself. Through Buck's many annoying questions, he found out that Hank had a spread of a few hundred acres in north Texas. Hank's ranch had a cabin, bunkhouse and barn. It had good water and was only about two miles from a small town. Hank had lost his wife giving birth to their only child; unfortunately, the child died just a few days after her mother. Hank had never remarried, nor felt the need for another fulltime woman in his life.

His only living relative was a younger sister, and after the misunderstanding with her new husband, Hank doubted that he would be welcome back there again. Therefore, Buck and Hank were both orphans in a way. He also suggested that the boy call him “Uncle Hank,” to avoid having to answer a bunch of questions regarding their being together.

His plan had been to borrow the money from his new brother-in-law; head back to Texas by way of the Mississippi and then cut across country to his spread. Bob was looking after things until he returned. The rest of his men were to meet him there in the spring for the next roundup.

Buck had never been on a riverboat, but he had seen pictures of them in a book at school. Those pictures did not do it justice. The trip from St. Louis south by boat was wonderful, more pleasant than the train. The boat glided along on the mighty river effortlessly.

Once they left the ship, Hank told Buck that they might as well buy the needed chuck wagon and team there. That way both could get broken in on the way to his place. Hank questioned Buck's riding skills for such a long cross-country trip. The stampeding Longhorns from his last drive had stomped his old chuck wagon and all its contents into the dust. He had not been able to salvage much more than an old iron skillet and a few bent spoons.

He did make a good point about the needed supplies being cheaper from stores along the river. Why should they pay extra for someone else to haul the stuff to Texas; they were going there anyway? The general store near his ranch always charged more for things near roundup. The owner knew Hank had to have these supplies for his drive north.

After buying the wagon, supplies and team, not much was left of the money Buck had given Hank. The trip downriver had been costly as well. Especially after one late night poker hand, that Hank was certain that he was going to win. Buck had to make up for this loss from the other half of his money.

With nearly all his money now gone, Buck had little choice but to stick it out to the end. The speed that Hank had gone through the money had Buck doubting the soundness of his decision to hook up with him. Yet Hank's assurances that he intended to repay this debt in full kept Buck's hopes alive. Besides, Buck really had nowhere else he had to be, here was as good a place as any.

Hank pushed the team westward, but not too hard. He told Buck that a good chuck wagon team needed to be trained to travel at a slow, steady pace. The chuck wagon would be traveling at the head of the herd. If its team started to run the rush of the wagon could cause the whole herd to stampede. He definitely did not want a repeat of last year's loss.

Sleeping under a wagon sure beat sleeping out in the open, especially when it rained. In addition, they had the added bonus of having plenty of supplies. Had they decided to just buy two mounts, then the stars would have been their only shelter. Their food would have been limited to what their saddlebags could have held and what game they killed along the way.

Throughout the trip, Buck poked and prodded more information from Hank. He kept asking exactly what his duties would be on the cattle drive. At times Hank would start to balk at the boy's many questions. That was when Buck would remind him that he was Hank's partner and not just some kid along for the ride. Hank would then reluctantly answer, but would not try to hide his irritation. Buck did not care if his questions made Hank mad. He was paying good money for these lessons, and was intent on picking Hank's brain for any bits of useful information.

By the time they made it to Hank's place, Buck thought he knew enough about cattle that the locals would not think him too much the outsider. Buck had even been practicing to speak with a slow southern drawl. He wanted to blend in, and vanish. The Law was not looking for Hank Rhodes' nephew in Texas.

Chapter Twelve

“The Training Begins”

The leaves had started to turn by the time they arrived at Hank’s ranch. Bob Harper greeted them warmly upon their arrival. He and Hank swapped tales of their trips back to the ranch. Bob was not too thrilled to be taking a kid on the next drive. Nevertheless, after Hank explained that the two of them would not be going on one if not for the boy’s investment; Bob reluctantly accepted the idea.

Although the cattle drive would not start until the last snow melted in the spring, a lot of preparation was needed. The test drive of the chuck wagon had revealed several weak points in its basic design. It had to be reinforced in several key locations to make it withstand the rigors of cross-country travel. Luckily, Bob was a good blacksmith as well as a fine cowboy. Several water barrels were mounted to the wagon’s sides for the long dry areas that they would have to cross.

The contrariness of the half-wild Texas’ Longhorns meant that the men’s mounts had to be dependable. Hank had a pretty good string of green-broke cow ponies, but these mustangs needed more work before they could make the long drive to the stockyards in Abilene, Kansas. This trip could take as long as two months, and would be going to be a real test of both man and beast. This journey, however, was well worth the time. Cattle in Texas cost only four dollars per head, compared to over forty dollars in Abilene.

The three of them were up before dawn each morning, and worked until darkness drove them indoors. They sometimes worked late into the night by lamplight. Something else always needed fixed. Once the chuck wagon passed Hank’s final inspection, they turned their attention to the livestock.

Buck had bought some boots and leather chaps to work the stock. His job was to wear the ponies down, then Hank and Bob would finish breaking them. Breaking these ponies was sort of fun at first, but after being bucked to the ground a few dozen times it soon became real work. By nightfall Buck would be so sore that he could hardly crawl onto his bunk. Yet come sunup, he would be right back in the saddle of another hardheaded pony.

His backside was getting tougher and his legs stronger with each passing day. Every time a pony bested him and sent him flying through the air, Hank and Bob would taunt him with shouts of, “Buck Adams, Hell, looks more like Bucked-off Adams to us!”

They never seemed to grow tired of their little joke, but Buck was getting tired of being the butt of it. Each time he climbed back on he tried to stay in the saddle a little longer. Soon, Buck spent more time in the saddle and less in the dust. Some of the ponies could not get him off their backs at all, and gave in to his will. At that point Bob would take over their training, and start working them around the few head of Longhorns that Hank kept on his place.

By late winter they had a good string of well-trained cow ponies and a completely outfitted Chuck wagon. All that was missing were the cowhands, and the herd of Longhorns to drive north.

Hank started making his rounds to the local ranchers, setting up deals for

their steers. All the ranchers knew that Hank was as good as his word. Therefore, his word and a handshake sealed the deals. Soon he had contracted two thousand head of Longhorns for the spring drive. Each rancher would deliver his part of the herd to a box canyon just west of Hank's spread. There was a small stream running its length and good grass lined its banks. When the last of the cattle arrived the drive would start.

With a little time to kill waiting for spring, Hank and Bob intensified the boy's cowboy training. The riding he had down pat now, but Buck was weak in the roping and gun departments. Hank felt no need to teach him how to use a six-shooter. If they ran into any Indians or cattle-rustlers along the way, a rifle would be his best defense. You could shoot a rifle from a moving horse with much greater accuracy than a short-barreled pistol. A handgun was only good for close-in fighting.

Hank made Buck shoot at a fence post, as he rode by at different distances. Buck worked at it until he could hit the target from twenty yards away, at a fast gallop. Buck's shoulder soon became accustomed to the recoil of the rifle and he no longer flinched when pulling the trigger. Shooting at a post, however, is not the same as shooting a man. Buck was not sure if he would be able to shoot someone, if that time ever came.

A stiff Lariat was harder to master. As with the rifle, Hank made Buck practice for endless hours. Soon the rope and rifle felt as though both were a part of him. Buck had one or the other in his hands at all times. Gone now was that soft farm boy, and in his place stood a cowboy. Months of hard work and rough grub had toughened this greenhorn, who was now eager to hit the trail.

Saturday nights, Bob and Hank would go to a little canteen in town to drink and play cards. This gave Buck some time alone. The bunkhouse was so small that Bob's snoring sometimes made sleeping difficult. The best part about their little trip was it caused them to sleep late on Sunday. The extra hour or two of shut-eye helped. These men treated Buck as an equal, and expected a full day's work from him.

On the outside Buck was looking the part of a hardened cowhand, but inside, the boy in him sometimes missed his mother and father. He hated those times when he let his guard down. Some nights he would think of his folks and remember their fun times together. Those memories made him feel both sad and glad at the same time. In his mind, he could still see the three of them sitting around the supper table, laughing. This recollection made him feel warm inside. However, at other times bad memories rushed into his mind.

Buck remembered the look on his mother's face, as she died in his arms that awful night on the bridge. He could still remember how sad he felt standing over her grave. He once again felt hurt and all alone in the world. This thought he hurried from his brain before the memory could force the tears from his eyes.

"No more tears, damn it," Buck would say to himself angrily. "No more tears."

Chapter Thirteen

“Chickens and Beer”

As spring neared, Buck was anxious to start their journey. It was getting harder for him to just sit around the ranch, and wait. As a result, he asked Hank if he could tag along one Saturday night. Hank understood the restless feelings Buck was having, because he too could not wait to get back on the trail.

“Sure Buck,” Hank said, “might do you some good to blow off a little steam. You been cooped up on this ranch all winter.”

When they got to town, Buck felt a little backward at first. It had been months since he had been around anyone besides Hank or Bob. The sights and sounds of even this small town were somewhat overpowering at first. He caught himself walking a little nearer to his companions than what he should. It was almost as if he was expecting them to hold his hand.

“Damn,” Buck said to himself. “Act like you are grown!”

With that bit of self-admonishment, he backed off from his friends and walked into the canteen as if he had done it all his life. Buck had to remind himself that his childhood had ended that night on the bridge.

The canteen was not a fancy place. The bar was a few rough boards nailed to three inverted rain barrels. Behind it was a shelf made from the same lumber. Perched on this board was an assortment of partially filled bottles of spirits and a collection of mismatched glassware. The floor of this establishment was hard-packed dirt covered with tobacco-stained sawdust. Several half-starved chickens roamed about freely, searching for any bits of food that found their way to the floor.

The canteen’s remaining furniture consisted of four tables and sixteen chairs. Old Army blankets covered the tables’ rough surface, which made card playing possible. Each was a patchwork of rings and spills from careless patrons.

“What may I gets for you gentlemen?” asked the short, chubby bartender in a thick Mexican accent.

“Give me and old Bob here some of the good Tequila,” Hank stated in a very business-like manner, “and a beer for my little partner here.”

Buck had not expected to be drinking with them. The ride into town to break the monotony would have been enough. He was not sure if he could hold down a beer. He had never tasted anything stronger than sweet cider. Nevertheless, Buck was determined not to look foolish. He had made up his mind that no matter how bad this beer tasted, he was not going to let it show.

The bartender poured two shots of Tequila for Hank and Bob, then handed Buck a big mug of beer. The two veteran drinkers downed theirs in one quick gulp each, and then ordered two more. Buck stood motionless, staring at the foam on top his mug as if it was a snake about to bite him.

“Drink up, boy!” Hank commanded.

Obeying this order, Buck took a tentative small sip. Other than a slight bitter taste, beer was not that bad. He then took another longer drink. Buck then felt a slight warm feeling in his stomach. Not wanting to look foolish; he turned the mug up and drained it. Buck then wiped the foam from his lip with his sleeve and asked for

another.

After finishing the second beer, the effect of the alcohol started making its way to his brain. The world around him started to become a little out of focus. This new experience was actually somewhat relaxing. Buck began to realize the attraction of alcohol. It felt good to have your senses numbed, and the alcohol gave him a strange feeling of self-confidence.

His shyness mysteriously vanished, and soon he was talking to Hank and Bob as though he was a grownup. The three of them laughed about small things that had happened on the ranch. When these everyday things originally occurred they had not seemed that funny. Both Hank and Bob knew that Buck was having his first adventure into the enticing world of intoxication. They also knew that he was ignorant of the heavy price he would have to pay tomorrow for tonight's fun. Naturally, both encouraged him to drink more. No one wants to suffer alone. They too would pay come sun-up for the Tequila they were so greedily consuming. The main difference was that Hank and Bob were well aware of this painful fact.

To add to Buck's night of firsts, Hank ordered three cigars. He watched the others bite a small portion from the end, then spit that part on the floor. Buck followed suit, not completely sure as to the purpose of this ritual. They then passed around the candle that sat in the middle of the table and lit up.

Buck was still unsure as to the proper method of attacking this new challenge. He watched the others suck hard on the bit end until the other end turned bright red. Each pulled the smoke deep into their lungs, and then exhaled the gray cloud with a look of pure enjoyment on their faces. This activity must surely give one much pleasure.

Buck mimicked their movements up until the point where the smoke began to enter his lungs. Even with the numbing effects of the beer, his body knew that smoke was not something you sucked into your lungs. Buck started coughing so hard that he could not catch his breath. Both older men howled with laughter at his reaction. No doubt their first time had resulted in a similar response.

"I guess maybe cigars aint your cup-of-tea, boy," Hank said as he winked at Bob. "Better have another beer to get the taste out of your mouth."

He was certainly right about the cigar not being something Buck ever wanted to try again, but now the beer had started tasting good. He lost count as to how many he drank, but he had no doubt that the number was too many for a kid. On the ride back to the ranch Buck lost everything that he had in his stomach by the roadside. His head swam as if someone had blindfolded him and spun him around hundreds of times. His situation worsened when he tried to get into his bunk. Then it was not just his head spinning, it was the whole damn room. Buck's suffering ended with the loss of consciousness, at least for the rest of the night.

The next morning brought with it the brightest sunlight Buck believed he had ever seen. This blinding light hurt his head through his tightly closed eyelids. Buck now knew why Hank and Bob stayed in bed on Sundays after their visits to town. It was late afternoon before he could hold down more than a sip of water. A cool wet rag across his eyes blocked the piercing sunlight and brought some relief. He had not felt such a throbbing pain in his head since that night at Willow Creek. With the numbing effect of alcohol gone from his system he now questioned the logic of

drinking as a form of relaxation. Beer and cigars were manly pleasures Buck would forgo for the moment.

Chapter Fourteen

“The Drive”

As the spring sunshine warmed the countryside, the local ranchers started bringing in their steers. Hank’s cowhands began drifting in as well. The first to arrive were the Davis twins, Jim and Jack. The rest came in a day or two apart. It was not long before there were no empty beds in the bunkhouse. As soon as all hands and steers were accounted for, they were ready to head north. The anticipation was killing Buck. He anxiously looked forward to putting his training to the test. He did not think about the fact that this trip could turn deadly at any moment. This youngster just wanted to start the drive, and experience the life of a real cowboy.

Everyone bought the lie about Buck being Hank’s nephew. Not that it really mattered that much to them, one way or the other, as long as the kid stayed out of their way. Hank assigned Buck as the cook’s helper until he got accustomed to the ways of the trail. This menial job was a far cry from being a cowboy, but at least he was going to be part of the drive.

Hank told Buck that he would work him into the crew a little at a time, for his own protection. Buck did not object to this slight demotion after he saw the size of the herd. Even on horseback, a rider would be at the mercy of the Longhorns if these potential killers decided to stampede. Buck felt much safer on the seat of the chuck wagon next to the cook, Raymond Sayre. Even this lofty perch actually offered little protection in a stampede.

When the first rays of sunlight peeked over the bluff, Hank got things started by shouting, “Head’em up boys, let’s get these bastards moving!”

The rest of the cowhands started shouting and whistling, as the herd was slowly prodded north at a casual walk. A cloud of thick dust soon formed over the herd from the many hoofs shuffling along. The whole crew wore their bandannas over their faces to block the choking dust. The exceptions were Hank, the chuck wagon crew and the scout, who all road at the head of the drive.

Once underway, the Longhorns stretched out in a column about twenty steers wide and half a mile long. The outriders were constantly driving wondering strays back into the line-of-march. At first it appeared that each Longhorn wanted to choose his own way north. After a few days on the trail they settled into the rhythm of the drive. Soon men and beasts forged slowly ahead as one.

As promised, Hank started letting Buck assume more and more cowboy duties. At first his job was to ride night-herd. This was tedious and boring work. From sunset to sunrise all he did was walk his pony slowly through the herd to help keep them calm. On more than one occasion, he became so sleepy toward dawn that he dozed off and fell to the ground. The next day, while the chuck wagon bounced along the uneven trail, Buck would try to sleep on the seat beside Mr. Sayre. However, every rut and rock the wagon passed over woke him from his uneasy slumber. Buck was glad when his turn as nightrider came to an end. The prairie was a hard mattress but at least it did not move.

By the time the drive was over Buck had worked every position except cook and scout. This trip had been uneventful. They had no Indian attacks, rustlers, or storms.

The drive had been little more than a long dusty walk. Several Indians were seen along a ridgeline one evening, but Hank posted extra riders around the herd, so nothing happened. Fewer than fifty head of cattle were lost the whole drive. Hank said that Buck had brought him good luck. A normal drive expected losses of a third or more.

With the herd safely locked away in the cow pens at the railhead, Hank collected his money. After paying his men and the ranchers, he had over ten thousand dollars profit; not bad for a slow walk out of Texas. Being a man of his word, he paid Buck back his hundred and gave him full cowhand-pay for the trip as well. When Buck protested this amount, Hank insisted that he take the money. Without Buck's original investment Hank could not have made a drive.

As a bonus for the men's hard work Hank treated them to a week in the best hotel in Abilene. They had hot baths, soft beds and all they could eat. The majority of the men stayed drunk the whole week. The crew spent many hours sampling the wears of the local working girls and gambling. Buck still remembered his bad experience with beer and opted not to try it again just yet.

At week's end Hank surprised everyone with the announcement that he was not going back to Texas. He had signed his ranch over to Bob for his years of dedication and friendship. As for his plans, he was going back east to retire. He told them that he was getting too old for the saddle, and that the Texas summers were just too damn hot.

Hank took Buck to the side and handed him a small leather pouch. "What's this?" Buck asked.

"It's what that cheap brother-in-law of mine would have made if he had been as trusting in this old cowboy as you," Hank said with a broad smile.

Buck opened the bag, and was surprised find a roll of money; one thousand dollars in brand new hundred-dollar bills, fresh from the bank. "I can't take this Hank," Buck said, as he tried to hand the pouch back. "You have already paid me back my loan plus wages."

"I'm a man of my word, boy," Hank continued, taking a step backwards and holding up both hands as if Buck were trying to give him a snake. "Without your faith in me the drive would not have happened and I would still be flat broke."

"But this is too much."

"It's what I was going to give my sister's husband but he had no vision," Hank stated flatly. "Sometimes you got to be willing to reach for the moon, Buck."

In a rather un-cowboy manner, he hugged Hank. Buck could tell by the way that Hank stiffened that he was unaccustomed to such displays of affection from another man. Realizing his mistake Buck stepped back and took Hank's hand in a more dignified shake.

"So what you got planned for yourself now, son?"

"I was going back to Texas but now I think I'll head west and buy me a small farm somewhere. Cowboy life was not as much fun as I thought it would be. I guess I'm still just a farmer at heart."

"Well, the train runs all the way to the ocean now. With that much money you can pick out a place about anywhere."

Hank was right; with the money that he had just given Buck, along with the

paid back loan, and his wages Buck now had over twelve-hundred dollars. Most folks would not see that much money in a lifetime.

Going east was out of the question for obvious reasons, so west would be his direction. How far west would depend on what he found down the line. Who knows, he might just go all the way to the ocean. Buck had never seen one and right now time was not a factor. He could always start farming a little later. He might as well take some time off and see what this world had to offer. With Hank gone from his life, Buck was once again alone. He was somewhat sad, but he now had absolutely no one to answer to and with this much money Buck could go where he damn well pleased.

Chapter Fifteen

“The Ocean”

Once again Buck Adams was riding the train westward, except this time he was not some scared little boy. Working with Hank and Bob had hardened him. He now looked much older. Buck bought a new handgun and holster; with the amount of money he had he could not chance a robbery. Buck looked the part of a tough Texas cowhand, not some scrawny farm boy from Ohio. His boot's two-inch heels added to this illusion. Most folks would have believed him to be at least seventeen.

The train ride was fun, but he soon became bored at looking at the seemingly endless prairie. He took a room at one of the stops and rested for a few days. There was little to do in this small town.

A patient and bored bartender took the time to teach him how to play poker. All that these lessons cost were a few shots of whisky. Nevertheless, Buck soon tired of this pastime and was ready to resume his westward trek. He had one more layover before the train entered the Rockies. Then the view from his window changed with each bend in the tracks. These snow-capped mountains were magnificent.

He now understood the attraction of these giant peaks to the early mountain men. A man would have to be special to survive amongst their rugged glory. It would take both great physical strength and will power to stay alive there alone for months on end. Buck knew that he had a lot more growing to do before he could try something as adventurous as that.

When the train dropped out of the mountains it was almost to the ocean. Buck was looking forward to seeing the Pacific. He had seen a picture of it in his schoolbooks, but that illustration did not properly prepare him for the actual thing. A picture cannot capture the power of the surf as it pounds against the shore. Nor does a mere image let you hear the sounds; the roar of the waves, or the shrill cry of gulls circling high above. The sea had a smell of its own; a fresh, strange scent that Buck had never noticed on inland waters.

Buck's first walk along the beach made him feel small and insignificant. As with the Rockies, this vast expanse of water seemed to stretch on forever. He felt as though something had drawn him to the sea. Buck was not destined to be some poor dirt farmer, trapped in a small valley in Ohio. He was going to be a sailor, plowing the open waters of the seven seas.

But how could Buck go from being a ranch hand to deckhand, overnight? He needed to find a ship big enough to travel around the world. His thirst for adventure was too great to allow him to work aboard some small fishing boat, safely near the shore. Buck wanted to travel far away beyond the horizon. To see firsthand all the distant exotic lands that he had only read about. If the ocean was this different from its picture, Buck knew that those faraway lands would also be much more exciting in person. The West had been fun but there had been a certain dull, sameness about it. He needed more variety in his adventures.

With nothing to hold him, it did not matter how long it might take to see the world. Buck may spend the rest of his life at sea. The land had brought him only heartache. Surely, the sea would have to be a kinder place. After he spent some time

riding the waves and seeing all that one man could see, then he might consider a life on land again.

Those were brave and noble thoughts coming from someone who had never been to sea. His ride down the Mississippi had been on a flat, gentle-flowing river. Although powerful in its own right, that mighty river could not begin to compare to the force of an angry sea. His anticipated voyage, filled with sunny days and smooth sailing, was not to be. Buck soon learned to respect the deadly power of an ocean, whipped into a Tempest by high winds.

He booked passage on a ship bound for the Hawaiian Islands. From there he would head to the South Seas, then on around to Australia. Buck could not remember his geography well enough to plan much farther than that. He would find out what part of the world came next when he got that far. India and Africa were over there somewhere, but Buck could not remember in what order these points fell along his path. His money should be adequate to get him around the world. If he did run short, he could work as a sailor to pay his way.

This was an excellent plan, and might have worked; if the sea had cooperated. Unfortunately, those deadly waters had other ideas. Two days out from port a storm cut short Buck's dreams of world travel. The wind started picking up about midday and by nightfall the storm howled. Waves crashed down on the ship with such force that the vessel soon buckled under their endless attack. The captain gave the order to abandon ship shortly before it broke apart and sank.

Panic broke out amongst the terrified passengers. People were fighting frantically for seats in the small lifeboats. The idea of women and children first did not apply to this mob. Men shoved children down and scramble over them to gain a potential life-saving place in the small crafts.

Many of the overloaded lifeboats sank shortly after they lowered into the raging sea. Each boat was supposed to have two members of the ship's crew, but terrified passengers forced these trained seamen out of the boats at gunpoint. These amateur sailors then lowered the boats at an uneven pace, dumping themselves and all those with them into the water.

Many of the passengers tried to bring along their belongings. Apparently these worldly possessions meant more to them than someone else's life. Because of this greed, several large suitcases occupied seats in the lifeboats instead of people.

After the call was given to abandon ship, Buck started struggling up the stairs to the deck. The ship was being rocked so violently by the huge waves that keeping his footing was nearly impossible. As each wave swept over the deck, much of it splashed down the stairway. Taking on more and more water, the ship settled lower into the ocean.

Buck had almost topped the stairway when a wall of water sent him tumbling back down. It took him three tries to make it to the deck. Once on deck, he struggled along the rail to where his assigned lifeboat was supposed to be; it was not there. A quick glance over the rail revealed what was left of the lifeboat, hanging by one of its mooring lines.

The waves were smashing the small craft's remnants against the side of the ship. Only one of the lifeboat's passengers was still visible. It was Buck's cabin mate, clinging desperately to what was left of the small craft.

Buck frantically searched the nearby deck for a rope, but by the time he found one and dropped it over the side his cabin mate was gone. The man's grip had failed. He dropped into the angry dark water, and never resurfaced.

Buck escaped in the last lifeboat with just the clothes on his back, his boots, handgun, and a few dollars in his pocket. The rest of his small fortune now rested on the ocean floor, safely locked away in the ship's big iron safe. As they pulled away from where the ship had once been, many bodies floated face down in the sea around them.

After the storm clouds cleared, the sun beat down on them mercilessly. They were tempted to drink from the sea to quench their unbearable thirst, but the two sailors in their party told them that the salty water would only increase it. The survivors drifted for several days, with only the lifeboat's small supply of water and emergency rations. These ran out two days before a passing fishing boat rescued them and took them ashore. Of the seventy-five passengers and crew, only eight survived the storm.

It seemed that the ocean was going to be no kinder to Buck than the land. With no secret stash of money to give him courage, he would have to start over again from the bottom; alone and broke. His few damp dollars would not last long. Buck needed a job, and needed one fast.

Chapter Sixteen

“Buck’s First”

The village where the fishermen had taken Buck and his fellow castaways offered few choices for employment. Buck did not want to venture back out to sea, even as a deck hand on a small fishing boat. This vast ocean’s dark waters had tried to kill him and it was not going to get a second opportunity to do so.

The villagers gave them some food and shelter for a few days, but made it plain from the start that these strangers would have to be on their way as soon as they recovered their strength. These poor folks were just barely getting by themselves and could not afford to extend their hospitality for long. An elder told Buck that a larger settlement was eight miles inland. It was San Luis Obispo, located midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. He assured Buck and the others that from there they could arrange to get back to the railroad.

Of Buck’s fellow survivors, two were seamen from the ship’s crew, Eli White and Paul Walters. Two were Christian Missionaries, Brother Curtis and Brother Joseph, going to convert the natives on some island. The remaining three were a rich Eastern family. The father, James R. Warner, was in his late fifties and rather portly. The mother, Brenda Sue Warner, was much younger and incredibly attractive. Their ten-year-old daughter, Allison, completed this family.

Buck had not met them on the ship. The rich stayed in upper staterooms, while he shared a cheaper cabin below deck with some foreigner. Buck thought the man was German, but he might have been French. Buck could not understand anything this foreigner said, nor could he understand Buck. This total lack of communication would have made for a boring trip had their journey not been cut short.

Mr. Warner was the last to regain his strength for the walk to San Luis Obispo. His daughter was out of bed early the next morning, playing with the village children as though she had not just had a near-death experience. Buck’s youth had aided his speedier recovery as well. He spent several hours sitting on the small dock answering Allison’s many questions as to his dress, age, and was he a real cowboy. Buck answered most of her questions truthfully, but some he simply could not.

Not trusting the ship’s crew, Mr. Warner kept nearly all his trip-money in the money belt under his shirt; a well-guarded secret. He did remove enough cash to buy a donkey and cart from one of the locals, along with some provisions, cooking utensils, and eight old blankets.

The cart was only big enough to transport the supplies, his wife, and child. The rest of the party had to walk. Buck’s inventory of his present personal wealth consisted of seven still damp dollars and some change. He offered to help pay for some of the food but Mr. Warner insisted on paying for everything. In exchange for his rations, Mr. Warner placed Buck in charge of the donkey. It was obvious to him that Buck knew livestock; after all, anyone could tell by Buck’s dress that he was apparently a cowboy. The group packed the cart just before sunup and started their trek inland. This little band was a strange cross section of humanity; young, old, rich, poor, sinners, saints, sailors, and one young pretend cowboy.

Buck's boots had oversized heels that kept them from slipping out of the stirrups. This footwear was designed for ridding, not long walks over uneven ground. They quickly caused his feet to blister. After a mile or so, he was glad Mr. Warner had to ask for frequent breaks to catch his breath. These stops gave Buck the opportunity to slip his boots off and rest his tired feet. He thought about walking barefoot, but he needed the extra height his boots offered to keep his real age concealed.

The group made only three miles before Mr. Warner had to stop for the day. The redness of his face made Buck question if this fat old man was going to survive this trip at all. His obesity was a huge burden to bear. Buck wondered why Mrs. Warner did not offer to trade places with her husband. Buck later realized that this was a loveless marriage, at least on the wife's part. She cared little about Mr. Warner's discomfort. He, on the other hand, obviously cherished her.

His money had bought her body, but he could not buy her love. As the group sat around the campfire, it was plain to see that she could hardly stand her husband. He fretted over her as if she were a child. He asked repeatedly if she needed anything to make her more comfortable. Her replies were short, bitter, and hurtful. It was as though she blamed him for the ship sinking, and for her present discomfort.

Buck knew little of how married folks were supposed to act, but this was not normal behavior if you cared at all for someone. Her actions reminded him of Jessie's treatment of his own mother. It was really none of Buck's business, yet their close quarters made it all but impossible to ignore. Blinded by his love for his tormenter, Mr. Warner apparently could not see what was painfully obvious to those around him. Each time Mrs. Warner scolded him for her present state of discomfort, he responded with a sincere apology, and downcast eyes. A servant would have expected better treatment.

As the group made its way toward their destination, Buck started to resent Mrs. Warner because of the way she treated her husband. Nevertheless, something made it near impossible for him to keep his eyes off of her. Strange new feelings were developing inside Buck. He was starting to become a man. He had to force himself to keep his eyes on the trail ahead. Watching Mrs. Warner's breasts bounce, as the cart dropped in and out of the ruts in the road, caused Buck to stumble and almost fall several times.

One thing that helped take his mind off of Mrs. Warner was the frequent visits from Allison. She would become bored with the cart ride, and would jump down to walk along side Buck as he led the donkey. Her steady stream of questions was a welcome relief from his lustful thoughts about her mother. Buck was nearer Allison's age, so talking to her came easy for him.

Allison was fixated on the life of a cowboy, and expressed the fact that had she been born a boy that would have been her choice of occupations. Not that working was ever going to be in her future. As the only heir, she would inherit all her parent's wealth. About the only work she might encounter would be dressing for a night on the town, or a fancy dinner party in her mansion. Her soft hands would never know a callous, or her brow the sweat of an honest day's labor.

Mr. Warner had prospered selling uniforms to the Union Army during the Civil War. His small garment factory had won a big government contract that allowed him to expand his operation. After the war he sold the factory, and had enough money to

retire comfortably.

