

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A TRUE COWBOY

CHAPTER 1

The day had started just like most days. Jim slowly got out of his bunk, pulled on his clothes, and stumbled toward the kitchen where his father was stirring a cast iron skillet of eggs.

“Get the coffee, would you, Jim?” he said as he slid the skillet from the stove and banged it onto the battered wooden table he had made for Jim’s mother about twenty years before.

Jim glowered at his father, and then poured coffee into two chipped mugs. He still hadn’t forgiven his father for last night’s disagreement; he slammed the mugs onto the table.

His father looked up from dishing out their breakfast. “Still bent out of shape about last night?” He sat down with a sigh. “You know I was right. You’ve got no business going to war and I won’t allow it. We’re going to make a crop, and I need you to help harvest it. So get that foolish notion about going to war out of your head.”

With a tone of anger, Jim said, “I’m eighteen now and old enough to decide for myself exactly what I want to do. Can’t you get it into your head that you don’t have any right to tell me what to do anymore?”

His father hesitated, and then said, “I know you think I don’t care about you, but you belong here on the farm, not dying on some battleground. I’m sure you don’t believe it, but I’m just thinking of what’s best for you.”

“Like hell you are,” Jim said. “You’re just thinking about what’s best for you!”

Jim ranted on, “I’m getting out of here, and don’t you try to stop me!” Jim shoved his six-foot frame away from the table and leaped to his feet. Then he grabbed his guns and bedroll, bolted out the door, and headed for the barn.

Once in the barn, Jim quickly saddled and bridled his sturdy chestnut mare, Daisy. He led her outside and looped her reins around the pine tree.

He stepped back into the barn to fill a saddlebag with the sorghum grain and corn kernels he knew Daisy would need in the days ahead.

Then hurrying back outside, he paused to fill his canteen from the water barrel; and as he mounted Daisy he heard his father burst out the door behind him.

“Go ahead and leave, you rebellious hardhead, and don’t ever come back!”

Jim turned his head back towards his father, and hollered, “It’ll be a cold day in hell before you see me again, old man!”

CHAPTER 2

In his anger and frustration, Jim urged Daisy to her fastest speed. After about a mile, he came to his senses, and slowed Daisy to a walk. His anger had cooled and he began to reflect on the morning's events.

"There's no way I'm going back home," he thought. "I'm not going to give that old man the satisfaction of thinking he can boss me around. I've got a right to my own life, and I'm going to live it the way I want to."

Hours later at sundown, he began searching for a place to spend the night; and he soon found a meadow near the road that had a little lake in it.

"This is as good a place as any," he thought. "I sure wish I had grabbed some food for myself before I left home. Water's better than nothing, but it doesn't satisfy my hungry belly. Well, I guess I'll worry about that tomorrow." Jim dismounted, led Daisy out into the meadow, put on her hobbles, and took off her saddle and bridle.

His stomach was growling like an angry bear, so he took from his saddlebag an ear of corn he'd packed for Daisy, and gnawed off some kernels.

"I sure would like to have some ham and eggs," he thought; "and how I'd love even a biscuit right now." Tired, hungry, and angry, Jim eventually drifted off to sleep on his saddle blanket.

When he woke in the morning, Jim set out to find a farmer who would supply him with a meal. So he mounted Daisy and started his journey again, wrestling with his thoughts.

"I should have planned better. If I hadn't taken off while I was mad, I could have prepared food and clothing, saved up money, and bought more ammunition. I should have thought this out. I don't even know how far it's to Fort Tampa.

"And if I manage to get there with no food or money, am I going to be prepared to kill a man I've never met? Maybe Dad was right. Maybe I'm not ready yet."

Jim thought about it a little while and then said, "Well, I won't find out if I'm ready to be a soldier and kill a man if I don't try."

Jim's inner battle was interrupted a few hours later when he spotted a farmhouse a short distance off the road. He noticed smoke curling up out of the chimney and he hoped the folks were getting the noon meal ready.

So he rode up to the house, dismounted, and tied Daisy to the hitching rail. Biting his lip nervously, he knocked on the door.

A young girl opened the door and said, "Hello."

"Howdy, ma'am, I'm Jim. I was wondering if you might have some work I could do to earn a meal."

"You'll have to ask my father," and then she called him. "Pa, there's someone at the door who wants to know if he can trade some work for a meal."

Her father came to the door and looked Jim over. "Where are you off to, son?"

“Well, sir, I’m on my way from Hominy to Fort Tampa in Florida to enlist. I got so fired-up and hurried, I forgot to pack enough food. I reckon if Mom was still alive she’d be plenty embarrassed because I left home half cocked.”

“Why don’t you come on in, son? I’m sure Matilda won’t mind another mouth to feed. And don’t worry about working for it. The day I force a man to work for a meal, the Lord would surely dry up my crops and stunt my chickens.”

“I thank you very much, sir,” Jim said as he sat down at the table and eyed the fried chicken and gravy.

As he wolfed down a man’s portion of the delicious food, he asked, “Have you heard any news about the war?”

“Well, we don’t keep up with the news that well out here;” and before he could continue speaking, his wife spoke up.

“War is such a terrible thing. Why can’t people learn to live in peace with one another?”

Mr. Hinkle sighed. “The Bible says there will always be wars and rumors of wars, so why should we expect there to be peace—any peace?”

“The Bible says that?” Jim asked. “I only know a little bit about the Bible. Mother tried to teach me when I was small, but I didn’t take to it, so she finally gave up.”

“Yes, Jim, Jesus said that. He said a lot of good things that you ought to be knowing and studying. I’m sure the Bible will make better sense now that you’re older.”

As they continued with their meal, Mr. Hinkle told Jim how the Bible had helped him be a better husband, father, and farmer.

When Jim asked again about the war, Mr. Hinkle said, “Jim, we really believe in letting go of our worries and letting God work. If we’re meant to win the war, we will. Worrying about it won’t change the outcome, but it will mess up our enjoyment of this good meal Matilda made for us.”

Jim finished one last helping of chicken and gave a contented sigh. “I sure do thank you for this fine meal. It’s been years since I’ve had anything this good. Dad and I can get by on what we cook, but only Mother could cook fried chicken like this.”

About ten minutes later Mrs. Hinkle gave him a small basket of bread, chicken, and a packet of coffee as he prepared to leave.

As he took the basket, Jim said, “Thank you, ma’am, for the wonderful meal and for the basket of food. I really do appreciate your hospitality.”

“You ride carefully and safely,” Mr. Hinkle said as Jim placed the food in his saddlebag. “Make sure to stop by and share a meal with us again when you come back this way.”

“I sure will, sir,” Jim said. Then he asked Mr. Hinkle, “Mr. Hinkle, about how far is it to Florida?”

He was shocked by the answer: “About three hundred miles.”

Then Jim responded, “Wow, if it’s that far I guess I’d better get back on the road again,”

So he mounted Daisy, waved goodbye, and struck out toward his destination: Florida!

He continued stopping at farms that looked to be wealthy; he assumed that he was more likely to get food there. He was correct in his assumption and never once failed to get a meal at a farm where he stopped; and it was no wonder. He was six feet tall, muscular, and very handsome. He also had a very likable personality, and was very intelligent. It was no wonder that he had no trouble getting a family to welcome him in for a meal and an interesting talk!

CHAPTER 3

Jim rode Daisy to the tip of Florida because that is where they were assimilating an Army to go to Cuba to whip the Spaniards. And if the Spaniards were whipped by the United States Army, Cuba would become an independent nation under the supervision of the American Federal Government; Jim learned this after he was taken into the Army.

But before he got into the Army, he rode Daisy to a corral and made a bargain with the owner. “Sir, I’ll leave my horse here while I go to fight the Spaniards, and if I come back to get her I’ll pay you for keeping her. If I don’t come back, you can keep her—and her name is Daisy.” They shook hands to seal the bargain, and then Jim walked over to the Army post.

He found the enlisting sergeant and asked him what he needed to do to get into the Army. The sergeant said, “Sunny boy, all you need to do is sit down here and sign some papers. Then you can go south just a little ways out of town and you’ll find the recruits there along with the Instructors and the Army Officers.”

So Jim signed the papers, and then went south out of town to the Army Camp. He found the officer in charge and reported to him.

The officer told him: “Tomorrow we are going to do some training so you will know how to fight the Spaniards. We believe they will surrender very quickly as the soldiers are homesick, and they can't see any good reason for their Government to want such a little spot of land as Cuba in the western hemisphere.”

It was supper time, so Jim got into the line that was moving toward the chow hall. And after he had finished eating, he went to a barrack and chose a bunk.

Then he visited with the other recruits until the go-to-bed trumpet sounded. Then he went to his bed and crawled in; and being very tired he went to sleep almost immediately.

The next morning at daybreak the trumpet was sounded to awaken the recruits. They were then told they had thirty minutes to get dressed and ready for breakfast.

Jim sat up, stretched, and put on his shirt and trousers. Then he walked outside and over to the chow hall to get his breakfast.

They were given thirty minutes to eat, and then they were to get in line to get their uniforms and their rifles. Jim hurriedly ate his breakfast so he could get in the line while it was short.

After his hurried breakfast Jim got into the line that led to the building where they got their Army clothing and their equipment. It was a fast moving line so Jim got the things he needed in less than ten minutes. Then he went back to his barrack and changed into his Army clothing.

As soon as he got dressed, he took his rifle and went out and got in the line with the other recruits. A sergeant appeared and called out “Tens hut” which really meant “Attention,” and then he told them what they were going to do.

“We’re going out to the target range to teach you all about your rifle and how to use it. We do this because your gun is for killing the enemy and keeping you alive; so treat it like it’s your sweetheart.

“We don’t teach you any marching because we won’t be doing any in Cuba. Now follow me and I’ll take you to the target range.”

The range was very close so in about two minutes they were lining up facing the targets. Then the sergeant asked how many of the recruits knew how to shoot a rifle. Fortunately, every one of them said they knew how.

“Now I’m going to give each of you a box of twenty bullets, and after you use them up we will examine the targets to see if you need further practicing.”

The sergeant passed out the bullets, and the recruits began firing at the targets. To his amazement, every one of the recruits got their bullets in the bull’s eye, or very close; then the sergeant found out why.

Every one of them came from a farm where there was a lot of game to hunt. Also working on a farm was a good body-builder, and every one of them was in good physical and mental shape. The sergeant was very proud of these recruits—but he never told them so.

During the next three weeks the recruits were taught how to fight the enemy hand to hand and with bayonets. They also learned all the commands they were going to have to obey, but that was no real challenge.

Then after the sergeant was satisfied they were ready for battle, he told them what was going to happen next.

He said, “Tomorrow you will be put on ships and taken to the Army’s Headquarters on the eastern tip of Cuba. Right now I want you to pair up with another recruit, and I want the two of you to stick together like a married couple.”

Jim immediately got into partnership with “Tex,” a young man he had already become acquainted with.

The sergeant waited a few minutes for the pairing up to be completed; then he continued his speech. “Once you get to Cuba you will be given one good meal in the evening, a tent to sleep in, and cots to sleep on in your shorts.

“Now hit the hay because you will hear the trumpet blast very early in the morning.

The next morning they were awakened by the trumpet blast. Then a sergeant told them to get dressed immediately, and go get in the breakfast line.

After breakfast they were told to pair up, get into lines, and stay paired up. The boys were soon to find out the reason for doing that.

Then the recruits were marched down to the coast, put aboard a ship, taken to the south end of Cuba, and disembarked.

As soon as they were disembarked, they were lined up at the foot of a big hill. In a few minutes Teddy Roosevelt appeared, and without any introduction, he gave them a short talk.

“Soldiers,” he said, “We are going to attack the Spaniards, and they should be easy to overcome. They are tired of keeping Cuba for Spain, and they think it’s stupid for their government to be so anxious to keep such a little chunk of land.

“So we are here to take Cuba away from the Spaniards and make it a possession for the Government of the United States.”

Then he had the soldiers’ turn around and line up facing the foot of one of the big hills close behind them. When they were in position, he said, “When the trumpet sounds, CHARGE!”

In less than a minute the trumpet sounded; and Jim and his partner, Tex, charged up the hill in front of them, shouting very loud along with the rest of the soldiers.

They had not expected to meet the enemy until they got to the top of the hill, but they were mistaken. The enemy came rushing down the hill in great force. In just a few minutes the American soldiers were called to retreat.

But Jim and Tex got separated from the rest of the soldiers because they ran to the south, not to the east.

They soon found a farm in an opening in the forest where there were small hay stacks. The boys knew the enemies were getting close because they could hear them shouting to each other.

So the boys paused a moment to catch their breath and decide what they should do. Still panting Jim said, “Let’s hide in one of the hay stacks;” so they rushed to the nearest one and wiggled their way into it.

The enemies were soon inside the field and went around thrusting their bayonets into the haystacks. Unfortunately, Jim got a big slash on his right leg, but he was able to take the pain without a sound.

The enemies quickly moved from haystack to haystack but they found no one; so they moved on to another field.

As soon as they were out of hearing range, the boys worked their way out of the haystack and examined Jim's leg. It was bleeding badly, so they made a tourniquet of Jim's torn pants and tied it around his leg; this slowed the flow of blood considerably.

Then they got their bearings by the position of the sun and started in the correct direction. Fortunately, they were not far from the Army camp and soon entered it.

The doctor cleaned Jim's wound and applied some liquid medicine to it. Then he suggested that Jim be put on a ship and taken back to Florida to get the wound properly cleaned and sewed up.

The General in command agreed, so Jim was loaded onto a ship and immediately taken to Florida to a hospital. His wound was carefully cleaned and stitched closed. Then they gave him some Laudanum for sleep, and put him in bed in a private room.

The next day Jim decided to write his father.

“Dear Dad, a few weeks ago I left you standing in our doorway shouting for me to leave. I left in a rage and vowed I’d never come back. But Dad, things have changed. I’m now a wounded veteran of the Spanish-American war. And while I was lying here in the hospital I came to my senses and decided I’d been a hardheaded youngun with lots of brass and not many brains. But I’m a lot wiser than I was when I left home. Is there a ghost of a chance I could get forgiven by you if I came back home? Jim.”

A few days passed and Jim hadn’t received a reply from his dad. He comforted himself with the notion that he hadn’t received a reply because the mail was so slow.

By now his wound had healed and he could walk with only a slight limp.

CHAPTER 4

Jim got discharged from the hospital and checked on his friend, Tex. He learned that Tex had not yet been discharged from the Army, but was still in Cuba helping the Army get re-assembled and moved back to Florida.

Jim went to the Army Paymaster and received his pay of four hundred dollars for his time in the service; he then went to the livery stable where he'd left Daisy.

On his arrival, the owner said, "Jim, I'm so glad to see you again and all in one piece, except for the limp of course!" Then he added: "To be quite honest, I was about halfway hoping you would forget our arrangement and leave Daisy with me for good. She's such a fine horse that I hate to let her go, but an agreement is an agreement."

Jim asked if he could spend the night in the stable so he could get an early start homeward when morning came. The owner said that would be fine with him.

So Jim walked to the cafe where he'd eaten three times before joining the Army. He greeted the owner and some discharged soldiers he had met while in the Army.

He gave the waiter his order and then he walked over to a table where five ex-soldiers were seated. He was invited to join them, so he pulled up a chair and sat down. In a few minutes the waiter brought all of them their orders. They started eating, and at the same time they began to ask Jim questions about his adventures in the war.

Jim was a little reluctant to talk about his war experiences because the trauma of them was still fresh in his mind. But he finally said, "Well, fellows, as soon as I finish eating my steak I'll tell you all about my adventures.

Jim kept his word and was soon telling them all about his experiences in Cuba. The listeners were almost spellbound as he told them how he and his friend, Tex, had fought in a battle, were called to retreat, and then eluded the Spaniards by hiding in a haystack. To add a little more drama to his story, Jim pulled up his pants leg and showed them the long, jagged scar left by the bayonet. The young men were aghast at the size and shape of it.

Then they looked on young Jim with compassion and proclaimed him a hero. Jim soaked up the sympathetic remarks, relished the loving attention, and thought: "If only Dad will have a similar reaction to my story."

After Jim had milked his story to the full, he wished them all a goodnight, and made his way back to the stable, tired, but uplifted—and a little proud.

The next morning Jim walked to the café and had a big breakfast of ham and eggs, a pile of pancakes with syrup, and a couple of cups of coffee. He finished his meal, paid his bill, and said goodbye to the owner and left.

He walked to the little general store near the café and went inside. The owner welcomed him, "Hello, sir, what can I do for you this morning?"

Jim got out a wrinkled piece of paper upon which he'd scrawled a list of items he'd need on his journey home.

It was a rather long list: jerky, canned meat, canned beans and peaches, coffee and coffee pot, salt and pepper, a frying pan, lard, and a can opener. He also purchased a couple of additional blankets for his bedroll, a new slicker, and a large canteen.

"Is there anything else?" asked the owner.

"Yeah," Jim replied. "I need some cartridges for my pistol and my rifle. I also need another set of saddle bags to put some of this stuff in."

The owner rounded up all the items, and summed up the cost. Jim paid him, loaded up the items in his arms, and told the owner goodbye.

He walked back to the stable and fed and watered Daisy. Then he placed the various items into the saddle bags and fastened the bedroll and new slicker to the saddle. He completed his preparations for travel by filling his canteen, buckling on his holstered pistol, and slipping his rifle into the sheath attached to the saddle.

About this time the owner showed up and asked, "Don't you want a bag of oats for your horse?"

"Thanks for asking. Yeah, I'll take a bag." Jim fastened it on top of the bedroll, and swung into the saddle as he told the owner farewell. Then he headed Daisy westward and nudged her to a leisurely pace.

CHAPTER 5

Jim began to have thoughts about what might have happened to Tex and about how he might be received by his dad when he got back home. And he kept mulling over in his mind the events of his hasty, defiant departure. He could see in his mind's eye his dad standing in front of the house, shaking his fist and cursing him.

He said to Daisy, "I sure hope Dad has forgiven me for my being so stupid. If he has, I'll be able to move back in while I look for a job. If he hasn't forgiven me, I guess I'll just have to" His voice trailed off into silence and a lump came into his throat.

As he rode along, Jim began to focus his mind on more immediate matters. "Where will I spend the night—will I find a farm house or will I have to bed down in a field somewhere?" he said to Daisy.

He had decided to take the same trail back to Texas that he'd followed in going to Florida. It was an old trail that was little-traveled because there was a much better trail just a few miles south. But Jim had reasoned that highwaymen probably wouldn't be as likely to use this old road as they would the newer and better one.

Noon came and Jim found a little grove of trees with a creek where he could water Daisy and eat his lunch.

He watered Daisy, unbridled her, fed her some oats, and then hobbled her so she could eat the grass without wandering away.

Then he opened his saddle bags, got out some jerky and a can of peaches, and proceeded to scarf down his lunch.

After finishing his meal and resting for a spell, Jim un-hobbled Daisy, bridled her, and climbed into the saddle. "Come on ole gal, let's get going. We have a long trek ahead and I'm anxious to get back home—I think!"

Mile after mile they traveled without seeing anybody or any farmhouses. "It's still desolate territory, isn't it, Daisy?" Though the countryside was sparsely populated, it was naturally beautiful.

The yearly abundance of rain in that part of the country had produced a variety of trees and some showy flowers: red, purple, violet, yellow, and many other rainbow-like colors. Even though he was just a farmer's son, he appreciated and enjoyed the exquisite landscape. His thoughts then turned to his mother who had so loved trees and flowers, and he wept.

Periodically, Jim would get off Daisy and walk beside her for a short distance. Then he'd swing back into the saddle and urge Daisy into a leisurely lope. He found this technique would actually enable him to make more miles in a day because Daisy would regain her strength while walking and then she would be able to lope more frequently and for a greater distance before needing to walk.

Evening came and Jim began looking for a place to spend the night. He still hadn't spotted a farmhouse so he settled for a grove of trees near a creek. He unsaddled Daisy and led her down to the creek to drink. After refilling his canteen, he led Daisy back to his campsite and gave her some oats.

Then Jim decided to treat himself to a cup of hot coffee and a hot meal. He rounded up some firewood and soon had a fire going. When the wood had burned to a bed of coals, he made some coffee and heated up some canned meat and beans. "This is a pretty good meal if I do say so myself," he thought.

He finished his meal and cleaned up the utensils in the creek. He unrolled his bedroll by his saddle, laid his rifle and pistol beside it, and crawled in between the blankets. Using the folded-up saddle blanket as a pillow, Jim was soon snoring lightly.

CHAPTER 6

Jim was awakened by a whinny. He sat bolt-upright, grabbed his pistol, and peered into the semidarkness. In the dim moonlight, Jim could see a few feet away the silhouette of a man standing beside a horse. "Move closer to me Buster, slow and easy, and put your hands over your head and keep them there," Jim said.

"Don't shoot, Jim! It's me, Tex!"

Jim scrambled to his feet, dropped his gun, and then rushed to Tex. He grabbed him, gave him a bear hug, and then shook his hand. "You ole son of a gun, what're you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Tex said.

"Well, how did you find me?"

"It wasn't too hard. I found out that you'd left earlier in the day so I just followed your tracks. But I thought I was never going to catch up to you. Your Daisy is a real racehorse. I believe she may be even better at traveling than my Bonny."

Tex was hungry, so Jim opened a can of beans and got out some jerky for him. He wanted to know all about what Tex had been doing. But as both men were tired, they decided to postpone updating stories until the next day.

At daybreak, the two men crawled out of their bedrolls, made a fire, and had a breakfast of coffee and jerky. Then, anxious to be on their way, they quickly put the saddle and bridle on their horses, broke camp, and headed west again.

Jim was soon plying Tex with rapid-fire questions to which he responded, "Jim, just hold your horses a minute, and I'll tell you all about it.

"As you know, I stayed behind in Cuba after the war ended. I guess you could say I was part of the 'occupational' Army. But after a few weeks, I was sent back to Florida and discharged. Then I began searching for you and finally found out that you had just left town on your way back to Texas. I decided to try to catch up with you so that we could travel together."

"Well, Tex, it sure is good to have you traveling with me. It really makes the journey a lot more pleasant.

"By the way, Tex, I really don't know much about you; how about filling me in with as much information as you want to give me."

"To be right honest about it, I'm a little reluctant to tell you my life's story as it's pretty uneventful, and a bit boring."

"I doubt that. I'll bet you have some pretty interesting stuff to tell."

"Thanks for the confidence, Jim. Where would you like for me to start my story?"

"Well, how about starting at the beginning?"

"Okay, here goes," Tex replied, and he launched into his story.

"I was born in 1880 in Smithville, Texas, and grew up there. They named me 'Horace,' a name I hated." But like most kids, I soon got a nickname after I started

to school. Since I was big for my age and loved to act like a cowboy, I was given the nickname ‘Texas,’ but that was soon shortened to Tex, and I’ve been Tex ever since.

“I grew up with a worthless dad who spent on booze most of what he earned at the saw mill. Not only was he a heavy drinker, he also would sometimes slap Mom around during one of his drunken spells. Thank God he never really hurt her, but I was always afraid that someday he would.

“Mom was a good Christian lady who seemed to do all the right things, but Dad never appreciated her a bit. I got slapped around a lot by the old man too. How I hate that son of the devil!

“He made me start working in the saw mill as soon as I was ten years old, and he never let me keep any of what I earned. Oh, occasionally when he was feeling real generous he’d give me a dollar or two to spend on myself. I mostly used it to buy something special for Mom. She was very good to me, and I think Dad resented that a whole lot.

“I often wondered why Mom didn’t leave him, but she never did and I guess she never will. She really took it serious about the ‘til death do us part’ phrase of her marriage vow. And I think she’s still praying Dad will get religion and change. I’m not a great believer in God but she is—and I guess that’s what really counts.

“When I was sixteen, I got a real strong urge to have a gun. I guess I was thinking about one day having to defend myself against my dad, or having to stop him from beating up on Mom. So I told Dad that if I had a rifle, I could hunt squirrels and put some more food on our table. He didn’t much like the idea but eventually he okayed it and allowed me to keep enough out of my paychecks to finally buy a rifle and some cartridges. But without telling him about it, I managed to get enough money together to also buy a pistol, holster, and cartridges.

“Every time I got off work early enough, I’d go into the woods about a mile from our house and hunt squirrels with the rifle. I learned pretty fast that the little varmints were kinda smart. As soon as they spotted me, they would run around to the other side of the tree. And as I circled the tree, they would also circle the tree so I could never get a good shot at them. So I changed my strategy. Once I spotted one, I would sit down and wait until he would peer around the tree, apparently to see if I was still around. I’d slowly aim my rifle at him and squeeze the trigger.

“I was not a very good shot when I started hunting, but after a few times in the woods, I got to be a good shot. I think Dad was pleased that I was bringing home some meat, but he never let on that he was. Mom always expressed her thanks for the additional food and let me know how proud she was of me.

“When I got really good with the rifle, I decided to try my hand with the pistol. So when I went hunting, I’d go to the hollow tree where I’d stored my pistol and gun belt. I would get them out and strap on the gun belt. Then I’d tie the holster to

my leg so I could draw the pistol easily and rapidly; well, at least I could draw it easily. But after many, many times of drawing the pistol, I did get to be pretty darned fast.

“Then I practiced drawing and firing it at a target I’d nailed to a tree. I got fast on the draw, and I got to where I could hit my target every time. Boy, did I ever feel tough! I’d visualize that the target was a bad hombre who was fixin’ to draw down on me, and I could see him slump to the ground when I beat him to the draw. Of course, I never had anyone threaten to draw on me, but I guess I got some comfort knowing that I’d be prepared if it ever did happen.”

“Golly be, Tex! Do you think that you might be able to teach me the fast draw sometime?”

“Sure! I’d be happy to teach you some day when we get settled down somewhere,” Tex replied. “But for now, let’s concentrate on getting back to Texas.”

“Oh, by the way,” Jim asked, “did you ever have a showdown with your pa?”

“Well, as a matter of fact I did. I started demanding that I get a bigger share of my wages but he refused. He made it clear that if I didn’t like the way things were going, that I could get out—pronto!

“So I told the old codger what I thought of him, packed my gear, and with two other local chaps, I headed for Florida and the Army. Mom was heartbroken, and I guess I was too, but I had had all I could take from the old man.

“I sent her a letter telling her I’d gotten into the Army. She answered the letter and said she hoped that I would come home when I got out of the Army, and that she was praying that I could forgive my dad. She even speculated that Pa was sorry he’d been so tough on me. I hope she’s right, but I won’t believe it until I see it!”

CHAPTER 7

The young men fell into silence and continued their journey toward Texas.

Finally, Jim broke the silence, “Tex, you told me a lot about your life, but you failed to let me in on your ambitions and dreams. How about sharing them with me?”

“Jim, most of my life I’ve thought how great it would be if I could become a foreman on a big ranch, to have a lot of men working under me, and obeying my orders with a ‘Yes, sir, Tex.’

“Mixed in with those daydreams were visions of a lovely young lady with long, wavy, coal-black hair who would look up to me, really love me, and I would really love her. No, Jim, I do not want a strife-filled marriage like the one my parents have been in as long as I can remember.”

Around noon they found a creek where they could water the horses, refill their canteens, rest, and eat some jerky. They let the horses graze for a little while, and then they remounted and resumed their journey.

They rode along in silence, each one lost in his thoughts. Jim was wondering how his dad was doing and if he’d forgiven him for running off and joining the Army.

Jim thought, “I sure hope he got my letter and has forgiven me, because I really want to get back home and see him. And maybe I can get on at the saw mill and make enough to keep me going until I decide what I really want to do.”

Tex was also deep in thought and was trying to decide whether or not he wanted to go back home. He really did want to see his mom again, but he was not so sure he wanted to see his dad. He figured the meeting would result in a verbal, if not physical, battle; and for his mom’s sake he did not want that to happen.

Sundown came and the boys again found a creek where they could have water and grazing for the horses. It didn’t take them very long to get a fire going so they could have some coffee, jerky, and canned peaches.

“How far do you think we came today?” Tex asked.

Jim did a little calculating in his head and answered, “I suspect we’ve covered about thirty miles today. So I guess we should be getting to your place in about twenty-five to thirty days.”

“That sounds about right; however, I lost track of the days when we were traveling to Florida so your guess is better than mine,” Tex replied.

As the boys were traveling along the next day, Tex asked, “By the way, Jim, I’ve told you about my life and my dreams, how about you telling me about yours?”

“Well, Tex, there isn’t really that much to tell, but I’ll tell you about what little there is. I was born on a farm about two miles from the East Texas town of Hominy, which as you know, is about fifteen miles from Smithville where you live. I was

named James, but I soon became ‘Jim.’ And as you already know, my last name is Liney.

“Dad and Mom were good people and highly respected in the community. Dad was a pretty good farmer and managed to keep us well fed, clothed, and in a reasonably good house he’d built.

“So in the first ten years of my life I learned to ride a horse, milk a cow, feed the chickens, and to help Dad some with the farming. And when I got to be a teenager I got good enough to drive a team of horses, and I even learned how to break them; and I guess I got pretty proud of my abilities!

“By the way, speaking of abilities, I had a young Indian boy, Jake, as a good friend. His dad had been a scout for the military in the Oklahoma territory, and he passed on to his son his techniques for tracking. Jake taught me all he knew about tracking and I became good at it. I used to brag to my friends that I could track a feather in a dust storm. How’s that for a whopper, Tex? Now back to more important things.

“Since Mom had been a school teacher before she married Dad, she taught me reading, writing, and arithmetic; and occasionally she had to apply some ‘learnin’ to my backside. She also told me about Jesus and tried to get me to read the Bible, but I couldn’t understand it. It was kinda like a foreign language to me, so eventually she gave up trying.

“About two years later a drought set in and Dad’s crops barely made enough feed for the livestock; certainly there was no surplus to sell. So Dad got a part-time job at the saw mill, and I decided I would get a job and help out.

“So I got a job,—can you believe this—breaking horses. I got pretty good at it, and for a while I had more than enough jobs to keep me busy. But eventually I sort of worked myself out of the business.

“Then I decided to see if I could get on at the saw mill; I was pretty well-built and stout for my age, so I didn’t have any trouble getting a job stacking lumber at the mill where Dad worked. Finally, the drought broke and Dad went back to farming. But I stayed on at the lumber mill till I turned eighteen.

“Then one day we got the word that a war had broken out with the Spaniards. Some of the boys got the idea it would be fun to join up, and they traveled to Florida and enlisted. Dumb me, I decided I’d like to get into the Army also, and go to Cuba to help set those people free from the Spaniards.

“Dad didn’t like the idea at all. But being the stupid kid that I was, I argued with him for a while. Then, in a fit of anger, I left for Florida. And of course you know the rest of the story.”

CHAPTER 8

“That was quite a tale, Jim, and I was surprised to learn you can break horses. But, by the way, you didn’t say anything about what you want out of life. Have you thought much about that?”

“Well, Tex, I guess I can say that I’ve sort of daydreamed from time to time. Most of my daydreams have been about becoming a big land owner with a lot of cattle and horses, and hundreds of acres of land growing wheat, or some other profitable crop. Also, like most boys I’m sure, I continually dream about marrying a beautiful young lady who looks upon me as her lover, her knight in shining armor. So I guess what it boils down to is this: I want to be a rich man married to a real princess!” Both boys laughed at Jim’s pronouncement and then again fell into their private world of daydreaming as they continued their journey.

During their return trip home Jim would occasionally spot a farmhouse at which he’d stayed on his way to Florida. If it happened to be close to sundown, they would stop and visit the farmer and his family.

In every case the boys were welcomed, and were asked to have supper and to spend the night in the barn.

The families were always eager to hear the adventures of war “heroes.” The boys always told their stories with a little embellishment; and just to make their stories a bit more interesting, Jim would show them the long, jagged scar on his leg.

A few days later they were traveling along in Louisiana when they spotted a town a short distance from the trail they were on.

Tex made a suggestion: “Jim, why don’t we take a little detour here and go to this town. I sure could use a shave and a bath. And if there’s a bar, I wouldn’t be too surprised if I decided to go in and get me a cool beer.

“Three things I want are a big juicy steak with a side order of mashed taters and green beans. And if it’s not too expensive, I believe I’d like to sleep in a bed for a change. How does the idea of all this appeal to you, Jim?”

“Well, Tex, I believe I’ll go along with you and your wild ideas; but I must confess to you, that I’m not much of a drinker. Dad didn’t drink and my mom certainly didn’t approve of liquor in any form. She stated emphatically that booze was a tool of the devil.”

Then the young men turned their horses southward toward the town. It was of moderate size and was named “Columbine.” Much to the delight of Tex and Jim, it did have a bar, a hotel, and a cafe, along with the usual stores.

“What should we do first,” Tex asked, “go to the bar or clean up?”

“I’m for getting cleaned up first, and then putting on a clean shirt and pants,” Jim replied.

So they went to a hotel, took a hot bath, shaved, and put on clean pants and shirts. The clothes were pretty wrinkled from being wrapped up in the blankets, but the boys couldn't have cared less; the clothes were clean and so were they. Then they strapped on their guns and struck out for a bar.

They walked in and immediately felt out of place. But they put on a big front and casually walked up to the bar and asked for two beers.

Noting that they were quite young, the barkeeper said in a joking tone, "Are you younguns sure you don't want a glass of milk or some lemonade?"

At that joke, a couple of men sitting at a nearby table guffawed and pounded the top of their table. It was obvious they were "drunk as skunks."

Tex shifted from one foot to the other a couple of times, so Jim whispered to him, "Don't pay them any mind; it's pretty obvious they've had too much to drink."

But just in case matters got worse, Jim pulled his jacket back from over his gun, and the drunkards didn't notice what he had done.

The barkeeper saw the uneasiness in the boys, so he warned them in a low voice as he put the beer in front of them: "I wouldn't do anything foolish because those two men are brothers, Hank and Bart Wilson, and they have reputations of being the meanest, lowdown thugs in town."

So the boys tried to ignore the thugs; but they kept making fun of the boys, laughing and pounding the table top.

When Tex couldn't tolerate their ragging any longer, he turned, looked straight at them, and said, "You guys are drunk. Why don't you go on home before you get into trouble?"

At this, Hank staggered to his feet and retorted in a loud, sarcastic voice: "Why don't you make me go home, sonny boy?"

Then Jim saw Hank pull out his gun, so he instantly hollered, "Drop that gun!" But Hank ignored the command, and pointed the gun toward the boys. So Jim whipped out his gun and fired at Hank. The bullet hit him in the right shoulder; he dropped his gun and almost fell.

Then Bart staggered to his feet, grabbed Hank by his arm, and bellowed as he started dragging Hank toward the door, "Let's get the blazes outta here!"

As they were going out the door, Hank turned and in a murderous tone threatened the boys, "You boys are dead meat. You ain't seen the last of us!"

Tex and Jim exchanged glances, and Jim exclaimed, "I didn't want to do that, but I was afraid the drunken bum was going to shoot us!"

The barkeeper said "Boys, I believe I'd be leavin' town before those two sober up and come gunnin' for you." So they paid for their beer and left the saloon.

"What do you think, Jim? Should we chance it and stay the night here, or should we grab some grub from the general store and beat it out of town?"

It didn't take Jim long to give his friend an answer: "Well, Tex, I believe we should buy some grub real fast, and then put a lot of distance between us and those two. As crazy as they are, they might try to bushwhack us if we stay anywhere close to this town."

So they rushed to a nearby store and bought some groceries. Then they hightailed it to their room, grabbed their clothes, and headed for the corral.

They loaded their goods on their horses, mounted them, and galloped out of town.

After they had galloped a few miles out of town, Jim said, "You know, Tex, we just paid for two beds for the night, and now we're going to run off and won't get to sleep in them!"

"Yeah, but I believe it's like I once heard a fellow say: 'Discretion is the better part of valor.' I'm not sure what that means, but I believe it means 'Turn tail and run like a scared jackrabbit!'"

Jim laughed and responded, "I once heard an expression that also might be appropriate for this occasion: 'I'd rather be a live coward than a dead hero!'"

After they'd ridden most of the night, they decided it would be safe to hole up somewhere, catch a few winks, and let the horses graze and rest; so they did just that.

CHAPTER 9

They awakened at sunup, got some jerky out of their saddlebags, and had their breakfast. Then they un-hobbled the horses, let them drink at the nearby creek, mounted up, and hit the trail once again.

The young men now made it a practice to travel from daylight to dusk every day as they were eager to get back home, even though they were quite anxious about what they might encounter when they got there.

"Jim, what are you going to do if your dad hasn't forgiven you and he won't allow you to stay there with him?"

"I guess I'll try to get a job either lumberjacking or working in a saw mill; or I might be able to go back to breaking horses. In any case, when I get a little money saved up I plan to do some traveling, like going to South Texas and learning Spanish firsthand from some lovely little senorita!"

"Sounds like a good idea, Jim. I may even want to go along with you, particularly if my old man is still the scoundrel he was when I left home."

Mile after mile they traveled and they seldom saw anyone or any towns. The boys liked this particular trail because they not only felt less threatened by bandits, but they just liked the feeling of wide-open spaces.

Finally, the landscape began to look familiar and the boys realized they were almost home.

Tex broke the silence, “Well, Jim, it won’t be long until I’ll know how I’ll be greeted by Mom and Dad. Of course I know that Mom will be delighted to see her son again, but I doubt that Dad will.

“I tell you what, why don’t you wait for me at the edge of town while I go on home. When I find out how things are there I’ll come back and let you know my plans.”

Jim shouted to Tex as he rode away: “I’ll be waiting here to get your report!”

As Tex rode up to the house where he was born, his heart began beating faster and faster. He was dreading the idea of meeting his dad, but he was looking forward to seeing his mom again.

He dismounted in front of the old, weather-beaten, house and tied his horse to the hitching rail. He walked slowly to the door and knocked lightly. In just a few seconds the door opened and there stood his dad. “Well, well,” he said, “I guess you didn’t get your brains blowed out after all!”

Tex took a step backwards as his dad’s breath reeked of booze. About then, Tex’s mother appeared beside her husband. She hesitated for a second, and then flung herself into Tex’s arms, sobbing. “Thank God you’re home, thank God you’re home!” she kept repeating this. At this, Tex’s dad turned around and disappeared into the house.

When Mrs. Williams regained her composure, she invited Tex into the house. But he declined and said he would like to talk to her in the swing there on the porch. So they sat down in the swing, and his mother began to ask questions. Tex answered them as briefly as he could and eventually his mom ran out of questions.

Then Tex asked, “Is Dad still drinking like he used to, and does he still slap you around?”

After a brief pause his mother said “Yes, to both questions. He’s still the same man he was when you rode away last year. I keep praying the Lord will change him, but up to now it hasn’t happened—perhaps one day it will.”

“Mom, I really love you and it grieves me to hear Dad is still boozing and slapping you around,” Tex said. Then he raised his voice to be sure his dad heard him through the opened window, and said, “Mom, when I come back to visit you in the future and I find out that Dad is still mistreating you, I swear I will beat him to within an inch of his life!”

Then he lowered his voice and continued. “Well, Mom, I’m going to leave you for now. I don’t believe I could be around my old man very long without having a showdown with him, and I don’t like the thought of what I might do.

“But don’t worry about me; I’ll be all right. I’ve a friend I met while in the Army; his name is Jim Laney and he’s waiting for me at the edge of town. We’re going on to his home town, Hominy, where we plan to get jobs working at the saw mill where

he once worked. But I promise I'll either write to you or come to see you every once in a while."

Tex hugged his mom, said goodbye, and mounted his horse. As he turned to ride away he looked back at his mom who was weeping and waving goodbye. "Will I really ever see him again?" she murmured to herself. "Lord, I pray it will be so."

Tex rode up to Jim and said, "Let's go to Hominy." So they pointed their horses westward and loped out of town. Tex was silent for a while, but it was obvious to Jim that the meeting with his dad had been a real bust.

After they'd ridden a couple of miles, Tex cooled down and told Jim what had happened. After hearing the story, Jim said, "I'm so sorry the visit turned out the way it did. But there's still hope that your dad will change."

Tex replied sarcastically, "I'll see pigs a flyin' before that old man changes!"

CHAPTER 10

By the time the boys arrived in Hominy, it was about suppertime. So they stopped at the café and ordered something to eat. While eating, they discussed their options about a job and where to live; Jim listed some possible options: “If Dad has forgiven me, we will be able to stay at my house. If he hasn’t, I guess we can get a room here in Hominy and split the cost.

“Of course what we finally do hinges on our being able to get on at the saw mill. But for now, I suggest we ride out to my place and see if Dad has forgiven me. If he has, we will be able to bunk there for the night, and then tomorrow we will check with the boss at the saw mill about getting jobs.”

Tex agreed with Jim on the plan, so they finished eating, mounted their horses, and headed for Jim's home.