To impress his beautiful young wife, he had planned a yearlong trip around the world. The factory had taken nearly all his time, and he sensed that she was drifting away from him. This was a grand gesture on his part, but Mrs. Warner had married him only for his money. Having his child assured her that he would take care of her, no matter how badly she treated him.

Mrs. Warner had taken several young lovers, while her husband was preoccupied with his factory, and making money. She fulfilled her wifely duties at a bare minimum, making any excuse to avoid her husband's sexual advances. Now she was eyeing this strong young man that led the donkey, wondering what sort of lover he would be.

After the evening meal, everyone settled under their thin blankets for some much needed rest. Mr. Warner was the first to start snoring, joined shortly by the rest of the little band. Buck thought that he was the only one awake until he turned toward the fire and saw Mrs. Warner on the other side of its warm glow. She was on her side with her back toward her family. Buck assumed she was simply watching the flames, until her eyes locked onto his.

Her intense stare made him feel uncomfortable. Then she pulled her blanket slightly off of her soft shoulder, revealing the top of her under garment. Knowing she now had the young man's undivided attention, she slowly exposed one of her supple breasts, and then licked her lips seductively.

The effect of her performance became immediately obvious through Buck's thin blanket. She knew she had him. Motioning into the darkness with her eyes, she slipped from under her blanket, and then walked toward a small stand of pines just out of firelight. Buck picked up his blanket and followed without question. At this state of arousal, he threw all caution to the wind.

Once they were at a safe distance she stopped, turned toward him, and then dropped her nightgown to the ground. In the moonlight, she had the look of a Greek marble statue. Everything about her was perfect. In the dim light Buck's heart raced, as he devoured her with his eyes.

Mrs. Warner took the blanket from his hands and spread it on the ground. She never uttered a word, just nodded for him to join her. He hesitated for a moment, unsure if this was the right thing to be doing with another man's wife. His lust, however, quickly won this battle with his conscience.

After undressing him with a few quick skillful moves, the two of them locked in an embrace that was heart stopping. Her warm body molded itself into his, and they became one being. She then skillfully led Buck into manhood.

His first performance was over much too soon. The newness of this carnal experience had caught him completely off guard. With his lust abated somewhat, Buck regained control of his body and did much better the second go around. As with riding a horse for the first time, he soon found Mrs. Warner's rhythm and matched her pace, thrust for thrust. This time they both slipped over the edge into oblivion at the same time.

Without saying a word Mrs. Warner dressed, then calmly walked back to her place by the fire and went to sleep as if nothing had happened. Buck, on the other hand, stayed there in the darkness mentally replaying their encounter until the first

golden rays of sunlight raced across the morning sky. The aroma of her perfume, and their mingled sweat still lingered on his skin; it was intoxicating.

Chapter Seventeen

“The Deadly March”

Buck hurried back to his place by the fire before any of the others began to stir. He tried to keep his eyes diverted from Mrs. Warner, but caught her slightly smiling in his direction as if acknowledging their secret meeting. Buck averted his eyes on each of these occasions, feeling a bit ashamed.

Mr. Warner was the last to get up, with a great deal of difficulty. The hard ground was not kind to his advanced years. He moaned, and then stretched, cursing under his breath as to his primitive accommodations. Allison, as usual, bounced up ready for another day of adventure. After a quick breakfast the group again set off toward civilization.

Mr. Warner was unable to match the cart's pace. The others had to stop often to wait for him to catch up. By the noon break it became obvious to all that he could go no farther on foot. Mrs. Warner reluctantly gave up her place in the cart for the remainder of the day's travel. She found that walking on the uneven terrain was no easy chore, and demanded more rest stops than had her fat husband. This slower pace meant spending an extra night on the trail.

Mr. Warner apologized profusely to his wife for his failure. She returned each of his comments with an angry glare or sharp criticism of his lack of stamina. Buck found himself feeling sorry for Mr. Warner and even guiltier for his own lustful actions of the previous evening. Mrs. Warner was an evil, vile person, and Buck hated that he could only hope for a repeat of last night's performance.

Having once enjoyed the pleasure of a woman's body, nothing else could ever compare to the experience. He knew it was wrong to want another man's wife, but in this case she was the one who wanted someone else. If not Buck, then it would be the next stranger who caught her fancy. She thought of only herself and her own pleasure. Her husband was simply an annoyance, tolerated for his money.

As soon as they made camp Mr. Warner quickly fell asleep without eating any supper. His color did not look good, and his breathing was becoming labored. If Buck's lust had not been so overpowering he might have taken the time to get Mr. Warner to at least drink something. At this moment Buck's only desire was to have the old man out of the way, so that he could be with Mrs. Warner. This might be his last opportunity. As soon as they were back in civilization Mrs. Warner would board a train with her family and be gone from his life forever. Tonight, however, she would belong to him once more. In the concealment of darkness they repeated her act of infidelity.

With the dawn came the realization that Mr. Warner had passed away quietly in the night. His old heart had apparently failed him. Allison was grief stricken at the loss of her beloved father and wailed pitifully at his side. Mrs. Warner showed little emotion. Not a single tear fell from her eyes, although she dabbed at them repeatedly with her silk hanky for show.

After the two sailors loaded Mr. Warner's body onto the cart for the last leg of the expedition, Mrs. Warner quickly removed his money belt and stashed it under her dress. She now had what she prized most from their union, his wealth.

Mrs. Warner walked beside Buck as he led the donkey. This strange funeral procession had Allison, along with Brother Curtis and Brother Joseph, walking behind the cart. Allison sobbed softly as the missionaries said prayers under their breath and both tried to console the grieving child. The two sailors walked well behind to avoid disturbing the child's mourning with their own conversation.

When they neared the town Mrs. Warner asked Buck what his plans were for the future. He told her that they lay at the bottom of the sea in the ship's safe. She then asked if he might be interested in working for her. Buck asked what the job entailed, even though he was not in a position to be picky. His seven dollars would not last long; nevertheless, he did not want to appear desperate.

She explained her need of an armed male escort for the trip back to New York. Buck would be both a bodyguard for her and a baby sitter for Allison, among other things. He secretly hoped that these other things might include being her lover. She said he would be paid well for his services. Buck had no problem taking money for honest work, but the sex would just be a bonus of sorts. Taking money for that would make him no better than the tavern whores he held in such low regard.

He accepted her offer of employment; resigning himself to the fact that his trip around the world would have to wait for a while, and possibly might never happen. Soon he would be heading in the opposite direction, backtracking over already traveled ground. The only bright side to his situation was that he now had a job, and would not have to try to live on his seven measly dollars.

After the town doctor secured statements from the group as witnesses to her husband's death, Mrs. Warner arranged to give him a decent burial in the town cemetery. He was gone from this world, and she now was a rich widow with a huge appetite for younger men.

She would have her pick of young studs when she got back to New York; for now this young cowboy would have to do. Mrs. Warner enjoyed the fact that she had taken Buck's virginity. This small conquest made her feel powerful. With the aid of her late husband's wealth, she would be able to ravish many more young men in the years to come.

Chapter Eighteen

“Used and Discarded”

After the ceremonies, Mrs. Warner took care of all the travel arrangements. Before Buck knew it they were heading back across the Rockies, bound for New York. This time he shared a private car with Allison and Mrs. Warner. She never let him call her Brenda; even late at night, when they again became one creature. This was her way of keeping Buck in his place. He was simply a thing of pleasure to her and nothing more. She was not looking for love or romance, just someone to help satisfy her own lustful cravings.

It did not matter to Buck as long as she kept offering her body, and paying his way. He figured as soon as he got them safely back to New York she would send him packing. With his pay he could then make his way back down to Texas and work another cattle drive with Bob. Buck enjoyed the idea of being a real cowboy again, and now that he knew how to please a woman, his Saturday night trips into town would take on a completely different meaning.

They made good time, and soon they were approaching the Ohio border. Buck’s heart almost stopped when he remembered that a double murder still hung over his head there. Luckily they traveled across Ohio at night and had no reason to get off the train. Black porters brought their meals to the private car on silver trays, and it had its own bathroom.

Even though this ride had been rather pleasant, Buck was glad that this trip was nearing its end. If he spent much more time living this rich lifestyle, a smoky bunkhouse filled with snoring cowboys might be hard to take. At least there the men treated him as an equal and not just some wealthy woman’s plaything. This experience had given him a little better understanding as to why the tavern whores drank so heavily.

When the train arrived in New York, Mrs. Warner again took complete control. She ordered her baggage delivered to a waiting carriage, and then tipped the three black porters that had been at her beck-and-call. When the carriage arrived at the Warner home, about twenty minutes later, she casually handed Buck a roll of money, then dismissed him with a slight wave of her hand without as much as a “thank you”.

She and Allison then walked up the marble steps into her house and disappeared through the massive oak doors. Her house servants scurried along behind her with the luggage. Buck now stood on the sidewalk alone.

Looking down at the money in his hand, Buck now felt somewhat used, and had to face the fact that he had been no more than a temporary distraction for her amusement. She had felt nothing for him, and Buck had to admit that seeing the last of her was not going to upset him that much. The only time Mrs. Warner spoke kindly to him was when she wanted his services in her bed. The rest of the time she had snapped orders at him just as she had done poor old Mr. Warner.

Murray Hill, where her home was located, was an affluent neighborhood in midtown Manhattan, near the Central Railway Station. Unlike the rest of the city, Murray Hill’s streets were clean and the homes there were well maintained.

To an outsider much of New York appeared to be one big frightening slum. This city appeared to be the very center of vice and debauchery. Rows of tenement-houses reeked with filth. Yet to those poor folks living there, this was a thriving working-class neighborhood, and the only home most of them would ever know. Buck, however, longed for the fresh air of the countryside, or open prairie. These crowded streets reminded him too much of the cow pens of Abilene, and he had no desire to become part of this herd.

Buck caught the next train heading west. New York was no place for a cowboy, even a pretend one. Whichever way his life played itself out, it would not be in the smothering confines of a crowded Eastern city.

On the ride back to the station Buck checked the roll of money that he still held so casually. Apparently his sexual abilities had been better than he had realized. A quick inventory revealed two-hundred dollars in twenties. It was rather ironic. He had made as much in this short time giving a woman pleasure as his father had working his entire life in the dirt.

Money-wise Buck was back to where he had started the year before. Now though, he was not some scared little farm boy. The past year had hardened him, and he had shot up like a weed. Buck could now ride, rope, shoot, drink and service a woman with the best cowhands. He doubted his own parents would have recognized him; if they were still alive.

The painful memory of their passing came rushing back, and he had to fight the urge to cry. Buck also remembered the promise that he had made to place proper markers on their graves. This train would be traveling through Wilsonville on the way back west. He could secretly arrange to have the markers placed.

His only concern was the Law. Having no desire to dance at the end of a rope for his past misdeeds, Buck exited the train one town east of Wilsonville. There he arranged for the carving of the headstones and their placement. He dared not risk making a personal appearance in Wilsonville.

With that last detail taken care of, there would be no need for him to venture to this side of the Mississippi ever again. Once back out West he intended to live out his days under the warm Western sky. A small ranch or farm would be all he needed, and maybe a woman to sit with on the front porch. Who knows, perhaps a bunch of kids as well.

Buck had it all planned out, but life does not always cooperate with one's dreams. Besides he still had a lot of growing to do before he would be ready for that rocker on the front porch.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the train exited the Ohio border the next day. Buck had skipped the meal stop at Wilsonville, opting instead to slouch down under his hat and pretend to be asleep. He dared not chance any of the town folk seeing him. It would be his luck to run into Big Mike if he set one foot off the train. Buck could imagine the blood-curdling cry of alarm, and the ensuing lynch party. He would just as soon avoid that little get-together.

With Ohio fading into the distance, Buck concentrated on what lay ahead. He was napping when the sound of a familiar voice woke him. It took a few seconds for his mind to pinpoint the rugged face that went with that familiar Texas' drawl.

Hank Rhodes had boarded at one of the stops and was now bending the ear of

one of his fellow passengers with tales of the “Wild West.” A smile crept across Buck’s face as he listened to Hank tell almost the exact same stories he had told Buck the year before. Buck could not stop himself from a little mischief.

Disguising his voice as best he could, Buck said from under his hat, “Why don’t you hold down the noise old man, some of us real men are trying to sleep.”

Before Buck could sit up straight in his seat, Hank was standing over him with his fists balled tight and his jaw set. Keeping his hat pulled over his eyes and his head tilted slightly toward the floor, Buck asked in his own voice, “You wouldn’t hit a partner, would you cowboy?”

After a moment of stunned silence Hank let out a big belly laugh, then snatched Buck to his feet and hugged him as if he were Hank’s long lost son. He then held Buck at arm’s length and said, “Buck, I was a fixen to take your damn fool head off.”

“Now that’s pretty big talk for an old dirt farmer.”

“I’ll show you who’s an old dirt farmer!” Hank shouted as he grabbed Buck in a headlock.

“I give, I give!”

“You damn site better,” Hank said as he loosened his grip on Buck’s neck. “I’ve killed white men for less than that kind of insult.”

“What the Hell you doing back east Buck?” Hank asked after they both flopped back down in the seat.

“It’s a long story.”

“Well, start telling her then, son,” Hank said as he leaned back and relaxed.

The two friends talked most of the night. Buck told Hank of his adventures, and then Hank told how he had lost nearly all his money in a big poker game. He was heading back to the ranch and asked if Buck wanted to join him. The money from the widow was not enough to buy much of a spread, so Buck said that he would give the Longhorns one more chance to kill him. This old world can be a cold and lonesome place at times; being with a friend again sure felt good.

Chapter Nineteen

“Captain Buck”

Hank and Buck retraced their route from the previous year. This time they only had to buy two saddle-horses and some gear when they got off the riverboat. Not having a chuck wagon to slow them down made their trip overland to Texas much speedier. A few days later they were on the ridge overlooking Hank's old ranch.

“Damn, I just about forgot how beautiful the place looked,” Hank said as he wiped his nose on his sleeve. Buck thought for a moment that Hank was going to cry.

Hank was looking more with his heart than his eyes. To Buck the ranch still looked the same as when they had left. He had not spent enough time there to have Hank's sentimental attachment. This was just going to be a means to an end for Buck, but Hank knew it was the end of the line for him.

Bob welcomed the two of them warmly and made Hank a full partner, even though Hank insisted he did not have to do that. The partners also paid Buck well above regular cowhand wages. Buck stayed with them for four seasons, and then decided to set out on his own once again. At eighteen, Buck felt himself every bit a man.

He now stood six-feet tall and weighed one-hundred and eighty pounds, all muscle. The trail drives had made him as hard as nails. His riding and shooting skills were honed to perfection. Buck was now, from head to toe, a real cowboy.

The sexual lessons taught him by the widow had not gone to waste either. A string of broken-hearted *senoritas* could attest to that fact. If anything, he had improved in this department; if not in skill, at least in volume. He still guarded his feelings closely and never let himself care much for the dancehall girls. Those women were fine for sexual release now and again, but he knew that they were not marriage material. Not that he wanted a wife at this stage of his life anyway. Buck had too many things that he needed to accomplish before considering such a commitment.

When he finally left Bob and Hank after their last drive to Abilene, Buck had amassed the sum total of eight-hundred and sixty dollars to buy his own place. He was still not in love with the Texas' summer heat, so he set out for a cooler part of the West.

Buck had heard stories that the Oregon Territory had rich farmland that a man could buy cheap. Its temperature seemed more to his taste as well. The wind from the ocean kept the winters mild and the summers cool. There would be some snow to contend with, but there should be none of the scorching heat of a Texas' summer. Buck had his fill of dust and cows. The slow-paced life of a farmer was now something he felt that he could enjoy until he ended his days.

As is often the case, just when his life is planned down to the smallest detail, something goes wrong. His plan was to take the train back to the ocean, then catch a coastal steamer for the trip north to Oregon. Although he was not keen on the idea of going back out to sea, a ship that stayed near the shore should be fine. If bad weather threatened they could outrun it and make port safely. This would be easier than taking the long and dangerous wagon train ride over the mountains. A trip that once took months, now took only weeks by rail and sea. The train part was completed

without a hitch. However, when Buck got to San Francisco things went terribly wrong.

His new holster and six-shooter proved to be no match for a club to the back of his head when he turned down the wrong waterfront alley by mistake. Buck awoke some hours later. He was chained in the hole of a schooner, bound for China to pick up another load of immigrant workers for the Industrial West. All that his captors had left him, besides a rather large bump on the head, were his pants and shirt.

Apparently able-bodied seamen were in short supply. This form of conscription was the only way to quickly man a ship. Once they were several miles offshore escape would be all but impossible, even for a strong swimmer. A well-armed captain and ruthless first mate guaranteed strict discipline. Each stood twelve-hour watches over their new crew. The slightest act of revolt could mean certain death, or some punishment that would make a person wish they were dead.

Buck's new comrades consisted of five sailors from other ships, a fat bakery shop worker, a pig farmer, and three well-to-do brothers from back East in town for a vacation. The brothers' names were Mathew, Mark and Luke Winthrop. The one thing that these men shared besides the damp, foul smelling chamber was the fact that they all had made a wrong turn in the night.

The first mate brought everyone on deck at daybreak. The captain explained the rules of their confinement. Captain Donald Bishop was obviously displeased with this group that his first mate had hastily collected. Judging a man's abilities from behind, and in a dark alley can be rather difficult. Nevertheless, pleased with what he had or not, these men would have to do until the next port. Perhaps the pickings would be better there.

After a brief, crash-course in seamanship for those not sailors, the first mate put them to work. The three brothers were obviously unaccustomed to manual labor. Buck's body, on the other hand, was strong and hardened from the cattle drives. He adjusted to this new occupation rather quickly. His hands had held a rope just about non-stop for the last few years. Both were well callused and tough.

All three brothers' hands were bleeding by the end of their first watch. It would take weeks to harden them to withstand the pain. Buck tried to help them when he could, but doing his own job took nearly all his strength. One misplaced foot, or handhold could bring any of them crashing to the deck, from their stations high in the rigging.

Luke, the youngest of the Winthrop brothers, slipped once and Buck just barely caught him by the seat of his trousers. After that incident Captain Bishop had the good sense to keep Luke on deck, and not risk losing a crewmember when none was around to replace him. Young Mr. Winthrop's lot in life would probably change drastically once the ship neared another port. Where the captain might be able to replace any of the crewmembers that he felt were not pulling their weight.

After a few weeks at sea the men all performed their duties well enough that the captain felt no need to replace any of them, even young Mr. Winthrop. It takes a lot of time to train a new man, and the new conscript might not be any better than the one he replaced. A poor crew was always better than having no crew at all.

The crew worked sixteen hours shifts with only two meal breaks. The food was mostly salt pork and corn mush, with the occasional lime slice to fight off scurvy. At

the end of their watch the crewmembers each received a full tankard of watered-down rum. This dulled the pain so that they could get some badly needed sleep. No one considered mutiny at this point; the crew did not have the strength to even try. Although the men complained constantly amongst themselves, none dared voice their grievances within earshot of the captain or first mate.

A day out from the China coast the ship encountered a violent storm that threatened to swamp it. Captain Bishop wisely changed course and outran the worst of the storm; a costly maneuver that would add two days to the journey. This upset the captain, and he took his anger out on any crewmember that had the misfortune to be near him.

It was in one of these fits of rage that Bishop made the mistake of striking Buck with his pistol. Buck felt that he had done nothing to deserve this cruel treatment, and exploded back at him with a rain of blows from both fists. When Buck's eyes cleared from the stunning blow he saw Captain Bishop lying unconscious at his feet. Bishop was bleeding from both his nose and mouth. It appeared that many of Buck's wild punches had found their mark.

The other crewmembers on deck at the time realized this would probably be their only hope for salvation. As one, the crew rushed toward their now helpless captain. With little effort they hoisted him above their heads and cast him overboard. Their next victim was the sleeping first mate, who had no idea anything was amiss up on deck. Each man picked up whatever sort of club he could find, then rushed the first mate's cabin. The attack was savage, but brief. Soon both captors' lifeless bodies were sinking into the black depths of the ocean.

The crew raided Captain Bishop's private store of good Jamaican rum and toasted their victory. The men pronounced Buck the hero of the day. Then one of the older sailors asked, "Any of you swabs know how to navigate this tub?"

The men looked around hopefully. When none of the crew stepped forward they knew that they were in real trouble. The celebration abruptly ended. What good would their freedom be if they still died, wondering aimlessly about the open sea without food or water.

The remnants of the storm hung overhead in a thick cloud cover. Its darkness blocked the sun. The crew could not tell which way was west. The best they could do for now was to just keep sailing ahead of the storm until they found a patch of clear sky to get a bearing.

Chapter Twenty

“Dinner Guests”

Even though he was the youngest, the crew elected Buck their captain. This was their way of showing their appreciation for being set free. After an inventory of the ship's stores, the men realized that they were in even more trouble than they had originally thought. The captain had intended on replenishing his supplies in China when he picked up his human cargo. He had stocked the ship with just enough food and water for a one-way trip.

The storm had cost the crew precious days' supply of these items. The cook had overheard the captain telling the first mate that they were only one day from China before the storm hit. The men, however, had no way of knowing which way their flight from its destruction had taken them.

On the morning of the third day after the mutiny the skies cleared and the sun rose in the east. Unfortunately the ship was sailing straight for it; this meant they were heading in the wrong direction. With the sun now to guide them they made a quick about-face, putting on all the canvas the ship could hold. They were not sure where they might make landfall, but at least now the crew felt they were heading toward something.

Buck's best guess was that they were five or six days from China. This meant they had to ration their supplies. No one had thought to try to catch rainwater during the storm. The captain had known that he had enough water left even with a day or two delay. Now the men had to make what little water they had last and all they saw for the next eight days were bright sunny skies and clear moonlit nights. Not one drop of precious moisture fell.

The fifth day came and went without any land showing on the horizon. The crew ran completely out of food and water on the sixth day. By the eighth day it appeared doubtful that any of them were going to make it. Then just before sunset on the eighth day a plume of clouds appeared directly in their path and a cry of, "Land Ho!" boomed down from the lookout in the Crow's Nest. What land, they had no way of knowing, but at least it was something. Land usually meant water and perhaps some sort of food.

It takes a cowboy to miss something as big as a continent, but that is exactly what Buck did. He had not landed in China, or even Asia for that matter; it was Borneo. The storm had blown the ship south and east. By the time they righted their direction the ship was nowhere near China.

The crew lined the rail as they sailed along the rocky coastline looking for any signs of life and a safe place to anchor. It was hard to resist the temptation of heading the ship straight for the beach. However, the roar of the waves crashing against the jagged coral reefs that lay hidden just below the surface made them reconsider. They hoped that there would be a break in these deadly waves somewhere. For now, they would have to be patient and sail on.

Just after dawn the ship rounded a point and found a small natural harbor. Buck sent the ship's dinghy in first with two of the crew to test the depth of the water. The men returned shortly and assured him that the ship could clear the reef

on the high tide. Two hours later they cautiously ventured into the cove. Only once did the ship's keel scrape the bottom ever so slightly, but not hard enough to cause any damage. The grinding of wood against coral sent a chill up Buck's spine.

Safely inside the breakers, the ship was anchored. Buck then posted lookouts high in the rigging. One of the older sailors had warned them about savage tribes of headhunters that sometimes populated these islands; the men dared not rush blindly onshore. Buck took a boatload of men to check the area before letting down his guard.

Armed with the captain and first mate's pistols, along with some knives from the galley, this small band eased their little boat onshore. They then silently slipped into the nearby jungle. Splitting up, they scouted all around the lagoon, but found no signs of danger. The boat was sent back for the rest of the crew and the empty water barrels.

Not far from the beach they could hear the sound of rushing water. The men followed its babble to a small waterfall that cascaded off a nearby cliff. It then ran into the lagoon by way of a small fresh water stream. They all dropped to their stomachs on its bank and drank thirstily. Having spent time in the dry parts of Texas, Buck cautioned the men to take it easy; otherwise they would just throw up.

After all the men had abated their thirst, Buck ordered the water barrels filled and loaded back onboard. A man can go a lot longer without food than water. They might have to make a run for it at any moment. Getting the water safely on the ship was their first priority.

After the water was stowed below deck, Buck divided the men into three groups. One group would guard the ship and small boat. Another would try to catch fish in the lagoon using nets from the ship. The remaining crewmembers went with Buck into the jungle to look for fruit. He was tempted to shoot some birds or monkeys but chose not to; fearing that the sound of gunfire might invite unwanted guests.

Both food-gathering parties were successful. The men now had fresh fruit and fish to eat. Buck chose to put back out to sea before letting them begin their feast. They all were tempted to just stretch out in the sun on the soft sand and have a leisurely meal. But Buck's experiences with Indians and cattle rustlers made him distrustful of any situation that he did not control completely.

His caution proved to be justified. As they sailed back out of the lagoon, several hundred painted savages, with bones through their noses, swarmed onto the beach the crew had just vacated. Each native carried either a sharp spear or nasty looking club. This was obviously not a welcoming committee. Word of the crew's trespass had spread quickly. One casual lunch on the warm sand would have probably been their last meal. Buck shuddered at the prospect of his head shrunk and worn as a trophy around one of these native's neck.

Chapter Twenty-One

“The Reunion”

After this narrow escape, the crew sailed along the coast for three days and nights before seeing the first signs of civilization. High upon a cliff, overlooking a larger lagoon, was a small church with a big white cross in its front yard. As the ship neared, the men could see a port with Western style buildings around the waterfront. Half-hidden in the trees going up the slope to the church were several larger homes and many small native huts.

During the trip down the coast Buck had called all the crew to a meeting on deck. They discussed what to say about the missing captain and first mate. The crewmembers all agreed that their story would be that the storm had swept the captain and first mate overboard, while both men fought courageously to save the ship. None of the crew wanted to hang for murder or mutiny.

While searching the captain’s cabin Buck had found Bishop’s logbook. The last entry read:

One day out of China

Big storm directly in our path

Changing course to the south

Going to try to outrun the storm

God help us--- Captain Donald Bishop

This tied in nicely with their lie. The ship being lost and blown off course this far made the crew’s story believable. In a large chest at the foot of Bishop’s bed Buck also found the personal property of Bishop’s involuntary crew, including all of Buck’s money. He returned these stolen items to their rightful owners. In the top drawer of Bishop’s desk Buck found a locked metal strongbox which held the ship’s operating money. After beating it open, he divided its contents amongst the crew as pay; except for the three rich brothers. Buck was sure a few dollars would not break them. He did not keep any of the ship’s money for himself; just having his own back was enough.

By the time the ship had anchored in the small harbor the whole town had lined the waterfront docks to greet the new arrivals. To Buck’s surprise, two of the welcoming committee were the same missionaries that had survived the shipwreck with him several years before; Brother Curtis and Brother Joseph. The church on the hill was apparently the result of their hard work and preaching. They had converted many of these local heathens to Christians.

Neither of the men recognized Buck until he told them his name. Brother Curtis and Brother Joseph deemed it a true miracle that their paths had crossed again half a world away. Buck considered the event rather strange but did not classify it a miracle; just chance.

Brother Joseph asked about the widow Warner and her daughter. Buck explained that he had escorted them safely back to New York before returning to Texas. He never went into any details as to how he wound up becoming a sailor. This might give rise to too many questions as to the captain’s disappearance. As far as anyone needed to know he and the rest of the crew were all volunteer seamen.

When Buck inquired if many ships stopped at this port, Brother Curtis told him that a mail packet-ship was due in about a week. Without a navigator Bishop's ship was useless to Buck and the others. None of the crew was concerned about returning it to the owner in San Francisco. If he wanted it he could send another ship with extra crewmembers to pick up his abandoned vessel. These men felt they owed the owner no loyalty.

Buck had one of the brothers write a letter to the ship's owner giving the exact location of his property. Buck also sent the captain's logbook along with the letter. Buck had no desire to hang for being a pirate. All three brothers assured him that when they made their way back to Boston their father's attorney would also be in contact with this owner. Their father, a wealthy man, would make someone pay dear for his sons' mistreatment.

These were strong words for three lost souls on the other side of the world. Daddy's wealth was a long way from here. When they were captured by the first mate, all three brothers had spent what pocket money they had with them that night on fine wine and dancehall girls. Because of this drunken partying the brothers were now a little short on cash.

Having recovered his property from the captain's cabin Buck had lost only time. He had more than enough money for his passage back to San Francisco; a fact that had not escaped the brothers' attention. Therefore, they offered Buck a business proposition. If he helped them get safely back to Boston the brothers would fully reimburse him the cost of their tickets and expenses, in addition to paying him a good wage for his time.

Buck nearly said no to the trip back across country but he needed to make up for the cost of his passage somehow. This would be a lot easier than working another cattle drive, so he agreed. The eldest brother insisted on drawing up a contract for the four of them to sign. Afterwards they divided Buck's money equally; each was to be responsible for keeping their part safe.

They found accommodations at the town's only tavern. The rooms were small and dirty, but it beat sleeping on the beach. They spent the next week recovering from their ordeal at sea. The brothers tried to make up for the time they had lost by drinking. Buck, however, spent most of his free-time eating everything he could get his hands on. He drank his fair share of rum as well. He had rather gotten used to its taste while on the ship. But this time he consumed it just for pleasure, not to kill the pain of a day's hard labor.

The brothers and Buck spent hours exchanging life stories. Something they had neither the time, nor strength to do on the ship. Their life of luxury seemed as strange to Buck as his life as a cowboy did to them. The brother, whose life Buck had saved in the rigging, thanked him repeatedly for his heroics. The others agreed that had Buck not attacked the captain, none of them would have likely survived the return trip.

Buck felt uncomfortable accepting their praise. He had done what he had to do at that moment. That was not being a hero, just an ordinary man. Still, the brothers felt strongly that he was their savior. If this made them happy he would accept their compliments, even though he did not think he deserved them.

In the evenings Buck walked along the beach by himself to think. The sand

was soft under his bare feet; a welcome relief from the ship's hard planking. Coconut Palms stood guard at the jungle's edge. These towering giants, having been washed ashore on the incoming tides, must have come from some distant island.

The cool sea breeze was relaxing as it flowed gently over his skin. The moon rising over the now calm sea dropped little bits of light into the water. It looked as if the ocean had millions of pieces of broken glass floating on its surface. This calm water gave no indication of the terrible monster that it could become.