As they approached Jim's home, he halted Daisy and stared at the old ramshackled house where he was born. “I guess Dad hasn’t done much to fix up the old place since I left,” Jim said.

“Yeah, if he lets us stay, we’ll have to do some major repair work,” Tex replied. “And I’ll be more than glad to help you fix it up if your pa will just let us live with him for a while.” They rode up to the old hitching rail, dismounted and tied up their horses.

Jim walked with hesitation up to the door, and then looked around at Tex as if to say, “Be ready to run for your life.” Then he knocked on the door lightly—there was no response. So he knocked again with more vigor, and the door slowly opened to reveal his dad, dressed in his old overalls and denim shirt.

Jim said, “Dad, I was wrong, please forgive—” but before he could finish, Blaine grabbed him, gave him a big bear hug, and shouted, “You’ve come home, Jim, you’ve come home!”

Jim returned the hug and with tears in his eyes, said, “Thank you, Dad!”

After a few tear-filled moments, Jim got control of himself, turned toward Tex, and said, “Dad, this is my best friend, Tex Williams from Smithville. I met him in Tampa in the Army.”

Tex was a little uncomfortable by such a display of emotions, but he extended his hand toward Blaine and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Laney; yes siree, it’s a real pleasure.”

Blaine took Tex’s hand, gave it a few hearty pump-handle shakes, and replied, “Likewise, Tex, I’m very glad to meet you. Come on in boys and I’ll fix us some coffee.”

They all went inside the house and into the kitchen. “Have a seat, boys, while I get the coffee pot heated up,” Blaine said. Jim knew everything was going to be all right now that he was home, and it was obvious that his dad had forgiven him.

“Say, Jim, why didn’t you let me know you were coming home, and I’d have killed the ‘fatted calf?’”

Jim explained, “Well, Dad, I did send you a letter but I guess it must have gotten lost somewhere. It just might show up one of these days because the mail runs mighty slow.”

In a few moments the coffee was hot and Blaine poured the boys a cupful. “Would you like a little sugar and cream for your coffee, Tex? I don’t need to ask Jim how he wants his—just black and hot,” Blaine said with a chuckle. Tex said he preferred his black and hot also.

After a few sips of his coffee, Blaine said, “Well, boys, I sure would like to hear about your experiences in the Army. Did you get to Cuba, did you kill any of those Spaniards....”

Jim interrupted: “Whoa, Dad, one question at a time. Or better still, how about just giving us a chance to tell you all about it?”

Blaine said, “Forgive me boys for being so anxious to hear about your war experiences, but I’ve heard stories about the war from some of the young bucks that made it back home. Some of their stories were about how bad everything was, and I’m not sure I believe everything they told. But I know you boys will tell it like it really was, won’t you? Yeah, just take your time and tell me all about it.”

Jim and Tex looked at each other; then Jim turned toward Blaine and said, “Well, Dad, it really was pretty bad. Tex, why don’t you tell him what you want to, and then I’ll sort of fill in the blanks.”

“All right, Jim” he said, and then he launched into his story, beginning with the poor living conditions at the training center and the man-killing training they had.

After about twenty minutes, with occasional interruptions from Blaine, Tex finished his story and said, “Now, Jim, it’s your turn.”

Jim responded with a chuckle, “I don’t think so, Tex. I believe I should wait a while before jumping into my tale. We sure don’t want to talk the ears off of poor ole Dad. And besides, I’d like to take you for a look around the place so I can see how much it has changed.”

“I think you’ll find everything about like it was, but a walk will be good for you boys after all the time you have been sitting on your behinds,” Blaine said. “And by the way, you boys may want to unload your gear from your horses and bring the stuff in and put it in the back bedroom.”

“Thanks, Dad, we’ll do just that,” Jim said as he started toward the door. “Come on, Tex, and let’s get ’er done.”

So they brought in all their belongings and put them in the bedroom; then they made the tour. And after they had finished the tour around the homestead they “hit the hay” because they wanted to get an early start to Hominy in the morning.

The boys did get up early the next morning and feasted on the breakfast that Blaine had prepared: ham, eggs, biscuits and gravy, and a cup of coffee.

“That sure was a mighty fine breakfast, Mr. Laney. Thank you. I haven’t had a breakfast like that in several years,” Tex commented as he patted his stomach.

“Yeah, Dad,” Jim said, “it sure is good to be back home where I can get a really great breakfast, not to mention getting back to living with you.”

Blaine smiled and replied, “You’re welcome boys. I’m so glad to have you under my roof. Now that you’ve had breakfast, what are your plans for the day?”

“Well, Dad, we’re going back to town to the saw mill to see if we can get on there. I guess the mill is still in business, isn't it?”

“Yes, it is, and I think you’ll have a good chance of getting jobs because I hear they have been running a little short on help.” So the boys saddled up their horses and set out for Hominy.

CHAPTER 11

When they arrived in town, they rode out to the north edge where the mill was located, and made their way to the mill's office. The boss, Mr. Seth Adams, had a friendly, weather-beaten face, and looked to be about sixty years old.

He greeted them with a handshake and said, "I believe I know one of you. You must be Jim," he said to Jim. Then he turned to Tex, "My name is Seth Adams; what's yours?"

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Adams. My name is Tex Williams from Smithville. I got acquainted with Jim during the war in Cuba, and I'm presently staying with him and his dad."

Seth looked at the boys and said, "I reckon this is not a social call—I suspect you're looking for jobs; right?"

"Yeah, that's right. We're hoping you have a place for us as we sure could use a job," Jim said.

"Well, boys, you're in luck. I can use a couple of hardworking young men. I know Jim has had experience with mill work but what about you, Tex?"

"No, Mr. Adams, I haven't had any experience, but I'm a fast learner."

"Okay, fellows, I can pay you two dollars for putting in ten hours, with a thirty-minute break for noon lunch. Is that acceptable?"

The boys agreed it certainly was, so Mr. Adams outlined their duties. "To start with, you will be responsible for dragging the logs from the supply piles to the saws. Later on, I may put you to taking the boards from the saw tables and stacking them in the curing sheds. But I want to warn you, handling logs and boards can be dangerous, and it's hard work; I don't want you to hurt yourselves trying to do too much before you get in shape."

Jim turned to Tex and stated, "He's telling it like it is. I know from experience that you're going to have some sore muscles for a while; but it only takes a week or two to get toughened up."

"Jim, since you're an old hand at this, would you work with Tex for a few hours and show him how to do things?" Seth asked.

"I'll be glad to," Jim replied as he put his ear muffs on. He didn't give Tex a pair yet because he wanted him to be able to hear the information that he was getting ready to shout at him.

Jim started his education of Tex. "Tex, the logs go through several different processing steps, starting with attaching a cable to the log and then to a horse. Then the log is pulled up to the saws, and the log detached from the horse. Next the log is attached to a powered cable that pulls it up onto the table and into the saw. Then the logs are mechanically debarked, cut into planks, and moved outside on a wide, engine-driven belt.

“As the planks come to the end of the moving belt, two men catch them by their ends and carry them to the curing sheds where they will be air-dried.”

Then Jim took Tex around to the back of the mill where the steam engine was located, and explained how it provided the power for all the machinery in the mill.

Tex was impressed by what he'd seen, but he was quite irritated by the loud, shrill noises made by the saws.

Jim noticed the look of consternation on his face and shouted, “You'll get some ear muffs that really lower the noise; and then in a few days you will be used to the noise that the earmuffs don't shut out.”

Then Jim gave Tex a pair of earmuffs, got a team of horses from the corral, put harnesses on them, and drove them to the log pile.

He showed Tex how to hitch the horses to a doubletree, and then he showed him how to chain a log to the doubletree.

After re-checking the chain to be sure it was properly attached to the log and the doubletree, Jim drove the team, dragging the log, up to the saw table. There he uncoupled the chain from the log, and drove the team back to the log pile to get another log. “Now you try it,” Jim shouted to Tex.

Tex was a quick learner and was soon dragging logs like a professional. Once Jim was satisfied that Tex was doing everything properly, he got another team of horses and started dragging logs also.

During their noon break, the boys found a quiet spot, and removed their earmuffs. Then ate their lunches of cold chicken and potatoes they had brought for their lunch. And when they finished their lunches, they stretched out on the grass and rested until the foreman called them back to work.

Quitting time finally came, and the boys dragged themselves to the little grove of trees where they had tied their horses. They untied them, painfully pulled themselves into the saddle, and started the ride back to Jim's house.

After a few minutes of riding, Jim said, “Tex, I don't think we should take advantage of Dad by staying with him without paying him anything for room and board; how about us working out a deal with him this evening?” Tex agreed.

After the boys had bathed in the nearby creek and had eaten their supper, Jim approached his dad with the proposition that they would like to continue living with him. Then he asked, “How much would you charge us for room and board?”

Blaine pondered the question for a few minutes, and then suggested: “How about twenty cents a day from each of you, and I'll fix a lunch for you as part of the bargain.” The boys were delighted with his proposal and quickly told him so.

Tired and sore from their labors of the day, the boys bade Blaine goodnight, dragged themselves to the back bedroom, and climbed into their bunk beds. They were soon “sawing logs.”

The next morning they arose about sunup and slowly got out of bed because it seemed that every muscle in their body was stiff and sore.

But after a good breakfast and a cup of hot coffee, they began to feel more like young men are supposed to feel—full of vim, vigor, and vitality.

They made their way to the barn, saddled their horses, and put their syrup bucket lunch pails in the saddlebags. Then they mounted their horses and rode off by the house, hollering a goodbye to Blaine as they passed.

It didn't take long at pulling logs to the mill for the soreness to get worked out of their muscles; so they were soon able to speed up in their log-pulling.

Mr. Adams came out in a little while and told the boys he was pleased with the way they'd so quickly got into the log-pulling routine. Jim and Tex looked at each other and smiled, feeling just a bit of pride.

The day went well—without incident. And after the quitting time whistle sounded off, the boys made their way home, feeling much less tired than they did the day before.

After supper a week later, Jim said, “Tex, remember that you told me back on the trail that someday you would teach me your quick draw? Well, how about starting now? My muscles have lost all their stiffness and soreness, and I believe I am ready for a lesson on fast drawing.”

“Okay, get your hog leg and holster, and we'll go to the woods for a little practice before it gets too dark.”

Jim was a good pupil and after a few evenings of practice he was almost as quick on the draw as Tex and he was almost as good as Tex on hitting the target they had nailed to a tree. Tex was pleased and Jim was proud!

CHAPTER 12

One day, Jim decided to buy some new clothes. So during his lunch break he rode into town, dismounted, and tied Daisy to the hitching rail in front of the general store. He walked into the store, and much to his surprise he saw his dad talking to the owner, the widow Sally Whitaker.

“Hello, Dad, what’re you doing here?” Jim asked.

Blaine looked a little like the kid who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar, and he answered with a bit of embarrassment. “Oh, hello, Jim, I was just buying myself a new shirt. Do you know the owner, Mrs. Sally Whitaker?”

Jim extended his hand to Mrs. Whitaker and said, “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Whitaker.” He noted the widow was an attractive lady with black hair, and a very small waist. Jim thought, “I’ll bet she’s wearing a corset.”

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you, Jim. Your father and I are old acquaintances, and I’m glad to meet his son at last. I understand you spent some time in the war.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jim replied, “and I’m sure glad to be back home.”

“What can I do for you today, Jim?”

“I need some new shirts and work pants. These old ones have seen better days.”

Jim gave her his measurements and she soon found the correct sizes for him. She bundled them, handed the bundle to Jim, and said, “That will be a dollar fifty, please.”

Jim paid her, tucked the bundle under his arm, and started for the door.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Whitaker. It was nice to meet you. And Dad, I’ll see you at supper time.”

Later that evening, Blaine was visiting with Jim, and said, “Son, I’d like to talk to you if you have a few minutes.”

“Sure, Dad, what’s on your mind?”

Blaine glanced at Tex who quickly said, “I guess I’ll be going to bed now. Goodnight.”

As soon as Tex was gone, Blaine spoke up. “Jim, there’s something I guess I should tell you. While you were gone I got acquainted with Mrs. Whitaker. She’s a really nice lady and we’re thinking about getting married. How would you feel about that?”

After a few moments of silence, Jim replied, “Golly, Dad, I don’t know what to say. I guess I never thought about you getting married again. But if that’s what you want to do, then I guess it’s all right with me; but what about the store?”

“Well, Jim, we have been talking about this for some time, and here is our current plan. I thought we could build a room onto the well house for you and Tex. Then your room would be free for her sixteen-year-old daughter, Jane.

“After we get married, Sally would move in with me. Then her married daughter, April, and her husband, Mark, would take over the store for her mother. April and her mother would split the profits fifty fifty. Sally would then sell or rent out her house there in Hominy.

“I’ve agreed to let her do as she pleases with her part of the profits as I should be able to make enough here on the farm to take care of both of us. I know it sounds kind of complicated but I think everything will work out okay. But I would like to know what you think about these arrangements.”

“Dad, I want you to be happy, and if marrying Mrs. Whitaker will make you happy, I’m all for it.”

Blaine walked over to his son, stood him up and gave him a big, bear hug. With a smile on his face, he said, “Thank you, Jim; you have just made me a very happy man!”

“One final question, Dad: When do you think the wedding will take place?”

“Well, Jim, I thought as soon as we could get the addition built onto the well house we could also make some repairs to the house; then we could tie the knot.” And with a sheepish grin on his face, he added, “And Jim, I would like to start building as soon as possible.”

“Okay, Dad. Tex and I can get the lumber from the mill and start on the room right away. We can work on it in the evenings and on our days off, so we should be able to get the jobs done pretty fast.”

“That will be great. Now let’s get to bed because tomorrow is going to be another busy day.”

Jim, Tex, and Blaine sat down the next evening, sketched out plans for the addition to the well house and plans for repairing the house. Then they estimated the lumber that would be needed.

“Since we are working for Mr. Adams, I’ll bet we can get the lumber at a good discount, don’t you, Tex? “

“I’ll bet you’re right, Jim, and it certainly won't do any harm to ask.”

The next morning Jim went to Mr. Adams, told him their plans and asked if they could get a discount for the lumber. Mr. Adams thought about it for a moment and then suggested, “How about a ten percent cut in price?”

“That would be great, Mr. Adams. Thank you so much; we really appreciate that.”

The following morning, Jim and Tex hitched a team to Blaine’s freight wagon and drove to the mill. During their noon break, they loaded the wagon with lumber, nails, windows, and the tools they would need for construction of the addition to the well house and repairing the house. Jim paid Seth for the materials, and after quitting time the boys drove home.

In anticipation of the boys bringing home the building materials, Blaine had prepared their supper early. As soon as they finished eating, the men began building the room onto the well house. It was quite obvious that Blaine was happy to see the project getting off to such an early start.

In just a few days the room was added to the well house, complete with a wood floor, two windows that could be opened, a wood-burning stove, and their bunk beds.

“Well, well,” Blaine remarked as he inspected the room, “you fellows did a great job—got it fixed up for summer and winter. Now that the new room for you boys is finished, there’s no reason to postpone the marriage any longer! And by the way, you did a great job on repairing my house; I know that Sally will be pleased with the repairs you boys made.”

Sally agreed wholeheartedly with Blaine’s plan for the living arrangements, but Jane was not so sure. She didn’t like the idea of having to share her mother with Blaine and Jim. But the adults prevailed and the wedding date was set for Sunday, two weeks away.

Blaine got ready for the occasion by buying a new suit and Sally got prepared by buying a new trousseau. They decided to have a private wedding ceremony officiated by the local judge and with only the family members and Tex attending.

The big day came; the judge arrived at Blaine’s house at nine o’clock Sunday morning and performed the ceremony.

After the vows were read and the usual questions answered, the judge pronounced them “man and wife” and told the groom he could kiss the bride. The kiss was a rather brief one as the couple felt a little embarrassed about kissing in front of other people.

The newlyweds had decided to spend their honeymoon at the local hotel, so they placed their suitcases in the back of Blaine’s buggy and rode off to the Hominy Hotel.

Needless to say, after the wedding Blaine’s morning routine changed somewhat. He would have to prepare breakfast and lunches for the boys, and then prepare a special breakfast for Sally and Jane as their breakfast wants were different from those of himself and the boys.

Sally and Jane would usually appear in the kitchen a few minutes after the boys had left for work. They would make small talk with Blaine while eating their meal.

When they finished eating, Sally would give Blaine a peck on the cheek; then she and Jane would depart for Hominy in a buggy so they could work at the store.

Even though she had turned the management of the store over to April and her husband, Mark, Sally felt she should help out—at least for a while.

Not long after the new bride and Jane moved in, Jim began to notice how well-developed and pretty Jane was. On every available occasion he'd chat with her about various subjects—anything to have the pleasure of her company. The attraction was not one-sided. Jane was early-on infatuated by handsome young Jim.

The two tried to avoid giving their parents any sign that they had a romance going, but after a few weeks of their clandestine activities, the truth came out.

Much to the amazement of Jane and Jim, neither parent was surprised at the goings-on. However, the parents weren't in favor of the romance, but they were not sure what they could do about it. So they set the two love birds down and had a friendly chat with them.

Once the parents were convinced the affair was more sincere than puppy love, they gave Jane and Jim this proposition: "If you two continue to feel like marrying when Jane becomes seventeen, we will give you our permission."

Jim said, "Well, I guess we don't have much choice do we, Jane? But to show that I'm in dead earnest about marrying you, hold out your left hand."

With a puzzled look on her face, Jane held out her hand as requested. Jim took it, pushed an engagement ring on her finger, and announced: "Now you're officially engaged to me, and as soon as you have your eighteenth birthday next year, we can get married." Then he gave her a quick kiss.

Blaine and Sally were speechless for a moment and then Blaine exclaimed "Well, I guess congratulations are in order—do you agree Sally?"

Sally paused a moment and then said, "Yes, I guess I do, but it's hard for me to believe my baby girl is going to get married."

CHAPTER 13

The building boom dried up and the demand for lumber fell off sharply. So Mr. Adams had to let the boys go. The chances of finding a job locally were non-existent. So after a few days of discussing options, Jim suggested to Tex that they go to South Texas to see if they could get a job breaking horses. They had heard that the Army was increasing its cavalry and in constant need of horses.

The evening after the decision was made to go to South Texas, Jim and Jane had a long talk. Jane was heartbroken at the thought of Jim's leaving but she agreed it was the only thing for him to do. Jim assured her that he'd be gone for less than a year, and Jane promised him she would be eagerly waiting for his return.

Blaine did not want to see the boys go either but he realized they didn't have much choice. So he helped them get together all they would need for their journey.

Jim and Tex had been setting aside most of their wages and as a result had a tidy nest-egg set by. So the first day of April they loaded up their gear, said their goodbyes, and rode off toward South Texas.

About an hour later, Tex asked, "How far do you reckon it is to the Mexico border?"

"I heard it's between one-hundred-fifty and two-hundred miles," Jim replied, "but since we're going to be traveling about thirty miles per day, we should be there in about five to seven days if we don't have any problems." It turned out it was a big "if."

After five days on the trail, the boys noticed that the people and landscape were somewhat different. They'd gotten out of the Piney Woods and into mesquite and farmland, and they were seeing an increase in the number of native Indians and Mexicans.

When they arrived at Houston, they paid for a room for one night in a hotel. It was not a fancy one by any means, but it did have a dining area and plenty of pretty señoritas as waitresses.

"I believe I'm going to enjoy living next to the border if the girls there are as attractive as these," Tex declared.

"Tex, remember we're going down there to break horses, not so you can court the young ladies!"

"Jim, you're a real killjoy, aren't you?" Tex said with a laugh. "But I realize you have a young lady back home that you must remain true to."

When a cute little Spanish waitress brought their supper to their table, she remained long enough to flirt a little with Tex, and no wonder. He was built like Jim, perhaps a little taller, and every bit as handsome. His blond hair and ruddy complexion completed his very good looks.

After the waitress left to fill their orders, Tex said with great anticipation in his voice, "I believe I'm going to enjoy working in these parts!"

Before they had finished their supper, they were approached by a well-dressed fellow about fifty years old, with a mustache and goatee, and with the face of a prosperous businessman. He came over to their table and introduced himself: "My name is John Derrick. Could I sit down with you boys for a moment or two? I believe I have a proposition that will interest you."

"Sure, have a seat. My name is Jim and this is my partner, Tex," Jim said in a noncommittal tone. "What is this proposition you're talking about?"

"Well, where are you boys from and where are you headed? I don't believe I've seen you in these parts before."

"We're from the Piney Woods of East Texas and we're on our way to the Mexican border area to get jobs breaking horses," Jim said.