In this solitude Buck thought about his parents and Hank. The memory of the widow's warm body often flooded his brain with erotic thoughts. In his mind's eye he could envision her bedding all the young men in New York. He was envious of all her possible lovers; not jealous mind you, just envious. Having once enjoyed the comfort of a woman's body made going back to a life of celibacy all but impossible for a young hot-blooded male.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Another Chance”

When the Packet-ship finally arrived, Buck and the brothers booked passage to Hong Kong. From there they sailed back to San Francisco on a fast Clipper ship in First-Class cabins. Then by train, they crossed to their destination back East.

The brothers' family was ecstatic to have their sons safely home, and what a home it was. It looked more along the lines of a castle. Buck had seen mansions in New York, but none compared to this. The widow's place would have fit in the Winthrop's living room.

The brothers had telegraphed their pending return when they made landfall in San Francisco. Because of this information their family had planned a gigantic welcome-home party. A small brass band was playing on the front lawn when they arrived.

After a round of lengthy embraces and many tears for their sons the family turned their attention toward Buck. Their mother hugged him as if he was a long-lost relative. Then the father shook his hand until Buck thought it was going to fall off. The blessings flowed as an unending river. Buck flushed from embarrassment.

Once inside, the beauty of their home took Buck aback. He felt unworthy to be in such a lavish place. He was just a dust-eating cowboy, not some rich city kid. No wonder the rigors of ship-life had been so difficult for the brothers. It was obvious that anyone growing up in such luxury would never know what it was to do a day of hard labor.

Servants streamed from all directions to be at their beck-and-call. Men, wearing white gloves and spotless waistcoats, served glasses of French Champaign from silver trays. When they entered the main banquet hall the smell of a fabulous feast was intoxicating. The Father had spared no expense to welcome home his sons. After the meal all the men retired to a huge adjacent drawing room for Cuban cigars and Brandy.

Mathew, Mark and Luke took turns entertaining their male guests with detailed versions of their ordeal and rescue. Their audience sat in total silence, hanging on every word. When the last brother finished his part of the story there was a flood of questions. All wanted exact descriptions of the savages and the wild country the brothers had visited.

Buck's part in their rescue seemed to be inflated somewhat. He had not remembered the events exactly as the brothers now recounted them. Nevertheless, this was their version; Buck felt no need to make corrections. Perhaps the brothers remembered things clearer than he had. His thoughts were only of survival and getting back home. Buck had not taken the time to make as many mental notes as the brothers apparently had.

These three young men appeared to have not considered this experience as anything more than an adventure. They obviously had not expected to die. Perhaps that was why they paid such attention to the details. This whole ordeal was to be nothing more than an exciting tale for their dinner guests when they returned safely home.

After many hours of entertaining, the last guests went home. A servant escorted Buck to a large bedroom. With the aid of a full stomach and several glasses of expensive Brandy, he soon fell fast asleep. When he awoke he was startled to find a male servant standing by his bedside awaiting his commands. The man escorted Buck to his own private bathroom where Buck took a long hot soak. Buck then sat nervously while this servant shaved him, and then helped Buck dress in the new clothes that filled the closet in his bedroom.

Buck did not much care for another man helping him into his drawers, but this man seemed accustomed to his chosen profession. Buck assumed the brothers had included his sizes in their telegram. He hoped these fancy city clothes would not be coming out of his pay.

As they ate breakfast, Buck leaned toward the nearest brother and hesitantly asked about his money. It was such a trifling amount to them that none of these wealthy folks had given it much thought. Buck, on the other hand, had watched his entire life savings dwindle away quickly as they made their way across the country. He was beginning to think that he would have none by the time their train rolled into Boston.

Buck was shocked when Mathew Winthrop stood and tapped his water glass with a fork to get everyone's interest. He then started his speech with, "May I have your attention, please?"

All eyes turned in his direction as he continued, "It seems Mr. Adams is concerned as to the solvency of our family."

"Wait a minute! I don't know what that word means but all I asked was about the money I loaned you and my pay."

Everyone in the room seemed to find what Buck said amusing; the servants even stifled a small laugh behind their white gloves. Buck was not certain, but he felt that they all were making fun of him and he was starting to get damn mad. His face flushed with both anger and embarrassment. Sensing Buck's building rage the father asked Buck to join him in his study.

Once inside, Mr. Winthrop dismissed the servants from the room, having them shut the door as they left. He walked behind his desk, and then pressed a secret latch on the portrait of his family. The painting opened to reveal a wall-safe. He then turned the dial, opened the heavy metal door, and removed several bundles of cash.

"Mr. Adams," he began. "Unlike my sons, I was not born rich. I have worked hard my whole life to have what you see around you. My sons are good boys; yet none of them had ever worked a day in their life until they had the misfortune of joining you aboard that ship."

Looking up at the family portrait he continued, "That is all that matters to us, not these material things you see around you. If we had lost our boys, I doubt very much that their mother and I could have continued to live. For their safe return, we shall always be in your debt and no favor asked from you will ever be refused."

"What I did, sir, I did to save my own hide as much as theirs," Buck stated flatly. "You don't owe me any favors; just what money I spent getting them here and the wages your sons promised me."

"Very well then, let's get this business settled once and for all so that I may put your mind at ease." He then asked, "Exactly how much do I owe you?"

“As best I can figure,” Buck stammered, “it’s somewhere in the neighborhood of a thousand dollars.” He then continued quickly, “I know that seems like a lot but your boys can run through money like corn through a goose.”

“Oh I can believe that. But it’s not their fault. Their mother and I spoiled them from birth. We tried to give them all the things we didn’t have growing up.”

He looked back up at his sons’ picture and sighed. As if he was remembering all those long nights spent staring at their image, not knowing if his sons were alive or dead. He then slowly turned toward Buck and said, “If you will not accept a favor, then you must at least accept a small bonus for your troubles.”

Before Buck could mount any sort of protest he slapped two, thousand-dollar bundles into Buck’s hand and said, “Now let’s finish our breakfast, I’m starved.”

When they reentered the dining room Mr. Winthrop had his arm over Buck’s shoulder. He was as happy as any father could be. Buck had given this old man something that meant the world to him. In doing so, Buck had gotten another chance at a good life as well.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Paying His Respects”

Buck spent two more weeks with the brothers. They took this opportunity to show him all that Boston had to offer by way of entertainment. Their father tried to get Buck to stay longer, offering him the pick of any job in Mr. Winthrop’s vast empire; Buck respectfully declined. He missed the wide-open spaces. A bedroll on the ground, with a saddle for his pillow, would be better than spending another night in that oversized bed.

The whole family came to the station to bid Buck farewell. As the train pulled away he wondered if he might be making a mistake in refusing their generous hospitality. No, that was their world not his, Buck did not belong there.

He needed to make one stop on his way. Looking nothing like that scared little boy who had fled from Wilsonville years earlier, Buck felt certain that if the missionaries had not recognized him no one in town would either. At least that was his hope. Buck needed to pay his respects to his family one last time.

When the train pulled into Wilsonville, early the next morning, he cautiously stepped out onto the platform. In his new clothes Buck appeared to be just another rich Easterner, out to see the sights. Few paid him much attention as he casually walked through town.

The first test of his anonymity came when he went to the blacksmith shop to lease a horse for the ride to his parents’ graves. Mr. Anderson showed no signs of recognition as he took Buck’s money, then saddled him a horse. Buck passed several other townsfolk on his way out, but none gave any indication that they knew who he was. These folks all looked about the same to Buck, just a little older.

On the way to his parents’ graves Buck had to pass over the Willow Creek Bridge. He started to gallop over it fast, but something made him stop and look over the rail. Memories of those two awful nights rushed back fresh into his mind. He could see the faces of the people he had killed there, as if both were standing right in front of him.

A chill rushed through his body, as if blown by a winter wind. Buck then remembered everything that he had been trying so hard to forget. As he reviewed all that had happened there, he realized, for the first time, that he had really done nothing wrong. Anyone would have done the same in his place. It’s only human to want to protect yourself, and your loved ones. Those two evil people truly meant to do them harm.

His only regret was that he had not acted sooner, that night on the bridge. Perhaps his mother would still be alive, if he had known what Sophie’s true intentions were. Buck was just a kid, with no way of knowing that the exchange would not go as agreed.

With this huge burden of guilt removed from his shoulders, Buck rode on with a new appreciation for his own self-worth. He was not some murderous villain, just a boy who loved his mother and did everything in his power to protect her.

His lighthearted mood faded when he rode up to where their farmhouse once stood. In its place were the charred remains of a building, overgrown with weeds.

Even the barn had fallen into a state of disrepair. It looked as if no one had lived there for some time. The fields his father had labored so hard to clear now had a growth of scrub brush and saplings covering them. It was nearly impossible to tell that a farm had been there.

A dull ache settled into his chest as he looked around. Buck could still remember the tiredness in his parent's faces as they sat at the supper table. All their long hours of backbreaking work had been for nothing. A few more years and the wilderness would wipe out all their efforts completely. It would be as if his parents were never there. This thought saddened him.

If it were not for the size of the headstones that he had ordered, Buck would have not been able to locate his parents' final resting place. He pulled the weeds from around the markers, picked some wild flowers, and then placed them on both their graves. Buck sat there for a long time, remembering all that he could of their life together. Then he broke a solemn promise; Buck cried.

After paying his respects at his parents' graveside, Buck thought that he might as well give his new appearance one last test. He quickly rode back into town, pulling his horse to a stop in front of Big Mike's Tavern. Buck stayed in the saddle for several moments, building his courage, to dismount and venture inside. Tempting fate this way was rather foolish, but it was as if something was drawing him to this place. It was midmorning and no one was inside, as far as he could tell. The door was open, so he decided to face his fear and go on in.

Once inside, Buck saw the same whore passed out in that same old chair. She and the chair were both well worn. Then the back door opened and a short bald man walked in, going straight behind the bar. For a moment Buck thought the guy might be a customer helping himself to a free drink. The man put on a dirty apron, and then asked what he could get Buck.

"Beer," Buck said in his deepest voice.

After a few sips of his beer Buck asked to speak to the owner. "You are talking to him," the man announced proudly.

"Someone said a big Irishman owned this place," Buck said, as he looked around the room, as if looking for Big Mike.

"Not anymore. The fool got his brains bashed in trying to break up a fight. I bought the tavern from the Bank that held a note against it."

"When did this take place?"

"About six years back. Same night his other whore got herself killed."

"Who killed her?" Buck asked, as his guts tightened into a hard knot, expecting to hear his name as the murderer.

"Folks never found out who done it," the little man said with a slight chuckle. "Most likely just a dissatisfied customer, the law never really looks too hard into whore killings."

Buck's heart was about to pound out of his chest with excitement. Had he been on the run all this time for no reason? Buck thought about identifying himself, and then he remembered that his mother had also died that same night. There would be no use inviting too many questions as to where he had been, or why he had never come back to town before now.

“You from around these parts?” the bald man asked, as he eyed Buck up and down.

“No,” Buck lied. “A buddy of mine had passed this way some years back and said if I ever happened this way to look up the big Irishman. My friend said that Big Mike had some fine looking whores.”

“They might have been once, but as you can see over there,” the man said as he nodded toward the drunken woman slumped in the chair. “Drinking sure takes its toll on whores. If you aint too picky, I’ll try to get some coffee down that one and have her clean up a bit, if you want to give her a go.”

“Thanks anyway, I’ll pass,” Buck said with a big grin. “She looks like she can use the sleep.”

A man would have to be desperate for female companionship to bed that poor old thing. Buck doubted that any man could drink enough to turn back the ravages of whiskey and time on her worn out body. Nevertheless, when a woman is the only whore in a one-whore town she will always have customers.

“Well, how about another beer then?”

“Sure, I got time for one more.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Empty Feelings”

After leaving the tavern Buck returned the horse to the blacksmith. Walking around town he felt a strange sense of belonging that he had not felt for many years. Not a lot had changed in Wilsonville during his self-imposed exile. Other than a few new buildings here and there the town looked much as it did when he left.

Buck attracted some stares, but none that signaled recognition. His expensive city-clothes stood out compared to the drab garb of the locals. Starting to feel a bit uncomfortable from this unwanted attention, he stopped by the bank for some information.

“How are you today?” the teller asked, when Buck walked through the door.

The man behind the counter was an odd little fellow. His frail stature suggested that his chosen profession was about all his small frame would allow. He obviously spent little time outdoors; his skin was ashen and his thinning hair was plastered to his scalp with some sort of greasy hair tonic.

“Just fine,” Buck replied cheerfully, and then asked, “I was wondering if you could tell me who owns that abandoned farm just west of town? The one with the burnt house.”

“The bank President will be back shortly. He handles all matters concerning property. Just between you and me, I would not touch that place with a ten-foot pole. That farm seems to have some sort of curse on it,” the teller said softly, as if he were telling some dark secret.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the first owner died from some unknown fever. His wife then sold the place to an Eastern land-speculator for half its value right after her second husband drowned. She died shortly after the sale and no one knows what ever happened to her boy. He is probably dead as well. Anyway, the land-speculator wound up going to prison for bashing in our tavern owner’s skull during a fight with another man. The Easterner had to sell the farm at a loss to pay for a lawyer, and he still got ten years. The farm’s last owner drank heavily. He kept borrowing against the farm until the bank was forced to foreclose on him. The drunk got mad and burnt the house before he skipped town,” the teller concluded.

“Damn, sounds to me like that place is cursed.”

“Please sir, don’t tell the president I told you any of that or he might fire me,” the teller said, realizing his mistake of possibly frightening off a potential buyer. His boney little fingers started to tremble, and for an instant he looked as though he might faint.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let on I heard anything about the place from you,” Buck said to reassure the teller.

A few moments later the Bank President returned. As the teller started to introduce them he realized he had not gotten Buck’s name.

“Excuse me Mr. Hartford, but this gentleman would like to speak to you about the old Miller place,” the teller said sheepishly. His voice quivered, as if he was scared to death of his employer.

“The name is Hartford, Paul Hartford,” the President said as he extended his hand. The banker was a short, barrel-chested man in his late fifties. He wore a dark suit with a silk vest beneath. From his vest pocket dangled a silver chain that attached to an expensive pocket-watch. He was the richest man in this small town; made so at the expense of other’s misfortune.

Taking his hand and shaking it firmly Buck said, “My name is Buck Adams and I’m looking for some land to buy. Your teller tells me you handle all property matters.”

“That’s correct. The Bank holds title to several fine pieces of land. How big a place were you looking for?”

“I looked at the old Miller place this morning and would like to make you an offer.”

The banker’s face flushed with anticipation at the sound of the name, and then he said, “A very good selection on your part, sir. That’s prime farmland, just needs a bit of work.”

“Don’t take me for a fool, mister! That place will need plenty of work. Hell, it is not even a farm. It’s just a patch of weeds with a burned down shack!”

Mr. Hartford was unaccustomed to anyone addressing him in such a stern and disrespectful manner. The majority of his customers were just poor farmers pleading for a loan because of a failed crop or some other calamity. No one in town ever dared raise their voice to him.

He and the banker haggled over a price for a while, then Buck stood as if to leave and the banker folded. He bought the farm for the same price that his mother had originally gotten. The amount could have been even less if he had brought up the alleged curse, but that would have only caused the little teller trouble. There was no need for that.

With his past wrong deeds well concealed, Buck did not need a home in some far away land. This had been his home, and now would be again. He felt a great sense of relief of not having to look for some place new to settle. He could now spend the rest of his life finishing what his father had started. This cowboy planned on making the farm a showcase for others to admire. Best of all was the fact that he now could visit his parents anytime he chose to do so.

Buck opened an account with the bank and deposited nearly all the cash he was carrying. There was no point risking a robbery. Having lost his life savings twice before Buck dared not tempt fate. The odds of his recovering from a third financial failure were slim. From here on out only hard work would make what he wanted to happen, happen.

Having money can make accomplishing a difficult task a lot easier. Buck intended on doing his fair share but, unlike his father, he was determined not to let the land kill him. He started by buying the tools he needed to clear the overgrowth from the farm. To help man these tools Buck hired several strong young men from town.

He also purchased a team of horses and a good mount for himself. While the hands cleared and plowed the fields Buck oversaw the construction of his new house where his family’s small shack had once stood. Additional workers were hired for this

construction. When these men finished the house they build a large barn and several outbuildings.

Buck's money enabled him to accomplish in a few short months what would have taken his father a lifetime. Even then his father's results would not have compared to what he now had. His parents watched over him from the newly completed cemetery on the knoll behind the new house. A white picket fence was constructed around its perimeter and Rose bushes were planted inside.

After all the work was completed Buck settled into a regular routine of farm living. The months soon turned into years, and Buck started to grow restless. He just did not feel complete. He was a well-respected and somewhat wealthy farmer, yet his life felt as though it was missing something. Buck's station in the community made him one of the most eligible bachelors in the county. He had his share of female companions but none touched his heart.

Often times he would catch himself daydreaming about his earlier adventures, longing for the excitement they had brought him. Buck found himself taking less of an interest in the farm. He turned nearly all the tedious, day-to-day operations over to his foreman, Luther Young.

The tavern now occupied more of his time. Cards and drinking were becoming his favorite pastimes. Buck started to resemble his stepfather more and more. Gone was the hard body of his youth and in its place resided the soft useless body of a slacker. His taste in females also began to lack good judgment. Buck started spending more time with whores than he did the respectable young women of the town.

Then one rainy night as he rode home from the tavern half drunk, Buck stopped on the Willow Creek Bridge and looked over the rail. A sudden lightning flash illuminated his reflection in the pool below. What Buck saw sickened him. The image in the water was not William Adam Miller Junior; it closely resembled the late Jessie Tate.

With this revelation Buck vowed to straighten up and start making his life worth living again. He stopped drinking and started taking a more active role in the farm. Hard work is the best medicine for a soft body. Yet no matter how he tried to force himself to be content with his life, Buck still felt empty. Something new to challenge his abilities and test his resolve was badly needed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“A Childish Crush”

As winter approached Buck grew even more restless. Winter was always a slow time on the farm. With no crops to tend and the livestock all sheltered in their stalls, his duties were few. Not wishing for a repeat of his past drinking and gambling mistakes, he told his foreman that he was going away for a while. When Luther asked where he was heading Buck said that he honestly didn't know. Because he was unsure as to how long he might be gone, he had made arrangements with the bank for Luther to be able to withdraw money from Buck's account for anything he needed to keep the place going.

This meant putting a lot of trust in Luther, but he had showed his loyalty while Buck was going through his drinking period. If Luther had wanted to take advantage of Buck he had the perfect opportunity then, and had not. He had proved to be both a good man and a dear friend.

The next morning Buck withdrew two hundred dollars from his account. The same amount he had started with years ago. Perhaps this time he could find whatever it is that was still missing in his life. At the very least he should not be bored.

Buck packed a bag with the bare necessities and boarded the next train heading west. Perhaps he had ended his journey too soon the last time. If he had not stopped in Wilsonville there was no telling where he might have wound up. At least this time Buck traveled as a free man without the fear of a double murder charge hanging over his head. This gave him a great deal of peace of mind in itself.

So much had happened since his first trip west. A boy no longer, this train ride was a trip back in time. The attraction of the unknown was exciting. Buck wondered what he might get into this time around. Whatever it turned out to be would have to be better than the wrong path he had started down in the tavern. If he ever let himself get in that shape again he might just as well put a pistol in his mouth and pull the trigger.

Buck had not noticed the private car on the end of the train when he boarded, but when the train stopped for breakfast it caught his eye. It looked similar to the one he and the rich brothers had used to make their way back to Boston. Its occupants had no need to get off to eat as did the regular passengers. For a moment Buck envied them. He then shook off this feeling. Soft living makes a man weak, he reminded himself.

When the train stopped for supper a young couple exited the private car. When they saw Buck the man walked up and gave him a big hug.

“Buck, you scoundrel you,” he exclaimed. “How have you been?”

It was Luke Winthrop, and by his side stood the most beautiful woman Buck had ever seen. He fell instantly in love.

“Buck, I'd like to introduce you to my wife Allison,” Luke said.

As she shook Buck's hand she asked, “Are you a real cowboy?”

Allison then kissed him gently on the cheek and his soul melted. The softness of her lips, the scent of her hair, and the firmness of her breasts combined to arouse

stirrings Buck had not felt since that first sexual encounter with her mother, years ago.

She had all her mother's charm without the bitterness. It was hard to imagine that this beautiful woman was that same little boney girl with all the questions.

Her voice had a calming effect, as if she was that part of Buck's life that had been missing all this time. He felt ashamed for letting his thoughts dwell on the wife of a person whose hardships he had shared. It was apparent that she loved Luke deeply; Buck had only been a childish crush, nothing more.

Perhaps the part of her that was her mother was what caused Buck to become so infatuated. Still, his feelings went much deeper than simple lust. He had not felt this strongly toward anyone since his mother had died. Each time he beat back the almost overpowering urge to pull Allison into his arms, it returned moments later, even stronger than before.

"Which way you heading, Buck?" she asked.

"West," Buck replied, as he gazed deeply into her eyes as if he were a lovesick schoolboy.

"So are we," Luke said cheerfully. "You must join us in my father's private car, we have plenty of room."

Buck wanted desperately to say no thanks but the only word that came out of his mouth was, "Sure!"

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Tequila”

Buck collected his luggage, and then joined them in their private car. He knew that he was making a big mistake, but he just could not stop himself. Once the train pulled away from the station Buck sat in one of the over-stuffed chairs in the lounge, trying to focus on things outside the window. His thoughts, however, were only of Allison.

Her presence was so distracting, that he did not hear Luke when he asked him what he been up to these last few years. Buck had to have him repeat the question.

Buck then told them about visiting his parents' graves and buying back the family farm. He went on to tell that he had grown bored with farm-life and was setting out to find some sort of adventure.

“So you are going back to being a cowboy?” Allison asked.

“I'm not sure where I'm going, to be honest with you,” Buck said, staring once more into those lovely eyes.

Had he the chance to change his decision, Buck doubted that the outcome would have been any different. If he should never get to actually hold Allison in his arms, being in her company was enough for now. Perhaps one day he might make her his, but Buck promised himself that he would do nothing to come between Allison and Luke, no matter how it made him suffer.

Unfortunately, suffer was too poor of a word to describe the pain Buck experienced the next few weeks. To be so near perfection and be denied the warmth of her body was a pain he would wish on no man. The muffled moans coming from their sleeping compartment next to his were like daggers plunging into his heart.

He pulled the pillow tightly over his ears to try to drown out their passion, wishing all the while that he was the one causing her to moan. Buck had to keep reminding himself that he had no right to feel this way. Yet he could not help himself.

After spending time with them in San Francisco going to lavish parties and seeing all the sights, Buck suddenly set out for Mexico. Perhaps there he could drown his sorrow in Tequila. At least he would be putting some distance between he and Allison. The temptation of ripping her from Luke's arms and dragging her off somewhere was getting harder to resist.

Buck was only able to leave Allison after what she had said to him their last night together. The three of them were at yet another fancy dinner party when a rather attractive older woman started openly flirting with Buck. He was polite, but did not give this woman any encouragement. When Allison saw what was going on she leaned near, then asked coldly, “Why don't you accept her advances? You like them older as I recall.”

Her words brought back a flood of shameful memories of his indiscretions with her mother. Buck and Mrs. Warner had wounded Allison's father deeply with their lustful behavior. Neither Allison, nor her father, had been blind. Buck now had an idea of how Mr. Warner must have felt. Seeing someone you treasured in another man's arms. Were Buck's immoral cravings the cause of another's life to end? God he hoped not.

The look in Allison's eyes pained him more than an arrow thru his heart. Buck left the party without saying another word. Luke followed him to the street and asked what was wrong. Buck dismissed Luke's question with a wave of his hand without looking back. He then went straight to their hotel, gathered his things, and left.

Buck's trip across Mexico was one drunken, whoring orgy. He only vaguely remembered crossing the Rio Grande at El Paso into Texas and heading north.

Buck arrived at the ranch a little after daybreak. He could smell Bob's coffee half a mile away. Buck had a desperate need of some of this strong brew to finish clearing his head. Bob and Hank were always early risers, unless they had spent the previous night in town. From the smell of the bacon frying it was obvious his friends had not made a visit last night.

As Buck neared the house a shot rang out and his hat flew off his head. Instinctively, Buck dropped to the ground and drew his pistol. "Who the hell you trying to kill!" Buck shouted, as he aimed his gun toward the door.

From inside the house he heard Bob Harper call out, "Buck, is that you, boy?"

"Damn straight it's me! What's with all the shootin'?"

"Keep low and get yourself in here, son!"

Buck ran to the door bent over, trying to make himself as small a target as possible. Once inside, Bob filled him in on what had been happening the last few days.

The short version, of Bob's long-winded tale, was that Hank had shot and killed a rancher named Howard Bowie over a game of stud poker. Bob swore the other man drew first, but Bowie's four sons were not interested in the details. The fact that their father was dead was all that mattered to them. The sons had come out to the ranch seeking revenge; hiding in the underbrush and shooting at anything that moved.

When Buck asked about Hank, Bob said, "He's propped up next to a back window, watching that side of the house. Damn fool got himself shot in the leg trying to get us some water from the well."

Buck rushed into the back room to check on Hank. He was slumped forward in a chair and Buck thought for a moment that he might be dead. When Buck leaned near to see if he was still breathing, Hank stuck his pistol against Buck's chest, and cocked the hammer.

"You better not shoot me you old fart."

"That you Buck?"

"If it had been one of those brothers, you would be a dead man now. Some damn lookout you are."

"Damn! I must have nodded off. We aint slept for days."

"You lay yourself down in that bed over there and rest some. I'll stand watch."

"Maybe just a short nap, I am feeling awful tired."

Buck helped Hank to the bed and he fell instantly into a deep sleep. It was late afternoon before Hank awoke. Bob helped him sit up, and was able to get a little coffee down him. It had taken the last of their water to brew it. After a bit he looked over at Buck, and asked, "What the hell you been up to boy? You look like something the damn cat dragged in."

"You don't look like you are ready for no church picnic yourself."

"Seriously, son, you look like you have fallen on some hard times."

“Just tried to flush a pretty woman out of my heart with Tequila.”

“Did it work?”

“Don’t know yet, I don’t think I’m sober enough yet to tell for sure.”

“Drinking don’t make your troubles go away, son, it just hides them for a spell.”

“Well drinking sure as hell aint going to make the trouble you got here go away.”

“Them boys sure are mad about their father, reckon I’d feel the same if it were mine.”

“Either of you knot heads tried talking to them?”

“Them damn boys never give us no chance. They just been shootin’ at us.”

“Care if I give it a try?”

“You can if you want to, but they seem pretty damn set on killing me,” Hank said, as he looked down at the bloody bandage on his leg.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“A Long Black Dress”

Buck was not sure he could change the sons' minds but it was worth a try. After fashioning a flag from a stick of firewood and a piece of white cloth he stuck it out the front door, waved it back and forth several times, then eased outside. No shots rang out so it appeared the brothers were willing to hear what Buck had to say. After all it was now four against three, not as good of odds as four against two.

Leaving his pistol holstered Buck walked about ten paces away from the door, his white flag still held high. Then one of the brothers shouted, “Hold it right there mister!”

“I'd like to talk to you men for a minute about this situation we seem to be in.”

“You three are in the situation,” another brother shouted from his new vantage point atop the barn, “and it's a damn bad one!” He had raised his rifle to fire when Bob's pistol shot came from the house.

The young man lurched backwards from the impact of Bob's bullet going into his chest, and then fell from the rooftop dead. Having been distracted momentarily by the shot, the oldest brother now turned his rifle toward Buck. Before he could squeeze the trigger Buck drew his own weapon and fired. The round found its mark in the young man's left lung. He fell and started coughing up blood. One of the two remaining brothers then sprang up from the high grass and fired.

Buck felt the pain in his side before he heard the gun discharge. The impact of the bullet spun him around as if he were a child's top, and then he fell. Clutching his side with his free hand, Buck found his target and returned fire. This bullet entered just below the boy's left eye and exited the back of his head leaving a large gaping hole. He too was dead before he hit the ground.

The last brother came running from behind the bunkhouse toward Buck in a blind rage, firing as he came. His bullets threw up small clouds of dust on either side of Buck. The young man's rush to kill caused his aim to be unsteady. Buck tried to roll over, but the pain in his side left him practically immobile. He turned as best he could to meet his assailant; firing twice in the other boy's general direction as he ran toward him. Buck's own aim, hampered by the pain and his awkward position on the ground, was off by several feet.

The remaining brother had closed to a distance that left little room for error when Buck heard the sound of thunder come from the house. His attacker flew backwards as if kicked by a mule. His chest and face were riddled with the buckshot from both barrels of Bob's double-barreled shotgun that he kept just inside the front door.

In less time than it takes to describe what had happened the whole thing was over. A strange calm settled over the ranch. Bob checked all four bodies to confirm their deaths, and then helped Buck back into the house. They met Hank crawling across the bedroom floor toward the action. With his pistol in hand, he was trying his best to assist them in the battle. They both had to step over him to get Buck onto the bed.

“Would it be too much damn trouble to tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Me and the boy been busy cleaning up the damn mess you started!”

“How many are left?” Hank asked as he kept his gun trained on the front door.

“You can put your gun away, old man,” Bob said as he laid Buck on the bed. “They are all dead now. Buck got two and I got two.”

“The kid hurt bad?” Hank asked softly as he turned and raised himself on one elbow to look in Buck’s direction.

“Nah, just creased his ribs a bit. He’ll be right as rain in a few days. He might need a little stitchin’ done on him, that’s all.”

Bob wrapped a damp cloth around Buck’s ribs and then tied it tight to stop the bleeding. He then helped Hank back in the bed beside Buck and put a new dressing on Hank’s wound as well. After giving them a drink of fresh water Bob headed to town to bring back the sheriff and Doc Blackburn.

The Doc patched Hank and Buck up and the sheriff took the brothers’ bodies back to town for burial. There would be no need for a trial. This was a plain case of self-defense. The brothers had come looking for trouble and they got a hell of a lot more than they had bargained for.

After a few days bed-rest both men were able to sit on the front porch and catch up on things. Buck told Bob and Hank about his farm and heartbreak. Both advised him to just head straight home and forget the girl. They felt a woman that vengeful could be dangerous. Neither Hank nor Bob said anything bad about Buck’s drinking, only that he might want to limit it to the weekends and not try to make a career out of it. After his drunken trip across Mexico Buck was somewhat inclined to agree with them.