"Well boys, how would you fellows like to make an easy fifty dollars, cash money, on the way there?" Mr. Derrick asked.

"What kind of job do you have in mind?" Tex inquired.

"I'm a rancher, and I've sold a herd of forty five cows and five bulls to a fellow in Atache, a rather small town just about five miles north of the Mexican border; he wants them for breeding stock. Would you like to drive that herd down there for the easy cash?"

"Is that offer for fifty dollars for each of us, or fifty dollars between the two of us?" Jim asked.

"Fifty dollars for each of you. Are you interested?"

"I tell you what, Mr. Derrick. If you will let us talk this over privately, we can give you an answer in ten minutes or so."

"That will be fine; when you decide, just wave at me; I'll be at the bar having a drink."

As soon as Mr. Derrick was out of earshot, Jim asked, "What do you think? Should we take him up on his offer, or should we ask for more?"

"Why don't we ask for seventy-five dollars? We could always back down to the fifty."

"Good idea," Jim agreed as he waved to Mr. Derrick.

When Mr. Derrick rejoined them, the boys told him they would accept his proposition for seventy five dollars each.

"Done!" Mr. Derrick said as he shook hands with the boys. "I'm in a hurry to get the herd down to Atache. Do you boys think you could start the drive tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Jim said, "I don't see any problem with that."

"Good. I'll meet you at the corral at the southwest corner of town at six o'clock tomorrow morning, and I'll have the seventy-five dollars in cash for each of you."

“And by the way, when you get to Atache you’ll turn the cattle over to a Mr. Redemer. He lives about two miles just to the northeast of Atache, so you should have no problem finding him. And if you get the cattle there by next Monday, six days from now, he will give you each a twenty-five dollar bonus.”

The boys were excited about the deal, so they went to the general store and purchased some supplies needed for the trip. Then they returned to the hotel and went to bed, but they had a little trouble going to sleep because they were excited about the one hundred dollars they will be making on this deal.

CHAPTER 14

The next morning the boys got up at five-thirty, ate some jerky, and drank a little water for breakfast because the hotel dining room was not open.

After finishing their meal they got their horses from the stable near the hotel and rode out to the meeting place. Mr. Derrick was waiting for them with the cash.

He gave the money to the boys, and after a few final instructions he opened the gate. The boys drove the cattle out and started them toward Atache. The cattle had been fed the night before and they seemed almost eager to get out of their pen and onto the trail.

The trail was well used and the boys had no problems keeping the cattle together and moving along at a reasonable pace.

Evening came, and the boys found a grassy little glen with plenty of water, so they set up camp for the night. The cattle grazed for a while and then bedded down. But just to make sure nothing went wrong, Jim took the first five hours of nighthawking, and Tex was to take the second five hours.

Morning came, and the boys built a fire, brewed a pot of coffee, and ate some jerky. Then they broke camp and started the cattle on the second leg of their journey.

As they rode along, Jim said, "Tex, do you suppose there's some catch to this deal? Mr. Derrick seemed awful eager to pay us seventy-five dollars to make this drive."

"Aw, Jim, don't be so pessimistic about it. We got our seventy-five dollars, didn't we? Just think what we can do with the hundred dollars that will soon be ours. Besides, what have we got to worry about? What could go wrong?"

"I guess you're right; I'm a little jumpy but I'll try to be an optimist like you."

The fifth day was drawing to a close when the boys saw a road sign that read "Atache Fifteen Miles." So they decided at that point to spend the night and finish the drive the next day.

They ate a cold supper, and then Jim mounted Daisy and took the first watch.

The cattle were all bedded down, and Jim was fighting sleep when he heard a horse whinny behind him. He whirled around in the saddle and saw in the moonlight three men with rifles pointed at him.

"Get your hands up, mister, or we'll blow you clean out of that saddle," one of the men growled. Jim thought for a second he would draw his pistol but he changed his mind when he heard the clicking of three rifles being cocked.

About this time, one of the outlaws spotted Tex's bed and saw him sit up on his bedroll. "Don't even think about it, buster, unless you want your hair parted with a rifle slug!"

Tex was wide awake now, but helpless to do anything about their situation. The three men dismounted and approached the boys.

“All right you dumb heads, let’s have your seventy-five dollars peacefully or we’ll have to take it away from you after we knock you out with a rifle butt,” the leader of the trio threatened.

“We haven’t got seventy-five dollars. We mailed most of the money home and spend the rest on supplies,” Jim said.

“Don’t you lie to me, boy,” the leader again threatened. “Pass that money over to me or I’ll beat it out of you!”

“Sir, you can search us if you like, but you won’t find any seventy-five dollars.”

The bandits searched the boys and found only five dollars and a little loose change. Not satisfied with that, the men searched the bedrolls and the saddlebags, and still found no money.

“Okay, one last chance: where’s the money? We get it now or I’m going to beat the hides off of you two!” the leader yelled.

The boys looked at each other, and then Jim said, “We don’t have any more money, please believe us!”

“Well, you asked for it and you’re going to get it,” the leader snarled as he walked back to his horse, got his whip, and began bringing blood as he lashed Tex.

Jim couldn’t stand to see his friend beaten, so he jumped between Tex and the leader.

“So you want a little of it too, buster. Well, have some!” and he began lashing Jim.

Tex decided that their getting beaten was not worth a hundred and fifty dollars, so he screamed out “Okay, okay! The money is in our boots.”

“That’s more like it,” the leader growled. “Shorty, you and Slick get them boots off these heroes and dig out their money.”

They shoved the boys down onto the ground, yanked off their boots, fished out the money, and held it up in triumph.

“Well, now that we have the money, there’s no use in keeping you young bucks around.” He slowly pulled out his pistol and took aim at Jim.

“Hold it, Bat, hold it,” Slick implored. “Stealing and beatings is one thing, killin’ is another, and I don’t want their killin’ on my conscience.”

Bat snapped back. “All right, you yellow belly, what do you suggest we do? Now that they’ve heard our names and got a look at us, they could someday spot us, and we’d be in a pack of trouble.”

Slick replied, “How about taking them back in the woods a ways, tying them up, and letting the wild hogs get them; there are plenty of them around here. You know they’ll eat anything with flesh on it. And the smell of fresh blood on the boys will

certainly attract them. If the hogs don't get 'em—well they won't last very long in the heat without any water.”

Bat thought about it for a minute and then said, “Okay.”

So they took the boys into the trees about fifty yards, tied their wrists together, then set them down back to back and tied their bodies together. Then they rounded up the herd and started driving it toward Atache. As they departed, Bat yelled loudly “Thanks for the dough and the cattle, you dumb bastards!”

After a few moments of silence, Jim spoke up, “Well, it could have been a lot worse. They could have found our wages from the mill in the lining of our saddle blankets, and they could have shot us!”

“Yeah, I guess you're right, Jim. But getting shot might have been better than getting eaten by wild hogs or dying of thirst.”

The boys struggled and struggled trying to free themselves, but it was to no avail. So they ceased their struggling as it increased the pain and made their wounds bleed more.

Tex asked, “Jim, do you suppose we should be worrying about that pack of wild hogs coming along and tearing us up?”

“Yeah, I've just been thinking that a bunch of wild boars might look us up and decide we would make a tasty breakfast,”

“Thanks a bunch for those comforting words, you ornery pup; that's just what I didn't need to hear!” Tex complained.

“I'm sorry, partner; I'll try to be more comforting with my talk, but the thought did cross my mind.”

Suddenly, the silence was broken by grunting in the distance. “Oh Lord,” Tex exclaimed, “I hear them wild hogs grunting!”

“Shush,” Jim whispered, “and maybe they won't discover us.”

But the grunting got louder and louder as the hogs made their way through the brush toward the boys.

“What are we going to do if they discover us?” Tex whispered with panic in his voice.

“Pray, if you know how,” Jim replied in a whisper, “and hope they have already had their breakfast.”

Finally, the herd of hogs broke through the brush just a few feet from the boys.

“O boy,” Jim murmured to himself, “We've had it now.”

One of the hogs approached the two boys, grunting and showing his long tusks. The terror-stricken boys tried to stay motionless and to breathe as little as possible.

Then the hog moved slowly forward and sniffed at Jim's feet. The remaining hogs stopped a short distance away and became motionless, as if they were pondering what to do.

It was a lucky day for the boys, because after a few minutes the hogs all turned around and went back into the brush.

After several minutes the boys could hear them no longer, and gave big sighs of relief. "Boy, I thought for a minute there I was going to lose my feet to that big-fanged hog!" Jim exclaimed. "They must have had breakfast already."

"Yeah," Tex teased, "either that or the smell of your feet turned their stomachs."

"Well, you may think it was funny, but if my stinking feet is what turned them away, I'm glad they stink!"

"I'm sorry, Jim; I guess the situation was pretty serious, wasn't it?" Tex said; and the two fell into silence.

Not long after their adrenaline-rush experience, the sun made its appearance and the temperature began to rise quickly.

"I'm as dry as a sun-bleached bone," Tex said. "I sure would pay a pretty penny for a swig of water."

After a few minutes, Jim said, "Tex, I've got an idea. It's pretty far fetched but what've we got to lose. See that little tree over to the right about twenty feet? Why don't we try to inch our way to it and see if I can rub my ropes in two?"

"Great idea, let's start inching;" and start they did.

They had a lot of difficulty synchronizing their movements, but they continued their agonizing journey.

Their progress was slow and accompanied by pain, panting, grunting, and a few uncouth words as their posteriors became sore from scooting over the hard, abrasive ground.

They arrived at the tree and positioned themselves so Jim could rub against the tree the rope binding his wrists. The tree had rough bark and Jim succeeded in rubbing the rope into. He dug out his pocket knife, cut loose his remaining rope, and then freed Tex.

The boys then went to look for their horses. Daisy had trotted off into the brush as soon as Jim had dismounted her, and Tex had hobbled Bonny in the brush earlier that evening. The boys found them rather quickly, grabbed the canteens off their saddles, and gulped down big swigs of water.

Then they made their way down to the little stream about thirty yards from the campsite, washed their wounds, and they soon stopped bleeding. After a few minutes of resting, they made their way back to the campsite, changed into clean clothes, and had a cold-camp breakfast. Then they led their horses to the stream of water and let them get a drink.

They gathered up their scattered belongings and repacked their saddle bags. As it was now sunup, they were able to spot their weapons in the brush where the bandits had flung them.

CHAPTER 15

“What do we do now?” Tex asked with a sigh. “Do we go back to Houston, back home, or on to Atache?”

“Good question, Tex, but I’ll have to think about it a minute.”

In a little while, Jim said, “Well, we know one thing for sure; those bandits were working in cahoots with John Derrick. How else would they have known how much Derrick paid us?”

“You are absolutely right, Jim, but how does that help us?”

“It really doesn’t. Besides, Derrick is probably long gone from Houston. So I guess we should ride on to Atache, find the sheriff, and tell him what happened. Who knows, he might be able to find those guys and arrest them for cattle rustling. “They won’t have any papers to show how they got them and I’m sure Redemer is just a phony name Derrick made up.”

So the boys rode on to Atache, found Sheriff Campbell, told him their story, and gave him all the details they could remember about the gang members.

He assured them he would try to find the gang. But he added that he was sure that the cattle had already been disposed of and the gang was probably long gone—that was not really what the boys wanted to hear.

Believing they’d done all they could do about the bandits, they went to a general store and got some salve to rub on their wounds. Then they got a room in the Puritan Hotel, cleaned up, re-salved their injuries, dressed, and went to the dining room. There they ordered a big meal and plenty of coffee.

While they were waiting for their food to be served, Jim commented, “I’ll bet we will be able to make better plans after we have a good, hot meal.”

“I sure hope they hurry up with that food. I’m as hungry as a female wolf nursing fifteen pups,” Tex said.

Jim looked around, hoping no one had heard Tex’s rather loud proclamation, and apparently no one had. Then he leaned over toward Tex and whispered, “Tex, you can come up with some of the darnedest expressions I’ve ever heard. Where did you get them?”

Tex chuckled and said, “From my Pa and his friends. They had a lot of them, but most of them aren’t fit to repeat, particularly in mixed company.”

About that time the food arrived and the boys quickly devoured it, sipping coffee between bites.

“I feel better already,” Tex said as he stifled a burp. “I’m ready to come up with a plan anytime you are.”

So the boys went back to their hotel room and discussed various options. They finally decided to stay in Atache and see if they could find a job breaking horses.

“Where do you think we should start looking for someone who can tell us who needs bronco busters?” Tex asked.

“I think maybe we should find a blacksmith that shoes horses. He should be well acquainted with the ranchers around here.”

So the boys started down Main Street looking for a blacksmith shop. They hadn’t gone very far until they ran onto Ramirez’s Blacksmith Shop.

They went in and introduced themselves, and then asked Senior Ramirez if he knew a rancher who needed bronco busters. He said there was a Mr. Warner who was furnishing mustangs for the military and he’d been looking for bronco busters.

He gave the boys directions to the Warner ranch, which was only two miles away. They thanked him and set out for the ranch.

As the boys approached the ranch they saw a large archway with a sign on it that read: “WELCOME TO WARNER RANCH.” They rode under the archway and on to a large ranch house about fifty yards beyond it. It was an impressive two-story house with a wide veranda across its front that was supported by huge, ornate pillars; between the pillars were matching railings.

“Wow, Jim, have you ever seen a house like this one?”

“No, I haven’t, Tex. Mr. Warner must be a wealthy rancher.”

The boys dismounted, tied their horses to the hitching rail, and strode across the veranda to the front door. Jim knocked on the door and in a few moments it was opened by a young housemaid.

Tex said, “Ma’am, we are looking for a Mr. Warner; is he here?”

“Yes, he’s here. If you will wait a moment I will go tell him he has visitors.”

In a few minutes a gray-haired man with a ruddy face appeared in the door dressed in a denim shirt, blue jeans, cowboy boots, new neckerchief, and a neatly-creased felt hat—a fitting outfit for a wealthy rancher, Jim thought.

Mr. Warner extended his hand and said, “I’m George Warner, owner of this ranch; what can I do for you boys?”

The boys shook his hand as they introduced themselves; then Jim explained their reason for being there.

“Mr. Warner, we understand you are looking for bronco busters, and we want to apply for the job.”

“Come on in, boys, and we’ll have a cup of coffee while we discuss the job.” They followed Mr. Warner into the kitchen and sat down at the table with him.

“Julia, come in here a moment, please; I want you to meet a couple of young men.” In a moment a short, middle-aged lady with silvery hair appeared.

“Jim, Tex, this is Julia, my wife for thirty years.”

Julia smiled as she shook hands with the boys and said, “It’s so nice to meet you young men. Can I bring you some coffee and cinnamon rolls? We got them out of the oven just a little while ago.”

The boys thanked Mrs. Warner for her offer and in a few minutes they, and Mr. and Mrs. Warner, were sipping hot coffee between bites of cinnamon rolls.

As they were finishing up the coffee and rolls, Mr. Warner turned to the boys and asked, “Have you fellows had any experience breaking horses?” Jim replied in the affirmative and Tex in the negative.

Tex admitted, “I have never broke a horse, but I’ve watched other cowboys do it, and I’m sure I can do it too.”

“Well, I need to make one thing clear: we don’t break horses the so-called “gentle way” as that takes too long. We do it the hard way and that’s a lot quicker—and I might add a lot tougher on the bronco buster and the bronco. Do you have any objections to doing it the hard way?”

Jim and Tex looked at each other, and then Jim said, “Naugh, I don’t guess so. And by the way, what do you pay for breaking horses?”

“I’ll provide you with a bunk and your meals, and take care of your horses. And I’ll pay you five dollars for each horse you break,” Mr. Warner said, “but I have certain requirements that must be met if the horse is to be accepted by the military.”

“And just what are those requirements, Mr. Warner?” Jim asked.

“The horse must learn to be neck reigned, broke to the bridle and saddle, and you must ride him for at least an hour each day for three consecutive days,” Mr. Warner replied. “And I would ask that you not treat the horse any rougher than you have to.”

The boys looked at each other and Jim asked, “Mr. Warner, could Tex and I have a few minutes to talk this over?”

“Certainly, you boys take your time. When you decide something, you can find me at the corral.” He then got up and walked out the door.

“Well, Tex, what do you think,” Jim asked.

“Do you have any idea how many horses we could break in a day?”

“I think we might start out with each of us breaking three horses a day. Then after we get used to the job, we could probably increase the number to four, or maybe even five. Anyway, we won’t know until we try it.

“And I can tell you this from my experiences of breaking horses. The first week will be the worst because you will be using muscles you didn’t know you had, and your butt will be black and blue from the pounding you’re going to get from a bucking horse.”

“Golly, Jim, are you sure we’re doing the right thing?” Tex asked. “It sounds to me like it’s going to be a tough job.”

“I understand your feelings about this, Tex, but where else could we make up to fifteen dollars a day?”

“Okay, Jim, I’m willing to take a crack at it; I can always quit.”

The boys looked up Mr. Warner and told him they were ready to give it a try.

He had two of his men pick out six of the broncos and put them into the breaking corral. Then the men got into the corral, and with their whips made the horses run around the pen clockwise for a while, and then counter-clockwise. After about fifteen minutes of this, the animals were sweating and tired. Then they roped one of them, snubbed it to the center post of the corral, and put a bridle and saddle on it.

Jim climbed into the saddle, gathered the reins into his right hand, and grasped the saddle horn with his left hand. “Let him go!” Jim shouted.

They did, and the horse began bucking as it ran around the corral with Jim kicking it in the flanks and jerking its head up. After a minute or so the animal ceased bucking and just ran around in the corral.

“Open the gate and let me out!” Jim shouted as the horse continued its frenzied running in circles around the corral. They opened the gate and let Jim out but kept the remaining horses herded into the back side of the corral.

Jim rode the horse into the big pasture and kept it running at full speed for a few minutes. Then he allowed the winded horse to slow to a gallop and then to a walk. He kept talking to the horse and patting it on the side of the neck.

After a few minutes he spurred the animal into a gallop. He repeated the process several times during the next forty-five minutes or so. Then he rode him back to the “holding” corral where they kept the horses once they’d gone through the initial breaking procedure.

The hired hands led the horse into the corral, painted a code number on its flank, and then removed the bridle and saddle. It was a tossup as to whether Jim or the horse was the most exhausted.

Jim declared he was pooped out but that he was ready to have a go at number two horse. However, the crew decided it was Tex’s turn to break one of the remaining five horses.

They got a horse ready, put Tex on it, and then turned it loose. Tex had a hard time staying aboard the bucking animal but managed to do so. After a few minutes of riding around inside the corral the mustang ceased bucking, so they opened the gate and let horse and rider out. In about an hour, Tex and his mount returned. Tex looked beat, but he had a proud, triumphant look on his face.

“Congratulations, Tex,” the crew shouted as Tex rode into the holding corral. Tex dismounted, and walking like a frozen-toed rooster, he made his way out of the corral and then sat down on a nearby bench.

“I wonder if my guts and my butt will ever fully recover,” Tex bemoaned as he gulped down a drink of water. The crew assured him that he’d recover fully in a month or two, to which Tex said, “Thanks a bunch, boys; I really needed that.” They all laughed as they kidded Tex, but all he could manage was a halfhearted grin.

While Tex was gone, Jim had “broke” his second animal from bucking, and was out in the pasture giving it the run-walk treatment.

By the end of the day both Jim and Tex had broke their three horses, and were feeling encouraged by their accomplishments.

After supper that evening, the boys gave each other a rubdown with some horse liniment touted to help get the soreness out of the stretched and tired muscles. (It was supposed to be used on both horse and rider.) Then they went to bed and slept like logs all night.

The next day each of the boys was able to break four horses; this was a great encouragement to both the boys and Mr. Warner. Also, the boys were not as sore as they had been the day before.

In line with Jim's prediction, in a month the boys were breaking an average of five horses per day; they had hardened up their muscles and their butts and no longer had to use the liniment every night. Also, they were jubilant about the money they were accumulating. Of course, they had no place to spend it—yet!

CHAPTER 16

The boys would sometimes ask each other how things were going with their loved ones back home. One Sunday Tex asked Jim, “How is your sweetheart doing these days, if you don’t mind my asking? Is she still being true to her vow to wait for your return?”

Jim replied, “Boy, you are a bit nosey aren't you? But to answer your question, I think she’s still being true to me. But I’ll admit her letters have been getting shorter and shorter. I guess she just doesn’t have a lot to say anymore.

“But I did get a real surprise yesterday; I got a letter from my dad—the first ever! Would you like for me to read it to you?”

“Yes, I would, Jim. You know I’m very fond of your dad.”

Jim got the letter out of his saddlebag and began reading.

“Dear Jim, I know you are going to be surprised to get a letter from your dad, but things are going so well I decided to share the good news with you.

“First off, Sally and I have grown to love and respect each other more and more; and we even discuss plans for a marriage! Also, I’ve developed a great relationship with Sally’s daughters and her son-in-law, Mark.

“Mark is a really nice young man, very business minded and a hard worker. Once in a while, I have a need for a man’s help and he’s always willing to lend me a hand.

Things on the farm are going well. We’ve had plenty of rain so my crops look real good, pastures are very lush, and the watering holes are almost full. Too bad it can't always be like this.

“Well, son, I’ve run out of news so I’ll close and get this to the post office. Keep writing. We always enjoy your letters and wish they weren’t so brief and so far between. Oh, yes, give Tex my regards.

Love, Dad.”

When Jim finished reading the letter, he turned to Tex and asked, “Now how about you. What do you hear from home?”

“I’m sorry to say things haven't changed. Mom is still praying for Dad’s salvation but he hasn’t changed one iota yet.”

Then one Sunday instead of reading and writing letters, they decided to go to Quertoma, a little Mexican village that was about three miles south of the Warner ranch; the last mile was south of the Texas-Mexico border.

The boys had learned some Spanish from the employees of Mr. Warner, and felt confident they could “get by” in Mexico just fine. So they put on some clean clothes, strapped on their pistols, and rode to Quertoma. They arrived there about nine o’clock and the town was just beginning to come alive. So they just rode

around the town, sightseeing and making mental notes of the locations of the various business establishments.

They found that Quertoma had two cantinas, a general store, and a hotel with a café, a blacksmith shop, and a few other shops. Finally, they decided to go into Rosanne's cantina and sample the tequila.

The place was almost vacant; it had only two costumers. They strolled up to the bar, put their right foot on the rail, and rested their elbows on the top of the bar. The barkeeper was a attractive young Spanish maiden who was a bit thin but well proportioned. Her wavy, coal-black hair, filled with neatly-spaced barrettes, streamed down her back, almost to her waist. She greeted them with a friendly smile and asked, "Como estar usted?"

"No hablo the espanol mucho bueno," the boys replied in their best Spanish. Then they asked, "Do you speak English?" And much to their surprise and delight she answered, "Si, si, senors, most of us here speak English because a lot of our customers come across the border from Texas and we want to do business with them. My name is Margareta."

So the boys told her their names, and ordered a shot of tequila. When she set the drinks on the bar before the boys she said, with a twinkle in her eyes, "That will be twenty-five cents apiece—in your gringo money." They paid the senorita the quarter and added a ten-cent tip. She smiled and said, "Thank you."

"What do you do in this town for entertainment?" Jim asked.

"We have a dance hall just down the street where a band plays every Saturday night. It's usually well attended, and the people are generally sociable and well behaved. But sometimes a tough guy will get too much to drink and raise a ruckus, and sometimes there's a fight with knives or guns," Margareta replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Well," Tex said, "back on that ranch where we work breaking horses, it gets boring. And we just thought that some Saturday night we just might come down here and have a little fun. Now that we know you have a dance hall, we will come down some Saturday night and join the crowd. Will you be there?"

"I will be there as I really like to dance. Perhaps, you will ask me to dance with you, Tex. No?" Margareta said.

"You can bet I will," Tex answered. "I'll be here next Saturday night with bells on. What time does the dance start?"

"It doesn't start until about dark because it doesn't cool down much before that time. But if you come a little early, we can always sit around on the veranda for a little while and get better acquainted."

"I'll be looking for you next Saturday night, for sure," Tex said, "and I can hardly wait!"

Then Jim spoke up, “Well, Tex, don’t you think we should go to that little café we saw just down the street, and get a bite to eat before we start back to the ranch? And we might want to go to a store and buy us some fancy clothes to wear next Saturday night.” Tex agreed with Jim's suggestion, so they said goodbye to Margareta and departed.

After a hearty meal of good Mexican food, they went to the general store and began their shopping. Having plenty of money from their saw mill wages, and their bronco busting, they bought two expensive outfits each: shirts, pants, underwear, boots, sombreros, kerchiefs, and jackets. And just to be sure they would smell good, they bought some expensive perfumed soap and perfumed after-shaving lotion.

“Boy, we will really cut a wide swath next Saturday night, won't we, Jim?”

“Yeah, we’ll probably be the best dressed and best smelling hombres at the dance,” Jim replied with a laugh. “We’ll have a hard time keeping the señoritas from ripping off our clothes when they’re trying to get us to dance with them.”

Having finished their shopping, they mounted their horses and returned to the ranch. They were glad they’d made the venture into Mexico, and they kept talking about what they were going to do next Saturday night.

CHAPTER 17

The boys could hardly wait for next Saturday to arrive; they were almost like little kids waiting for Christmas. So as soon as their Saturday duties had been taken care of, they cleaned up, shaved, donned a new set of clothes, applied plenty of perfume, and left for Quertoma.

On the way, they discussed possibilities for the evening. Tex asserted he was going to dance every dance with Margareta, and Jim said he'd probably just watch from the sidelines as his dancing abilities were very poor.

"Oh, come on, Jim; you need to get over your fear of making a fool of yourself. You just need to pick out some *senorita* and let her teach you the dance steps. It really isn't hard to learn. And once you get the hang of it, you'll be sorry you didn't learn sooner. I'll bet Margareta has a friend who would be glad to teach you how to dance."

"Okay, okay!" Jim said with an exasperated tone. "I'll try it if it will get you off my back!" Then both boys laughed at their petty argument.

They arrived in Quertoma just about sunset, and the area around the dance hall was crowded with people awaiting the arrival of the dance band.

The boys searched the crowd, looking for Margareta and finally spotted her talking to a young lady who was both attractive and animated; she had long, coal-black hair with many barrettes, just like Margareta had.

"I bet that young lady is Margareta's friend," Tex speculated. "Let's go find out."

The boys approached the ladies with great anticipation, and a little trepidation. As soon as Margareta saw them her face lighted up, and she stretched out her hand toward Tex—who noticed she was almost as tall as he was.

"Hello, fellows," she said, "I'm so glad you came!" Then she turned toward her friend and introduced her to the boys. "Rosita, these are the fellows I was telling you about, Tex and Jim." They all shook hands and exchanged greetings.

About that time, the band members arrived and proceeded to the platform at the front of the room; then in a few minutes they began tuning their instruments.

The people filed in and began seating themselves on the benches that surrounded the dance floor. The two couples located a bench near the door and sat down.

The crowd was quite noisy so they had to talk rather loudly to make themselves heard. Jim started a conversation with Rosita, who, like Margareta, spoke good English. Finally he got up the nerve to ask her if she would teach him how to dance.

"I would be delighted to teach you, Jim. It's really easy to learn to dance most of the steps," Rosita said with a smile.

About that time, the band began playing a waltz and the dance floor was quickly filled with couples.

“Jim, let’s just watch how they’re dancing for a few minutes and then we will try it,” Rosita suggested.

Jim watched attentively for several minutes, and then said to Rosita, “I guess I’m ready to give it a try if you are.”

So they moved onto the dance floor and began waltzing. After a very short time, Jim was dancing acceptably, much to his delight and relief.

In the meanwhile, Tex and Margareta were having a great time dancing and chatting—just like they were longtime friends.

“Looks like old Jim is a fast learner,” Tex said to Margareta, “and it looks like he’s having a great time.”

When the dance number ended, the couples made their way back to their bench and continued their conversations.

A little later, the girls excused themselves and went off to the powder room to freshen up a bit. Jim and Tex sat quietly just looking over the crowd. Jim nudged Tex and asked, “Tex, see those two young Mexicans across the room who are putting their heads together while looking our way? Do you suppose they’re plotting some mischief against us?”

“Could be,” Tex replied. “Do you suppose we should have worn our pistols tonight?”

“I’ve got a feeling we’re going to be in big trouble shortly,” Jim said with a little uneasiness in his voice—prophetic words indeed!

After several minutes, the girls returned to the bench and the conversations were resumed. After a few more moments, Tex asked a question of the girls: “Do you see those two fellows across the room who seem to be interested in what’s going on with us?”

The girls laughed and Margareta answered, “Tex, those two fellows are our brothers! They watch us like a mother hen watches her chicks, and if they think we’re in any danger of getting too friendly with gringos, they take immediate action.” She had no more than finished her sentence than the two young men got up and started across the room toward them.

As they neared the group, all four got up and Margareta started to introduce the two young men to Jim and Tex. But before she could do so, one of the men interrupted in a threatening voice, “All right, gringos, it’s time for you to quit messing with our sisters and go on home!”

Tex said, “And just who do you think is going to make us go home?”

“We are,” the larger of the two responded as he shoved Tex backward onto the bench.

Tex jumped up, glared in the face of his antagonist, and proclaimed, “Let’s go outside and settle this like men.” Jim got up and went along with Tex.

The girls began to protest, but to no avail. So they just followed the young men as they made their way outside.

Once outside, wrestling and fisticuffs began and the girls commenced shouting loudly, “Stop it, stop it!”—but the fighting continued.

A crowd gathered in a circle to watch the combatants and to goad them on. After about five minutes of grunting, groaning, heaving, sweating, and swearing, the young men ran out of steam and collapsed onto the ground, with no one being a winner.

One of the two young Mexican men spoke up between gasps, “Gringos, you are two very tough hombres, and we respect you for that. How about shaking hands and calling it even?”

Tex and Jim looked at each other through swollen eyes, started laughing, and Tex managed to exclaim, “You fellows are pretty tough costumers yourselves!”

The four helped each other up, and Margareta introduced the two young Mexican men. “This is my brother, Raphael, and this is Rosita’s brother, Jose.” The men shook hands, and then Jose turned to the girls and said, “I guess these hombres are good enough to dance with you girls.”

He then turned toward the boys with a little smile on his face and warned, “But if you hombres do anything disrespectful to our sisters, we will come after you with pistols and knives.”

To this, Jim replied with a laugh, “You don’t have to worry about that ever happening. And now how about me buying a round of tequila for the four of you after we wash off some of the evidences of the battle?”

That met with their approval, so the men made their way to a nearby creek and washed off the dirt and sweat from the battle. The girls hunted around and found some towels for them, and soon all four men were halfway presentable.

The little group made their way to the bar where Jim made good his word and bought tequila all around.

After a spell of goodwill visitation, Tex and Jim hugged the girls and shook hands with the two young Mexican men. Then, with the promise to return peacefully the next Saturday, they said their goodbyes and took their leave.

On the way back to the ranch the boys relived the events of the evening and concluded they’d had one “helluva” good time. But they agreed not ever to repeat the battle part of the affair—if they could avoid it.

CHAPTER 18

The boys continued breaking horses, and they continued making the trip to Quertoma every Saturday evening. The romance between Tex and Margareta had become serious. Jim, however, had deliberately kept the affair with Rosita from heating up by telling her about Jane back home; so they had just remained good friends.

One Monday morning, Jim glanced at the calendar on the bunkhouse wall and suddenly realized he'd been gone from home, and Jane, almost a year. He was a little surprised because he figured he would have had a letter from Jane reminding him of his promise, but he hadn't. In fact, he hadn't had a letter from her in almost two months. He tried to relieve the gnawing feeling something wasn't quite right by telling himself she was probably just busy at the store.

That evening, Jim told Tex about realizing it was almost time to start home. Tex said he really had mixed emotions about going back home versus staying on at the ranch. But he told Jim he should probably go back home because his mother was anxious for him to come home—at least for a short visit.

Jim said he thought that would be a good idea because Tex could find out firsthand just how his mother was getting along. Also, Jim suggested that an absence from Margareta for a while would enable him to decide if the affair was “real” or just “fascination.”

Tex pondered the suggestions for a couple of days. Then he told Jim that his suggestion was a good one and he would make the trip home with him.

The next Saturday night the boys told the girls of their plans to go home. The girls were disappointed, but they said they understood.

Of course, Margareta was distressed as she had developed a real affection for Tex, and she didn't look forward to his absence. However, she convinced herself that Tex would find out that he “couldn't live without her,” and would come back to Quertoma.

Rosita was also disappointed; but since she had known from the beginning that Jim had a lady friend back at Hominy, she hadn't allowed herself to become more than just a friend to him.

The boys dreaded the time when they would be saying goodbye to Mr. Warner. A strong bond between the boys and him had developed, and parting was going to be a sad time. But the day had arrived to break the news, so Tex and Jim went to Mr. Warner who was out by the corral.

“Mr. Warner,” Jim said, “we've been working for you for almost twelve months, and it has been a good year. However, the time has come for us to be getting back to our homes in East Texas as we told our loved ones we would not be gone more than a year.” Tex nodded in agreement.

“Yes, Jim,” Mr. Warner said, “I remember when you hired on you told me you would not be staying more than a year; so go, and Godspeed. You two have been excellent hands, and I want you to know that if you should ever need a job again, just come back to Atache and I’ll put you back to work.

“And by the way, I want to give you boys a little bonus as a way of showing my appreciation for working for me with genuine earnestness and fervor.” With that he pulled out his wallet and handed each man a crisp one hundred dollar bill. The boys were surprised, but they accepted the money humbly as they shook Mr. Warner’s hand. Then they mounted their horses and rode away, waving as they went. Mr. Warner brushed away a tear and made his way back toward the corral.

With a note of sadness in his voice, Tex confessed, “I’m sure going to miss that dear old man and the boys. But most of all I’m going to miss Margareta; she’s a real doll.” Jim nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

Finally Jim broke the silence and said, “I’m going to miss Rosita, but I keep reminding myself that I have a young lady waiting for me in Hominy, and I sure am anxious to get back there.” After a brief pause, Jim continued, “I guess we should spend the night in Houston when we get there.”

“When will that be, Jim?”

“Well, since we don’t have any cattle to slow us down, I think we should make Houston in three days.” He was correct, and they arrived in Houston the evening of the third day.

They went to the hotel, checked in, and went to their room. After they had bathed and rested for a short time, they got ready to go downstairs.

“Jim, do you suppose we should wear our pistols?”

“It might be a good plan. My idea is that it’s better to have your pistol and not need it, than to need it and not have it.” So the boys belted on their holsters, shoved in their pistols, and went downstairs to the café.

They picked out a table near the back wall and waited for the waitress to bring them a menu. Shortly, a nice-looking young lady brought them glasses of water, menus, and greeted them, “Good evening, gentlemen, how are you fellows this evening?”

“We’re doing mighty fine,” Jim responded with a grin, “but we will be doing much better when we’ve had one of your tasty meals.”

“Thank you for your compliment, sir,” she said. “Have you decided what to order or do you want a little more time?”

Tex quickly spoke up, “I know what I want: a T-bone steak, rare, green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a mug of coffee, black.”

“That sounds good to me,” Jim said, “I’ll have the same.”

“Thank you, sirs; I will bring you your suppers shortly.”

Their suppers were soon brought to the table and they began to eat with great gusto.

Just as they were finishing their meal, Tex turned to Jim, and whispered, "Don't look toward the door but Mr. Derrick and three other men just came in!"

Jim covered his face with his hand and napkin as if wiping his mouth. Then he peered cautiously toward the door and saw the four men. He leaned over close to Tex and whispered, "I believe those men are the ones that robbed us! Let's pretend we haven't seen them and hope they don't spot us." But the men had seen them and they started toward their table.

As they approached, Bat smiled; and with derision in his voice, he said, "Well, well, I guess them hogs didn't eat you youngsters after all. So, I'm going to do now what my yellow-livered compadre talked me out of doing then," and he reached for his pistol.

Moving as if they had rehearsed it, the boys sprang to their feet, overturned the table with their left hands, pulled their pistols with their right hands, and fired twice in unison. When the smoke cleared, the four men were lying on the floor, wounded and unconscious. The patrons were stampeding toward the door, shoving each other out of the way, and screaming in terror.

The sheriff immediately appeared on the scene with his pistol drawn. "All right, boys, what went on here?"

Jim said, "These men were pulling their guns with the intent of killing us, but we were a bit faster on the draw, and you can see the results there on the floor."

"Did you boys know these four men?" the sheriff asked.

"Yeah, we did," Tex replied. Then they told the sheriff the details of their deal with Mr. Derrick, and their encounter with the three thieves.

"I'm so glad you two showed up," the sheriff said. "I have had my eye on those outlaws for a long time. I had suspicions that they were killers, thieves, and cattle rustlers, but I could never get enough evidence to arrest them. Now, with the testimony of you two young fellers, we will be able to bring these scoundrels to trial."

"What will happen to them if they're found guilty of these crimes?" Jim asked.

"Well," the sheriff replied, "people in this area don't take kindly to thugs like them. If they're found guilty I suspect they'll swing for it."

About that time, the local doctor came rushing in with his black bag in his hand. He made a quick exam, turned to the sheriff, and said, "Jack, these men have some pretty severe wounds, but they will survive."

Jim explained to the sheriff that they were on their way to their homes in East Texas. So he took a brief deposition from each of them, and then told them they were free to go anytime they wanted to.

The boys paid for their meals, and then went back to their room to rest a bit and allow their nerves to settle.

After a short discussion of the showdown, the boys began to relax. Then Tex made a startling statement: “Jim, I’ve changed my mind; I’m going back to the ranch. According to Mom’s last letter, the old man has not improved in his behavior. And if I go on home I might wind up killing him and I sure don’t want that to happen. I know Mom will be very disappointed, but I’m sure she will understand why I decided to stay down here.

“I’m going to ask Margareta to marry me. If she says ‘Yes,’ I’ll buy a little home real close to the ranch and go back to work for Mr. Warner. I think I have enough savings to buy a house she will be pleased with. And being close to the ranch where I’ll work will give her a sense of security.”

Jim was disappointed but he told Tex he understood. So the next morning, the boys reluctantly parted company; Tex started back to the ranch and Jim started back to Hominy.

CHAPTER 19

Jim was very anxious to get back home, so he pushed Daisy pretty hard. To make the best time, Jim rode from dawn to dusk, stopping only to rest a little and to let Daisy rest, graze, and get a drink. He didn't bother to do any cooking at all; he just subsisted on jerky and canned food.

His determination paid off, and in ten days he was riding up to his dad's home about five o'clock in the afternoon. He was tired but exceedingly happy to be back home. He had not told Jane or his dad that he was coming home; he wanted to surprise them.

He tied Daisy to the hitching post, walked to the front door and knocked. No one came to the door so he knocked again, louder. There was still no answer, so he opened the door and went in; no one was home.

So Jim took his gear to his former room by the well house and then he put Daisy in the barn. He decided he'd wait until everyone was back home and then he would make a "dramatic" entrance.

Jim was lying down resting when he heard a horse whinny. He cautiously peered out the window and saw a buggy drive up to the house with Jane and a handsome stranger in it. The stranger got out, went around to Jane's side of the buggy, and helped her out. They embraced briefly, kissed passionately, and then walked arm in arm toward the house, talking as they went. Jim couldn't hear well even though the window in his room was open. But he did understand enough to catch the young man's name: Clay. And what he had seen through his window made him sure Clay and Jane were lovers! And when the couple reached the door, they embraced briefly, kissed, and then went into the house.

Jim was astounded and infuriated. His heart began pounding, his adrenalin began surging, and he was too worked up to think clearly. But finally a thought came to him: "Maybe I should either beat that woman-stealing scoundrel half to death, or shoot him!"

Jim buckled on his pistol and pondered his next move. Finally, he decided to go into the house and confront the stranger and the girl who had obviously been unfaithful to him.

He quietly made his way to the window that opened into the living room and cautiously peered in. What he saw further fueled the fire already raging in his mind. The two were on the sofa, kissing and locked in a tight embrace.

Jim burst through the door with pistol in hand and shouted, "I ought to kill you both, right now!" The stranger looked toward Jim and jumped to his feet, dumping Jane onto the floor, and yelled, "Please don't shoot! Please don't shoot!"

Jane was lying on the floor screaming, "Please don't, Jim, please don't!" Jim fired one shot into the wall near the stranger, then turned and strode out the door.

When the smoke cleared, the couple discovered that neither of them had been hit by the bullet; and the only damage that had been done was the bullet hole in the wall behind the sofa.

Still shaking and with a quiver in her voice, Jane asked her beau, “Clay, what do you think we should do?”

After a few moments, Clay recovered his composure somewhat and replied, “I’m going to the sheriff right now and file charges against Jim for attempted murder. If he hadn’t been such a lousy shot, he would have killed me!”