Two weeks later, both men felt up to a trip into town. Fourteen days of sobriety were enough for now. They all needed a drink of something a little stronger than water. When they entered the town Buck stopped in front of the Barbershop. He told Bob and Hank to go on to the cantina and that he would join them in a few minutes. This might be his last chance for a while to get a much-needed haircut.

The barber had just started clipping Buck’s hair when a shot rang out in the direction of the cantina. He jumped to his feet, jerked the barber shawl from around his neck and hurried down the street, with his gun drawn. Buck had a bad feeling as to what might have happened as he ran to the bar. Once inside, Buck stopped dead in his tracks. There, slumped forward onto a card table, was Hank’s lifeless body. A pool of blood was spreading across the table and had started to drip onto the floor. Bob and the bartender were holding a struggling woman’s arms. She wore a long black dress and veil. The still smoking revolver lay on the floor at her feet. She kept screaming hysterically, “He killed my family! He killed my family!”

The sheriff rushed in the door behind Buck. One glance around the room and he had a good idea as to what had happened. After the sheriff took the woman away Bob told Buck exactly what had taken place in his absence.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Everyone Just Calls Me Richie”

Apparently the widow of the rancher Hank had killed was in town arranging with the bank to sell her place. Without her husband and sons she no longer could manage it alone. When she saw the three of them ride into town she followed Bob and Hank into the cantina, walked up behind Hank and shot him in the head. He died instantly. She then turned both her attention and gun toward Bob. He reacted quickly, throwing the drinks he was returning with in her face. The burn of the Tequila had blinded her long enough for him to disarm her.

Now not only did she no longer have a family, she would likely hang for Hank’s murder. It all seemed so senseless; all this death over one stupid hand of poker. Buck regretted having any part in this mayhem. Killing is one of the things you can’t undo. Buck felt he had done enough to last him a lifetime.

The sheriff told Buck that he did not have to stick around for the trial. The testimonies’ of Bob and the bartender would be all that he needed. Buck opted to leave right after Hank’s funeral. He rode to Abilene, sold his horse and bought a train ticket to Wilsonville. The peaceful life of a farmer was looking better to him all the time. Buck had originally set out looking for adventure, but all he wanted now was peace and quiet.

He promised himself that when he got home this time he would stay put. His wanderlust had been completely satisfied; no more running away from his responsibilities. Buck had a lot for which to be thankful. If the widow had followed him to the Barbershop he would be the one dead now instead of Hank. He had a fine farm waiting for him as well, which needed much more of his attention than he had given it lately.

When the train pulled into St. Louis a Mother and her son joined his car; occupying the seat directly in front of him. The lad looked about twelve. He kept turning around to stare at Buck when he thought that Buck was not paying any attention. He reminded Buck of himself when he first saw Hank Rhodes. That day now seemed as if it was a lifetime ago.

Buck could tell that this boy was a city kid. He had probably never seen a real cowboy before. Buck still had on his Western wear, down to his dusty boots and shot-up Texan hat. This farmer from Ohio at least looked the part of a cowboy.

Slumping down in his seat and pulling his hat over his eyes, Buck tried to sleep. Yet the young man’s constant gaze made Buck uncomfortable. He started to chastise the boy for his rudeness. Then Buck remembered how mesmerized he had been at Hank’s appearance that first time that he saw him. Instead of hurting the lad’s feelings Buck sat up in his seat, looked the boy straight in the eyes and asked in his best Southern drawl, “Would you like to hear about some of my adventures in the West, son?”

“I sure would, sir,” the lad said, as he turned completely around in his seat on his knees. He stuck out his hand and said, “My name’s Richard Ellis, but everyone just calls me Richie.”

Buck shook the boy's hand and said, "My name is Buck Adams, but you can just call me Buck."

The Stories fascinated Richie. Buck smoothed over some of the bad parts and played up the good. He never made himself out to be any sort of hero, just a cowboy doing his job. The boy found even everyday cowboy stuff amazing, but the shootout with the four brothers was his favorite. He had Buck repeat it several times so that he did not leave out even the smallest detail.

"Is that the gun you used?"

"As a matter of fact, it is."

"May I hold it?"

"I'd have to take the bullets out and you would have to ask your mother if it's OK," Buck told Richie, nodding in his mother's direction.

It was obvious that Richie's mother had been following their conversation by the way she had cocked her head slightly to hear. He had even noticed a little shudder in her shoulders, when he talked about the shootout. She was not alone; everyone in the train car was listening to Buck's tale. Yet not everyone found what he said believable; especially a big farmer in the back.

He stood a good head taller and outweighed Buck by thirty pounds. The man's larger size gave him the confidence to challenge the truthfulness of Buck's stories. As Buck was telling his tale the farmer mumbled something negative under his breath several times. However, Buck continued talking, and acted as though he had not heard the man.

Right after Richie asked to see the gun this big fellow walked up behind Buck, poked him in the shoulder and said, "Why don't you stop telling the boy such whoppers, little man."

He had barely gotten "little man" out of his mouth by the time Buck sprang into the aisle. He thrust his pistol under the big man's chin, with the hammer cocked. The farmer's greater physical size meant nothing now. Buck almost squeezed the trigger and scattered the man's brains all over the ceiling. Luckily Buck regained control of his temper and calmly told the farmer to sit down and leave him be.

When Buck withdrew his pistol from under the man's chin the big farmer backed all the way to his seat, apologizing as he went. As Buck started to sit back down he noticed a damp spot in the aisle carpet. Apparently Buck's actions had frightened the man, who would have been even more so had he known how near Buck was to actually pulling the trigger. Obviously Buck needed to work on his short temper.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“A Five-Dollar Bill”

When he sat back down Buck saw the woman clutching her son to her side. The fear in both their eyes saddened him. “I beg your pardon; I didn’t mean to frighten either of you.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Richie said in a mock display of bravery. “You should have blown his head off for calling you a liar.”

“Hush up, Richie!” his mother scolded him. “Leave the man be.”

“I reckon now might not be the best time to ask your mom if you can look at my gun,” Buck said to Richie, giving him a wink, “Maybe later.”

The big farmer got off at the next stop. It apparently was not his actual destination, but a very wise decision on the man’s part. Any further challenge as to Buck’s honesty or manhood might very well have gotten him killed.

The next stop was for a meal. Buck opted for plain black coffee. The things his body had been subjected to these last few months had left him with a constant sour stomach. Food seemed to aggravate the situation in his guts. About one meal a day was all he could keep inside. The greasy food at the train stops agreed with him even less. Buck had plenty of money to eat on, but no desire to do so. After his drunken romp across Mexico, he had still managed to hold onto forty-five dollars of his original two-hundred. The money he had gotten from the sale of his horse and saddle had more than covered the cost of his train fare.

As he sat sipping his coffee at a rear table in the small café, little Richie came over and offered Buck half of his cheese sandwich. “That’s OK little pard,” Buck said, “I’m not really hungry.”

“Don’t worry Mr. Adams, Mom made us a bunch of cheese sandwiches,” Richie said as he placed half his sandwich in front of Buck. “She said we couldn’t waste no money on fancy restaurant food.”

The two of them chatted as they ate the cheese. Richie told Buck that he and his mother were going back East to a cousin’s house to live. Richie had lost his father a year earlier to diphtheria. His mother’s job as a housekeeper for an old woman had ended when the poor old lady passed away. His mother could not find work, so that was why they were going to the cousin’s place. It had taken almost all their savings to buy their tickets.

Richie looked down at the table, and then said softly, “I sure miss my father.”

“I know what you mean, son. I miss mine too.”

To break the somber mood they had drifted into, Buck asked Richie if he had talked to his mom about looking at his pistol. Richie told Buck that she had flatly refused him permission. Even when he told her the gun would have no bullets.

“We had best do as she says then. No sense getting her upset.”

Buck saw so much of himself in this kid. They both loved their parents deeply and both wanted to be cowboys. Richie and his mother had fallen on hard times. Maybe it was time Buck Adams did some good with his life.

“Your mom a good cook?” Buck asked, as he finished his half of the sandwich.

“The best! But you wouldn’t know it from this sandwich. I told her the cheese smelled funny when she bought it, but it was the cheapest the store had. The bread was old too.”

“You think your mom would be interested in working for me?”

“She don’t know nothing about cowboying,” he answered in almost a whisper, “And, if you don’t mind me saying, you don’t look much like you can afford any hired help.”

Buck had forgotten how rough he now appeared. A shot-up hat and dirty worn clothes would make anyone take him for a pauper instead of a wealthy farmer.

“What was the old lady paying your mother?” Buck asked, as he dusted his hat against his thigh and tried to straighten its brim.

“Ten cents a day plus room and board for the both of us. I worked some too; after school and on weekends. I’m strong for my age, and I shared a room with Mother.”

Buck told Richie about his farm, and that they should be there sometime tomorrow morning. He and his mother could ride out to inspect the place before agreeing to anything. The train stopped at Wilsonville and there would be another one the next day if she chose not to take the job. Buck told Richie that he would also put them up at the hotel for the night and pay for their meals.

Richie caught up with his mother just as she was about to board the train. By his excited hand gestures it was obvious that he was explaining Buck’s offer. What Buck did not know was that neither Ritchie nor his mother was anxious to move in with this cousin. Their stay there would be more as unpaid servants than family. If Buck’s farm was half what he claimed both were ready to give it a try.

Mrs. Ellis decided to visit Buck’s spread, but she would not promise anything until after she had the opportunity to question his neighbors as to his character. She was being both wise and cautious. Buck could be a lazy drunk living in some run-down shack for all she knew. In addition, she wanted the price of the meals and hotel up front, just in case. Her budget for the trip to her cousin’s house did not include the cost of any unnecessary delays.

This woman was smarter than most folks would have been under similar circumstances. She put Buck in mind of the quick thinking of his own mother.

To put her mind at ease, as far as being stuck in Wilsonville eating cheese sandwiches, Buck handed her a five-dollar bill. This money was for her to keep if either his farm or character proved not to be to her liking.

She quickly folded the bill into a small square and stashed it deep in her handbag. If she accepted Buck’s offer of employment or not, this would be the easiest money she had made in a long time. It would have taken her a month and a half of caretaking the old woman to make five dollars.

Chapter Thirty

“Fresh Well Water”

When they got off the train at Wilsonville Mrs. Ellis was surprised at the greetings this dusty, ragged-looking cowboy received. Buck’s position in the community as its richest farmer brought with it a certain respect not shared by the common folk. As the three of them walked down the street everyone they passed smiled and said, “Good morning Mr. Adams, how have you been doing? We haven’t seen you around town for a while, is everything alright?” Or some comment similar to that.

To each Buck replied, “Things are just fine. I had to go out of town to take care of some business.”

Mrs. Ellis said nothing but Buck could tell that she was impressed. Then two young lads ran up to them and asked, “Can we help with your bags, Buck?”

This was a familiarity allowed only the children of the town, the adults knew better. Buck pitched them both a penny and handed them Mrs. Ellis’s bags.

“You been back out West, Buck?” one of the boys asked as he looked Buck over.

“Yep,” was Buck’s only reply.

His brief answer let the boys know that he did not want to talk, so both fell in behind them and never asked any more questions. Buck would often take the time to visit with the town children. At times he was still just a little boy inside. If he was not in the mood to talk the children knew to back off. They had witnessed his bad temper at the tavern when someone made the mistake of overstepping their bounds and getting on his wrong side.

As the group neared the café the smell of sausage and eggs frying reminded Buck that they had not had breakfast. He certainly did not want another stale cheese sandwich. Miss Ann, the owner of the café, had fed Luther and Buck about the only decent meals they ate. Neither of them could cook worth a damn. He always thought Miss Ann was sort of sweet on Luther, because she always served him the bigger piece of pie.

Whenever Buck suggested this fact to Luther he would laugh it off saying, “I don’t go for no fat women.” Miss Ann’s proportions were rather generous and Luther was a die-hard bachelor. He vowed that he would never have some woman telling him what to do. His occasional visits to the upstairs of the tavern were enough for him.

Miss Ann greeted Buck warmly at the door. He introduced Mrs. Ellis and Richie, and then Miss Ann seated them. Buck’s two miniature porters stopped in the doorway, still holding the bags. Each tilted his little head back slightly and took a long sniff of the aroma drifting out from the kitchen.

“You think you boys could choke down some of Miss Ann’s hotcakes?”

“Sure thing, Buck!” the boys said, as they set the bags just inside the doorway and ran to the table next to Buck.

After a good breakfast Buck had the boys take the bags to the blacksmith shop. He told them to tell Mr. Anderson that he needed the use of a wagon and that

he would send it back by Luther. Buck then excused himself and went to the bathroom out back. This gave Mrs. Ellis an opportunity to ask Miss Ann about him.

“Mr. Adams is a good man. Kind of a loner though. He’s real good with the kids; however he can have a violent temper if you try to push him. Most folks around here know better than to do that. All in all, he’s a fine young man.”

Having seen the results of his temper firsthand, Mrs. Ellis was more than a little hesitant about taking Buck’s job offer. The condition of his farm would make or break the deal. If Buck’s place was in need of too much repair to be fit for human habitation, she and Richie would be back on the train the next day.

Mr. Anderson brought the wagon to the café about ten minutes later. Buck, Richie and his mother loaded and then started for the farm. When they got to the Willow Creek Bridge Buck stopped the wagon, turned to Richie and said firmly, “If you and your mother decide to stay I need you to promise me that you will never play around this bridge. A deep hole of water is under it and you might get drowned.”

Mrs. Ellis thought it a little strange but said nothing. Richie also looked puzzled but agreed to this odd request. He had no fear of water, even though he was only a fair swimmer. He and his mother had no way of knowing why Buck dreaded this place so much.

Luther met them at the door and shook Buck’s hand briskly. “Good to have you back, boss. I about give you up for dead.”

“You aint that lucky,” Buck said as he slapped Luther on the back.

Luther looked over Buck’s shoulder at the woman and boy then asked, “Who’s this you got with you?”

“It might be my new housekeeper and her son Richie if that ugly face of yours don’t scare them off.”

“Don’t pay the boss no mind, he aint right in the head,” Luther joked. He then led Richie and his mother into the front room and offered them a seat. In an uncharacteristically proper manner he also offered them something to drink. “I have some cool sweet cider or fresh well water; just brought a bucket in a minute ago,” he said in an unusual display of politeness.

“I must have made a wrong turn somewhere. As best I can recollect my farm don’t have no butler.”

“You been gone so long you don’t know what your farm has or hasn’t got,” Luther said sternly, as if he were chastising a child. He was the only person Buck allowed to speak to him this way. He had been more of a father to Buck than an employee. Without his steadfast support the farm would probably be nothing more than a patch of weeds.

Buck showed Richie the barn and livestock, while Luther gave Mrs. Ellis a tour of the house. He was acting strangely nice around this woman. If Buck had not known better he might have thought that Luther was flirting. Perhaps, Luther just wanted a housekeeper around, so that he would not have to straighten up the place anymore; not that he and Buck ever kept a very neat house. It was obvious this house could use a woman’s touch.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Dear Buck”

Mrs. Ellis was still somewhat reluctant to accept Buck’s offer of employment until Luther turned on the charm. Richie, on the other hand, was ready as soon as Buck mentioned that if he and his mother stayed; Buck would buy him a pony to ride to school and run errands.

They all quickly settled into the farm-life routine. It felt good to be back working the place. As the boss, Buck could take off anytime he pleased. This he did most often with Richie at his side. With his mother’s permission Buck took him hunting and fishing. They raced on horseback and on foot. Buck was getting to act as if he was a kid again, and it felt good. His hard life had taken most of his own childhood.

Luther and Mrs. Ellis ran the farm as if the place was their own. Both were shrewd business people, turning a profit at any venture they set their minds to. They encouraged Buck to start raising hogs for market, and to start a small dairy herd. Luther convinced Buck to plant the knoll around the cemetery with apple trees. Buck’s mother would have been pleased; she always loved the sweet smell of apple blossoms.

Buck often tried to get Luther to go to the tavern with him, for a beer, but he always had something he had to do for Iris. It took Buck two months to find out that was Mrs. Ellis’s first name. Luther had known it from the first day they met.

After a year of being around each other every day, Luther and Iris fell in love. Buck thought Luther was in love from the start. Buck gave them the biggest wedding the town had ever seen. A small band was brought in from the county seat to play the wedding march. Then Buck sent them to New York for their honeymoon. Both protested the trip as a waste of good money, but Buck wanted them out of the way. He surprised them with a new house of their own when they returned. He knew that married folks needed their privacy.

Buck also deeded the acre of land around the house to them. This was just a formality; the whole farm was as much theirs as his. Still, a man needs a place he can call his own. Richie spent nearly all his free time in the evenings with Buck. This gave his mother and Luther some time to themselves and Buck some much-needed company. The big house seemed empty with Luther and Iris gone.

Seeing how happy they were made Buck wish that he had someone. He thought often of Allison. If her mother had not been the way she was perhaps Allison would be with him now. Nevertheless, wishing does not make things happen. He had made a costly mistake, now he had to pay the price. A few selfish hours of pleasure had cost him the chance for a lifetime of happiness.

He thought once about going to Boston to see Mr. Winthrop in hopes of maybe bumping into Luke and Allison again. This, however, would only be tormenting himself for no good reason. Allison hated him for what he had done to her father; who could blame her. Buck would have to be satisfied with what he had and quit feeling sorry for the things he didn’t have. Most folks would love to be in his position.

Another year passed; Buck had busied himself with the farm to the point that his longings for Allison had all but disappeared. With Luther's and Iris' help they more than doubled his acreage. The livestock reproduced well, and they added several hundred chickens. Richie quickly outgrew his pony and had to start riding a horse to school. Richie tried to talk his mother and Luther into letting him quit but they would not hear of it. He appealed to Buck, but he told Richie that he had no say in the matter.

The four of them were having their noon meal in the big house dining room one summer day, when a stranger in a dark dress coat came to the door. Mr. Anderson had brought the man from town in his wagon. He was a Boston Lawyer representing the estate of the late Charles Winthrop. He gave Buck a letter and a check for five-thousand dollars. After Buck signed a release the man left without telling him much, other than the fact that the old man had died leaving Buck this money.

Buck sat on the front steps and opened the letter. It read as follows:

Dear Buck,

I know you will not want to take this money but do this dying, old man one last favor. The doctors tell me I have but a short time left on this earth. I could not go to my maker without thanking you one last time for my sons' lives. Knowing how stubborn you can be, I have instructed my attorney not to give you this until I am gone.

*Gratefully Yours,
Charles B. Winthrop*

The old man sure had a flare for the dramatic; Buck had to give him that. Nevertheless, it did not feel right to accept such a generous gift. All Buck had done was to try to survive. The fact that Mr. Winthrop's sons had benefited from Buck's actions was purely coincidental. He knew the old guy meant well, but keeping this money was out of the question. If he had needed it then it would have been a different story. Buck was not Winthrop-rich, but in his local area folks considered him a wealthy man.

Buck took the check inside to show it to the others. They all told him to keep the money, but he simply could not. He told them to look after things for a spell; he felt he had to go to Boston to give the check back to Mr. Winthrop's widow.

Sunup found him on a train heading east. Richie wanted to tag along, but Buck told him that he was needed more on the farm. What Buck wanted was some time alone. He had been a good boy for a long time now and might just get into a little mischief while away. As he recalled Boston had some fine looking women. Buck had pretty much exhausted the local supply of the fairer sex. A man needs a change of scenery now and then.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Self-Righteous Anger”

It was cool and foggy the morning Buck’s train rolled into Boston. He had packed light for the trip, one bag. He hired a buggy to take him to a downtown hotel. He planned to get a good night’s sleep, and then go to the Winthrop’s the next day.

When he called at the Winthrop house the next morning, the butler told him that Mrs. Winthrop was out of town and would not be back for three days. Just as well Buck thought; this would give him a chance to check out the ladies first. He would come back in three days, return the check, and then be on his way home that same day.

The first bar he came to after leaving the Winthrop’s was an Irish Pub called Pat’s. Something about the big man behind the bar looked vaguely familiar. After a few drinks they started talking and the bartender asked Buck where he was from. Buck told him Wilsonville, Ohio. The big bartender said that his older brother had once owned a tavern there, but that he was dead now. After studying this man’s features a little closer Buck asked, “Was his name Mike?”

“Yes it was. Mike Sullivan, did you know him?”

“No,” Buck lied. “But I have heard some of the townsfolk mention him. He died before I moved there.”

At the mention of Mike’s name a young barmaid came out of the back room and asked, “Why are you two talking about my father, Uncle Pat?”

Buck turned in her direction and saw a redheaded young woman. She was tall, as was her father, but still had a delicate look about her. She was not plain, but not beautiful either. She did not have the dull look in her eyes from too much drink as did most barmaids.

“This gent is from Wilsonville but he never met Brother Mike,” he said to his niece as she walked up to the bar.

“I don’t know that much about my dear old dad. He got himself killed when I was young. It would have been nice to hear something about him.”

“Sorry, I haven’t lived there long.”

“Just as well, few folks ever had anything good to say about him.”

“What about your mother?” Buck asked, feeling the need for a little female conversation. Sometimes just the sound of a woman’s voice can be a comfort when you are alone in a strange town.

“She went and got herself killed. They said it must have been one of her customers, but I don’t agree.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I was just about five, but I still remember that night like it was yesterday. You don’t ever forget the night you lose both parents.”

“No one in town ever knew I even existed. My dear old dad had never married mother, so they made me stay inside all the time. Father did not want to hurt Mother’s trade. Some men are funny about sleeping with a whore who has a kid. I only saw the outside when I went to the bathroom in the mornings, when nobody was at the tavern.”

“Earlier that day I heard mother and father arguing outside my window about something she had put in the woodshed. So I tiptoed down the back stairs to see what it was. When I removed the prop stick from the door and peeked inside, I saw a boy asleep on the ground.”

“Who was it?” Buck asked, trying not to seem too eager for the answer.

“When I went back inside I heard mother say it was the Miller boy, and that he had killed his stepfather. Mother also said she was going to get enough money from the boy’s mother to move us back to Boston, so that we could open a real Pub. Maw said she was tired of working in a run-down, two-bit tavern out in the sticks. However, when I woke up the next morning, I found out that my father had got himself killed in a bar fight, and that someone had found mother floating in Willow Creek; knifed to death.”

“Why didn’t you tell the authorities what you saw and heard?”

“I was just a kid, and afraid. If Uncle Pat hadn’t come to make the funeral arrangements I’d probably still be hid in the attic, where I slept. My bones would be anyway.”

“So, Pat brought you back here?”

“Been here ever since,” she said patting her uncle on the back. “This has been the only father and mother I need.”

Feeling that this stranger was growing weary of her tale of woe she excused herself and went back to her cleaning. Buck was relieved that she had not gone into any more details. Her self-righteous anger over her parents’ deaths was causing him to want to shout out what a murdering bitch her mother really was and that she deserved to die. Yet he held his tongue. It seemed as though Buck’s past was never going to quit haunting him.

He quickly finished his beer then left. Glad that he had kept his temper under control. She and Buck had both lost loved ones that night, but her parents were not worth grieving over. Sophie’s daughter would never know that she had just been within arm’s reach of the person who had killed her mother.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Two Options”

Meeting Big Mike’s daughter had dampened Buck’s partying mood. He went straight back to his hotel and rested the remaining days until Mrs. Winthrop’s return. He even took his meals in his room, not wanting to deal with any more chance encounters with his past; unaware that the real drama of this trip still lay ahead.

On the third day he returned to the Winthrop mansion. A servant escorted him to the library to wait for Mrs. Winthrop. Moments later Janet Winthrop entered, then walked over and hugged Buck.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Buck said somberly. Not really knowing the right words to say.

“Thank you Buck,” she said, as she eased into a nearby chair. “My husband thought highly of you, as do I.”

“That means a lot to me,” Buck said, as he sat down in the chair beside her and fumbled in his pocket for the check. “I’m here to return this. I know your husband meant well, but I can’t accept this.”

“My husband predicted this would be your response,” she said as she took the check. “We sent three spoiled children off on vacation and you brought us back three fine, strong young men. For that, we will always be in your debt.”

“I was merely trying to keep myself alive. What your sons became was of their own doing.”

“You won’t accept money or praise. My, but you are a stubborn man, Buck.”

“I did what I had to do, that’s all; mostly for my own benefit.”

“Would you object to food as a token of my appreciation?”

“One meal, then we can call us even.”

“One meal it is then. How about tomorrow around seven?”

“Seven will be fine,” Buck answered, and started for the door.

“Luke and Allison will be pleased that you will be joining us,” she said, causing him to stop dead in his tracks.

“Allison’s mother is up from New York as well. It should be an interesting dinner party.”

“Mrs. Winthrop, I need to tell you something. It has to do with Allison’s mother and me.”

“Luke has told me about her seducing you as a lad, Buck,” she said to his amazement.

Buck was more confused than ever. If she knew about the affair she must surely have a low opinion of him. Yet she still wanted him to dine with them knowing how awkward it would be.

“He also told me how badly Allison treated you at your last meeting,” Janet said in a serious voice that Buck had never heard her use before.

“Please, sit back down, Buck. I need to tell you some things.”

Buck sat mesmerized as Mrs. Winthrop told him about Mrs. Warner’s addiction to alcohol and young boys. After her return to New York she had placed Allison in a

series of boarding schools. Mrs. Warner then set about squandering her late husband's fortune. Much of it went to pay hush-money to the parents of the young boys she had molested.

Mrs. Warner had lived a very lavish lifestyle and soon spent most of her husband's money. Allison was unaware of her mother's problems. Luke finally confronted her with the facts, after Buck suddenly left them to go to Mexico. He was so upset with Allison's treatment of Buck that he almost divorced her.

Mrs. Warner had gotten so depraved that Mrs. Winthrop had to send all her younger house staff away for their own protection, anytime she came to visit. She had even tried to bribe Mrs. Winthrop's butler to find poor street boys for her unquenchable sexual appetite.

Mrs. Warner was forced to sell her home and quickly ran through that money as well. Now Luke pays for the modest apartment where she lives. The reason for this latest visit is to have her committed to an asylum. It was either that or prison; Allison had to choose. Luke promised Allison he would give Mrs. Warner one last farewell party, but the Doctors will be outside right afterward to take her away.

"So now you know why your being here is important. Luke and Allison will need your strength and support."

"If you think my being here will help, I'll gladly stay."

"You are a fine man, Buck," she said with tears in her eyes, "A fine man."

Buck felt no hatred now toward Mrs. Warner, just pity; most of all he felt sorry for Allison. How sad to have to face the fact that your mother was insane. She would have felt less pain if her mother had simply died.

When Luke and Allison arrived they were surprised to find Buck there. Mrs. Winthrop had felt it best to keep his presence a secret. Soon afterwards Mrs. Warner came staggering into the main hall. As usual, Luke had to go out and pay for her cab. She was obviously drunk before the rest had finished the first course. Mrs. Warner picked at her plate lightly, but drank the table wine heavily.

No one introduced Buck as he sat eating quietly at the far end of the big table. None of them had much of an appetite. After dinner Buck asked if he could speak to Mrs. Warner alone. They went into the adjacent study and then Buck revealed who he was.

In her drunken stupor it was hard to make her understand exactly what was in store for her that night. Buck felt he owed it to her late husband and Allison to give their family a dignified way out of this situation. Once he had her attention, Buck gave Mrs. Warner two options; the doctors, or the pistol hidden under his coat. She chose the latter.

Buck exited the study and closed the big double doors. He motioned for Luke to take Allison upstairs. The two of them had barely made it halfway, when they heard the gun discharge. Allison ran back down, but Buck stopped her from entering the room. Luke caught up to her and had to bodily drag her back up the stairs. Once she was gone Mrs. Winthrop and Buck went into the study.

Even in her alcohol saturated state Mrs. Warner knew this was the best way to fix her problems. This was probably the first unselfish thing she had done in her whole miserable life.

Buck turned to Mrs. Winthrop and said, "Sorry about the mess."

“Don’t be sorry Buck. You have cleaned up a much larger mess for this family, tonight.”

On the train ride back to Wilsonville Buck sat for a long time staring out the window without really seeing the world outside. He wondered if there might have been a better way to have handled the situation. Then Buck’s mother’s words echoed once again in his mind, “Son, you did what had to be done.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

“The Issue Has Been Resolved”

When Buck got back to his farm Richie greeted him with the news that he was going to have a baby brother or sister. Luther looked sheepish when Buck asked who the father was. Iris just swatted him with her apron then said, “You know dang well who the papa is, mister.”

Buck said with a grin, “Well, shouldn’t someone go into town to tell Mr. Anderson he’s going to be a daddy.” This joke got him another swat. Although he was happy for them, at the same time it made him realize how empty his own life really was. Buck wanted someone in his life to share all that he had accomplished; not wanting to go to his grave having never known the joy Luther was now experiencing.

Feelings are strange creatures; you cannot force them no matter how hard you try. Either you have them for someone or you do not. Buck tried being more social in the community, dating several of the available young women. Yet none made him feel anything more than lust. He wanted the same love that his parents had shared; something that went beyond mere physical attraction.

After months of trying to force something to happen in his love life Buck gave up. He felt he was destined to go through this world alone. Allison may have been his one opportunity for true happiness. She and Luke had a chance now that her mother was no longer in the picture. Buck was truly happy for them.

He buried himself in his work thinking no more of romance. Those types of thoughts just make a man pathetic; at least that was what he tried to convince himself. If he worked to a state of exhaustion he would not have time for such idle thoughts of love, babies and what not. Besides, he still had Richie and he was almost a son to Buck.

Even though Buck shared him with his mother and Luther, it was the time that Richie spent with Buck that meant the most to him. Buck had to admit that he did spoil Richie a bit. Failing to see any faults in the lad, even when those faults stood out plain to everyone else. This blind devotion is what led Buck to the schoolyard one autumn morning.

Richie had come home the day before with a black eye, given to him by a bigger new kid in his class. Buck was infuriated and showed up the next morning at the school just after the bell rang; planning on giving the new teacher a piece of his mind, then maybe slapping this big kid if he gave him any lip. Teachers are supposed to control the children and keep them from harming each other. Buck had practiced this speech all the way to town, getting madder the nearer he got to the school.

By the time he walked into the classroom Buck was ready to beat somebody’s ass; student or teacher, it really did not matter which. Then he saw the new teacher. From behind she looked as small as one of her students. Her long black hair flowed over soft shoulders, and cascaded halfway down her back. The floor length skirt fastened at her narrow waist strained to conceal a set of full hips. When she turned to see who had intruded into her classroom Buck was stunned to see how beautiful she was.