In the meantime, Jim rode into town, got a room at the hotel, and went upstairs. Once inside the room, he began to review his confrontation with Clay and Jane. He said to himself, “Jim, I’m glad you decided to not kill Jane and that new lover of hers. But even so, what you just did was very stupid, and you’re probably going to be in a lot of trouble.”

Jim had guessed right. Within the hour the sheriff appeared at his door and said, “Jim, I hate to do this, but I’m going to have to put you under arrest for attempted murder.” He put handcuffs on Jim and took him to jail.

The next morning, Blaine appeared at the jail and asked to be allowed to talk to Jim. A deputy took him back to the cell block, unlocked Jim’s cell door and let Blaine in.

“You have fifteen minutes, Mr. Laney,” the deputy said as he relocked the door and turned to leave.

“Jim, what in the world possessed you to try to kill Clay?” Blaine asked.

“Dad, when I saw that lowlife coward fondling Jane I just went wild. But fortunately, I didn’t try to kill him; if I had, he would be dead. I just wanted to scare the living daylights out of both of them. And who is this guy, Clay, anyway?”

Blaine thought about it for a few moments, then replied, “Well, Jim, he showed up in town about four months ago looking for a job. According to him, his mom and dad died from the flu about a year ago, and he couldn’t stand to stay in the family house alone. He said he had no close relatives so he just wandered around until he finally arrived in Hominy.”

CHAPTER 20

“Soon after arriving here, he approached Sally about a job. Her business was going great and she did need some more help. So she hired him to help with stocking the store and making deliveries to customers. He seemed to be a nice enough young man and was a good worker. But unbeknownst to us, Jane took a liking to him and apparently began to see him on the sly.

“Judging from what we just learned about what happened yesterday, Jane and Clay must have had a romance going for some time. We all thought she was still being loyal to you and waiting patiently for your return; obviously we were wrong.

“Jim, I’m so sorry for what has happened, but I can understand why you did what you did. I will get you a lawyer and see if I can get you out on bail.”

“Thanks, Dad; I really appreciate your helping me out. And by the way, how are Sally and Jane reacting to the situation?”

“They are both pretty much in shock and disbelief. Jane says she is very sorry about what happened, and that she realizes she did you wrong by taking up with Clay. As for Clay, he’s saying his relationship with Jane is simply platonic, but I’m not convinced that’s the truth.”

Blaine couldn’t get Jim out on bail, but he did secure a lawyer, Jock Hendricks. Jock visited with Jim as he planned his strategy for Jim's defense.

“Jim, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to take you to the judge tomorrow morning so you can tell him that you had no intention of killing Clay or Jane; you only wanted to scare the daylights out of them. Do you think you can convince the judge of that?”

“Yes, I think I can,” Jim said, and he told Jock how he was going to do it. Jock listened to Jim's plan and agreed that it might work.

The next morning Jock took Jim to the office of the judge. The judge looked at him for moment, and then said, “Jim, you claim that you had no intention of killing Clay, but to only scare the wits out of him and Jane. Do you have any way to prove this?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim replied. “If I had wanted to kill Clay I certainly could have done so. When I shoot, I hit what I want to hit, nothing more and nothing less. And if you will allow me, I will demonstrate to you what I have just claimed.”

Jock looked toward the judge and politely asked, “Your Honor, would you allow Jim to go into the courtyard tomorrow and prove what he has just stated?”

The judge said the request was most unusual. But since he was curious as to how Jim was going to try to prove his statement, he said he would allow the demonstration.

Jock quickly arranged for Blaine to bring to the courtyard the next day a board with a man-sized head painted on it. Blaine brought the board and attached it to a tree about fifteen feet from where Jim would be standing.

Then the next day, having secured the judge's approval, Jock brought Jim outside and handed him his gun belt and pistol. Jim glanced at the crowd that had gathered; then he immediately buckled on the gun belt and holstered the pistol.

"Your Honor," Jock asked, "are you ready for the demonstration?"

The judge answered, "Please proceed."

At this, Jim crouched slightly, whipped out his pistol, and with lightning speed fired six shots into the head painted on the board; the watching crowd gasped with amazement.

Then Jim turned, looked at the judge, and said, "You see your Honor, if I had wanted to kill either one or both of them, I could have easily done so."

The judge nodded his head slightly and announced, "Court adjourned until ten o'clock tomorrow morning." Jim was escorted back to his cell, and the onlookers made their way out of the courtyard.

When Jock and Jim got back to his cell, they immediately began discussing Jim's demonstration.

Jock said, "Jim, I believe the judge was convinced that you certainly could have killed either Jane or Clay, or both of them, if you had wanted to. Now, I believe I can get the charges dropped."

"And how are you going to get Clay to drop those charges?" Jim asked.

"Well, Jim, Jane is a reasonable young lady and she cares a great deal for your father. I think as a way to make it up to your father for what she has done to his son, she will do everything she can to get Clay to drop the charges against you. And if Clay loves her as much as I think he does, he'll probably drop those charges to stay on her good side."

"Jock, you're a genius," Jim exclaimed, "and I believe your strategy might work!"

That afternoon Jock had a long talk with Jane and she agreed to try to talk Clay into dropping all charges against Jim. So, after Jock left her, she went to Clay's room and knocked on the door. Clay was still a little nervous, so he hollered, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Jane. Please let me in; I need to talk to you."

Clay opened the door and stepped back to allow Jane to enter. Then he closed the door and indicated for Jane to sit down.

"What's on your mind, Jane?" Clay asked. "Does it have something to do with the demonstration today?"

“Yes, it does, Clay. Jim proved today that he did not intend to kill either one of us. So for my sake, and the sake of all of those who are involved in this mess, I beg you to drop all charges against him. Just put yourself in his shoes; what would you have done if you had found your betrothed girl in the arms of another man?”

Clay dropped his head and sighed. “I don’t know what I would have done, Jane. But I have been thinking about the fact that Jim could have killed me, or both of us for that matter, but he didn’t. Perhaps you’re right; maybe I should drop the charges.”

Jane rushed across the room to Clay, and threw her arms around his neck. “Oh, Clay, thank you! I don’t believe you’ll ever regret your decision.”

Early the next morning Clay went to the judge and asked him to drop all charges against Jim. The judge was amazed at his request, but he thought Jim needed to have some measure of punishment. So he had Jim brought into the courtroom.

Then he said, “Jim, what you did was wrong, but Clay has asked that all charges against you be dropped. However, I believe you need to be punished for your act. Therefore, I’m sentencing you to thirty days in jail. Bailiff, take him back to jail.”

A little later Jock came to see Jim and heard the bad news. “Well, Jim, what are your plans now?”

“Jock, I’ve cooled down and done some deep thinking about what I did. So when I finish my jail time, I’ll go to Clay and Jane and ask for forgiveness. If I had been in Clay’s shoes I probably would have courted Jane just as he did; she’s really a pretty and sweet young lady. And I should have come home a time or two to visit with Jane and to reassure her that I still loved her—but I didn’t.

“Then, after I apologize to Clay and Jane, I plan to go to see my dad and then go on to Martha, Oklahoma.

“You see a while back, I got a letter from my cousin there who said I could probably get a job working for his boss, a wealthy farmer and rancher. I certainly can’t stay around Hominy for obvious reasons.”

After Jim served his jail time, he made good his word and apologized to Clay and Jane and asked for their forgiveness. They accepted his apologies, and said they would try to forgive him. Now, Jim’s conscience was clear, and he felt a great relief.

CHAPTER 21

Then Jim went to visit his father, and spent two hours with him. His father wanted to know what he did during the year he had been gone from Hominy. So he told him about his experiences breaking horses, and about the times he and Tex rode into Mexico. He included the episode about the time they went to a dance and got into a fight with a couple of young Mexican men who thought he and Tex were getting too friendly with their sisters.

Blaine laughed, and said, "It was a wonder those young men didn't carve the two of you into little pieces. What are your plans now, Jim? Are you going to stay around here?"

"No, Dad, I'm setting out for Oklahoma as soon as I leave here. If I stayed here there would be too many things to remind me of the nightmare I've just been through."

Then he told Blaine about getting a letter from his cousin, Sam Laney. Sam was working for a Mr. Starkey, a wealthy farmer and rancher, who lived near Martha, Oklahoma.

"Sam told me that I could probably get a job with Mr. Starkey because he was continually enlarging his holdings and hiring additional help. So I'm going to ride up there and see if I can get a job with him; and Sam assured me Mr. Starkey was a really good man to work for."

"Sounds like it would be a good place to work, Jim, and I'm glad to know that you will probably have a new job real soon," Blaine said.

Jim finally decided it was time for him to get going on the road. So he embraced his father and said, "Goodbye, Dad, and I promise I will write you." With those words he went out to the hitching rail and mounted Daisy.

As he rode off, he waved back at his dad and shouted "Goodbye!" Blaine got tears in his eyes as he mumbled to himself, "Why does it seem like I'm always saying goodbye to my son?"

Jim followed the directions Sam had included in his letter and after a three-day ride he arrived in Martha about three o'clock in the afternoon. It was not a large town but it had all the needed stores plus a post office.

Jim found a stable near a hotel and left Daisy there. Then he went to the hotel and got a room.

Jim took a bath and then he took a nap. After his nap, Jim went downstairs to the dining area and chose a table next to the back wall. In just a minute a nice looking middle-aged waitress came to his table, and said, "My name is Anna" as she handed Jim a menu.

Jim replied, "I'm glad to meet you Anna, my name is Jim." Then he ordered one of his favorite suppers: rare steak, green beans, mashed potatoes, and a cup of black coffee.

After he finished his meal, he asked Anna if she knew where the Starkeys' lived. She took a napkin and drew out the route to get to the Starkeys' home. Jim thanked her kindly and handed her a one dollar tip. She was pleased, thanked him, and asked him if he would be down for breakfast. Jim assured her he would be. He visited with her a few minutes, then excused himself, and went back to his room.

He went down for breakfast the next morning after being sure he was well dressed and smelled like after-shave lotion. He figured the nice smell would last until he had finished visiting with the Starkeys' later that day.

He chatted a moment with Anna and found out she knew the Starkey family rather well. He told her he was going to apply for a job there today.

"Well" she said, "you will not need to get out there until sundown as they are working with their cattle and won't quit until quite late."

Jim thanked her and said, "Well then, I guess there is no need for me to go to the Starkeys' until about sunset. So I'll eat my dinner and supper here before I go."

Anna said, "Oh, by the way, Jim, I have a suggestion. Why don't you go out there about an hour before sunset so you will have time to get acquainted with his wife and two lovely daughters before he comes in from the field?"

Jim thought that was a good idea. So he finished his supper about two hours before sunset, gave Anna a two-dollar tip, and then went out, mounted his horse, and started his trip to the Starkeys'.

He figured that he would get to the Starkeys' home in time to visit a little with the ladies before Mr. Starkey came in from work.

The road that led to their house had a few curves in it, but Jim had no trouble following it; he never had to refer to the sketch provided by Anna.

The distance to the Starkeys' home was four miles, so Jim arrived there just a short time before sundown.

He tied Daisy to the hitching rail in front of the house, walked up on the porch, and knocked on the door. Momentarily, a rather plain-looking girl, who looked about sixteen to Jim, came to the door and asked Jim his business.

Jim introduced himself and explained to her that he was Sam's cousin and was hoping to get a job working for Mr. Starkey.

The girl introduced herself as "Patty," shook Jim's hand, then told him her father was working cattle but should be in soon. Jim asked if he could wait until Mr. Starkey arrived so he could talk to him. So Patty invited him into the house to wait for her father's arrival.

She seated him on the sofa in the plush living room, then excused herself and went down the hall to the kitchen. In his mind, Jim said, “Well, she isn’t really very pretty, but she is nice looking. She has a shapely figure, and her dark hair looks really nice with all those combs in it; I wonder if Sam has ever made a pass at her;” and he smiled at the thought.

In a few minutes, Patty reappeared accompanied by an attractive, motherly looking lady and a pretty girl who looked to be about eighteen. “Jim,” Patty said, “this is my mother, Beatrice, and this is my older sister, Beulah.”

Jim stood, shook their hands, and said “I’m very glad to meet you ladies.” Then at Mrs. Starkey’s request, he resumed his seat on the sofa. In an instant, Jim sized up Beulah. “Wow,” he thought, “she’s a real stunner—great figure, cute little nose and beautiful brunette hair. I’ll bet Sam has been dating her!” His thought process was suddenly interrupted by Beatrice.

“Jim, Patty told us you are a cousin to Sam, but would you like to tell us more about yourself?”

After a brief pause, Jim launched into an abbreviated story of his life. He told the story with just enough details to make it interesting. He was good at telling about experiences, and his audience sat with rapt attention as he discussed his upbringing, war experiences, trip to South Texas, and so forth.

There was one experience he omitted—that of his coming home the last time. He assumed that it would not be a good idea to share that with his new acquaintances.

Jim had just finished his story when a tall, rather handsome man about forty years old, appeared in the doorway. “Jesse,” Mrs. Starkey said, “this young man’s name is Jim Laney. He’s a cousin to Sam and is looking for a job.”

Mr. Starkey responded, “If he’s as good a worker as his cousin, I will certainly hire him.”

Jim said, “Well, sir, I don’t know if I’m as good a worker as Sam, but I believe you will find me worthy of my wages.”

“Fair enough, Jim. Show up here in the morning about six o’clock for breakfast in the bunkhouse with the rest of the hired hands. Then we will go to the pasture and continue working cattle.

“Incidentally, you haven’t asked what your wage will be, and I appreciate that. Your wage will be two dollars per day, and I’ll provide you with meals, a bunk in the bunkhouse, and feed for your horse. What do you think of my offer?”

Jim replied, “I really like it, sir, and I will check out of the hotel in the morning and bring my gear with me so I can move into the bunkhouse. Yes, sir, I’m sure I’m going too really like working for you.”

“Oh, by the way,” Mr. Starkey said, “there are some rules that go with the job: No smoking, no drinking, no swearing, no off-colored jokes, and no flirting with my

daughters. Breaking the rules will result in immediate dismissal. Are you agreeable to abiding with these rules, Jim?"

Jim was caught by surprise and stuttered a little in his reply. "Yes-s, sir, I understand, and I plan to obey all the rules to the letter." Then he thought, "I guess Sam hasn't been dating either one of the girls."

His thoughts were interrupted by Mr. Starkey. "Jim, why don't you go to the bunkhouse now; you will be just in time for supper, and you can visit with Sam. But don't stay up too late, because tomorrow will be a very long, hard day."

"Thank you, Mr. Starkey; I'll see you in the morning. And thanks so much for the supper and the job." Then as he opened the door, he turned toward Beatrice and the girls and added, "It certainly was a pleasure meeting and visiting with you ladies."

Jim walked the short distance to the bunkhouse and entered it as the door was open. He took a hurried look around and spotted Sam sitting at the table, eating. He hadn't changed much since Jim last saw him. He was still Sam, with a tanned face, and a wave in his short, blond hair.

"Hello, Sam, I took your advice, and here I am."

Sam jumped up, rushed to Jim, and gave him a big hug.

"Golly, Jim, it sure is good to see you. I guess you're going to be working for Mr. Starkey?"

"Yeah, I start in the morning, so I'll be here at six o'clock for breakfast. I'll be bringing my gear so I can move into the bunkhouse with you and the rest of the guys."

At this time, the cook appeared and asked Jim if he would like to have a plate of food; Jim said he would like to have one even though he wasn't really hungry. He seated himself next to Sam and soon his plate of food arrived.

Between bites he and Sam chatted about what had been going on in their lives. Shortly thereafter, the other men finished their meal, got up and went to their bunks, leaving Jim and Sam still talking.

"Sam, forgive me for changing the conversation so abruptly, but I have a quick questions I would like to ask you. Tell me about this man, Starkey. Is he really rich, and if so, how did he get that way?"

"Yeah, Jim, he's quite rich, because he owns a lot of land—both farm land and pasture land—and he has a lot of cattle. You might think he would be miserly but he's not. Also, he's a religious, but humble man, who really loves his wife and daughters; and I have found him to be a good man to work for."

"Well, Sam, I'm glad to know all this. I'll sleep better tonight knowing I'm going to have a good boss. And by the way, how old are his daughters?"

“Well, they are old enough to date,” Sam said with a twinkle in his eye. “Beulah is nineteen and Patty is about two years younger. But don’t get your hopes up—Mr. Starkey doesn’t allow them to have boyfriends.”

CHAPTER 22

The next morning Jim arrived at the farm at six o'clock; right on the dot, thanks to his newly-purchased pocket watch. He carried his gear into the bunkhouse and deposited it on an empty bunk. In the adjoining room he could hear the six men chatting as they began their breakfast; so he hurried into the dining room and joined Sam at the table.

At the head of the table sat Mr. Starkey. As soon as he saw Jim seat himself, he stood up and announced, "Fellows, I would like for you to meet my new hand. Stand up, Jim, please. This is Jim Laney, a cousin to Sam.

"Now, each of you please introduce yourself, starting here on my right and going around the table."

After the introductions were completed, the men finished their breakfast and Mr. Starkey stood up again. "Fellows, let's go load up in the chuck wagon and get out to the field. It looks like the weather is going to be favorable so we should get in a good day's work."

The men filed out and climbed into the wagon. Once all the men were seated, the driver slapped the reins on the rumps of the horses hitched to the wagon, and hollered, "Giddyup!" And off they went to the pasture, chattering about what they were going to do once they finished working the cattle.

Jim had been brought up on a farm and ranch and was quite experienced in both farming and ranching; so he fitted in well with the six hired men.

The jobs that the men were doing were branding, vaccinating, dehorning, and marking (a word commonly used in place of castration).

The men doing these jobs had completed them on about half the herd. The addition of Jim and Sam to the crew greatly speeded up the operation, and in five more days the task was completed.

Mr. Starkey was pleased with Jim's work and his congenial attitude; so he asked him to stay on and work with the other men in keeping the ranch running properly. Jim was delighted with the offer and quickly accepted it.

Sam had also made a good impression in his job, so Mr. Starkey asked him to stay on along with Jim. He told them they would be working with the herds of cattle that were in the various pastures there on the homestead. They would have a section of land to take care of, and they would manage it just like they owned it; and they would get a monthly salary of three-hundred dollars.

They were happy to be staying on for various reasons—not the least of which was that now they might be given the opportunity to get better acquainted with the girls.

A few days later, the boys decided to "test the waters." They worked up the courage to ask Mr. Starkey if they could go with the family on their next picnic.

Mr. Starkey pondered the question for a moment and then replied, "Yes, you young men will be welcome to go with us on our next picnic."

Needless to say, the boys were ecstatic. And when he told the girls about his decision, they were pleased also. Patty thought, "This might be a chance for me to let Jim know how I feel about him."

The boys could hardly wait for the day of the next picnic, and it finally arrived. They rode to the picnic grounds with the Starkeys' in their large, luxurious coach.

The boys were on their best behavior and made it a point to visit with Mr. and Mrs. Starkey as well as with the girls. The topics for discussion ranged all the way from the weather to the prospects of the Indian Territory becoming a state.

The boys had been keeping up with worldly matters by reading the local newspaper and various periodicals that Mr. Starkey provided the men in the bunkhouse. So when a topic came up for discussion, they were able to get their "two-bits" worth into the conversation.

Finally, someone suggested it was time to eat. Everyone was agreeable to that; so a table cloth was spread on the picnic table and the food containers were opened. The family chef had prepared a real feast: fried chicken, potato salad, cole slaw, bread and butter, and a jug of cool well water. For dessert they had chocolate-covered cookies and canned peaches.

Patty made it a point to sit next to Jim, and she asked, "Jim, I would like to take you to a very special tree in the grove. Would you like to go see it?"

Jim was unsure how he should answer that question, but decided it would be proper for him to answer it in the affirmative.

"Well, yes, Patty, if your folks have no objections." The parents said it will be perfectly all right; so Jim and Patty started for the grove with Patty leading the way. Several yards into the grove Patty led Jim up to a tree that had been struck by lightning, but not killed. The regrowth was convoluted into many interesting shapes.

"Isn't this a fascinating tree? You can use your imagination a little bit and see all sorts of creatures in it," Patty said.

Jim agreed with her and was ready to return to the rest of the group, but Patty had other ideas. She suddenly took Jim by the arm, looked into his eyes, and softly spoke. "Jim, I really do like you, and I hope you really do like me so we can get better acquainted."

Jim was speechless for a moment and then replied with a defensive tone in his voice. "I like you, Patty, but some day I hope to get Beulah to be my wife. Why don't you take up with Sam; he has a real liking for you, but has been too bashful to show it."