She had a strong jaw line and a little button of a nose that turned up slightly on the end. Her eyes were a lovely shade of blue. They looked like the western sky on a sunny day. Her starched long sleeved blouse and high collar only slightly masked the fullness of her breasts. If Buck's teacher had looked that good he would still be in school.

Disarmed by her beauty he almost forgot the purpose of his being there until she asked coldly, "How may I help you, sir?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the fight yesterday," Buck stammered, as he removed his hat as if he was one of her students.

"That issue has been resolved," she said curtly, turning back to her blackboard.

"What do you mean it's been resolved?" Buck asked in a firmer voice, as he slapped his hat back on his head.

"I have given both boys extra assignments as punishment for fighting," she said, without turning around.

"Hold up there, lady. I want the name of the boy who beat up Richie!"

"Sir, I must ask you to leave my classroom, you are causing a disturbance," she said in a stern teacher voice that had no effect on him now.

"Come here Richie," Buck ordered. Richie reluctantly came to his side. Buck's anger and presence in his class was causing Richie some embarrassment.

"Point out the boy that beat you up!" Buck ordered angrily. Richie just stared at the floor, with his face turning red. The rest of the class turned toward a big boy in the back row. Little wonder he had bested Richie. He stood a good head taller, and was twenty pounds heavier. He was almost the size of a man. Buck was about to let the whole matter pass when this overgrown bully did something that truly upset him.

The big boy made the mistake of smirking at Richie, as though he was enjoying Richie's embarrassment. It was bad enough that he had hurt Richie. But for him to now take some sort of sick pleasure out of Richie's discomfort angered Buck to the point that he removed his pistol, handed it to Richie and commanded, "Shoot that little bastard!"

The whole class ducked to the floor leaving a clear shot to the bully in the back row. Richie raised the pistol and pointed it straight at the boy's heart just as Buck had taught him. Realizing his mistake Buck grabbed the gun just as Richie squeezed the trigger. The hammer slammed down onto the back of Buck's hand instead of the bullet; otherwise the class would have had one less pupil.

Seeing how near he had just come to being killed the bully passed out cold and fell from his seat to the floor with a loud thud; hitting the corner of his desk on the way down. Now both boys would be sporting shiners.

"What in God's name do you think you are doing!" the new teacher screamed at Buck. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Resolving the issue," Buck said calmly as he holstered his gun. He then turned and left the classroom. The bully never bothered Richie again, or anyone else for that matter.

Chapter Thirty-Five

“Church Picnic”

Buck did not see the pretty teacher again until the church picnic a month later. The preacher had a firm policy against bringing firearms to any church functions. Buck felt naked without a six-shooter strapped to his side, but he had to comply with this rule or the members would exclude him. Wearing a gun felt natural to Buck. He usually strapped on his before putting on his boots. The years spent out west had taught Buck the value of a good sidearm. Better to have one and not need it, than to need one and not have it.

Buck rode to the picnic with Iris, Luther and Richie. The smell of the fried chicken Iris had fixed was so tempting that Buck slipped two drumsticks out of one of the baskets. Then he and Richie secretly ate them on the ride into town. Even though they were sitting on the very back of the wagon Buck dared not risk any more thieveries. Iris had worked very hard preparing this food, and had a good idea as to how many pieces of chicken each basket contained. The Adams' farm always provided most of the chicken for these affairs.

As they approached the church Buck noticed the new schoolteacher talking to Mr. Anderson and his wife. After he helped unload the wagon Buck walked over to Mr. Anderson with some lame question about his horse needing new shoes, just to be near this pretty young thing. Something about her fascinated Buck. Perhaps it was her total dislike for him that made Buck want her. He had been with many women that were more attractive and smarter to boot. Yet he felt drawn to this one for some odd reason.

When Buck walked up Mr. Anderson extended his big hand and greeted him warmly. The teacher just turned her back as if he was not even there. His disruptive behavior in her classroom still had her upset. Buck talked about horseshoes only half listening to Anderson's replies. Buck's concentration was centered on this lovely creature's back; wondering how it would look without the confines of clothing.

Then Mr. Anderson's words cut through Buck's daydreaming when he said, "I would like for you to meet my youngest daughter Eve," as he took the new schoolteacher by the arm and turned her toward Buck. "She's been back East getting herself educated; graduated top of her class at the Long Island Female Seminary." Buck could tell Mr. Anderson was very proud of his daughter's achievement. Very few women had a proper education.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Adams and I have already met," she said coldly. "He stopped by the school to show the children how 'Not' to act in class." She then turned away and headed toward a group of other women who were standing in the shade of the big maple tree in front of the church.

"Oh, that's right, she told me about that deal with the big Larson boy," Anderson said. "I bet he aint bothered Richie no more." His big grin showed that he had approved of the way Buck had handled the matter even if his daughter had not.

"No," Buck said absent mindedly as he watched Eve walk away; her hips swaying ever so slightly as she left. He again found himself undressing her in his

mind. Buck could imagine the two of them tumbling about in a hayloft somewhere naked; clutching each other in a sexual dance that sent shivers down his spine.

Mr. Anderson interrupted Buck's fantasies when he asked, "So when do you want to bring your horse by?"

"Next week sometime; I'll let you know." Buck then headed back to where Iris was setting the baskets of chicken out on a red-checkered tablecloth, draped over some boards that spanned two sawhorses. This homemade table strained under its load of fried chicken, biscuits, potato salad, along with an assortment of cakes and pies. Buck was planning on sampling everything.

He was casually walking to the table when this big Swede rushed up and hit him square on the tip of his chin. The food had distracted Buck's normal cat-like reflexes. As he fell Buck saw a large shape that almost blocked out the sun. His attacker was Sven Larson, a new arrival in town. Several immigrant families had started homesteading around Wilsonville in the last year or so. Apparently his son was the one Richie had fought.

Looking up from the ground at this giant of a man, Buck could see where his boy had gotten his size. Sprawled there in his shadow Buck instinctively felt for his gun, then remembered that he was unarmed. This job would have to be handled the old fashion way; with fists.

Buck shook the cobwebs from his head and then regained his feet. Again a big right hand came rushing toward Buck's head. Only this time both men were aware they were in a fight. Buck sidestepped the blow and delivered one of his own, which had little effect. The big man's jaw was like hitting a brick wall. All he did was smile and showed no sign that Buck's punch had even bothered him.

Buck had fought big men before, but none this big. The one thing in Buck's favor was his speed. Big men are usually slower due to their size. As long as he could avoid those big fists and did not let the larger man grab hold of him. He should be able to wear this brute down. With his plan of attack firmly in mind Buck set about bringing down this mountain.

Every time the big man swung Buck would duck under and hit the guy's ribs twice. Even though Buck hit him with all his might the Swede showed little sign that he felt the blows. Buck was aggravated with the lack of effect of his punches and it was getting harder to catch his breath.

Slowing the pace for one second to fill his lungs with much-needed air, Buck did not see the big left coming that clubbed the side of his head. This blow sent him once again to the ground. He cleared his vision with a quick headshake just as a big foot came crashing down toward his face. Buck barely rolled out of the way in time as the ground thudded from this giant's stomp.

Unknown to Buck, Miss Anderson had run up to the Sheriff who was busy with one of Iris' drumsticks, and pleaded, "Please stop this fight sheriff, he's twice the size of Mr. Adams!"

The sheriff answered calmly as he finished his chicken and licked his greasy fingers, "He may be twice the size, but he aint twice the man."

Trying to stomp a man's head changes the rules of a fight; up until this point Buck had fought fair. If the use of feet was going to be a part of this fight, feet he would get. Buck's next blow was a sharp kick to the Swede's crotch. This blow he felt

and it showed. He sucked in a large gulp of air and his eyes crossed for a moment. When he bent forward and his hands went to comfort his damaged private parts, Buck brought his knee up under the man's chin with such force that the Swede fell backward to the ground, unconscious.

The Sheriff turned to Miss Anderson and said with a big grin, as he picked up another drumstick, "Told you he weren't twice the man."

Buck could not help himself. He walked over to Miss Anderson and said, "And that is how you are 'Not' supposed to act at a church picnic."

"You men are all alike! You think violent behavior is the solution for everything!" She then stormed off up the street. Even mad, Buck thought she looked good walking away.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“A Dropped Ripe Melon”

Buck had made up his mind that any more time spent thinking about Miss Anderson would be a waste of effort on his part. Then something happened that changed both their opinions. It was two weeks after the picnic and Buck had not been back into town. He felt that he had brooded over little “Miss Fancy Pants” long enough. Buck was in need of some female companionship. Other young women in town did not seem to mind his company; some even enjoyed it.

This night Eve had stayed after class to grade papers. She seldom worked this late; she did not like to walk home alone after dark. Wilsonville still had some rough characters that hung around town. They worked part time for the local farmers, but spent most of their time drinking. Two of these young drunkards were walking toward her as she made her way home. She saw them and crossed to the other side of the street.

Her father would usually come and meet her if she worked this late. He did not come this evening and she wished now that he had. Although Mr. Anderson was up in years his life spent as the town’s blacksmith had forged his body into one mass of muscles. No one messed with him, even these young toughs knew better. She always felt safe by her father’s side no matter how dark the night.

The realization that these men had crossed to her side of the street and were now heading straight for her interrupted any further thoughts of her father. She quickened her pace, but the two men intercepted her just as she passed her father’s stable. Each grabbed an arm and then pushed her inside, into the darkness of one of the empty stalls. One man had clamped his hand tightly over her mouth while the other tore at the buttons on her blouse. Eve knew what these men wanted and she was determined not to let them have their way.

She bit down hard on her abductor’s hand, causing him to remove it just long enough for her to emit a scream. The other man quickly backhanded her into stunned silence. She almost lost consciousness from the blow, but through the fog in her mind she saw a third attacker standing in the doorway of the stable. Then both men released their hold on her and she collapsed to the ground. From this new vantage point she realized now that this new arrival had come to her rescue and was struggling with her would-be rapists. She had no way of knowing in the darkness that it was Buck, or that he had just ridden into town when he heard her cry for help.

Buck did not want to use his pistol for fear of hitting the woman in the darkened stall. Just when his opponents were about to overpower him, Buck heard the clank of something metal crashing into one of his attacker’s skull. The man dropped to the floor as if shot. Seeing his partner fall took all the fight out of the other man and he quickly retreated toward the door. As he was about to make good his escape through the stable entrance a sudden vise-like grip on his throat halted his flight.

Mr. Anderson had been on his way to walk Eve home when he heard her cry. He now held his daughter’s struggling attacker at arm’s length. The toes of his

captive's boots were barely touching the ground. Then, with his free hand, Mr. Anderson struck a match and lit the lantern that hung by the door. He quickly surveyed the situation. Buck was now standing guard with pistol drawn over the downed attacker in case the man regained consciousness. Eve was holding the shovel tightly with both hands and was bleeding from her lip. Her body still trembled with fright.

Seeing her father, she now felt protected and her fear turned to anger. She walked straight over to the man her father held and kicked him in the privates, as she had seen Buck do the big Swede. She then threw down her weapon and stormed out of the stable. From over her shoulder she told Buck and her father to, "Take those damn bastards to jail!" This was rather strong language for such a delicate flower. Her near-rape experience and sore lip had flushed all that proper lady-like training out of her for the moment.

The man Buck was guarding came to as Eve was leaving. He looked at Mr. Anderson and said angrily as he rubbed the bump on his head, "You aint always going to be around to protect that little bitch, old man. One of these nights she might just get her pretty little throat cut!"

From the way that he said it Mr. Anderson knew this vile thing and his partner meant to do Eve harm the first chance they got. The charges he and his friend were facing would not buy them much jail time, a month or two at the most.

Mr. Anderson threw the man he had been holding to the ground next to his friend. Then both men continued to make threats as to what they intended to do to Eve. The vein in Mr. Anderson's temple started to pulsate as his blood pressure increased along with his anger. His hands tightened into two massive clenched fists.

Buck realized from the murderous look in Mr. Anderson's eyes that these men had driven this father too far with their taunts. He calmly walked over to the shovel Eve had dropped and slowly picked it up, turned as if to put it away but instead he brought it crashing down on the head of the nearest man on the ground. His skull split as if it were a dropped ripe melon. Mr. Anderson would never let these two creatures ever harm his daughter again.

Mr. Anderson's brutal attack distracted Buck for a moment, causing him to lower his gun. The second man, knowing that he would be the next to feel the old man's deadly wrath, pushed Buck aside. He then grabbed the pitchfork that was leaning against the far wall and charged at Mr. Anderson's back. His actions left Buck with no other option but to shoot the man in the back of the head as he was about to thrust the pitchfork into Mr. Anderson. The force of the bullet entering his brain made him flip head-over-heels in midair and fall onto his dead partner's now bloody body. Soon the stable's sawdust floor was drenched in a large pool of blood and bits of brain.

Hearing footsteps coming at a dead run down the wood plank sidewalk, Buck quickly placed the pitchfork back into the man's hand that he had just shot and a hammer in the hand of his friend. Now it looked as if this had been a clear case of self-defense.

Moments after these items were in place several townsfolk who had heard the shot ran to the stable to see what had happened. They all stopped short in the doorway and just stared at the carnage. Most had never seen a man shot to death

before. The exit wound in the one man's face and the other's crushed head made for an unforgettable ghoulish scene. Soon the fat sheriff rushed in, out of breath from the jog from his office.

Doing all the talking, Buck explained what had happened. Most of what he said was actually true. He had merely slanted the story a bit in his and Mr. Anderson's favor so as not to get Mr. Anderson charged with murder. Luckily the blacksmith just nodded in agreement when the Sheriff asked him if that was how it all came about. He was still too stunned to speak. This was obviously the first man he had ever killed, and would most likely be his last. Killing someone can lay heavy on your soul. A fact Buck knew all too well.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Rhubarb Pie”

The next Sunday Buck skipped church. Luther and the others went on without him. He needed a little time to himself, having grown tired of retelling the story of the other night’s event. Everyone in town knew it by heart now, yet each wanted the firsthand version. These two deaths was the most excitement the folks of Wilsonville had seen for years.

He was sitting on his front porch peacefully whittling to pass the time, when Eve pulled up in her father’s wagon. The bounce of the wagon caused her supple breasts to move most provocatively under her tight blouse. The bright sunlight made her eyes look even bluer. When she stopped the wagon a slight breeze carried the scent of her mild perfume in Buck’s direction. This perfume was not the overpowering type used to dampen the stench of an unwashed body, as with the tavern whores. Her aroma may have been simply the consequence of a recent bath. Damn she smelled good.

“Good day, Miss Anderson,” Buck said, as he walked to her wagon. “What brings you out this way?”

“Father told me what actually happened that night in the stable. I just wanted to come by and thank you.”

“I hope he hasn’t told anyone else?” Buck asked, with obvious concern in his voice. He felt no need of complicating things by bringing the law into this matter.

“No, and I told him never to tell anyone else, even Mother. He had to tell someone though, to get it off his chest. Unlike you, my father has never even been in a fight before. His greater strength has always saved him from having to become violent.”

“Those two meant to do you serious harm as soon as they got out of jail. Your father was not going to let that happen. He loves you. Any man worth his salt would have done the same thing in his place.”

“I know he loves me and I’m thankful he did what he did, what you both did. Those men needed killing. I hate to think what would have become of me if you hadn’t come by when you did.”

Buck could tell by the sound of her voice that she had not yet gotten over the experience. She also told him that her father had not been able to go back into his stable since that night. She further stated that her parents had gone to visit a relative and would not be back for two weeks. The purpose of her visit today was also to invite Buck to supper. This would be her way of rewarding him for coming to her aid.

Buck accepted, and asked what time. She told him six o’clock, then left. Buck was as happy as a coon in a corncrib. He bathed, and then had Iris iron his best shirt when she returned from church. Luther and Richie ribbed him about being in love with the new schoolteacher. Richie even called him the teacher’s pet. Richie had no way of knowing how near he was to the truth on the love part, at least on Buck’s side of this relationship. He had not felt this strongly about any other woman since Allison.

He arrived at the Anderson's doorstep at six sharp. Buck had combed his hair and his boots shined. On the ride to town he had stopped twice to pick wild flowers and had a nice big bunch of Daisies. When Eve answered his knock Buck awkwardly handed her the bouquet, then stated the obvious, "Flowers."

"Thank you, won't you come in," she said smiling. As she led the way into the parlor Buck could not help but notice a slight wiggle in her hips. Was she trying to be sexy, or was this just wishful thinking on his part?

He could smell the chicken cooking, along with some sort of pie. Buck was confident that he was going to have a real banquet. He could even smell biscuits; BURNING!

The kitchen quickly filled with thick black smoke. Eve rushed in to save what she could. Buck realized later that it would have been kinder to have let the whole kitchen go up in flames. After they fanned the smoke from the house, they sat down to eat, or rather try to eat. How someone so beautiful and intelligent could be such a terrible cook was beyond him. With the little mishap in the oven earlier Buck had not expected the meal to be perfect; and perfect it wasn't.

The biscuits were now little more than cinders. Nevertheless, Buck covered them with a generous amount of butter and ate them without making a face. It sounded as though he was chewing on a rock. The chicken in her chicken and dumplings was still alive, almost. She had managed to at least get the chicken hot, but Buck was certain that it did not qualify as being cooked.

This was still not that big of a deal. He figured he could fill up on her dumplings and just pick around the raw chicken. He was wrong again. Expecting the dumplings to be big and fluffy, Buck was ill-prepared for these sad little lumps of hard dough that sank to the bottom of the thin flavorless broth that covered them.

Eve's mashed potatoes were barely that. Iris' potatoes were creamy smooth without a solitary lump. Eve's were not only lumpy; Buck also found small bits of grit in them as he chewed. She had apparently mashed them with the peelings still attached. She must have taken them straight from the potato bin to the pot. These potatoes had a reddish cast that resembled the clay in which they were grown. Unfortunately, the dirt had the most flavor of anything on the table.

This meal was a complete and total disaster, yet Buck cleaned his plate. His last hope for any sort of nourishment was the fresh-baked rhubarb pie he saw cooling on the windowsill. When Eve brought the pie to the table Buck asked for an extra-large piece. He was hoping to take the taste of this god-awful meal out of his mouth with pie.

On the surface things looked promising. The crust was a golden brown, not burnt in the least. Baking was perhaps her redeeming quality; some women cannot cook worth a damn but are fantastic bakers.

This, however, was not the case with Eve. Her pie might have been good, or at least edible, if she had added all the correct ingredients; mainly the sugar. Rhubarb is a tart vegetable that requires generous amounts of sugar in the cooking process. Buck still ate the whole piece and asked for seconds. When Eve went to the kitchen for more coffee he tried to slip some of this bitter concoction to their family dog.

After taking one small taste the dog walked away from the table and spent ten minutes licking its private parts to get rid of the taste. Buck envied him. Fortunately

the tavern was on his way home and a few shots of straight whisky should cleanse his palate; he hoped. Buck made up his mind that night that their relationship, should there ever be one, would certainly have to be based on something besides her cooking.

Buck's and Eve's courtship was no overnight whirlwind affair. They took it slow, an occasional social gathering in town or dinner at Luther's. The two of them sometimes ate at the restaurant by the train station, or Buck would have Iris pack them a picnic lunch for a long buggy ride in the country. Buck used any excuse not to sample her cooking again. Being a professional, not cooking did not seem to bother Eve. Teaching occupied most of her time and Buck's farm responsibilities took much of his.

Before Buck knew it a whole year had passed and he was still receiving nothing more than a warm handshake or slight peck on the cheek goodnight. His body cried out for more, so he took what some might consider a drastic measure. Buck asked Eve to marry him.

The whole town showed up for the ceremony and the big feast afterwards. Several large tables were set up in front of the church, piled high with food and drink. Free food brings folks out of the woodwork like ants. There were people eating and drinking that Buck had never seen before in his life. Yet he was much too happy to worry about a few freeloaders; this was his and Eve's day.

The wedding day might have been perfect but the wedding night turned out to be a complete failure. Not on Buck's part, he had the sex down pat, and by all accounts was rather good at it. Eve, on the other hand, was something Buck had not been for a long time; a virgin. She truly loved him, of that fact he was certain. Yet her performance in bed that first night left much to be desired. All Buck's other sexual partners up until now had plenty of experience, especially his first.

This was uncharted territory for Buck. He had just assumed Eve had known other men, sexually. It was unusual for a woman her age to be unaware of the basics of sexual intercourse. Buck had not demanded any of the more exotic pleasures he had received from the professional ladies in his past, although he had certainly not ruled any of them out as possibilities for later in their relationship.

It took him half the night just to get her in bed. It then took another hour to get her out of her nightgown. He tried to be gentle at first, but there comes a point when a man's urges are stronger than his patience. Having been a good boy all year he expected a reward for such outstanding control on his part. She was his wife now and a peck on the cheek was not going to cut it.

When she finally gave in to his will she did not move at all while Buck did his thing. She kept her eyes shut tight the whole time. With his lust abated, the tears that streamed down Eve's cheeks made him feel more like a rapist than a husband. Buck doubted that he would ever understand the female mind.

He left the house early the next morning and walked into the fields. Not wanting to have to face Eve after his selfish behavior the previous night. He should have given Eve more time to adapt to her new surroundings and position in life as his wife. Buck was about at his wits' end when Luther found him.

"So how did things go last night?" Luther asked, even though he already knew the answer from the expression on Buck's face.

“Great,” Buck lied, trying to put up a fake front of happiness. He then looked back down at the stick he was absent-mindedly poking in the dirt.

“If things were great you would still be up there in bed instead of out here sitting on your ass. I’ll have Iris go tend your woman, knowing you that poor little thing will need some woman-talk about now.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“Little Willie”

Iris' conversation, along with some of the cream used on the cows' utters, made Buck's marriage bed what it was supposed to be. To his pleasant surprise, once Eve got the hang of this sex thing she enjoyed it, a lot. She would call him into the house in the middle of the day on the pretense of needing something fixed. Once she had him inside, she attacked him, and forced herself on him. Buck had to admit that he did not put up much of a fight. Whatever Iris had told Eve that morning sure changed Eve's opinion about sex. Eve never would tell Buck what the two women had talked about, only that it was female stuff and none of his concern.

Not long after the wedding Iris noticed that Buck was starting to lose weight. She asked if he needed her to give Eve some tips about cooking. Buck hugged her and kissed her cheek. She assumed from this response that Eve's cooking needed a little work. If Iris' cooking-talk went as well as her sex-talk had, Buck would soon be one fat happy farmer.

Eve's cooking did improve, a little. Nevertheless, Buck still used any excuse to be around Iris' house near mealtime at least once a day. Then just when Buck thought Eve had a pretty good handle on the cooking she started getting sick every time she made him breakfast. At first he thought it was something she was eating; God knows some of her meals had affected him that way. When Buck asked Iris about Eve's problem with food in the mornings, Iris just smiled a knowing little smile then said, "Congratulations, papa."

Buck ran back to his house and asked Eve if what Iris had just told him was true. Eve looked at the floor bashfully, and then said, "I didn't want to say anything until I was completely sure." Then she looked at Buck with a broad grin and screamed, "We are going to have a baby!" All his hard work in the bedroom had finally paid off. He was going to be a daddy.

Weeks turned into months. It amazed Buck how fast Eve's belly grew. That tiny waist that had first caught his eye soon disappeared and her perky breasts grew to gigantic proportions. She transformed from girl to woman right before his eyes, and grew more beautiful with each passing day. She thought her big belly was ugly, and did not want him to see her undressed.

Buck enjoyed everything about Eve's pregnancy except her morning sickness. This she was able to control until she started his breakfast. Eggs, floating sunny-side up in a hot skillet of grease always managed to turn her stomach. For a while Buck went without a morning meal. He then had enough sense to start eating his breakfast at Luther's house. Eve understood his needing food, and did not mind his morning trips to Luther's. This gave her the opportunity to sleep in.

The big house took on a new look as well. Buck hired a crew to add a nursery just off the master bedroom. Eve filled it with all the baby furniture she could find. Buck was hoping for a son and Eve was counting on a daughter. They had many heated debates as to names. Buck stood firm on William if it turned out to be a boy, and she chose Grace for the girl name. He had even overheard Eve referring to the baby as Grace when she and Iris were talking and did not think he could hear.

Nine months went by quickly. Eve was two weeks overdue when a bad storm rolled into the valley. The rain lasted for days. Doc Johnson had already been called to the house several times on false alarms, so Buck was not too excited when Eve woke him in the middle of the night telling him it was time. Buck sleepily fumbled for his clothes and boots in the dark. Then Eve let out a high-pitched scream, as she doubled over in pain. The speed that Buck became fully dressed was somewhat amazing.

This time Eve was having very hard contractions and they both realized that this was definitely no false alarm. Buck ran to the barn and saddled his horse. The rain was blowing sideways; with drops the size of grapes. It stung his face as he galloped down the muddy road toward town.

Nearing the Willow Creek Bridge, Buck saw the water lapping over its deck. What had once been a small gentle stream was now a raging flood, full of debris and downed trees. As Buck was about to cross the bridge, a massive oak smashed into it, sweeping away its center. Now a twenty-foot wide void made crossing impossible. He was barely able to pull his mount to a sudden stop right at the edge of what was left of his side of the bridge.

Buck dismounted, tied his horse to a nearby tree, and then studied the situation carefully. The muddy water was obviously flowing too swiftly for him to swim across. Yet he was determined to make it to the other side some way. His family was counting on him and he could not let them down. Losing his life trying to get help would be better than taking a chance on their life.

He was becoming desperate, and was tempted to try the swim. Then a lightning flash revealed a fence post on the opposite side of the creek near the end of the bridge. He removed the lariat from his saddle and walked out onto what was left of the bridge. The wind howled and the rain fell even harder. It took Buck three throws but he finally lassoed the post. He pulled on the rope hard; it felt solid. Climbing the tree nearest the creek bank, Buck tied the other end of the rope as high in its branches as he could reach.

With the rope now secure on both ends, Buck wrapped his legs around it, and slowly slid down to the other side, pulling himself along hand-over-hand. The rain fell so hard that he had to keep his eyes shut as he crossed. Twice his hold on the rope gave way and he hung over the raging torrent by only his knees. Each time it took nearly all Buck's strength to regain a grip on the wet rope.

Inching forward blindly, his head finally bumped the post on the far side. Once safely on the other bank, Buck ran the rest of the way into town as fast as the mud would let him. When he neared Wilsonville Buck had a flashback to his youth, when he had ran this same route out of fear of the darkness. This time the fear was not for him, but for the safety and well-being of those he loved.

When Buck got to town he woke Doc Johnson, Mr. Anderson and several of the men of the town. Buck told them Eve was in labor and that he needed their help to get Doc Johnson back across the creek. They hitched a team to Mr. Anderson's wagon, loaded some lumber, hammers and nails, then all climbed aboard.

At the bridge the men worked feverishly building what resembled a narrow ladder about twenty-two feet long. They then slid it across to the other side of what was left of the bridge. Buck walked across first to test it. Although their temporary

bridge creaked a bit it held fine. Doc Johnson came across next on his hands and knees with his small black medical bag clenched in his teeth. In his haste to get the doctor across the river Buck never thought once to secure him with a rope. All his thoughts were on Eve and her needs.

When Doc Johnson got himself righted on Buck's side of the river, Buck told him to take his horse and go ahead. Eve needed a doctor now more than a husband. Buck ran as best he could in the slippery mud but could not keep up. He had to stop several times to catch his breath. By the time he entered his house he heard the first faint cries coming from the bedroom. Buck rushed in just as Iris and the Doc had finished wiping off the baby, and had begun to wrap it in a small blanket.

"Hold up," Buck said, still trying to catch his breath from his run. He left a trail of muddy boot prints on the carpet as he walked to Iris and pulled back the blanket just enough to reveal the baby's sex. "It's a boy!" He shouted with joy. His yell startled the baby and it started to cry.

"Hold it down there cowboy," Eve said softly from the bed. "You are not telling us something we haven't already figured out. Your yelling like a wild Indian is going to scare your son back where he came from."

Iris finished wrapping the baby, and then placed him in Eve's arms. Buck leaned forward onto the bed, kissed both of them gently on the forehead and repeated softly, "It's a boy."

"Gloat all you want to, mister," she said strongly. "But if you don't give me a daughter by this time next year his name gets changed to Grace!"

They all had a good laugh but from the look in Eve's eyes Buck was certain that she meant it. He had better give her a daughter or their son would have a tough time making it through school with the name Grace.

Eve was out of bed in a few days, but Buck made her take it easy. He hired the widow Richards from town to help with the house. Eve was such a delicate little thing and this birth had taken a toll on her. Many women died soon after childbirth because they had to start doing chores before their insides had a chance to heal properly. Buck was determined not to have this happen to his wife.

Even though he offered to pay her for her time as well, Iris would not hear of it. In fact she was insulted that he felt he had to even make the offer. She knew that Eve meant the world to Buck and she was never going to let anything happen to her. Iris felt she and Richie owed Buck much more than they could ever repay. Without his generosity they both would have become nothing more than their dreadful cousin's servants.

Since Buck's son entered this world Iris had spent more time at the big house than she did her own. Between the two of them holding him constantly, Buck's time was limited to those rare occasions when Eve and Iris were busy trying to tell the widow how to cook.

With the two Mother hens distracted Buck would slip into the nursery, pick William up gently, cradle him in his arms and just stare at him. What a wonderful thing it is to be able to make one of these small creatures. His little hands and feet were so soft. He even made small sounds when Buck held him as if he knew that Buck was his father.

After a month Eve had regained her strength and felt no need for Mrs. Richards' assistance. The old woman hurriedly packed her bag and seemed glad to be getting away from the constant criticism of her cooking. Eve's cooking skills had improved somewhat, but Buck would dearly miss the older woman's fine meals. He could never tell Eve that though.

One afternoon, shortly after the widow had left the farm, Buck slipped silently into the nursery and wrapped William in a small warm blanket. Richie was in school, Iris had gone to town with Luther and Eve was taking a nap. Buck eased out the back door, and carried William up to the cemetery to introduce him to his grandparents. Buck knew this was risky, but he felt he owed it to his parents to share this amazing gift with them. His mother had always told him that people never die if their bloodline continued. A part of them would always live on in their children and grandchildren.

Buck knelt at the foot of his parents' graves on one knee as he balanced William on the other, then said, "Mom, Dad, I want to have you meet my son William." Buck knew his parents could not hear him, but somehow just saying the words aloud made him feel a little better. He then continued, "Eve wants to call him Bill but I'm going to call him Little Willie."

Just then Buck heard a dried leaf crunch. He turned and saw Eve staring at him with a puzzled look on her face. He had no lie to explain why he was here with his newborn son, so Buck looked Eve straight in the eyes and said, "Darling, they're things I need to tell you about my past."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Moonshine”

Buck and Eve sat together talking for several hours there on that grassy knoll in front of the cemetery. As the evening shadows moved softly across the valley floor below, the coolness of the day's end forced them back down the slope to the warmth of their home. Both of their throats had grown scratchy from their lengthy talk and from the smell Little Willie apparently needed his diaper changed.

With the baby changed and tucked snugly in his crib Eve joined Buck in the kitchen. He had just brought in a fresh bucket of cool water from the well and filled the fancy pitcher that Eve used for guests. He then poured two large crystal tumblers and handed one to Eve as she entered the kitchen. Both emptied their glasses before resuming their conversation. Eve had so many questions and Buck answered all of them honestly, or as honest as he could. Some graphic details of his past lovers were best omitted. It's not a really a lie if things of this nature are left out to spare someone's feelings.

However some of the events from his past that he did share were more than enough to make Eve's head spin. She knew that Buck had not been a “Saint” when she married him, but his killing the town whore when he was only twelve stunned her. His life out West and his many adventures seem too much for one man to have accomplished in those few short years. She began to question if she really knew this person standing before her.

There was no more Buck Adams. This man was actually William Miller, the local boy who had lost both parents and fled for his life. Eve wondered if there were any more dark secrets from Buck's past that he was too ashamed to tell her. She needed some time to sort out all this new information about the man she loved, so she asked Buck to leave her alone for a while. When Buck tried to take her into his arms to comfort her she quickly pulled away. This action hurt his feelings deeply. He reluctantly did as Eve asked and went to the barn to give her some time to think; besides there was always something that needed his attention in the barn.

Buck was mindlessly tinkering with a loose hinge on the barn door when Richie rode up and dismounted. He had seen his mother and Luther in town after school, so he came straight to Buck's to see if he had any chores that needed done; Richie missed spending time with Buck. They had done little together since the wedding. It seemed that Buck was always tied up doing things for Eve or the baby; Richie was envious. Seeing Buck alone gave Richie hope that his buddy might now have some time just for him.

“Got any chores need doing Buck?” Richie asked, as he walked up to Buck's side. His broad smile of anticipation soon vanished as he noticed the serious look on Buck's eyes.

“Not today,” was Buck's short answer, without looking in Richie's direction. Richie knew better than to bother Buck when he was in this type of mood. Maybe tomorrow the two of them could find something fun to do, however for now he had best just leave him be. Richie quickly got back on his horse and rode down to his house. He pulled his mount to an abrupt stop, jumped from the saddle, quickly tied

his horse to a post then ran inside. A small tear formed in the corner of Richie's eye as he flopped down on his bed.

Buck turned and watched as Richie rode off, wishing that he hadn't been so short with the boy. He would make it a point to do something with him tomorrow. Buck knew Richie had gotten left out with the new baby coming and all. Tomorrow would be a better time for all of them; he hoped.

About an hour later Luther walked to the barn to check on Buck. He and Iris came home to find Richie sulking in his room. After some prodding, Richie told them that Buck was in a bad mood. Luther could tell from Richie's red eyes that he had gotten his feelings hurt and Luther was not about to let someone mistreat his stepson; not even Buck. Richie thought the world and all of Buck. If Buck had a problem he could deal with Luther, not take it out on some defenseless kid.

"What the Hell is your problem?" Luther asked sternly, as he marched up to Buck.

"Whatever it is aint none of your damn business!" Buck snapped back.

The two men stood there toe-to-toe, with their fists clenched, each waiting for the other to make the first move. This thing with Eve had clouded Buck's judgment to the point that he was lashing out at those he cared about. They say that confession is good for the soul, but it does not do a damn thing for your temperament. Not knowing for sure what Eve's take on the matter had him uncertain about the soundness of his decision to tell her all about himself. Never the less this was still no excuse to take his frustrations out on his friends. Regaining control of his temper he exhaled in a long sigh, unclenched his fists, and then extended his hand to Luther.

"I'm sorry for my bad mood. They're some personal things Eve and I are trying to work out at the moment."

"Anything you want to talk about?" Luther asked, still not quite over his own mad spell. However having a wife of his own, he knew that these gentle creatures sure had a way of getting under a man's skin at times.

"Nah, just wife stuff, you know how it is" Buck said casually, trying hard to not show too much concern. "Never know when you are going to say the wrong thing and piss them off."

"Well if talking aint what you need then it must be drinking!" as he slapped Buck on the back and headed for his house. "I'll be back in two shakes."

Eve was against keeping hard-liquor in the house; however Luther's house had no such silly rule. Luther rushed in the back door, and then Iris heard the clanking of pots and pans coming from her kitchen. She went to investigate the disturbance and found Luther rummaging through her corner cabinet; cursing to himself, under his breath.

"Where's my damn jug woman, did you hide it again?" Luther asked sharply.

"It's where it always is, you old fool!" Iris snapped back. "Top shelf all the way in the back behind the butter churn. What do you need a jug for anyway?" Iris asked, even though Luther needed little reason to dig out his jug. Snake bite, tooth ache or broken heart; one excuse was as good as the next for Luther. However, his explanation that Buck needed some serious man-talk was all that Iris needed to hear.

“Just don’t drink too much, mister. There’s a lot needs done around here tomorrow,” Iris yelled at Luther’s back, as he sprinted back up to the barn.

If Iris had seen the look on Luther’s face as he ran up the hill, she would have known that her words were falling on deaf ears. Tomorrow’s chores were the farthest thing from Luther’s mind at the moment. He had a broad grin on his face like a schoolboy skipping class. It had been several months since his last excuse to pull the cork on his jug was good enough to get Iris’s permission and he felt he was well past due to tie a good one on.

Luther returned to the barn shortly with a gallon jug of moonshine and two tin cups. He rolled two hay bales into the center of the barn and placed a milking stool between them. After downing several cups each, both men began to relax and open up a little. Buck got up and went into his tack-room and returned with two big cigars from the box he had stashed there for special occasions. Eve would not let him smoke in the big house; said it stunk up the place.

“A man sure has to make a lot of sacrifices to keep a woman happy,” Buck said, as he lit up and deeply inhaled the rich, sweet smoke. Funny how much better something is when you know that you aren’t supposed to have it.

“I remember when we used to smoke indoors and drink when we wanted,” Luther said, as he remembered the old days. Then it was just he and Buck without no dang womenfolk telling them what to do all the time. Why did they decide to take on full-time women anyway?

Luther kept complaining about Iris in hopes of getting Buck to say what was wrong between him and Eve. However, even at this stage of intoxication Buck had only good things to say about Eve. If these two young folks had a problem then the fault was Buck’s; Luther expected as much. The only tidbit of information Luther could pry from Buck was something about a secret, or lie, or something; Luther’s mind sort of shut down after the fourth or fifth cup of shine.

Both men awoke the next morning with cotton-mouths and throbbing heads. Buck was facedown over a bale of hay, and Luther lay flat on his back halfway in a stall with fresh horse droppings covering part of his left leg. The now-empty jug still cradled in his arms. Alcohol may not fix all of your problems but it can damn sure take your mind off of them, for a while at least. It’s just a shame you have to pay such a dear price for what little pleasure that nasty stuff brings. Maybe that’s why they had women, to keep them from being this stupid regularly.

Buck helped Luther to his feet and sent him home to face the wrath of Iris. Neither man had any words left to say. A night of talking and drinking had left them both pretty much speechless. Buck watched Luther until he made his way safely down the hill and stumbled into his doorway. Buck could hear Iris start in on Luther, as soon as his stinking boot hit the front porch. Knowing how bad his own head ached at the moment, he felt sorry for Luther. Buck now had to walk his own “Last Mile” back up to the big house. As he trudged along he wondered what awaited him there. Would he even have a wife to chastise him for his drunken behavior? He wouldn’t have blamed Eve if she had just packed up, took the baby and left him during the night.

Eve was sitting at the kitchen table when Buck stumbled in and flopped down in the chair across from her. Buck could tell from her appearance that she obviously

hadn't slept. The redness in her eyes was either from crying or lack of sleep, probable both. She sipped a cup of black coffee and never offered to get him one. Buck's head was still somewhat cloudy from the moonshine so coffee might be the best medicine for now. He stood to get a cup and almost lost his balance, holding tightly to the table to prevent a visit to the floor.

"Sit back down before you break something mister," Eve said in what Buck could tell was her "not-mad" voice. "I'll get you some coffee."

After Eve placed the steaming cup of coffee in front of Buck he drank half of it in one quick gulp. It burnt all the way down to his sour stomach. He had to fight the urge to throw up. That certainly would not be the best way to start their conversation this morning. The rest of the cup he emptied by small sips. Buck focused on the coffee and dared not look Eve directly in the eyes for fear of what he might see. After the last sip he braced himself and looked across the table toward Eve. To his surprise she returned his gaze with a look of compassion and understanding; not what he was expecting.

"I've had time to think about what you told me yesterday," Eve began softly. "Not that I condone killing, mind you, but you were just a boy then trying to protect your mother. You had no way of knowing that the law wasn't after you, so I guess you did what you thought was best, at the time."

"I often wondered why you would slip off to the cemetery when you thought I wasn't paying attention," Eve continued. "It all makes sense now."

"I know that I should have told you sooner," Buck said, as he took Eve's hand and kissed her fingers lightly. "But I was afraid that you would think of me as some sort of monster; knowing your feelings on violence."

"This was a case of choosing between your mother or that blackmailing, evil woman; I would have probably done the same as you," Eve said firmly. "But that's all in the past now and long since forgotten."

"Not completely forgotten," Buck said, as he turned his eyes once again to his empty cup. "There's still Big Mike's daughter. She knew the boy in the shed was the "Miller boy". That's why I never took my given name back when I decided to settle here. I didn't want to have to deal with a blood-feud somewhere down the line."

"But you said she now lives in Boston with her uncle," Eve protested.

"Nothing stopping her from taking a train ride back to Wilsonville, to look for the person that killed her mother. When I met her in Boston, she struck me as the type that wouldn't give up until she had some answers," Buck said, as he looked back up at Eve; the concern showing plainly on his face.

"Well I married Buck Adams, so I guess I'll be Mrs. Buck Adams until the day I die," Eve stated flatly, as she poured Buck a fresh cup of coffee.

Chapter Forty

“Groundhogs”

Buck and Luther both slept the rest of the day and did not wake till early the following morning. Iris let this one slide because he was helping Buck sort out some personal matter. However Iris made it plain to Luther that she would not tolerate him making a habit of it. Part of his punishment was that he had to do two days-worth of chores to make up for sleeping off his drinking.

When Iris tried to get Luther to tell her what he and Buck had talked about, he told her that it was a private matter between him and Buck. The truth of the matter was that Luther had gotten so drunk he couldn't remember what the two of them had even discussed. Never the less he made it sound as if Buck had confided some dark secret to him and that he was bound by a solemn oath never to divulge any details. Iris only half believed him but let whole thing drop for the moment. If he had been in town at the tavern with Buck this story of his wouldn't have held water and she would have bounced an iron skillet off his hard head when he got home.

Because she did know the reason for the two men's bout of drinking Eve was more understanding. She nursed Buck through his hangover as if he had fought off an attacker. The pain in Buck's head made him feel like he had been in a fight, and lost. She placed cool rags over his eyes and made him light soup to settle his stomach. His recovery took a day longer than Luther's. Not that he had drunk more than Luther; it was because Iris did not completely believe that Luther had been on some noble mission to help his friend. This was just another one of his weak excuses to get into the jug. She had him back to work as soon as he could stand.

When Buck and Luther finally got the chance to talk in private, Luther admitted that the only thing he remembered clearly from the other night was that damn horse taking a crap on his leg. The moonshine had wiped his memory of the rest of the evening. Buck assured him that he and Eve had worked out their little problem but thanked him for listening all the same. Luther told Buck what he had told Iris and asked Buck to go along with the “little secret” story. This lie had worked so well for Luther that he never knew when it might happen to come in handy again. Buck told him he best not push his luck; they both knew that Iris was nobody's fool.

With all the recent drama in his life Buck almost forgot the promise he made himself about spending more time with Richie. Therefore the next day Buck was waiting outside the school for him. Richie was still hurt from Buck's actions the other day at the barn and was not ready to forgive him just yet. So when the bell rang dismissing class Richie ran right past Buck to his own horse and quickly climbed into the saddle. He was about to ride off when Buck yelled, “Hey, Richie where you heading!”

“I'm going for a ride before I head home Mr. Adams,” Richie said rather coldly.

Buck could tell that he still had some making up to do for his own curt remark. Richie had not called him Mr. Adams since that first day they met. Thinking fast Buck said, “Me too, care if I join you?”

“It's a free country, ride where ever you want.” Having said that Richie dug his heels into his mount's ribs and quickly headed toward home.

By the time Buck got his own horse turned and on the move Richie had gotten a good head start. They had just crossed over the Willow Creek Bridge when Buck caught up to Richie and grabbed his reins to pull both horses to a sudden stop.

“Let go of my horse Buck!” Richie yelled, as he tried to jerk his reins from Buck’s grasp.

“Oh, I’m Buck now. What happened to Mr. Adams, that had a nice ring to it,” Buck said with a slight chuckle. Then he got serious and said, “I’m sorry about the other day. I never meant to be short with you, can you accept my apology?”

“I guess so,” Richie stuttered, having never received a grown-up apology before.

“The other day you asked if I had any chores that you could do,” Buck stated in a mock, business-like manner. “As it turns out you can do something for me.”

“What’s that Buck?” Richie asked.

“It would seem that my farm is getting overrun with groundhogs.” Buck stated flatly, still trying to sound like a professional. “If you could rid my place of these varmints I would be much obliged.”

Now Richie tried to mimic an adult voice and asked, “How exactly would you have me kill these varmints, Mr. Adams?”

At this point neither could hold back their laughter any longer. Then Buck told Richie that the general store had received a recent shipment of 22, single-shot rifles; the perfect first gun for a young man. Buck also told Richie that if he wanted the job they could ride back into town now and Buck would buy him one, along with two boxes of ammunition. For the next few weeks the valley around the farm echoed with gunshots from the time Richie got home from school until Iris forced him in for the night. Soon not one groundhog could be found for miles around.

Chapter Forty-One

“Trip of Revenge”

Pat Sullivan was laid to rest on a snowy December day. The huge crowd that stood shivering around his grave was a testament to the man’s good nature. Pat was a friend to all who entered his pub. His free-lunch counter was open to anyone who might be hungry, whether they bought a drink or not. Many an Irish immigrant spent their first cold night in America huddled around the big fireplace in Pat’s Pub. He was just an all-around good guy.

His brother Mike’s illegitimate daughter Michelle was more like her mother. Pat had taken his niece in when both of her parents had gotten themselves killed. At first the little girl was a joy to Pat. He had never married, nor had he fathered any offspring. Therefore, now that his brother was gone this child was all the family he had. Unfortunately, children grow up to become people and this particular person had a mean streak.

It came on slowly at first and Pat hardly noticed. However, as Michelle grew older her ill temper became ever more obvious. No doubt brought on by her early childhood’s mistreatment. She refused to do what the teachers told her in school and got kicked out by the time she turned thirteen. That’s when she started working fulltime at the pub; this made her even more ill-tempered.

Pat tried using her as a server, but she upset the customers with her bouts of rage if she felt that anyone was trying to take any advantage of her. The slightest touch of her arm or off-color remark could get a patron’s order dumped into their lap. Pat finally had to restrict her activities to just cleaning. Even this job would sometimes end in a screaming match with one of the barmaids.

Pat started missing money from his till shortly after his niece started working for him. It was just a few pennies at first, so he paid it little mind. However, as the years passed his losses grew. It came to a head one night when Pat caught Michelle red-handed, taking not pennies but dollars from the cashbox under the counter.

Everyone had gone home for the night leaving just Pat and Michelle to wipe down the tables, restock the shelves and lock up. Michelle was pretending to wipe the bar while Pat brought up more supplies from the cellar. Having suspected that this was the time that she stole from the cashbox; Pat only started down the stairs then turned and crept quietly back upstairs. Peering around the corner from the backroom he saw Michelle slip a few bills from the box into her undergarments.

This act of disrespect angered Pat and he confronted Michelle. She denied taking anything and started into one of her rages. Pat lost his temper and slapped his niece hard across her face. She went down to the floor but sprang back up quickly and thrust the knife she kept strapped to her thigh straight into Pat’s heart. Pat’s eyes glazed over and he fell backward to the floor with a loud thud, dead.

Thinking fast, Michelle wiped the blood from her hand and arm then through the rag into the fireplace. Giving the rag time to catch fire, she took all the money from the cash box and concealed it with what she had stolen earlier. She then ripped her dress off one shoulder. Unlocking the door, she then ran out into the street screaming for help.

Michelle told the authorities that two drunken sailors had robbed them and killed Uncle Pat. Her black eye from Pat's earlier slap, along with her torn dress, did make it look as though there was an assault. As his sole heir, the pub was now all her's. Now Michelle could run things right; no more soft-hearted giveaways.

After the reading of the Will, Michelle took possession of the pub and started making changes right away. The first thing to go was the free-lunch table. Then she stopped letting the homeless immigrants stay by the fire on cold nights. Her rudeness soon drove away Pat's regular customers. Some of these folks had come to Pat's Pub since it first opened. She bought cheaper whiskey and refilled the expensive bottles with this vile stuff. A drunken sailor could not tell the difference but her regulars certainly could.

It took less than a year for Michelle to turn the pub into a rat hole, filled with low-lifers and tramps. Things got so bad that she hired a full-time bouncer, mostly for her own protection. She had advertised in the local paper and when Paul Rice ducked a little to walk through the door she hired him on the spot. Mr. Rice had been a bare-knuckle prize-fighter who was now passed his prime. Too many blows to his head had slowed his wits just a bit. However he took Michelle's orders without question and feared no man.

On many occasions this new crowd that frequented Pat's became nothing more than a drunken mob. That's when Michelle would ring the bell she kept behind the bar and Paul, who always sat on a stool in the far corner with his back to the wall, would come out swinging. He hit anyone that crossed his path; man, woman or child. He was a mindless machine. Every punch knocked someone out. He didn't stop punching until Michelle rang the bell again for him to stop. Soon all it took to calm an unruly crowd was for her to just pick up the bell. As a bonus for his good work, Michelle bought Paul a gold ring. She had to have it special made due to the size of his fingers. This hunk of metal also aided in the lethality of Paul's punches, not that he really needed any help in that department.

Even with Paul's help Michelle could only keep the place going for a few more years. Soon the pub became more trouble than it was worth, so she sold it for half what it had been worth at its peak when Pat ran it.

With some free time to finally think, Michelle started remembering her childhood; or rather the childhood she thought she had lived. Her fantasy parents were kind and patient. Her small dark room in the attic grew larger with each new recollection until it became spacious, with a large bay window and lace curtains.

Her remembered meals were not cold, leftover bar-food in a dirty, cracked bowl but rather hot entrées, served on silver trays, with cake or pie for desert. The main course would often be a whole baked chicken or tender, oven-roasted rack of lamb.

These figments of her imagination soon seemed so real that she couldn't tell fact from fiction. Ever since that damn farmer from Wilsonville had stopped by Pat's several years ago, all she could think about was going back there to avenge her wonderful mother's death. With the sale of the pub she now had both the time and money to do just that; plus she had big Paul.

Michelle bought new clothes for the two of them, along with matching luggage. Because of his huge size Paul's clothes were special made. It took as much fabric for one of his suits as it did to make two of normal size. Within a week they were ready

to start their “trip of revenge”. Michelle never told Paul what she was up to. There was no need, he was now her faithful lap-dog and would do whatever she ordered without question, even murder.

Chapter Forty-Two

“One Story, One Beer”

It was a warm, spring morning when Michelle Sullivan and her trusted servant Paul stepped off the train at Wilsonville. The conductor piled her many suitcases and two large trunks on the platform next to the office. She then asked the ticket agent about lodging. He directed her to the new hotel that had recently been built next door to Miss Anne’s café. Michelle tipped the agent and told him to watch her things until she had gotten a room. She would send her man back to pick them up once she settled in.

As she and Paul walked down the dusty street to the hotel, Michelle realized at how small this town was, compared to Boston. Her memories of this place from when she was a child had the buildings being much taller and the street wider. For the most part Wilsonville had changed very little in her absence. She hoped that what she came here to do would not take too long. After living in a big city, a small piss-ant of a place like Wilsonville would be almost unbearable.

After paying for two adjoining rooms, she sent Paul back to the station for the rest of her things. She didn’t know why she had brought so many clothes. There would be no place to wear her fancy city-clothes in this burg. She would buy some of the plain-looking dresses like the ones she had noticed on the town women. She wanted to draw the least amount of attention to herself as possible. However, being the new face in town would bring a lot of unwanted attention no matter how plain her dress was.

To give the townsfolk a chance to get used to her presence she and Paul stayed indoors for the most part. They ventured no farther than the general store or Miss Anne’s café for their meals. However, even these short trips would raise eyebrows. After a week of seclusion they slipped out after dark to the tavern. Michelle Sullivan was coming home. If a small dark room in a tavern attic could be considered home. Never the less she had to see it again if for no other reason than to help her remember her mother. During these last few years it had become harder and harder to remember what her parents even looked like.

As they entered the tavern the little owner ran around from behind the bar and put up his small hand up to stop their entrance.

“Sorry, but this aint no place for a Lady,” he stated firmly.

He had barely gotten the words out of his mouth before Paul snatched him by the front of his shirt with one hand and lifted him several inches off the floor.

“Put him down Paul. I’m sure what this gentleman meant to say was “Why don’t you nice folks come on in,” Michelle said with a smile. “Isn’t that right sir?”

“Yes mam, that was exactly what I meant to say,” the little tavern owner squeaked, as Paul’s grasp on his shirt started to cut off the man’s air supply.

Paul did as ordered and placed the man back on the floor and released his grip on the little man’s shirt. The tavern owner retreated behind the bar for his own protection and asked very politely, “What can I get you folks?”

"I'll have a shot of your best whiskey and my friend Paul will have a glass of water. He doesn't drink, kind of makes him mean," she said with a little sarcastic smirk.

"Whiskey and water, coming right up," the little man said in his friendliest tone. He was very glad that this Paul fellow was drinking water; he certainly never wanted to see this brute in a foul mood.

After several shots Michelle started asking a few questions about the previous owner of the tavern. The current owner had to admit that he had bought the place from the bank and really didn't know Big Mike. The current owner wasn't from around these parts and didn't know much about anyone in town.

It was then that an old barfly slumped in a chair in the far corner joined the conversation. "I knew Big Mike well," he said loudly, as he cleared his throat. "Buy me a beer and I'll tell you all about him."

Michelle Sullivan looked this old drunk up and down closely. If he was a wealth of information he sure as Hell hid it well behind those blood-shot eyes and smelly clothes. However this was her first contact with her past and worth the price of a beer. After being served a mug of cool beer and downed half of it in one gulp, her guest began his narration.

It was mostly mindless chatter until he came to the part about how Mike died.

"Sometimes Big Mike would let me sleep one off in the back corner of the tavern, as long as I did a little cleaning for him the next morning. That's when I heard Sophie arguing with Mike. Nobody pays any attention to an old drunk passed out in the corner. It was as if I wasn't even there. So I just lay real still and listened.

I heard Sophie say that she had seen the Miller boy kill Jessie Tate, his stepfather, and that she was going to meet Mrs. Tate at midnight on the Willow Creek Bridge to get enough money to move back to Boston. Sophie was apparently blackmailing Mrs. Tate. I knew that Mrs. Tate had sold her farm earlier that day and would no doubt have cash money on her.

Old Ben rubbed his jaw lightly, as if remembering an old pain, and then said, "That Jessie Tate was a mean one. I asked him to buy me a beer once and he back-handed me to the floor. If Big Mike hadn't stopped him he probably would have stomped me to death. Talk around town was that the boy and his mother got beat on real regular. No one missed that bastard when he got himself killed. The boy did us all a favor getting rid of him."

"Get back to your story you old fart," Michelle demanded.

Ben took another long drink from his mug, wiped the foam from his lip with his shirt sleeve then continued, "Well you see this got me thinking. So I planned on getting to the bridge first and rob Mrs. Tate after she and Sophie had finished their business. I could have robber Mrs. Tate before Sophie got there but I wasn't about to piss off Big Mike. That's something folks around these parts knew better than to do. I saw Mike break a man's back once, killed him dead. Anyway, with her boy wanted for murder and all, I figured that the Tate woman and her brat would just turn tail and run away after I robbed them. I had no idea people would get killed."

"So then what happened?" Michelle asked, anxious for this old drunk to get to the point.

“I got to the bridge around ten, just to be sure that I was there first. I found a good hiding spot in the bushes near the west end of the bridge and waited. I must have dozed off because I had me a few drinks earlier to keep my courage up. The next thing I heard was a gunshot coming from out on the bridge. That’s when saw the Miller boy stab Sophie in the back with a big old hunting knife and then dump her body into the creek. I didn’t want no part in no killing so I just took off.

I ran west toward my cousin’s farm; about three miles from town. I figured I’d stay there a few days till this whole mess calmed down. Being the town drunk I was usually the first one that got blamed for stuff. I hadn’t run very far when I heard a wagon coming from town. I jumped into the bushes and hid till the wagon was out of sight. As it went by, I saw the Miller boy driving their old plow-horse hard, with his mother slumped in the seat next to him. She looked like she was hurt bad.” Ben paused for another sip of beer.

“After I rested me a bit, I started to walk to my cousin’s place again. When I passed by the Tate farm I saw a lit lantern on the hill behind their shack and I could see the boy digging a hole. I guess he was burying his maw. I sure didn’t want to tangle with that kid after I saw what he did to that whore, so I just kept on walking and was almost to my cousin’s place when I heard the wagon coming down the road again. It was about sunup, so I hid by the side of the road behind a tree and I saw the Miller boy pass by in a real hurry. He was alone this time, and his clothes were all muddy.” Ben started to take another sip but Michelle pulled his arm back down to the bar.

“Finish your story then you can drink,” Michelle ordered.

“Well I stayed at my cousin’s place for a week until he ran me off for drinking the moonshine that he had hidden in his chicken coop. I never did like that son of a bitch. Anyway, when I get back to town no one had even realized that I had been gone. That’s when I heard about Big Mike getting himself killed in a fight the same very night that Sophie did.” With his story completed Ben drained his mug and licked his lips, then asked for another.

“One story, one beer,” Michelle said mockingly.

“Where exactly is this Tate farm?” she asked.

“More information will cost you more beer,” Ben said staring down into his now empty mug.

After several more beers, Michelle had gotten completely caught up on all the town gossip and the exact location of the Adam’s farm. She had picked Ben’s brain for every scrap of information this old drunk could recall. Things were starting to fit together like one big jigsaw puzzle.

It was strange that this man from out West had chosen the old Tate farm to buy when several better farms were for sale in the area. The rumor was he had spent a large sum of money restoring it. Not really a sound business move unless he possibly had some sentimental attachment to the place that no one knew about. Could it really be this easy to find her mother’s murderer?

Chapter Forty-Three

“A Shrine”

The next day, after a hearty breakfast at Miss Ann’s, Michelle sent Paul to rent a buggy. Following the old drunks directions they headed west down the road from town. When they got to the Willow Creek Bridge she had Paul stop, she got out then walked to the rail. Peering over the side into the muddy water below Michelle could almost see the image of her mother’s lifeless body floating face down. Tears welled up in her eyes and she wiped them away with the back of her hand, as if they were something revolting.

“No tears,” she said to herself. “It’s time for killing not crying.”

With her hatred rekindled she got back in the buggy and order Paul to drive on. Their next stop would be the Adam’s place. About a mile from town they rounded a bend in the road and could see a nice farm ahead on the right. From Old Ben’s description she knew this was it. Paul pulled the buggy to a stop near the big two-story house and Michelle got out, walked to the front door and knocked loudly; no one answered. The owners were apparently not home. Taking this rare opportunity to do a little snooping, Michelle went around to the back of the house and walked up the hill to the spot where the Miller boy was last seen.

Just beyond the orchard she saw the white picket fence that surrounded the small cemetery. As she neared, she saw how well maintained this little plot was. It was more of a shrine than a graveyard. Two marble headstones occupied the center of the enclosure, inscribed simply with “MOTHER” on one and “FATHER” on the other. There were no names or dates on the stones. “Why would someone pay the cost of having headstones carved and placed at these graves without naming their occupants?” Michelle mumbled to herself. “Unless that person wanted to keep his own identity a secret.”

The headstones by themselves would not draw that much attention toward Mr. Adams if it were not for the good condition of this graveyard. Family plots weren’t usually given much thought until someone died. Even then they were overgrown with weeds shortly after the burial of their love one. The Adams’ site looked too well taken care of for a burial-place for someone who he didn’t know. If he wasn’t the “Miller boy”, then chances are he was a close kin to the boy and should know his exact location.

Michelle and Paul were going back into town when they passed Buck, Eve and the baby heading the other direction. They were heading home after buying a wagon-load of supplies for an upcoming project on the farm. Eve looked at the two strangers and smiled politely; Buck just gave a friendly nod but kept his mind on the road ahead. Paul sat stone-faced in the buggy and never even looked in the on-comers’ direction. Michelle stared intently at Buck, as they passed each other, just a few feet apart. She knew that face but she couldn’t remember from where until she and Paul were several yards on down the road.

That was the farmer she had met in Boston years ago; the one from Wilsonville. She couldn’t remember his name and she didn’t think that he had ever given it to her

but that was him, she was certain. Maybe this sod-buster could help her find out some information about Mr. Adams.

When they got back to town Michelle saw Old Ben staggering down the street heading for the tavern. When their buggy caught up to him he turned and flashed a broad, toothless smile and tipped his hat. "Good day madam," Ben said and then hiccupped.

"Who was that man that we just passed on the road; the one with the wagonload of stuff?" Michelle asked, nodding toward the west. "He had a woman and kid with him."

Ben scratched his chin, as if he were trying to recall something, then he said, "Kind of hard to think on an empty stomach. Maybe if it had a beer in it I could remember the gent's name."