Patty's face took on a wounded and angry look. "One day you may be sorry for what you just said! And don't you dare ever say anything about this conversation to anyone. Promise? And as for Sam, we'll see...."

They finally regained their composure and made their way back to the others. Jim put on a nonchalant air and laughed, "That poor tree that got struck by lightning sure did get crippled up!"

Patty never again made a pass at Jim—to his great relief, but she buried her anger deep into her soul, and more or less on a rebound, set her cap for Sam.

Following that special day, the boys were allowed to take the girls to barn dances held twice a month in the large, community-owned facility.

Jim remembered the dances that Rosita had taught him there in Mexico, and Sam had learned how to dance while growing up in Wichita, Kansas. However, neither knew how to square dance and were grateful when the girls offered to teach them the various steps. They were both good pupils and were soon dancing acceptably well.

The girls were pleased and glad that Mr. Starkey was allowing them to date the young men. As a result of the dating, the flames of romance began to kindle in the two couples—even in Patty who was growing fond of Sam.

As a result of a few months of dating and dancing, serious thoughts of marriage began to inhabit the minds of Jim and Sam. However, they couldn't work up the courage to ask the girls for their hands in marriage.

The girls thrived on the attention the boys were giving them, and secretly confessed to each other that they wished the boys would "pop the question."

Picnics were not held during the winter months, but the square dances were held as usual—much to the delight of the youngsters. Also, the boys would frequently be invited to the Starkeys house on Sunday nights. They would have supper with them and then visit, or play parlor games.

One reason Mr. Starkey invited the boys over for a meal and visitation on Sunday nights was because he was concerned about their spiritual status. Even though neither of them smoked, chewed tobacco, used foul language, or drank liquor, they always respectfully declined the invitations to attend church. So he used the Sunday night occasions to expose them to some biblical teachings by reading a few passages of scripture and commenting on them before he asked the blessing on the food.

CHAPTER 23

Spring came and the countryside responded to the rains by becoming one giant, green carpet interlaced by an abundance of beautiful wild flowers. These beautiful surroundings seemed to furnish fuel for the romantic flames burning in Jim and Sam, and they began to have compelling thoughts about marriage.

They discussed the matter frequently but always seemed to come to the same question: Why would the girls want to give up their lives of luxury for lives of hardship?

Then one morning an inspiration came to Jim and he shared it with Sam. “Sam, we need to get farms of our own so we could make enough money to keep the girls happy.” Sam agreed with that.

So the boys kept pondering the idea of how they might come to have their own farms. Then one evening while reading the local newspaper, Jim spotted an article about “No Mans Land” in the Oklahoma Panhandle. He read the article with great enthusiasm and learned that it was possible for a man to get one hundred and sixty acres of land there—free. The conditions were that the man had to plow the land and live on it for five years. Then he would get the title (or patent) to the land. He showed the article to Sam and they both became excited about the possibilities of becoming rich land owners.

They discussed their options and finally decided to ask Mr. Starkey if they could take some time off to go to the Panhandle to look into the matter.

Jim told Mr. Starkey about the article and asked if he and Sam could make a trip to the Panhandle to evaluate the area. And much to Jim's surprise, Mr. Starkey said he'd read the article and he thought it might be something worthwhile for the boys to look into. He further said things were kind of slack at this time of year and it would be a good time for the boys to make the trip to the Panhandle.

But down deep inside he secretly hoped that this kind of venture might prompt his daughters to rethink their relationships with the two boys; he had sensed that the girls also had marriage on their minds.

So having Mr. Starkey's okay to make the trip, the next morning the boys buckled on their gun belts and put their rifles into the scabbards on the saddles. Then they tied their saddlebags and bedrolls to the leather thongs attached to the saddles.

Then they got Mr. Starkey to open his safe and get out two-thousand dollars of their wages—just in case they decided to purchase some land already developed.

After a final check to be sure they had food and everything else they needed, the boys waved goodbye to the Starkeys and rode off to the northwest toward No Man's Land.

They hadn't ridden very far before Sam posed a question: “Jim, how far do you think it's to where we're going?”

“Well, Sam, judging from the maps I’ve seen, I’d guess it’s around two-hundred miles, which means about a five-day ride.

“Next question: Exactly what town are we headed for?”

“It’s a small town named ‘Beaver’ and it’s about twenty-five miles north of the Texas border. As I recall from the newspaper article that’s where we will need to go to get directions to some land that is still available for homesteading.”

The boys rode along in silence for about ten minutes, and then Sam asked, “Jim, why is the Oklahoma Panhandle called ‘No Man’s Land?’”

“Well, when Texas became annexed to the United States it dropped off that area because it wanted to be a slave state and that much of Texas was above the line for slave states. Apparently, none of the surrounding territories wanted that land either. And because it didn’t belong to any territory, a person couldn’t get a legal claim to any of the land—apparently that’s the reason it was called No Man’s Land. Unfortunately, it became a refuge and home for outlaws and bandits. I’ve heard several really wild stories, and some just interesting stories about what went on in No Man’s Land.”

“I’d like to hear one of those stories, Jim, if you don’t mind.”

“Be glad to oblige you, Sam. Here’s one of them.

“There were plenty of dance halls in No Man’s Land, but the men far outnumbered the women. So when a man entered the dance hall he handed his gun to the cloakroom attendant and was given a number in return. Then before each dance started, they would call out numbers, in sequence. That way no one could fuss about not getting his turn to dance. They also said this way of doing things cut down on the number of fights.”

After five days on the trail, the boys arrived in Beaver, got checked into the only hotel, and then went to see the federal agent who was responsible for assigning land to prospective homeowners.

After an hour of discussion with him, they decided to take his advice and look at some land just to the west of Forgan, a non-incorporated little town located seven miles north of Beaver.

To make sure that the young men found the correct site, he drew them a detailed map showing the exact location of the surveyors’ zinc-pot markers on the quarter sections they would be looking for.

Early the next morning, the boys ate breakfast at the hotel’s dining room and then rode to the Forgan community. They rode through the town on the dirt road that appeared to be the main street. As they rode along, they were surprised at the number of businesses that lined the sides of the main street.

When they got to the top of the hill just west of Forgan, Jim consulted the map again and decided they were still on the right road. The map indicated the land they were seeking was one mile ahead.

As they rode along, they noted that the land was rather flat and covered with grass, knee high, and waving in the breeze just like a field of ripened wheat.

CHAPTER 24

Jim stopped Daisy, scanned the land to the right and left, then exclaimed, "Man alive, this land must be really fertile, judging from the height and thickness of the grass!" Sam agreed.

The boys continued their journey westward and soon found the markers for the quarter sections they were seeking.

"Which quarter do you want, Sam, the north one, or the south one?"

"It really doesn't make a lot of difference to me, but I guess I'll take the north quarter."

"That will be fine with me," Jim said with a laugh. "I will be a little further south of the North Pole than you will be; so it shouldn't get as cold at my house as it will at yours."

The boys then rode down through Sam's quarter and onto Jim's. They noticed a windmill and a large, two-story house in the quarter section just east of Jim's, so they rode over to see if anyone lived there. As they rode into the yard, a young man appeared in the doorway of the house.

"Hello, fellows are you looking for someone?" he asked.

"No, sir, we just spotted your house and were curious to know if anyone was living in it; so we rode over to investigate."

"Well," the young man said, "my wife and I are living in it at the moment, but we won't be living in it much longer if we can help it. Why don't you two come in for a cup of coffee and let me tell you my sad story."

The boys looked at each other, then dismounted and followed the young man into his house. He invited the boys to sit down at the dining table in the center of the room. Then he called out, "Marie, we have company. Could you please bring us some coffee?"

In a few moments a young woman appeared with a coffee pot, cups, and saucers. "Fellows, this is my wife, Marie, and my name is Robert Manning. And what might your names be?"

Jim apologized, "I'm sorry. We should have introduced ourselves right off. My name is Jim Laney, and my companion is my cousin, Sam Laney."

Mrs. Manning set the saucers and cups before the men and poured them full of the steaming, black coffee. Robert motioned toward the small pitcher and bowl sitting in the center of the table, and said, "Help yourselves to the sugar and cream if you would like some." The boys declined and explained that they always had their coffee black.

Then Jim turned toward Mrs. Manning and commented, "You folks sure have a nice, big house here."

“Yes, Mr. Laney it is a rather large house. It has two big bedrooms upstairs, and downstairs it also has two bedrooms.

“And downstairs it has a kitchen, living room, and dining room. We really hate to leave it behind, but as the expression says, ‘You can’t have your cake and eat it too.’”

There was a moment of silence, and then Sam said, “Robert, you said earlier that you had a sad story to tell us; we certainly would like to hear it.” So Robert launched into his tale of woe.

“In the first place, I was stupid to have dragged Marie out here from a good home back in North Carolina. We were by no means rich, but I had a good job in a textile mill, and made enough money for us to live comfortably. But I read some glowing reports in the newspaper about the opportunities that were to be had in No Man’s Land in the Oklahoma Panhandle. So I sold our home and we came out here.

“Since I didn’t want to take time to build a house, or dig a dugout and break out the land, I used most of my money to buy this place from a fellow who had already received a clear title to it. He had developed some health problems and wanted to move back East where the air wasn’t so dry.

“Well, we found out why the air was dry—it doesn’t rain very often. We were used to a lot of rain back in North Carolina, and we just can’t seem to get used to all this dry weather. We also miss the trees, the creeks, the hills and mountains, and a lot of other things.

“We’re sick and tired of the dryness of the area, and we’re going to move back to North Carolina as soon as we sell this farm.”

After a few minutes of thinking about what Mr. Manning had said, Jim spoke up. “How much would you want for your quarter section?”

Mr. Manning replied, “Jim, could I make you a special offer? I’ll sell you the land and house for the same price I paid for them, eight hundred dollars. Then for four hundred dollars more I will throw in two ponies, a good carriage, two mules, a freight wagon, all my farming equipment, and everything in the house except three large trunks and our personal belongings. We need the three trunks to pack our personal items in or I would sell them to you also. And as part of the deal, would you be willing to take us to the train station in Liberal when the time comes?”

Jim replied, “Yes, I’ll be more than glad to take you to Liberal.

“Now Mr. Manning, as for your special offer, here’s what I’ll do. I’ll go back to Beaver and see if I can definitely get the quarter section adjoining this one. If I can, I’ll take you up on your offer. Oh, there’s one thing more; as part of the deal would you be willing to remain here until I come back to move in?”

“Yes, as part of the deal we would be willing to stay here a while longer.” At that, Jim and Robert shook hands to seal the agreement, and the boys departed and

headed for Beaver. The boys arrived there just a short time before the agent's office closed.

They hurried to the agent's office, and Jim signed the proper papers for the north quarter. And then the agent said, "You have six months to occupy your land. If you haven't occupied it by then, it will be put back on the 'available' list."

Then Sam asked the agent if the south quarter adjoining Jim's north quarter was available. It was, so Sam signed up and received it.

The boys then assured the agent that they would indeed be back to occupy the land before the six months were up. They thanked him for his help and went to the hotel for supper and a night's sleep.

The next day they rode out to Robert's place and Jim paid him the twelve hundred dollars. He then signed the title over to Jim, and thanked him for making it possible for him and his wife to get back to North Carolina.

Confident they had secured some good land, the boys started their trek back to Martha, anxious to tell the Starkeys' the good news,—at least they hoped they would think it was good news.

After being gone for fifteen days, the two boys reached the Starkeys home shortly after sundown. The family greeted them warmly, and immediately began to ply them with questions as soon as they entered the house.

"Hold on, hold on a minute," Jim said. "We'll be glad to fill you in on all that happened on the trip, but please let us catch our breath and rest a bit first."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Starkey said, "we were just quite anxious to hear about your adventure, but I'm sure we can wait until after supper to hear your stories. Mrs. Starkey, would you check with the chef and see how long it will be before we'll have supper?"

Jim then said, "If you'll excuse us, Sam and I will go to the bunkhouse and get cleaned up a bit, and then we will come back for supper."

"Good idea, Jim. We will send someone out to get you when supper is ready."

After supper Jim made good his promise and he and Sam told the group the details of their experiences. They all were impressed by what the boys had accomplished, but Mr. Starkey had some very pointed questions.

"Could you please tell me where my daughters fit into this picture? Is it your plan to marry them and then take them to No Man's Land? And if so, how quickly do you plan to do these things?"

It was apparent to Jim that Mr. Starkey was not too keen on the idea of losing his daughters. So he quickly replied, "Mr. Starkey, we certainly would not marry your daughters and take them to No Man's Land without your permission. But in all honesty, we are hopeful that we can receive your blessing to marry your daughters.

We have six months to occupy our land or lose it. So what must we do to receive your approval to marry your daughters and take them to No Man's Land?"

At this, Beulah said, "Jim, you fellows haven't even asked us to marry you yet, and certainly you have not mentioned anything about taking us to that place called No Man's Land."

Jim blushed and quickly apologized. "I'm very sorry that I sort of jumped the gun. I guess I have certainly assumed things that aren't necessarily so. Please, all of you forgive me."

Jim was forgiven, and started to undo his mistakes. But before he was able to do so, Mr. Starkey spoke up again. "Boys, Beatrice and I need to pray about this. Anything this serious certainly warrants a lot of prayer and thought. And I know the girls and my wife will be willing to join me in seeking the Lord for guidance. Therefore, I strongly suggest we put the matter into God's hands and not make any decisions until we receive His guidance." Mrs. Starkey and the daughters nodded their heads in agreement.

In the following days, Jim and Sam had the opportunity to discuss the matter of marriage and No Man's Land with the girls. They soon learned that one of the major problems in their father's mind was the fact that the boys were not Christians.

Being desperate to get the approval of their plans by all of the Starkey family, the boys went to Mr. Starkey the next Saturday morning and told him they wanted to become Christians. Discerning that the boys were serious about it, Mr. Starkey agreed to take them through the scriptures and steps necessary to become Christians.

After a few evenings of tutoring and prayer, the boys accepted the Lord as their Savior. To complete the experience, Mr. Starkey took the boys to one of his stock tanks and baptized them. It was a day of great rejoicing and celebration.

The next day they accompanied the Starkey family to their church and became members. The boys' journey with the Lord had begun.

During the next several evenings, the Starkeys' and the boys had some very speculative discussions about the future of the young couples because Mr. Starkey had not yet given his permission for the marriages to take place.

But during one of those meetings, right out of the blue, the boys asked the girls for their hands in marriage. Silence reigned for a few tense moments; then Beulah said, "We will agree to marry you fellows if our dad and mother will give us their approval."

After what seemed a lifetime, Mr. Starkey finally said, "Well, youngsters, Mrs. Starkey and I have had some long discussions and have done a lot of praying, and we believe the Lord would have the marriages take place. However, we want your solemn word that you will treat our daughters with love and respect and that we will

get to see them at least once or twice a year. Do you boys agree to that?" The boys quickly said they did and there was hugging all around.

CHAPTER 25

Because of the deadline for occupancy of their land, the boys asked if the weddings could be performed as soon as possible, preferably the next day.

Mr. and Mrs. Starkey honored the boys' request, and the next day they rode their buggy into town for the wedding ceremonies at the church. The four young folk followed in the family carriage.

The girls had decided that under the circumstances, a simple wedding would be the most appropriate. So the only participants in addition to the two couples were the preacher and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Starkey, and a few close friends.

After the ceremonies were performed, the group went to the local café and had a celebration meal. Then Mr. and Mrs. Starkey went back home, and the newlyweds got rooms at the hotel where they could spend their first night as husband and wife.

The next morning the couples had their first breakfast together as newlyweds, and then rode the carriage back to the farm.

Each girl had her own bedroom, so their husbands just moved in with them.

At first, sharing the bathroom was a bit awkward, and sometimes a little embarrassing. But in a few days, things settled down and life became an almost normal routine for the couples and Mr. and Mrs. Starkey.

As two months had gone by since the boys had filed for their land, the couples started getting serious about moving to their new homes in No Man's Land. They had agreed they would all share the house on the property that Jim had purchased until a dugout was constructed for Sam and Patty.

Because Jim and Beulah's house was already completely furnished, they simply packed their personal belongings in large trunks. Then they made a list of the items they would need to purchase to take on the trip: food, pillows, sheets, blankets, wash basins, towels and wash cloths, water containers, matches, eating utensils, tin plates, coffee pot, and tarps.

As soon as the list was completed, the boys kissed their wives goodbye and rode horse-back to Martha. There both men purchased a team of mules and a covered wagon. Sam also purchased the tools that would be needed to construct a dugout.

Then they purchased the items that were on the list, loaded everything into the new wagons, tied their horses behind them, and drove back to the farm.

It was late in the evening when Jim and Sam arrived at the Starkeys' home; so they unhitched their mules, untied their horses, and took the animals to the barn.

After they had fed them, they walked to the house and joined their wives and the Starkeys' at the supper table. When they had finished their meal, they visited for a little while, finalized plans for the trip, and then went to bed.

Morning came and everyone rolled out of bed and hurriedly dressed. Then the men hitched the mules to the wagons, tied the horses behind them, and loaded the

trunks. In the meantime, the ladies prepared a big, tasty, breakfast of bacon, eggs, biscuits and gravy, homemade jelly, and coffee.

“You youngsters eat hardy because it will be quite a while before you will have the opportunity for another good homemade breakfast,” Mr. Starkey advised. The girls looked at each other and grimaced a bit, as they realized they would no longer have a chef to prepare their meals.

In fact, they almost became panicky at the thought that they were going to have to learn to cook and keep house for the first time in their lives. This realization had also come to the boys, but they didn’t dare let the girls know how they were feeling.

However, the boys found some comfort in knowing they both had had considerable experience in cooking and housekeeping; and if push came to shove, they could help the girls with the household duties.

Finally, amid much tear-wiping, the couples climbed into their respective wagons, waved goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Starkey, and started down the road.

They hadn’t travelled far until Patty said to her husband, “Sam, are you really convinced we’re doing the right thing by moving to No Man’s Land?”

Sam thought about the question for several minutes, much to the chagrin of Patty, and then he answered: “Patty, this is hardly the time to begin having second thoughts about moving to No Man’s Land. We did a lot of discussing of pros and cons about making such a move and you didn’t voice any objections when we finally made the decision to go. So why don’t you try to have a positive outlook about this whole affair? It will make life much easier for both of us. And if sometime in the future we decide to go back to Martha, we should be able to do so.”

“All right, Sam, I’ll try to have a positive attitude, but please humor me and help me to think the right thoughts.” Sam assured her he would do that and Patty was a relieved—but not much.

In contrast, Beulah was upbeat and excited about what might lie ahead even though she realized life was certainly not going to be any picnic.

“Jim, tell me again about our new farm and what will be the first thing we will need to do when we get settled in.”

“Well, it has only one tree on the entire half section, but we will take care of that right off. Next spring we will plant us a grove of trees for fruit, building lumber, and firewood. And if the windmill will pump as much water as I believe it will, we will be able to keep the trees watered enough for them to grow pretty fast.”

CHAPTER 26

Noontime came and the party found a little creek where they could water their horses and get water for their canteens and water barrels.

They made a fire and heated up some canned meat and made some coffee. This was the first time the girls had ever had to “rough it,” and Patty did not like it a bit—but Beulah did. To her it was a sort of game, not something to get bent out of shape about.

After finishing their rather meager meal, they put out the fire, climbed onto the wagons, and hit the trail again. They hadn’t traveled very far until Beulah asked, “Jim, could you teach me how to drive a team? Dad never would teach us anything about outside chores or farming. He was against ladies working outside of the house.”

“Okay, sweetheart, the time may come someday when you will need to know how to drive a team. And if you’re really interested, I will teach you all about farming and ranching when we get settled into our new home.”

“That would be wonderful!” Beulah exclaimed, “I can hardly wait to begin getting lessons on farming and ranching. But how about teaching me to drive a team—right now?”

Jim thought, “I hope her enthusiasm doesn’t poop out. She can be a big help if she really learns how to be a farmer’s wife.” Then he handed Beulah the reins to the team and announced, “Madam, your teaching has begun.” Beulah eagerly took the reins with a big grin on her face and exhilaration in her heart.

She was a good pupil, a fast learner, and within a short time she was acting like an old pro leading a wagon train—much to her delight and Jim’s astonishment.

“I’ll be glad when we stop for the night so I can brag a little to Patty about my learning to drive a team of mules,” Beulah said.

Evening came and the youngsters found a good place to camp for the night by the same creek they had been following most of the day. They fed and watered the horses and then had a cold-camp meal.