Michelle dug in her handbag, fished through some coins and threw a nickel in the dirt at Ben's foot then ordered firmly, "A name you old fool or I'll let Paul beat the answer out of you!"

"Adams, Buck Adams that's who you saw; and his pretty wife Eve," Old Ben said, as he dropped to his knees to search for the nickel in the dusty street.

Now she had a face to put to the name. This Mr. Adams may need a little Paul-persuasion to loosen his tongue. This farmer knows something about the Millers and she was going to get it out of him, one way or another.

The funny thing about secrets is that they are no fun unless you can share them with your closest friend. Buck had kept his for years until he shared them with Eve. Then, within a matter of a few weeks, Eve had shared them with Iris. Iris then told Luther because he was her husband and Buck's best friend. Richie overheard Iris telling Luther the "Buck secret" and he in turn told his best friend at school who in turn only told his favorite uncle. This uncle got very drunk one night and told everyone in the tavern. As luck would have it, this was a night that Michelle and Paul had decided to stop by for a drink.

She had him now. She had the bastard. Michelle knew who the killer of her mother was; not some long forgotten little Miller boy but Mr. Buck Adams; a soon to be "dead", rich farmer.

Chapter Forty-Four

“Champion Defeated”

Buck was working in the barn getting supplies ready for the new roof that he and Luther planned to add to the corn crib. He had brought most of these items from the general store yesterday. They had plenty of boards and shingles left over from earlier construction around the farm. Buck stored these items in the back of the barn to protect the lumber from being ruined by the weather. One thing that they had run low on was nails. Buck had bought a fifty pound keg of nails just to make sure that they had enough to do the job. He had unloaded the keg just inside the barn door yesterday.

Buck had also unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on a wooden peg by the front door of the barn. He had to carry a lot of lumber from the back and his gun was just unnecessary extra weight. It would still be close by should he need it. This little oversight nearly proved itself a near fatal mistake.

Paul and Michelle had pulled their buggy off the road into the woods about a quarter-mile down the road from the Adam's farm. They then quietly cut through the woods until they were right across the road from the barn, behind a clump of thick brush. For a big man Paul was very light on his feet. These two conspirators watched Buck for several minutes, waiting for just the right moment to attack. Michelle decided to move on Buck when he went to the back of the barn for another arm-load of boards. She instructed Paul to slip up to the barn and hide beside the front door until Buck brought out his next arm-load of boards.

When Buck dropped his next load of lumber on the pile and turned his back to the road, Paul slipped across and eased up to the door without making hardly any sound. Michelle held her breath when she saw Buck coming back with another armful. Her vengeance was so near at hand, nothing can go wrong now.

Just as Buck neared the door, Paul stepped into his path and punched him in the face, knocking backward head over heels. Buck was badly stunned but still conscious. Paul rushed up to him and kicked him in the ribs, hard. With all the air knocked out of his lungs, he blacked out from the pain. Paul then picked Buck up by one arm and dragged him out of the barn and threw him on the wood pile. Buck rolled off the lumber limp as a rag-doll.

Eve was bringing Buck some cool cider when she saw the big man cross the road and head for the barn. Before she could sound an alarm she heard the crack of the man's knuckles on Buck's face. Eve ran to the barn as fast as she could but by the time she got there Paul was throwing Buck on the woodpile. Eve rushed toward this giant to protect her man but Paul just backhanded her into the barn. The big gold ring that Michelle had given him gouged a large gash in her scalp and blood shoot up into air like a small geyser.

With this temporary annoyance out of the way, Paul turned his attention back to Buck. Standing up from the brush where she hid Michelle screamed, "Kill him!"

Looking around for a second to find something to make his job easier Paul spotted the heavy keg of nails by the door. This would make short work of his

helpless victim on the ground. Again Michelle screamed the order, "Kill that rotten bastard!"

Just as Paul was about to bring the keg crashing down on Buck's skull, a shot came from the woods across the road. Less than a second later a small red dot appeared over Paul's left eyebrow and bright red blood started gushing forth. The giant's head snapped back slightly and he stood straight as a poker momentarily then collapsed backwards to the ground with a loud thud. The keg of nails dropped from his hands and crashed harmlessly to the ground beside Buck's unconscious body.

The defeat of her champion enraged Michelle and she rushed up with her pistol drawn to finish Buck herself. Richie was running straight toward her now from the woods where he was hunting, trying to reload as he ran. In his haste, he dropped the first shell into the tall grass and was desperately trying to fish another from his shirt pocket when Michelle spied him running toward her. She turned and fired but her first shot just missed Richie by half an inch. She then re-cocked the hammer of her 2-shot derringer and took better aim just as Richie started across the road and was sliding his last bullet into the chamber of his 22.

Richie stopped in the middle of the road and was raising his weapon to aim when Michelle's second shot rang out. This one found its mark in Richie's left shoulder just above his heart and spun him around before knocking him down. An inch lower and he would have been dead before he hit the ground.

Michelle then started digging in her handbag for two more shells to reload. This time she would place the barrel of her gun right on Buck's temple before she squeezed the trigger. She was already imagining the site of her mother's murder with his brains scattered all over the barnyard. Her lust for revenge was so powerful that she was oblivious to her surroundings; the sound of Buck's pistol firing and the shock of the bullets impact caught her completely by off guard.

She looked down at her dress and saw the blood starting to cover her midsection. Her mind could not accept that she had just been shot in the back or that the bullet had exited through her stomach, just above her bellybutton. As is the case with a through and through shot that doesn't hit bone, there was little pain just a slight burning sensation.

When Michelle turned to see who had attacked her she saw Eve standing in the doorway of the barn, blood was still running down the side of her face from Paul's earlier blow. In her hand was Buck's six-shooter; still smoking from the shot. Although she was still somewhat dazed Eve had the presences of mine to retrieve the gun from the peg where Buck had hung it to help her husband.

When Michelle started to raise her pistol to shoot Eve another shot rang out and Michelle fell to the ground. Eve looked down at the gun in her hand in disbelief. She didn't remember squeezing the trigger the second time but she must have. Then Luther rushed out of the shadows from the back of the barn, gun still in hand. He had grabbed his gun and ran from his house when he heard all the shooting. He had just made it to the back of the barn when Eve fired. He jumped over a fence at cut through a rear stall. When he saw Michelle turn and start to raise her derringer he fired. Luther's bullet pierced Michelle's heart and lodged in her spine.

Luther brushed by Eve and checked the two intruders' bodies on the ground to make sure that they were both dead, and then he turned his attention to the living. Buck was just starting to regain consciousness. He rolled over on his side and tried to regain his feet. Luther could tell at a glance that Buck was badly beaten but alive. His main concern now was Richie, lying motionless in the middle of the road.

Luther ran to Richie and slowly rolled him over on his back. Richie let out a low moan then opened his eyes. "I didn't mean to kill that man but he was about to hurt Buck bad," Richie said, then asked softly, "You see that shot I made?"

Luther gently picked up Richie and cradled him in his arms, as he walked back to the barn. "I sure did boy, I sure did!" Luther said proudly, even though he had not.

Chapter Forty-Five

“Killer Frying Pan”

By the time Luther had carried Richie back to the barn Iris came running around the corner gripping her big iron skillet in her right hand. In her left she held her dress tail; which she had hiked up to aid in running.

“What the Hell were you going to do with that damn thing woman, fry them to death?” Luther asked mockingly, as he laid Richie next to Buck. “And pull your dress down, there are decent folks here.”

“I’ll bounce it off your thick skull if you don’t quit making fun of me,” Iris said almost in tears, as she surveyed the carnage. She then ran to Richie and gently pulled back his shirt to check his wound.

Turning toward Luther she ordered sternly, “Instead of being such a smart ass mister you best get yourself on a horse and go fetch Doc Johnson!” She then ripped a strip of her petty coat and pressed it to Richie’s chest to help stop the bleeding, even though it had almost stopped on its own. The boy was lucky; the bullet severed no major arteries.

After several unsuccessful attempts, Buck gave up on trying to get to his feet and just lay back taking deep breaths hoping to clear his head. His vision blurred and he saw two of everything. He was aware that the danger had apparently passed but had no idea who solved this problem. As his eye focused, he could see Michelle and Paul’s dead bodies sprawled in the dirt. He tried to open both eyes but the left one was swollen shut and throbbed something fierce. He then turned his head toward the barn and saw Eve sitting on a bale of hay crying, still clutching his pistol. He tried to speak to her but the light faded and he passed out.

When Luther returned with the doctor, Mr. Anderson, the Sheriff and half of the town came with them. Every time Buck came to it seemed as though a different face was staring down at him. He started to wonder if maybe he had died and this was his funeral. No, he couldn’t be dead because the dead don’t feel no pain and he sure as Hell felt pain. Every part of his body hurt. Big Paul had really busted him up good; cracked four of his ribs the Doc said.

Eve had fared a bit better, still the ten stitches in her scalp and the large lump beneath them were very painful. This was not the time for thinking of herself, however, she still had a baby and injured husband to tend to. The Doc had offered her some Laudanum for the pain, but she refused. The doctor only had a limited supply of this strong pain-killer and she was sure Buck and Richie would need it more. Eve did, however, take a few generous sips of Luther’s moonshine mixed with some sweet apple cider, just to take the edge off her pain.

It took a while for the three of them to heal properly. Richie used any opportunity to remind everyone that it was his marksmanship that had saved Buck’s life. Every time Richie told his version of that day’s events the distance between the end of his rifle and Paul’s head got farther and farther apart. When he was well enough to return to school Richie was the center of attention in the schoolyard. All the other children wanted to see his wound and hear about his fantastic long-distant shot. It still bothered Richie that he had taken the big man’s life but he felt that at

that moment he had no other choice. The fact that he had even hit a target that far away was pure luck on his part.

When Luther told how Iris had come running up with her killer frying pan and bare legs showing like some can-can dancer Buck laughed so hard that his ribs hurt almost as bad as when Paul kicked him. Eve never talked about her part in this fight and out of respect for her feelings on violence Buck and the others acted as though she hadn't had a part in this whole mess. However, not long after the event, when Buck and Eve were sitting in their front porch swing Buck turned to Eve, took her hand, squeezed it gently, and said simply, "Thank you."

Chapter Forty-Six

“The Circuit Judge”

The problem with being the town drunk is that when the drinking is over you still have to find someplace to lay your head. Old Ben had spent many winter nights sleeping in the back corner of the tavern but an oak bar-chair does not make the most comfortable mattress. If the weather was not too cold Ben preferred to sleep it off in the loft of Mr. Anderson’s stable. The loose hay was soft and smelled sweet. It felt as if he was taking a nap in a warm meadow with wild flowers for his pillow.

On one of those not too cold nights in the loft that a woman’s scream disturbed Ben’s beauty sleep. He retired early that evening, not long after sundown. Few people were in the tavern all day so his opportunity of bumming a drink lessened with each passing hour. His only drinking companions for the last few hours were two part-time farm hands, who were less than generous and struck him as to being up to no good. Ben chose to part company with those two before they got any meaner. A lifetime of drinking taught him that some folks were best avoided when they got too drunk.

Shortly after the scream Ben heard what sounded to him like a fight in the stable below. Not wishing to meddle in other folk’s affairs he just buried himself a little deeper into the pile of hay until all that was left sticking out was his face. When a lantern was lit by the door Ben chanced a peek over the edge of the loft see what was disrupting his rest. He saw Mr. Anderson in the doorway. He held one of the farm-hands that Ben drank with that afternoon, by the throat. His buddy was sitting on the floor rubbing his head and cussing. Buck Adams stood over that guy with his gun pointing right at the man’s head.

All of sudden the new school teacher walked over and kicked the man her father was holding right in the privates and ordered her Paw and Buck to take those two bastards to jail. From the looks of her torn blouse and bloody lip it appeared that those two farm-hands had tried to have their way with her.

Ben thought it was all over and started to settle back into his nest when Mr. Anderson hit one of the men in the head with a shovel and Buck shot the other one. Ben guessed that Mr. Anderson and Buck weren’t going to chance those fellows ever hurting the Anderson girl again. Right before some townsfolk came running up Ben saw Buck put a hammer in one of the downed men’s hands and something else in the other dead man’s hand. To anyone just making their way to the stable it now looked as though it had been a clear case of self-defense; not cold-blooded murder. At least that’s the way the thing looked from Ben’s perspective.

Old Ben never mentioned what he saw that night to anyone until something happened that forced it all out into the open. It was the night that Buck Adams’ real name became known to all the folks in the tavern. From his regular spot in the rear of the tavern by the fireplace Ben heard the dark secret that Buck had kept hidden for all those years.

Ben was a younger man when Sophie’s murder took place; nonetheless he still had a warm spot in his heart for her. He didn’t love her, but she showed him the occasional kindness and was quick to buy him a drink. However, she did kill the Miller boy’s mother, therefore his killing Sophie seemed only fair, he guessed.

However, what happened in the Anderson's stable that night was a different matter altogether.

Buck had gotten away with murder twice as a kid. This didn't mean he should get away with it again, as an adult. He came back to town a rich man and that in itself didn't give him any right to shoot that man in the stable. If Ben had known that Buck was the Miller boy when that shooting took place he would have spoken up when it first happened. Now that he did know, he felt he had no choice but to go to the authorities and tell them what he saw that night.

Even though Old Ben was now just an alcoholic it did not mean that he was totally stupid. He knew that it would be his word against two prominent members of the community. So he had to devise a plan that could bring this truth out into the open. Somewhere in the back of his beer-soaked mind there still lurked what was left of a once good man. When Ben had lost his wife to pneumonia many years ago he pretty much lost his will to live. That's when he climbed into the bottle and never came back out. He had also lost his little farm and good name but none of those things mattered to him. All that he used to care about was keeping enough alcohol in his gut to block out those painful memories. Now, however, Ben had a reason to do the right thing for a change.

To expose Buck and Mr. Anderson as murders would be risky. Either one of those two could end his life quickly. Ben had to find someone to help him; a person as powerful as these two men and not easily frightened. But who could he get to help?

Ben pondered this problem for several days before he decided who he needed on his side. This person would have to have a personal reason for locking away Buck Adams. The only one in town that might benefit from this happening was Paul Hartford, the President of the Wilsonville Bank.

Mr. Hartford had a bad reputation for taking advantage of other folks' bad luck. Plus his older brother was also the Circuit Judge made him the only person in town capable of bringing these two criminals to justice. Now all Ben had to do was arrange a meeting with Mr. Hartford and get him on board with this plan.

Chapter Forty-Seven

“The Tailor”

Ben had gone to the bank the next day. He had cleaned himself up as best he could and even combed his hair. Walking up to the little teller that sat behind the counter he asked, “My good man, I wish to speak to Mr. Hartford.”

“And what is that you wish to discuss with Mr. Hartford?” the teller asked looking at Ben with an air of disinterest.

“This matter is private and I have no wish to discuss it with the help,” Ben stated firmly.

Frightened by Ben’s tone the teller said, “Won’t you please have a seat and I will tell Mr. Hartford that you wish to speak to him.” He then went to Mr. Hartford’s office door and tapped timidly. A booming voice ordered him to enter. Once inside the office the teller said. “Sorry to bother you sir but a rather unkempt gentleman wishes to speak with you.”

Thinking that it might be just another down and out farmer coming to beg for an extension on his loan Mr. Hartford told the teller to show the man in. Hartford loved watching these creatures beg.

When Ben walked in Hartford stood and started to great him when he recognized that it was just Old Ben. Years ago Hartford had let Ben drink his farm away for a mere fraction of its worth. Sitting back down abruptly he asked, without looking up from the papers on his desk, “What the Hell you want Ben!”

For the next hour Ben told Hartford what he had seen that night in the Anderson’s stable and why he needed the banker’s help.

“You sure about all this, Ben? You didn’t just dream this shit up?” Hartford asked. His mind was already spinning, thinking about how much he could get for the Adams’ place. With her husband and father in prison it shouldn’t take long for Buck’s wife and his old farm hand to run that place into the ground. A few well placed, high interest loans and the bank would have in its possession one of the finest farms in the county. A fat bribe secreted to his brother the judge would guarantee the outcome of a “fair” trial. All that he had to do now was make Old Ben’s testimony unimpeachable; not an easy task with Ben being known as the town drunk. He would have to attack the defendants’ and their families’ moral character. Hartford was a ruthless bastard when it came to making money. He cared not for other’s lives as long as he gained more riches.

They would also need at least one more creditable eyewitness to the crime in question. There were several store owners that were barely holding on to their establishments who could perhaps have their memories jogged by the promise of forgiveness of a loan. They needed someone who could have seen into the stable that night from their living quarters above their store on the other side of the street. This list had three possibilities, the barber, the tailor or Doctor Johnson.

The doctor was out of the group because he owed no debts, if anything half the town and surrounding countryside still owed him for his services. Besides he was too honest to ever consider involving him in anything the slightest bit deceitful. The barber too was not a good candidate for this scheme because of his poor eyesight. An

evident flaw known to everyone who looked at his customers' heads; most had to have their wife straighten up the mess he left when they got home. No one ever complained, however, because he had been the town barber for most of their lives. Everyone knew he could not possibly see anyone across the street; especially after dark in a dimly lit stable. That just left the tailor.

David Goldberg was a Jewish immigrant from Poland. He had not been in Wilsonville long and because he spoke very little English his tailor shop was failing quickly. He had already been into the bank in the last week to ask for an extension on his loan. The bank had sold him the shop at way above fair market value, plus Mr. Hartford charged such an outrageous interest rate on the loan that the man would never get it paid off. When Goldberg complained about the fairness of the contract, Hartford told him to take the matter up with the judge; the banker's corrupt brother. Needless to say the tailor let the matter drop.

Now it would be up to Mr. Hartford to convince Mr. Goldberg to go along with the plan to get Buck and Mr. Anderson convicted. It may involve a small lie on Goldberg's part but the facts of the case were true, none the less. He would have nothing to lose by cooperating and everything to gain. The promise of a clear deed to his shop and any outstanding debts being wiped clean would be an offer too good to pass up.

The next morning Mr. Hartford made a visit to the tailor shop on his way to the bank. It took very little time to convince Goldberg to agree to testify at the upcoming trial. What Mr. Hartford didn't know was that David Goldberg had actually seen the events of that evening. He had closed his shop early because of a lack of customers and was sitting sipping tea at the small table by the window that faced the street when he heard a woman's scream come from the Anderson stable. When he opened his window to investigate the disturbance he saw Mr. Adams dismount and run into the stable.

The rest happened pretty much as Ben had described with the exception that one of the men jumped up, grabbed a pitchfork and lunged at Mr. Anderson's back before Buck shot him in the back of the head. These were small details and it didn't seem worth mentioning. Besides, Hartford was willing to pay him well for telling Ben's version of the truth. Goldberg felt it was best to play along. Just because his English was poor did not mean that this immigrant was stupid.

Chapter Forty-Eight

“From Hero To Criminal”

After another meeting with Old Ben to double-check his story and willingness to testify, Hartford sent a telegraph to his brother requesting his presence in Wilsonville on an urgent legal matter. These urgent matters usually meant a foreclosure, for which the judge received a cut, so he boarded the next train to Wilsonville.

In a closed-door meeting at bank the judge took sworn statements from Old Ben and the tailor, and then issued warrants for the arrest of Buck and Mr. Anderson. The sheriff was more than a little reluctant to make these arrests. The judge authorized him to deputize several ruffians, who were hanging out at the tavern, to help him.

The first one arrested was Mr. Anderson. He offered no resistance after the sheriff read the charges to him. He simply took off his leather apron and picked up his hat and coat. He had expected that this event would one day come. Although the sheriff protested, his deputies insisted on placing Mr. Anderson in shackles for the walk to the jail. If he had decided to become violent there would have been little these men could have done to control him, short of putting a bullet in his head.

Buck's arrest was no easy matter. When Richie heard of the arrest of Mr. Anderson he left school and rode straight home to warn Buck. The sheriff and his deputies secured Mr. Anderson in Wilsonville's one-cell jail before riding out to the Adams' farm. They left one armed man to guard Mr. Anderson, even though there was little need. He had walked quietly into the cell and sat down on the cot without saying a word in protest.

Buck and Luther were standing on the front porch of the big house when the sheriff and his men rode up. Both farmers were well armed with pistols and shotguns. Richie had positioned himself and his 22 in the bushes across the road from the house, even though Luther had told him to go home and to stay out of any trouble that might take place.

Seeing that Buck and Luther had no intention of letting this arrest take place without protest, the sheriff wisely dismounted, held up both hands, and then approached the porch on foot. One hand held the Warrant and he handed it to Buck then stepped back with both hands still in the air.

“I don't have any say in this matter Buck, it's signed by the Circuit Judge himself,” the sheriff said in a trembling voice that sounded more like an apology than an arrest order. He then continued, “Let's just ride back into town and we can sort all these allegations out.”

After Buck read it he and Luther talked in low tones for a few minutes then Buck handed Luther the shotgun and told him to go saddle him a horse. After Luther left the sheriff told Buck he would have to come in unarmed and asked for his six-shooter. Buck hesitated for a second then handed the sheriff his pistol. With Luther gone and Buck unarmed two of the deputies dismounted, ran toward Buck and started to shackle him. When Buck pulled his hand away one of the deputies hit him in the stomach with the butt of the shotgun that he was carrying.

When Buck doubled over from the blow a shot rang out from the bushes across the road and the assailants' hat blew off his head, just missing his scalp. Fearing that Richie might be injured in a shootout, Buck caught his breath and ordered him to drop his weapon. Richie had started to reload but reluctantly did as told. The hatless deputy ran across the road and picked up Richie's 22 then slapped the boy hard across his face.

"No need doing that," the sheriff yelled at the man, "the boy was just trying to protect his father's boss!"

Having heard the shot, Luther came running back from the barn. As he rounded the corner of the house, one of the other deputies pointed his rifle at Luther and ordered him to drop his gun. Buck nodded for Luther to comply with that order. There was a long pause while Luther decided if he could gun down the deputies, then Buck said, "Put it down Luther, before you get your damn head blowed off." Following Buck's command Luther leaned his gun against the porch and then went back to the barn to get the horse.

Meanwhile Eve and Iris sat at the kitchen table at Luther's holding their breath. Buck had sent Eve and the baby to Luther's for their protection. When Richie had told them earlier about Mr. Anderson's arrest both Eve and Buck knew what all this was about. Buck had taken a big risk to protect her father from being charged for murdering her attacker. Someone must have seen Eve's father kill that farm hand that night in the stable. But why had they waited so long to come forth. Perhaps this witness had been out of town all this time.

Eve knew that Buck was in as much trouble as her father. Buck had tried to make it look as if it had been self-defense and probably would have gotten away with it, as long as no one knew the truth. His lie was just as bad as her father killing a man in the eyes of the Law. Even though Buck had also killed a man, it had been to stop a crime from being committed, namely her father's murder. But when Buck tried to cover up Mr. Anderson's actions he had crossed a legal line that changed him from hero to criminal.

Chapter Forty-Nine

"The Best Lawyer"

When Buck and his armed escort arrived back in town curious onlookers lined the street. Most had heard the rumor. Charged with murder, Buck and Mr. Anderson would be hanged, or at least sent to prison for the rest of their lives. Most of the townsfolk still remembered the bloody sight that night in the stable. All believed these two men were protecting the new school teacher's honor when they killed those farm hands. Now they looked at them with disgust, as if Buck and Mr. Anderson had intentionally made fools of all of them.

Once inside the jail the deputies unlocked the cell, and then roughly shoved Buck in and slammed the iron door shut. Mr. Anderson looked up for the first time since he had sat down several hours earlier. He looked like a sad old man the world had beaten to his knees, not the robust man who Buck remembered; his eyes red, as if he were weeping. Buck felt sorry for Mr. Anderson, even though Buck's own lot in life at this moment was not any better.

Buck sat down beside Mr. Anderson slapped him on the knee, and then asked cheerfully, "So what are you in for?"

Mr. Anderson was dumbstruck by Buck's question. Then he realized that Buck was making a joke. Only Buck Adams could be making jokes at a time like this. However, no matter how hard he tried he couldn't help but smile just a little, and then he said, "You are one crazy son of a bitch, Buck." He then continued, "Don't you know they are going to hang us for what I did."

"And exactly what was that thing you did?" Buck asked, as he looked up at the ceiling as if trying to remember. He then took a more serious tone and said, "You killed the man who tried to rape your daughter and was planning on cutting her throat when he got out of jail." Buck continued by asking, "Would you have rather that he had lived, and made good on that threat?"

"Hell no!" was Anderson's quick reply; he strength returning to his voice.

"Good then," Buck said with a big grin. "Let's put are heads together and figure a way out of this mess."

The two men talked most of the night and then right before sunup both fell asleep. The sheriff woke them round eight by relieving the deputy that had been on guard last night. The smell of fresh coffee brewing soon filled the small jail.

"Hey sheriff, any chance a man might get a cup of that mud you call coffee?" Buck yelled through the iron door.

"Not if you are going to bad mouth it before you even get a taste!" the sheriff yelled back. "Law says I have to give you water. It don't say nothing about no coffee; this aint no damn hotel."

Shortly the metal trap in the door dropped down and the sheriff handed in two cups of strong black coffee; steaming hot. Even without cream it tasted great. Maybe it was just that hot coffee in the morning made things feel a bit more normal. After finishing his drink, Buck asked to use the outhouse but the sheriff flatly refused, telling him to use the wooden bucket under the cot. Buck had wondered where that bad smell came from last night. He had solved that mystery at least.

When Buck asked about breakfast the sheriff told him that most of his prisoners had just been drunks from the tavern, sleeping off a night of drinking and fighting. None of those folks wanted food with hangovers and more often as not, busted lips. Never the less if Buck had any cash money on him the sheriff would send someone to the café.

Buck turned to Mr. Anderson and said, as he dug a few coins from his pocket, "It's a damn shame a condemned man has to pay for his own last meal."

This joke brought another slight smile to Mr. Anderson's lips. He looked better today than he did when Buck first entered the cell yesterday. He no longer had the look of a beaten man. He was sitting up straight and his eyes were clear. Mr. Anderson had hope today after listening to the plan Buck had come up with during their lengthy talk last night. It would be risky but they had no other options at the moment.

Buck had also convinced him that he had done the right thing that night in the stable. Mr. Anderson's actions had saved Eve's life for sure. Those two men would have gotten out of jail with nothing but revenge on their minds and Eve would have had her throat cut shortly after their release. Mr. Anderson had refused to talk about that night until now, and had it all wrong inside his own head. He lugged around a heavy load of shame but Buck's talk turned all that guilt into pride.

Eve came to see Buck and her father later that morning. Obviously she hadn't slept and her eyes red, from a night of crying. She was certain that she was going to lose the two most important men in her life. Her mother had been so upset that she could not bear the idea of coming to the jail see her man caged like some animal. She took to her bed and refused to eat or drink.

"Can we have a little privacy?" Buck asked the sheriff.

"I'll step outside the front door and take a smoke but I'll have to hold the lady's handbag. Can't have her slipping you no file or gun," the sheriff said with a slight chuckle. "She will have to hunker down and talk to you through the trap in the door."

Eve slipped the latch from the small trap door and it dropped down, making a loud clank against the metal door. Buck got on his knees and his face filled the small opening. Seeing her husband Eve dropped to her knees on the dirty floor and pressed her lips to Buck's, as best she could. The thick iron door made a proper kiss impossible, but even the slightest touch of Eve's tender lids made Buck's heart skip a beat. When their lips finally parted Buck could see that Eve was crying.

Buck stuck his hand through the opening and wiped the fresh tears from her cheeks. It broke his heart to see her so upset. Knowing that he had only a few moments to pass along his secret message, Buck wasted no more time consoling Eve. The sheriff was only a few feet away, just outside the jail entrance, so Buck pulled Eve's cheek to the opening as if to kiss her and then whispered in her ear. He had barely finished his instruction when he heard the sheriff coming back in. Buck kissed Eve's cheek and then said for the sheriff's benefit, "Now do as I said and get the money from our bank account to buy us the best lawyer you can find."

"Times up," the sheriff said, as he closed the trap and slid the bolt back in place. "You can come back tomorrow to see your man."

Eve left the jail with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, as if wiping away tears but in fact she needed the cloth at her face to hide the smile that she couldn't

control. As usual, her man had already had a plan to fix this mess. She should have never lost faith in him. Buck Adams or William Miller, whoever he was, he was her husband and he could always find a way to make things right.

Chapter Fifty

“A Kick In The Ribs”

When Eve got back to the farm Iris brought Little Willie up from her house. Eve then instructed Iris to go fetch Luther and Richie. When the four of them were all seated around the kitchen table Eve started explaining what Buck needed from each of them. Right from the start she stressed that what Buck was asking of them was illegal and that any could refuse to help with no hard feelings. This was a wasted gesture on Buck's part because Luther and his family would do anything for him, no matter what the risk.

Buck had made it plain that their involvement would be kept secret so that no harm could come to them. Luther and Richie were ready to just ride into town and bust Buck and Mr. Anderson out of jail. However, Eve told them that with Buck's plan they could do the same thing without anyone knowing that they had any part in his escape. It was somewhat complicated and all parts of it had to go just right for it to work. The four conspirators talked for several hours, working out the details, but by the end of their talk all seemed certain that this plan was within your capabilities.

When the deputy relieved the sheriff later that evening, his first stop was the tavern for a much-needed drink. Seated in the corner table were the Hartford brothers, talking softly to one another to not be overheard.

“Exactly how much did you say the Adams place was worth?” the judge asked his brother.

“Enough for both of us to retire on,” the banker said with a smile. “Providing that Mr. Adams is found guilty, that is.”

“With the two eyewitnesses you have these men will certainly be hanged.” the judge said, as he leaned back in his chair and took a big puff on a fat cigar. “As long as you are a friend of the court.”

The brothers erupted into a fit of laughter at that remark. Their mirth caught the sheriff's the attention, so he walked over to their table to see what was so funny.

“Care if I join you gents?” the sheriff asked, as he sat down without waiting for an invitation.

“Apparently not,” the banker said with a look of disapproval on his face for his unwanted guest.

“How are prisoners doing?” the judge asked offhandedly.

“Got them locked up tight and got my best man guarding.”

“That's good,” the judge said then asked “Have they had any visitors yet?”

“Just Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Anderson done took to her bed with the vapors.”

“I hope you are keeping a close watch on any visitors. I don't want any escapes,” the judge said sternly.

“I only let Mrs. Adams talk for a few minutes through the trapdoor and I held on to her handbag so she couldn't slip her man anything.”

“Be on constant guard my good man, these are cold-blooded murders you are dealing with not just some drunken farm hand.”

“I am judge, don't you fret none. They give me any trouble and you won't have to worry about hanging them.”

“Did you happen to hear any of their conversation?” the judge asked.

“Just something about Mrs. Adams hiring some high-dollar, fancy lawyer,” the sheriff said, as he drained his glass. “Mostly she just bawled.”

The sheriff then excused himself and went back to the bar for another drink. He felt that he had talked to these two long enough; they were slowing his drinking down with all their questions.

After the sheriff left their table, the banker leaned toward his brother and asked, “A fancy lawyer going to be any problem?”

“None what so ever dear brother, none what so ever. This case is cut and dried.”

Remembering what the sheriff had told him the night before, the banker was not surprised when Eve came in the next morning and closed the Adams account.

“Good,” he said to himself. “The sooner you go broke the sooner your farm is mine.”

What he didn’t know was that this was not lawyer money but getaway money. The first part of Buck’s plan had gone without a hitch. Next Eve had to get her mother out of bed and to the Adams’ farm without drawing too much attention.

That afternoon Eve went to her mother’s and explained what was about to take place. At first the old woman protested saying that the court would find her husband innocent. However, after Eve told her that there was no chance for them to win their case and that Buck’s way was the only hope for their husbands to survive, her mother agreed to cooperate.

Eve helped her mother pack for a one-way trip. It was difficult to get her to leave so many of her possessions behind but there would be only so much room in the wagon. Well after dark Luther arrived with the wagon. He and Richie loaded it as quietly as they could. As they left town, only a few townsfolk peeked out of their windows, as the buggy and wagon creaked by. Nothing seemed amiss, just a daughter taking her elderly mother in to care for her in their time of crisis. The wagonload of trunks and suitcases may have drawn some suspicion in the daylight but in the cover of darkness they weren’t even noticed.

Buck heard a slight rustling in the bushes outside his cell window around midnight. The window was nothing more than a twenty-four by four inch-slot in the wall. Just big enough to let in a little light and fresh air but too small for a prisoner to climb through. The loud snoring coming from the office signaled that his guard was sound asleep. He stood at the slot and peered out into the darkness. Then the butt of his six-shooter appeared with a small hand on the barrel that could only be Eve’s. Neither spoke, Buck just held her hand for a moment then motioned her away. Eve crept back to a stand of trees just outside of town where Luther was waiting with the horses.

Once Eve returned to mind the horses, Luther left to complete his assignment. Mr. Anderson’s offer of his stable as a distraction should buy them some extra time. Anderson will have no further use for it if he does make good his escape. His stable was perfectly situated on the opposite end of town, away from the jail.

Buck and Mr. Anderson busied themselves all that day, silently ripping the old army blanket from the cot into long strands and then braiding them into several lengths of stinky, homemade-rope. After Eve gave Buck the gun, he sat patiently

waiting for her to get back to the horses and for Luther to make it to the stable. Tracking their movements in his mind, he knew when to make his move.

“Deputy, Deputy!” Buck yelled excitedly. “There is something wrong with Mr. Anderson, he aint breathing!”

The deputy awoke with a jerk and almost fell out of his chair. In his half-asleep state he had heard only a muffled sound coming from the cell at first. When he neared the door Buck repeated his alarm. Not wanting the responsibility for something that may have gone wrong while he had slept, the guard pulled his pistol, then unlocked the cell door. In the darkened cell he could make out a large body slumped in the far corner. What he didn't see until it was too late to offer any type of defense was the butt of Buck's gun that smashed into his forehead with a sickening thud.

Mr. Anderson and Buck quickly bound and gagged the deputy with the rope they had made. Buck knew that this was the same deputy that hit him in the gut the other so he gave him a kick in the ribs for good measure. To further add insult to injury Buck shoved the rotten smelling piss-bucket down over the man's head.

As the two men started around to the back of the jail Buck saw the glow of Mr. Anderson's stable, as it burst into flames. While they made their way to the horses in the woods they could hear Luther yelling, “Fire, fire!” Then he ran to join them, and the four of them took off at a fast gallop toward home.

They had two wagons loaded and waiting when they got to the Adams' farm. Iris had Mrs. Anderson sitting in theirs and she held Little Willie, wrapped in a warm blanket, while holding the reins to both teams. After dismounting quickly Mr. Anderson jumped into his wagon, kissed his wife briefly then pulled his wagon on the road and took off. Buck and his family weren't far behind, he and Eve had taken only a few moments to tell Iris and Luther goodbye, and to hand them the signed deed to the farm. They then climbed on board their own wagon and rushed away.

Richie changed both wagons' exhausted teams with fresh mounts that he had hidden in the woods; these were well fed and rested. He had brought them out the day before and camped by a small stream to wait for the others. Mr. and Mrs. Anderson would be going on to their middle daughter's home just outside Indianapolis. She had a good husband and two small boys that hadn't seen their grandparents in some time. Eve had given her mother half of the money she withdrew from the bank; more than enough to buy them a small cottage near her sister.

From this point forward the group would split up and take different routes to their perspective destinations. The Millers were heading to Texas. Once safely across the state line they all would be out of the corrupt judge's jurisdiction. The Millers would take a slow boat ride down the Mississippi, and then cut across to Bob's ranch and a fresh start.

After they changed both teams, the Andersons said their goodbyes and headed out. Eve stood by the road with Little Willie in her arms and waved until her parents rounded the bend, out of sight. She then climbed into the wagon and settled Willie into his makeshift bed on several blankets between two trunks. Richie handed Mr. Miller the reins then stuck out his hand and said, “Have a safe trip Mr. Miller.”

Mr. Miller took Richie's hand, then pulled him into a big bear-hug, with tears in his eyes and said, “You can still call me Buck.”

Chapter Fifty-One

“Prearranged Code”

The Millers had a good head start on anyone pursuing them; nevertheless they still pushed the team hard until they crossed the county line. On horseback a man could make it in two days but by wagon it will take at least three. They ate the cold fried chicken and ham sandwiches which Iris had fixed for their journey. Buck stopped only long enough to feed and water the horses; they could not risk any unnecessary delays. There would be time for hot meals later.

Back in Wilsonville pursuing fugitives was the last thing on folk's minds. With half of the town fighting the stable fire, the bound and gagged deputy was not discovered until after ten the next morning. The man still had that awful smelling bucket stuck on his head. The print of Buck's gun-butt shone brightly on the deputy's forehead as a half-egg-sized lump that was starting to turn dark purple.

This late discovery of the deputy would have helped buy them some time but the main distraction was that the bank had also been robbed in the same night. Only two men knew the combination to the safe and one of those folks could be found nowhere. Mr. Hartford had arrived at the bank at nine and was very upset that his employee had not yet opened the door for business. If that little bastard had gotten sick again Hartford was going to dock him two days' pay for not giving advance notice.

Hartford was still muttering threats under his breath as he walked to his office, then something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. The big iron safe that sat behind the front counter, bolted securely to the floor, had its heavy door standing wide open and all of its contents were missing. Every record of debts owed to the bank was gone; along with all the depositors' cash money. Mr. Hartford's rather sizable horde of gold coins was gone as well.

A local farmer said that he saw a small rider heading east as if someone was chasing him just before sunup, when the farmer was going to his barn to milk his cows. Obviously this had been the frightened little teller that Hartford had mistreated for so many years. This employee had finally gotten his revenge and made a handsome profit as well. That first night on the trail the teller entertained himself by counting his new-found fortune by the light of the brightly burning pile of stolen loan documents.

The fat sheriff didn't know which way to turn. Mr. Hartford was demanding that he chase after the teller and his deputy with the stinking head wanted to pursue the escaped prisoners. Most of the men of the town were still exhausted from fighting the stable fire and none of them were anxious to tangle with Buck. When word got out that the teller had taken all the loan papers along with the money, what few citizens that did have their life savings in the bank started clamoring for their money back. Soon an angry crowd had started to gather outside the bank.

Knowing that his brother had no way of covering the bank's losses the judge got on the first train out of town. Without the signed loans the bank was nothing more than an empty building, worth very little. Hartford would later have his home

sold at a public auction and even then he would still owe folks money. In all this confusion the Millers and Andersons could have made their getaway walking.

The sheriff made a half-hearted attempt to follow but gave up at the Adams' farm when Luther met them and said that he hadn't seen anyone ride by. Turning back toward town the sheriff and his men stopped on the Willow Creek Bridge to rest their horses. After a lengthy debate, they voted to go after the little teller and try to recover the town's money. Of course by this time the man was long gone and would not be seen again until several years later when one of the townfolk visiting a relative in New York said they were sure that they had seen him eating in an expensive restaurant with a fancy lady at his side. They said that he was also dressed in a high-dollar silk suit and top hat.

Of course Buck had no way of knowing what a mess the town was in, as he pushed his team. He had hoped the fire might have bought them a few extra hours but he still expected the sheriff and his men to not be far behind them. His only hope was making it to the county line before that happened.

When the Miller family finally made it across the county line, Buck breathed a sigh of relief. His team could not have gone farther at the pace they had maintained. Luckily, Buck knew that he could board the train at the first town the other side of the county line; just as he had done his first time running from the Law.

This time he was not some scared little boy boarding the train with one small suitcase, but a grown man with his wife and son. A wagon-load of baggage made this small group look more like wealthy travelers than fugitives. Buck had also purchased first-class tickets in a sleeper car so that his family would not have to try to sleep sitting up on a hard train seat. Even half of the money that Eve had withdrawn from their account was still a rather respectable sum. Buck actually had not paid that much attention to the wealth his farm had generated through the years.

When the train stopped to take on water after they crossed the state line into Indiana, Buck sent a coded telegram to Luther telling him that a load of farm-tools was on its way. This prearranged code let Luther know that they were on the train heading west.

Chapter Fifty-Two

“What’s For Supper?”

It was late afternoon when the ticket-agent from Wilsonville rode up to Luther’s with the telegram. Luther tipped him a dime and he galloped off. Iris came out on the porch to see who had ridden up. She had been making biscuits for supper when she had heard the rider so she stopped what she was doing and rinsed the flour off her hands.

“Who was that?” Iris asked, as she dried her hands on her apron.

“The train agent guy brought us this,” Luther said, as he handed Iris the telegraph. Reading wasn’t one of Luther’s strong points.

“It’s from Buck!” Iris said excitedly. “They’ve made it; they are on the train, safe!”

“I knew Buck would make it,” Luther said confidently. “Shame the boy didn’t know about all the goings on in town after he left. Would have made his trip a lot less stressful.”

“Main thing is that they are safe for now,” Iris said, as she returned to her kitchen.

Luther stood on the front porch of his small house and stared up at the big house. The whole farm seemed empty now with Buck gone. He and Iris had talked about the Miller’s generous gift but neither really felt right about accepting it. He liked his little place. It too had been a gift from Buck. He had lived in the big house with Buck but it never really felt like a home; just a big bunkhouse. This place felt more like a home. The only real home he had ever had.

When Luther walked into the kitchen Iris could tell that something was bothering him by the look on his face. He fumbled with the wooden spoon that Iris was using to mix her dough. Building his courage to make his speech, Luther cleared his throat then said, “You know that big house will take an awful lot of work to keep up.”

Iris opened the oven door, slid the pan inside, then turned to Luther and said calmly, “Quit making excuses old man, we aint going nowhere.” She then poured a cup of coffee and placed it into Luther’s hand. They both sat down at the kitchen table and talked quietly for some time.

Iris explained that she had no wish to live in the big house either. Ever since she had lost the baby she had felt sad most of the time. Iris had hidden her true feelings from him and Richie; not wanting to burden the two of them with a mother’s grief for a child no bigger than her hand. The doc had told her that at her age she most likely would be unable to have any more children. Her woman parts were just not strong enough. So there was no reason for them to have a bigger place.

“What do you suggest we do?” Luther asked.

“Well, if you don’t mind I was thinking we could give it to Richie. He’s almost a man and I know Buck wouldn’t mind. When he gets him a woman, chances are they will have a bunch of kids and could use all that room. Once we are both dead the farm will be his anyway.” Iris took a breath and held it, waiting to hear Luther’s response.

“Sounds like a fine idea to me woman,” Luther said offhandedly then asked, “What’s for supper?”

“Just like that old fool,” Iris thought to herself, “worrying more about his stomach than a life-changing decision.”

Richie could hardly believe his ears when Iris and Luther told him of their plan. He was sad that he would most likely never see Buck again but to actually own the big house seemed like a dream. He had figured Little Willie and his family would be the ones living there, while he would have a little farm somewhere or maybe just be staying on as Willie’s top farmhand. Even that would have been fine outcome.

Meanwhile Buck and his family had gotten off the train and were now on a riverboat heading south. Another telegram sent to Luther before they boarded kept him up to date on their progress. Buck sent another when they got off the boat before they started across country to Texas.

This part of their journey would be as hard, if not harder than the first. There was no more delicious restaurant food or soft beds; now they were back to bedrolls and beans. Buck felt like a cowboy again and seemed to enjoy the ruggedness but this hard trail-life was not Eve’s or Little Willie’s cup of tea. Both made their complaints known often and loudly. Between Willie’s constant crying and Eve’s complaining Buck was starting to wonder if hanging might not have been the better choice.

About halfway across to Bob’s, Eve jumped from the wagon and walked a few yards away and screamed, “I hate Texas!”

“Get back on the wagon Eve,” Buck said patiently. “We need to make a few more miles today.”

“No sir, I’m not going an inch farther. You take me home right now!” She yelled at Buck.

“You know we can’t do that honey,” Buck said a little louder, starting to lose his patients. “If you want me dead just say so. Better yet take my gun and blow my brains out right here and save me the trip back across country with you two!” Buck upholstered his gun and extended it butt first toward Eve.

Neither said anything for several minutes, then both realized how stupid they both sounded and they began to laugh. They laughed until they both had tears in their eyes.

When Eve got back on the wagon she turned to Buck and said, “I wouldn’t make the gun offer tomorrow, I might just take you up on it.”

“It will get better Eve, I promise, or I’ll do the honors myself.” Buck said, as he pulled Eve close.

The rest of their trip was no easier but somehow after this little episode things didn’t seem so bad. Little Willie even started to get used to the constant bouncing of the wagon. Eve’s less than perfect cooking skills were not as important on the trail. However, Buck was not sure, but it seemed to him that her cooking may have actually improved.

Chapter Fifty-Three

“Playing Cowboy”

Back in Wilsonville things had started to calm down after the big night; one that would be recalled fondly as the night the town had gotten completely out of debt. With no records to back his claims, everyone that owed the bank money had gotten their debts forgiven. The town began to grow now that Hartford had lost his stranglehold on the economy with his high interest rates. Several new businesses opened and there was plenty of work for any who desired it.

A new bank opened, however this one, unlike Hartford's, now offered reasonable interest rates on the monies borrowed. New people arrived looking for land to start small farms. The larger farms were soon divided into several smaller ones, all sold for huge profits. New homes were then built in town by these original surrounding homesteaders; as a result, this small town began to look more like a city.

After his near-death experience that night in the stable, Old Ben completely quit drinking. He was sleeping in the loft on the soft hay that night when Luther had set the place on fire. Ben awoke from his drunken stupor to find bright red flames surrounding him. He was certain that he was dead and in the very bowels of Hell. Then a small gap appeared in this inferno and he dove through it to safety; breaking his arm in the process. In his intoxicated state Ben had forgotten that he was ten feet off of the ground.

After Doc. Johnson set his arm Miss Ann felt sorry for Ben and took him in, letting him sleep in her shed and gave him a part-time job in her café. When his arm healed and his drinking never resumed she moved him to a full-time position. As it turned out Ben was a good cook when sober. With the town growing as fast as it was Ann soon expanded her operation and with Ben's help her restaurant became very successful. She and Ben married some years later and he never drank again till the day he died.

The town's prosperity aided another small entrepreneur as well. David Goldberg, the tailor, now completely debt free courtesy of the teller's camp fire, slowly built his small shop into a successful clothing store. He was even able to bring a young Jewish girl from the "old country" for his bride.

As the town prospered Buck's situation was going from bad to worse. When they topped the ridge overlooking Hank Rhodes' old place a scene of total destruction greeted them. It was obvious that a Texas twister had passed over top the main house, part of the barn and the bunkhouse. All that was left standing were the end wall of the bunkhouse and one corner of the barn; the main house was gone. The storm wiped out Buck's idea of staying with Bob for a while as well.

Even though he had not planned on an extended stay, it would have been nice to hang around Bob's a bit to reminisce. He told Eve all about his time spent there on their wagon ride from the river. This mess of twisted timbers and scattered bits of broken terracotta looked nothing like the quaint little ranch he described in such vivid detail. There wasn't even a stray chicken roaming about.

Eve took one look around the place then turned to Buck and said sarcastically, "It looks like Bob's place could stand a little work."

"You know damn well what did this little Miss "I went to college, I'm smart," Buck replied just as sarcastically.

"Didn't you say there was a town around here somewhere?" Eve asked.

"Just up the road a piece," Buck said, as he looked around the ranch one last time. "We will be there before dark."

"Any chance of a hot bath there?" Eve asked hopefully.

"It's hard to tell, been years since I was there last."

"I'd settle for a pan of hot water and a bed off the ground." Eve said, as she rubbed her hips.

Eve was pleasantly surprised to find that Buck's old stomping ground had recently added a small hotel. It only had four bedrooms, but one was available. Best of all there was a bathhouse outback where one could get a hot bath for twenty-five cents. Eve handed Little Willie to his father, as soon as they had settled in the room and headed straight for the tub. She had been gone so long Buck was beginning to think that she may have drowned. When she did return it was the old Eve, not that evil person he had met on the trail. She smelled so good that Buck tried to kiss her, however Eve held him at arms' length and said, "Not till you have had a bath mister."

After a good, hot supper at the small diner down the street, the Millers returned to their room and slept until mid-morning the next day. Little Willie even stayed asleep all night for a change. He too was glad being back inside, without mosquitoes buzzing around his head or coyotes howling in the distances. Eve and Willie were not cowboys nor did they want to become one.

After breakfast Buck had gone to see about buying a fresh team, his were trail-weary and footsore. After making the trade with the man who owned the stable, he stopped by the old Cantina where he had taken his first drink. To his surprise, Buck found Bob Harper sitting at one of the tables sipping a beer. One arm was in a sling and he had a big bruise on his forehead. After a warm reunion and several more beers Bob finished his tale of the storm, "and that's how I hurt my damn shoulder."

When Buck got back to the hotel room Eve asked, "What took you so long?"

"I ran into Bob Harper at the Cantina, he's alive after all; just banged up some," Buck said, as he picked up Willie and spun him around. "He's going to rebuild his place, as soon as his arm gets better. I told him we would help."

"You told him what?" Eve asked excitedly.

"I told him we had nothing better to do at the moment, what's the problem? We were going to stay here a few days anyway, besides I sort of owe him."

"You sort of owe me and your son a home, or did that fact slip your mind?"

"I'm helping Bob, you and Willie can stay here and rest or take the wagon and head out, I'll catch up in a month or so."

Eve didn't find Buck's joke very funny. At least she hoped it was a joke, with Buck you could never be sure. It would be just like him to send her and his infant son out on the trail to fend for themselves while he played cowboy again.

Chapter Fifty-Four

“Shanghaied”

Buck didn't wait for Bob's arm to heal. He hired several Mexican carpenters to help him with rebuilding Bob's place. They salvaged what materials they could from what was left of Bob's buildings. A stray two by four here and the odd flat board there could still be used but most of the wood was nothing more than potential firewood. In the next town Buck bought lumber from a small sawmill and nails at the general store. He and his small crew were up at dawn each day and worked until the light faded. The work was hard and extremely hot, as a result each day they took afternoon siestas.

During those breaks Buck would walk around Bob's place and remember the time he had spent there in his youth. He recalled the hands that came for the cattle drives and the fun they had joking with one another in the now-destroyed bunkhouse. Leaning on what few rails that were still standing he could almost hear Hank Rhodes rough voice yell, “Buck Adams, Hell, looks more like Bucked-off Adams to us!”

Those memories were better to think about than that terrible day that the widow murdered Hank or Buck's own drunken return from Mexico after he had gotten his heart broken by Allison; good and bad, this place had many memories.

The livestock started to drift back in when they heard the sounds of hammering. They had scattered in all directions when the storm hit, some involuntarily. Bob's old milk cow was found impaled on a fence post a half a mile away. The chickens all had several feathers missing but from Bob's count most had made it back safe. It took a week before his horse limped back in with the saddle turned sideways, barely hanging on by a frayed, flank-cinch.

A few of Bob's neighbors stopped by from time to time and pitched in to help as well. In just two weeks Buck and the others had rebuilt the barn and a small, two-bedroom house. There was no need to rebuild the bunkhouse; no more cowboys would be sleeping there, or any cattle drives heading out from this ranch.

Eve was well rested by the time Buck finished the house. She and Willie had spent their time covering every inch of this small town and were both becoming bored with doing nothing. As much as she hated to admit it, she was sort of missing the trail. Not its hardness, of course, but that they were actually going somewhere then. This small town was just as about as close to nowhere as one could get. Eve had absolutely no desire to settle and grow old here. She had her new home pictured in her mind and it was positively somewhere, but it was definitely not in Texas.

Buck would not let Bob come out to watch the reconstruction progress. He insisted that Bob stay in town and recuperate. The Cantina owner had a shack out back and had let Bob stay there on a small, makeshift-bed since his accident. Buck had offered to put him up at the hotel but Bob insisted that would simply be a lot of unnecessary walking to get to the tequila.

After saying their goodbyes to Bob, the Millers were on the trail once again. As they were leaving town Buck turned to Eve and said thoughtfully, “I came to Texas three times in my life. Each time I was running away. I thought of this place as my

home, but now I know it's not. I created Buck Adams here, but that person no longer exists. I am now William Adam Miller Junior, husband to Eve Miller and father of William Adam Miller the Third. Our life begins from this day forward."

Eve turned to him and asked, "Now do I call you William or Bill?"

"Which do you prefer?" he asked earnestly.

"You can call yourself William, Bill, Billie or Silly for all I care, just as long as you get me the Hell out of Texas," Eve said with a laugh.

"Damn it woman, I'm being serious." Buck said trying hard not to laugh himself.

"You have been Buck Adams too long to become someone else, so let's just drop the subject and concentrate on getting out of this god-forsaken place." Eve said, as she put her arm around his shoulder and kissed his cheek.

Their trip north went by quickly; soon they were in Kansas at a railroad station. Buck sent telegrams to both Luther and the Andersons to let everyone know that they were still alive. After he sold the team and wagon, he bought tickets for San Francisco. If by chance Eve didn't like it there he could still take her to Oregon.

Little Willie loved the train. He was perfectly content to just sit on Eve's lap and watch the world pass by the window. Buck watched as Eve would point out things of interest to their son. She was a great mother and a good teacher as well. Even though Willie did not understand what she was saying, he followed her gestures and looked intently in whatever direction she indicated. Willie was a lucky boy to have such an intelligent woman for a mother and Buck was very fortunate to have such a fine family.

When the train entered the Rockies, Eve was as awestruck as Buck had been when he first laid eyes on those majestic heights. The train slowed to a crawl to climb the steeper grades but made up for that slow pace on the way down the western slope. Their train then dropped into another world. The coolness of the mountain tops gave way to a warm, almost tropical climate in the lush, green valley at its base. It was warm but not Texas' hot. Eve was starting to think that this part of the world was where her future home might be located. She had seen the Atlantic Ocean when she was going to college but it was a cold, dark, unattractive body of water. The Pacific, on the other hand, was a warm and inviting sea with gorgeous sunsets and a soothing, gentle breeze.

They had been in San Francisco a week when the first small earthquake hit. The locals hardly paid attention to the minor shaking, but this violent act of nature scared Eve to death. Buck had been out talking to a local banker to see if any small farms were for sale when the quake hit. Buck had never experienced an earthquake his other times in California and this movement of the ground made him feel a little sick to his stomach. The banker never even looked up from the list of farms he was describing to Buck, as if nothing was happening. Buck excused himself on the pretense of another engagement and ran back to the hotel. He had a bad feeling about this place. As he ran, he rehearsed a speech to give to Eve why they should go on to Oregon.

Buck could have saved himself the effort. As soon as he entered their hotel room Eve greeted him with, "Let's get the Hell out of here!"

They packed and boarded a coastal steamer heading for Portland the next day. Their apprehension proved well founded, some years later when a large, early morning earthquake and the ensuing firestorm completely destroyed San Francisco; many lives were lost.

As they steamed slowly up the coast Buck had a flashback to his earlier experiences on the high seas; as a paying shipwrecked passenger, Shanghaied sailor and mutinous sea-captain. He hoped to repeat none of those on this track. They named coastal steamers rightfully so; land was never out of sight to their right. This eased Buck's mind somewhat but he still kept a very watchful eye on the skies. Eve became seasick almost as soon as they left the harbor and spent the entire voyage either hanging over the rail or lying moaning on her bunk in their stateroom. It took her several days after they got to Portland before she could eat and hold down even a small meal.

Two weeks after their arrival Buck found a nice little farm that they could afford, just outside of town. It needed some work, but had a good well and the land was rich and fairly flat. The whole area reminded them of their old home back in Ohio; without all the drama of course. Here they were just farmers, with no old enemies. Little Willie can grow up here without ever looking over his shoulder. Perhaps this was the home for which Eve was searching.

Chapter Fifty-Five

“Two Cents”

The seasons flowed easily one into the other here; it was never too hot or too cold. The years passed without incident as well; it was a quiet life. After all the renovations were completed on their new home, little of the money was left from their account. They made a meager living selling butter and eggs to the general store close to where they lived but they had no money left over to foolish away. It was not that hard to go from a prince to a pauper. Neither Buck nor Eve missed being the richest farmers in the county. This small farm produced enough food for the three of them. However there were times when a few extra bucks would have come in handy.

That is why when Willie turned six Eve took a job as school teacher again. The one-room schoolhouse was about a mile down the road, on the outskirts of Portland. The pay was not that great, but any extra income would help. Buck protested a little at first. However Eve was a great teacher and it was a shame to let all of her schooling go to waste. There were also expenses that the butter and egg money just couldn't cover. Besides, Willie would be in school anyway and Buck could handle all the chores this small place required. He even cooked some of their suppers. Regrettably for Little Willie his father was no better cook than his mother. On more than one occasion the meal would have a flavor that none of them could describe; however delicious was certainly not the word they were looking for.

Another good thing about owning a smaller place was that it gave Buck extra time to spend with his son. Eve taught Willie from books but his father taught him the things that no book ever could. By the age of five Willie could ride their old plow-horse bareback at a fast gallop. At six he was hunting with Buck and was able to pick off a running rabbit at fifty yards with a 22. His fishing skills now almost equaled his father's and well exceeded his mother's. Eve had a distinct dislike for earthworms and absolutely refused to bait her own hook. Buck was so proud of his son's accomplishments. Buck could not imagine his life without the boy.

Iris and Eve exchanged letters about once a month. They kept each other up to date on the things happening in Portland and Wilsonville. Although Iris seemed to always have the more interesting news. Like her recent report that Richie was getting married to the younger sister of the big Larson boy who had given him the black eye in school all those years ago. Iris liked the girl but still could not stand her father; the big man Buck bested in that fight at the church picnic. The man was still a brute, however he was going to become family so she was trying her best not to let her dislike for the man show. Iris was certain that a grandchild would soon be arriving soon. Probably about seven months or so after the wedding by the way her little belly was starting to stick out.

Eve's letters had little information; their life in Portland was so unexciting. The biggest news that she had to offer was her taking the job as a teacher again. Other than that the bulk of her replies were simply more questions to Iris about things in Wilsonville. Buck seemed to not mind the uncomplicated life they were now living, but Eve wondered if he might be secretly missing his old life. Or maybe she was the one that was missing the adventure of being a wanted man's woman, on the run.

One evening after supper, as the two of them sat peacefully rocking on their little front porch; Eve turned toward Buck and asked, "Do you ever miss it?"

"Miss what?" Buck asked.

"The life you gave up for me," Eve answered, as she looked down at her hands folded on her lap. Eve knew Buck's actions to save her father from being charged with murder had forced them to this place.

"This is my life, you and Willie, this farm. It's all I need, circumstances beyond my control forced that other life upon me by," Buck answered in a not so convincing tone.

"Some of your life may not have been under your control but most of it was," Eve answered, as she looked Buck straight in the eyes. "You did what needed doing when it needed done; a lesser man would have not even tried."

Neither of them spoke for several minutes, each weighing their next words carefully. Eve then ended the quiet with the statement, "Let's do something."

"Do what?" Buck asked, not knowing which way this conversation was heading.

"Something fun, exciting, crazy, anything but just sitting in a rocker waiting to die!" Eve said, as she stood and paced back and forth on the little porch. "Let's do something that makes us feel alive!"

"I thought this life was what you wanted?" Buck asked, as usual, not having a clue what his wife actually wanted. He had come to this place to make her happy and to give Willie some place safe to grow up. Even though he had just been going through the motions of living, he thought that this was what she wanted. Maybe he had underestimated Eve; perhaps she had a wild side that she had suppressed all these years. She had adapted to the trail rather quickly; that is, after a lot of bitching.

"I know you think I'm crazy but what we have here would be a fine life for normal folks but you are not normal," Eve said by way of an explanation.

"Are you saying that I'm not right in the head?" Buck asked, somewhat offended.

"I'm not saying that you are crazy. I'm saying that you are better than just normal. You live life to its fullest, or at least you did until I came into your life to slow you down. I don't want you to slow down living just to make me happy. I want happiness for the both of us. This small farm is not your life's purpose; greater things than just living out your days in a safe, little corner of this big world await you. I'm not sure why you are on this earth, but I'm certain it was not to become some poor dirt-farmer with only two pennies in his pocket when he dies." Eve stopped her speech just long enough to catch her breath and to see what Buck's reaction would be to her words.

"Thirty five cents," Buck said without cracking a smile.

"What the Hell are you talking about?" Eve asked, somewhat puzzled at his response.

He then shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out a quarter and a dime and said with a big grin, "See, I've got more than two cents."

As usual he knew exactly what to say to make Eve laugh. She flopped down on his lap, almost tipping his rocker backwards, kissed him hard then said, “So cowboy, where we heading?”