During the meal, Beulah informed Patty, in great detail, of her learning to drive a team of mules. Patty listened nonchalantly and then said “Big deal!” Beulah was a little hurt but let it slide, knowing her sister was not really happy about making this trip.

After supper, all being tired, they spread their blankets beneath the wagons and got prepared to sleep.

Jim was just dozing off when Beulah nudged him and said, “Jim, are there any rattlesnakes in this area?”

“Yeah, Honey, but don’t you worry, we aren’t likely to have any come to visit us.”

“Well, Jim, I’m going to sleep in the wagon. Don’t you want to join me?” Beulah asked.

“I guess so,” Jim replied with a sigh as he crawled out from under the wagon, dragging their blankets with him. They arranged the blankets on the tops of the trunks in the wagon and crawled into the makeshift bed.

Sam and Patty noted what Jim and Beulah had done, and followed their example. Shortly thereafter, everyone was sound asleep.

Just before sunup the next morning, Jim awakened and roused the rest of the party. “Let’s get after it,” he said. “We need to be on the trail early every morning if we’re going to get to our farms as soon as we have planned.”

Jim climbed down off the wagon and immediately froze. The buzz he heard raised the hair on the back of his neck and produced an immediate adrenalin rush. He looked down and saw the rattler coiled under the wagon in the spot where they had planned to sleep.

“Beulah, hand me my pistol—now!” he shouted.

Realizing there was some sort of crisis, Beulah grabbed Jim's pistol from its holster and handed it to him. He quickly fired two shots and the snake lay writhing, minus its head.

The fracas prompted Patty and Sam to peer cautiously out of their wagon and Sam hollered, “What’s going on, Jim?”

“There was a rattlesnake in the very spot where we had planned to sleep last night, probably attracted by the heat we left behind when we decided to sleep in the wagon. Thank you, Beulah, for insisting on sleeping in the wagon!”

Jim pulled the remains of the snake from under the wagon and held it up to get an idea of its length. “Man O man,” Jim declared, “that snake must be at least four feet long, and I can see that it has twelve sections in its rattler. And we had better be on the lookout because his family and friends may be close around here somewhere.”

Patty was reluctant to get out of their wagon, so Sam told her to stay put and he would bring her some breakfast. Jim told Beulah he would bring her breakfast to her if she wanted him to. But Beulah said, “I refuse to let a hanky snake keep me from doing what I need to do.” So she climbed out of the wagon, cautiously, and began helping with the breakfast preparations.

Once they were back on the trail, Patty began to gripe about the aches and pains she was experiencing from riding and sleeping in the wagon. Sam was a little disgusted with her but he tried to console her anyway. “Honey, we should be there in another five or six days—just hang in there. You should get used to roughing it in another day or two and you will no longer get any aches and pains;” Patty was not convinced.

The rest of the journey was made without another rattler incident, but they took the precaution of sleeping in their wagons every night—just in case.

Tired and with some sore backsides, the group drove into Beaver the afternoon of the sixth day of travel. Jim and Sam checked with the federal agent to be sure everything was still all right—and it was until Jim made an assumption.

“Sir, I’m assuming that my wife and I will be allowed to live in the house that’s on the land I purchased. It’s just to the east of the quarter section I filed on.”

To Jim's surprise and disappointment, the agent said, “No, I’m sorry, Jim, but the law reads such that you’ll have to live on the filed-on quarter for five years. After that you can live wherever you choose.”

Jim then asked, “Sir, would it be okay if we just slept in the dugout, and the rest of the time we would stay in the house?”

“Well, Jim, the law is not clear on that point. So I’ll tell you what I’m going to allow you to do. As long as you boys sleep on your quarter sections you will be fulfilling the requirements. Your wives can sleep wherever they choose. Is that clear?”

Jim replied, “Yes, sir, you’ve made it perfectly clear, and I appreciate your allowing us to use the house during the day, and allowing our wives to sleep wherever they choose.

“I don’t know about Sam, but I almost wish you had said my wife had to sleep in the dugout with me.”

The agent laughed; but Jim was not kidding and Sam did not have any comment. The boys thanked the agent for his time and understanding, and then they made their way back to the wagons.

They reported to their wives what they’d learned, and they, especially Patty, were glad the women could stay in the house both day and night. Beulah said, “I’ll spend my nights with my husband wherever he chooses—in the dugout or outside the dugout under the stars!” Patty did not make such a comment, much to Sam’s disappointment.

Then they had a little discussion about where they would spend the night, and they decided to spend it near the edge of the Beaver River.

CHAPTER 27

After breakfast the next morning, they resumed their trip to the home of the Mannings and arrived there about ten o'clock. As soon as they stopped in front of the house, the Mannings came rushing out, and Robert called, "Hello, hello, we're so glad to see you fellows again, and these two lovely ladies must be your wives."

"Yes," Jim replied as he pointed toward his spouse, "this is my wife, Beulah, and the other lady is Sam's wife, Patty."

Robert introduced himself and Marie to the girls, and said, "It's so nice to meet you ladies. Have you had breakfast?" Jim replied in the affirmative.

Marie spoke up, "You all please come in and have a cup of coffee with us anyway, and tell us about your trip."

Marie served up the coffee and Sam related a bit about their trip, with some emphasis on the encounter with the rattlesnake.

"My word," Marie exclaimed, "it sure was a good thing you all decided to sleep in the wagons!"

After a few more minutes of pleasantries, Jim brought up the subject of the Mannings leaving for the East, to which Robert replied, "Jim, Marie and I discussed this at great length after your visit here before, and we agreed we should go back home just as soon as you folks got here to take over our farm. So if you're willing, we'd like for you to take us to Liberal tomorrow so we can catch a train to take us back to North Carolina."

"I'll certainly be glad to take you to Liberal anytime you are ready," Jim replied.

"Great," Robert said, "we'll start packing immediately."

"Could you use some help with the packing, Robert?" Jim asked.

"No, but thank you for the offer, Jim

The Mannings insisted that they eat supper with them. They readily agreed and shortly thereafter the group sat down for the meal.

By the time the group finished eating it was dark, and Robert said, "Well folks, we are going to bed now as we will need to get an early start for Liberal in the morning. If it's okay with you folks, I'll set the alarm for five o'clock; that way we'll have time to eat breakfast and get ready to leave for Liberal by six-thirty.

"If you'd like, Jim, I'll wake you up in the morning just as soon as I get dressed. Then while you folks are getting dressed, Marie can get breakfast for us and I'll get the mules ready for the trip."

"Good idea, Robert" Jim said, "We'll see you folks in the morning."

As the two couples went outside to go to bed in the wagons, Patty said with sarcasm dripping from every word, "Oh goodie, goodie. I get to sleep on a blanket on a trunk one more time!" No one dared to comment about her remark, so they all went quietly to bed.

The next morning everything went off as planned, and just about sunup Jim and the Mannings were ready to begin their journey,

The journey to Liberal was without any problems and the three arrived there about sundown. They stopped at the railroad station and Robert bought tickets for North Carolina; he was told the train would be leaving in the morning at eight o'clock.

They unloaded their belongings and put them in the station house where they would be safe. Then they rode the short distance to the hotel and got out of the wagon. Jim held out his hand to Robert and said, "Well, Robert and Marie, in case I don't get to see you again, it has been a pleasure knowing you."

Robert shook the extended hand and said, "Thank you, Jim, and I hope you like living in No Man's Land. Goodbye, and have a safe trip home." Then he and Marie turned and went into the hotel.

Jim had come prepared to spend the night, so he drove the mules to the livery stable and arranged for them to be fed and kept in the stable until morning. He ate some jerky, and then spread out his blankets in the wagon bed. Being tired, he was soon sound asleep.

Just before dawn, Jim was awakened by a man bending over him with a club in his hand. Immediately, Jim was wide awake, and dodged just as the man swung the club at his head. But he was not quite fast enough and the club hit Jim's head a glancing blow, knocking him unconscious. The thug went through Jim's pockets, removed Jim's wallet, and then he fled toward the railroad station.

In a few minutes, Jim regained consciousness and lay there in the wagon bed for a few seconds trying to get his thoughts collected. His head was almost covered by dried blood; so he sat up, wrapped his head with his neckerchief, and pulled his hat over it to hold it in place and cover the neckerchief and dry blood.

Then he quickly checked his pockets and discovered his wallet was missing. He climbed out of the wagon and started toward the train station. Jim approached the station cautiously but saw no one. So he slipped around to the back of the station and spotted a man trying to climb into an empty boxcar. Jim pulled his gun and shouted, "Turn around and put your hands over your head or I'll blow it off!"

The man turned around slowly and held his hands up slightly. Upon recognizing Jim, a look of surprise crossed his ugly face and he snarled, "You must be one tough cowpoke; I figured that club had knocked your brains out! And you'd better put that hog leg back in your holster before you shoot somebody, sonny boy." The man began walking toward Jim as he was speaking.

"That's close enough buster; any closer and I'll blow you away!" Jim was hoping his threat would be enough to stop the man's approaching, but it didn't.

Suddenly, the man dropped to a crouch as he was pulling out his pistol. But Jim was prepared for just such a maneuver and fired before the hobo's gun cleared leather. The bullet hit the bum in the right shoulder and he fell backwards, screaming as he fell. "Damn you kid; you'll pay for this."

CHAPTER 28

Unbeknownst to Jim the stationmaster had appeared just in time to see the bum go for his gun. So Jim was really surprised when the stationmaster hollered, “What in the devil is going on?”

Jim spun around and saw the stationmaster approaching with his sawed-off shotgun pointing right at him.

Jim replied, “Last night this bum hit me over the head with a club and stole my wallet. I was just trying to get it back when he went for his gun, so I shot him.”

“Okay, both of you march in front of me; we’re going to the sheriff’s office and let him handle this mess.”

“But I’ve been shot and need a doctor,” the hobo whimpered.

“All right, all right, the doctor’s office is next door to the sheriff’s office. So shut up and keep walking,” the stationmaster commanded as he motioned with his shotgun.

Fortunately, the sheriff slept on a cot in his office. He responded quickly to the stationmaster’s banging on the door with the butt of the shotgun, and hollered, “Okay, okay, I’m coming, I’m coming.” He yanked the door open, recognized the stationmaster, and asked, “Lucas, what in tarnation is going on here?”

Lucas and Jim filled him in while the bum stood by gripping his shoulder, bleeding, and moaning and groaning about how badly he was injured.

Seeing that the stationmaster still had his shotgun pointed at the bum, Jim turned toward the sheriff and asked, “Sheriff, would it be all right if I searched this thief to see if he still has my wallet?” The sheriff gave his permission; so Jim stepped behind the thug, searched his back pockets, and retrieved his wallet. He opened it and was relieved to find all his money was still in it. He held it up and exclaimed, “Thank the Lord; all my money is still here!” And about that time Finus, the deputy sheriff, arrived on the scene.

“Finus,” the sheriff commanded, “go get the doctor real quick. Just tell him I have a prisoner who is bleeding all over the place and he needs to get here pronto.” The deputy departed in a fast trot, and about ten minutes later he returned with the angry, unkempt, half-dressed doctor.

The doctor then led them to his office and unlocked and opened his office door, muttering unintelligibly as he did so. The deputy and the thug followed him in; the thug climbed onto the examining table and pleaded, “Hurry up, doc, I’m bleeding to death!”

The sheriff stood in the doorway a moment and then said to Finus, “Stay here with him while I take this young man and the stationmaster to my office for questioning. Doc, I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Okay, Sheriff,” the doctor responded. Then he turned back to the prisoner and said, “You’re a lucky man, mister. The bullet went clean through and didn’t hit a bone. You should be as good as new in a few days, so shut up your moaning and groaning; lie down and be still.”

In the meantime, the sheriff took Jim and the stationmaster to his office and began asking them for details of the shooting incident. Jim told his story in detail and the stationmaster told the sheriff about what he’d seen. After the two had finished their statements, the sheriff turned to the stationmaster and said, “Thank you for your help, Lucas. You can go on back to the station now.”

Then he turned to Jim, “Well, young man, apparently you shot the man in self defense so there will be no charges. You’ll be free to go in a few minutes, but for now I want you to have a seat while I check on something.” Then he picked up a stack of papers and began to shuffle through them.

Jim seated himself in a chair and wondered, “What is this guy doing?” He didn’t have to wonder long.

Suddenly, the sheriff jerked out one of the papers, held it up, and triumphantly exclaimed, “Jim, the man in the picture on this wanted poster is Hoag Rittenburger, the man you just shot. He’s wanted in Wichita for armed robbery, and there’s a five-hundred-dollar reward for his apprehension. Jim, you just hit it big!”

Jim was dumbfounded for a moment. Then with an incredulous look on his face, he asked, “Are you serious, Sheriff?”

The sheriff answered, “I sure am!” Jim sat there for a moment, speechless. Then he jumped up, grabbed the sheriff’s hand and slapped him on the back while exclaiming, “Thank you Sheriff, thank you!”

“Okay, Jim, why don’t you go next door and have the doc look at your head; I’ve noticed some dry blood spots on your collar. So you may need some medicine from the doctor for your head. And while you’re doing that I’ll fill out the papers you’ll need in order to get your reward.”

“Great idea, Sheriff; I’ll do just that. I sure don’t want any infection in my head.” Then with a big grin on his face he added, “Because I’m really going to be using it trying to figure out how to spend all that reward money!”

Jim took the few steps to the doctor’s office and went in. “Where’s the prisoner?” he asked.

“Oh, I got him patched up and the deputy took him to the jailhouse. He sure is one ugly hombre isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he sure is,” Jim replied.

Then he said, “Doctor, I got my head bashed by that mean rascal early this morning, and I’m wondering if you would examine my head to see if it needs some medicine applied to it. It hurts like the devil, but I think it has quit bleeding.”

The doctor carefully removed Jim's hat and the neckerchief, and said, "Son, you have a pretty nasty gash and a big lump, but it has stopped bleeding just like you said. So I'll need to clean it out and put in a few stitches."

Jim certainly didn't like the idea of the stitches, but he told the doctor to do whatever was necessary. The doctor gave him a swig of laudanum to ease the pain, and then began his procedure.

Thirty minutes later, the doctor finished his task and Jim asked him how much he owed him.

"Oh, a couple of dollars should about do it," the doctor replied, "and I'm going to give you some ointment to put on the wound and a little laudanum for the pain in case you need it." Jim paid the doctor, thanked him, and very gently placed his hat on his head. Then he left with the ointment and laudanum in his pockets, and went to the sheriff's office. He picked up the document he needed, and walked to the county treasurer's office which was only two blocks away.

He walked into the office and was greeted by the treasurer. Jim handed him the document which he examined carefully. Then he told Jim to have a seat while he got the reward money out of the safe.

In a few minutes, Jim was on his way to the stable, extremely jubilant about having five-hundred extra dollars in his wallet.

When he reached the stable he paid the owner for keeping the mules, and then he led them out and hitched them to the wagon. In a few minutes he was headed out of town chewing on some jerky as he rumbled along.

Jim kept thinking about the five-hundred dollars in his wallet as he rode along—how was he going to spend it? He finally concluded he would get Beulah to help him decide what they should buy with it.

Satisfied with that thought, Jim began running through his mind the various things that needed to be done to get them settled into their new home. Pondering about all those things made the time pass faster. And before he realized it, he was arriving at their new residence, safe, sound, and happy.

It was almost dark when he drove into the yard, and Beulah was beginning to worry. But her fears disappeared when she heard the wagon pull up in front of the house. She rushed out to the wagon and held up her arms for Jim to climb down into. He did, and they embraced. "Beulah, I love you so much, and I'm so glad to be back home."

Beulah responded, "I love you too, Jim, and I sure did miss you. It seems like you've been gone a week, not just two days!" While they were still greeting each other, Sam and Patty emerged from the house and paused for a moment, watching Jim and Beulah hugging and greeting each other.

Sam asked with a hopeful tone, "Patty, will you greet me like that when I come home from a trip?" Patty glanced at him with a noncommittal look and mumbled, "Maybe."

Sam turned his attention back to the couple and asked, "How was the trip, Jim? Did you have any trouble?"

"How about us going into the house and letting me get a bite to eat; then I will tell you all about it. But first, Sam, would you take the mules to the barn, unharness them, and give them a little grain?" Sam said he would be glad to do so.

The other three went into the house and Beulah got some food out of the pantry and set it before Jim. He began eating and said between mouthfuls, "As soon as Sam comes in I'll tell you all about my experience." In a few minutes, Sam arrived and Jim launched into his story.

The trio listened with rapt attention, very surprised by what they were hearing. Having left out the part about the reward deliberately, Jim finished his story. Then he took off his hat, unwrapped his neckerchief, and bent over so they could see the wound.

Beulah gasped, "Oh, my Lord, Jim, it looks so awful! Does it still hurt?"

Jim replied, trying to be casual about it. "Well, just a little. But I'm going to be okay. The doctor said that if I kept it clean, and kept putting salve on it, in a few days it would be healed."

Then he pulled out his wallet and proudly remarked, "Now for the good part about this adventure." With those words he turned the wallet upside down and out fell five crisp, one-hundred-dollar bills. Mouths fell open, and his audience gasped.

"Where in the world did you get all that money?" Sam asked in amazement; then Jim told them the rest of the story.

CHAPTER 29

The girls and Sam had done a good job of cleaning up the house, moving the excess furniture to the barn, and moving the furniture and other belongings from the wagons into the house. Jim was a bit surprised, but pleased at the progress the trio had made toward settling in.

“Looks like you folks were busy during my absence. I’m very proud of all of you.”

“Yeah, Jim,” Sam said, “we worked real hard trying to get all the moving-in done before you got back.”

“We wanted to surprise you,” Beulah said. “And by the way, I’m so glad you made Sam stay with us. Not only was he a big help with moving stuff out and in, but he also kept us from starving to death,” she added with a grin. “As you well know, Jim, we sisters can’t boil water without scorching it, but all that is going to change. Sam has volunteered to teach us wives all about cooking and housekeeping, providing you will help him.”

Jim was silent for a minute, and then replied with a grin, “Yeah, I reckon I can, just as long as it doesn’t interfere with my farming.”

The boys made good their word and set about in earnest to teach the girls how to cook, bake, clean house, and wash clothing using a tub of water and a wash board; and then they taught them how to iron the various types of clothing and other cloth items.

“I’m so glad you boys’ mothers had the foresight to teach you two about housekeeping. If they hadn’t, we’d all be in a real pickle,” Beulah said, and the rest chimed in with a hearty “Amen!”

Beulah was a fast and eager learner, and was soon competent in household duties. On the other hand, Patty was disinterested in such chores and was slow to learn anything. But the others were patient with her and tried to encourage her to “get with it,” but without a lot of success.

Poor ole Sam was beginning to wonder just what kind of a woman he had married, but he didn’t let on about his feelings because he really loved Patty—warts and all.

After the boys got the girls educated about house keeping, they decided the next thing they needed to do was to get their dugouts dug before the deadline. They had been warned by the federal agent that he would be checking on them from time to time to be sure they were complying with the law.

Jim and Sam discussed just how big they wanted to have their dugouts and decided to make them the size of a small bedroom. After all, they reasoned, the only time they would be in them was when they were sleeping. So they decided to make

them just large enough to hold a two-person bed and have three feet of walking space on all four sides of the bed.

Sam decided to put his dugout in the southeast corner of his land so he would be as close as possible to Jim's house. Jim decided to put his on the very east side of his "free" quarter in line with the house. Thus, Sam could easily ride from his dugout to Jim's house or dugout in two or three minutes.

Having decided on the locations for their dugouts, they flipped a coin to see which one they would start on, and Sam won the toss.

So they got their new picks and shovels out of the barn, walked to Sam's site, and started digging. The land was comparatively soft and the digging went very well. They took turns digging and in four days they completed the hole; it was eleven-foot wide, thirteen-feet long, and five-feet-deep.

After they got the hole dug, they located some lumber in Jim's barn and built a frame around the hole and included a wooden stair-step and door; then they covered the frame with a pitched, shingled roof.

The men decided they didn't need to install any windows as the dugout wouldn't be used for anything but sleeping.

Now, being experts in dugout construction, they confidently tackled the job of building an identical dugout for Jim and Beulah; and in four days it was finished.

After getting some "specifications" from Beulah and Patty, Sam volunteered to make the two-day round trip to Liberal to purchase the beds and bedding needed for the dugouts. He was also going to purchase food and various other items needed in the household.

Jim was grateful to Sam for volunteering to go to Liberal in his place because he didn't want to make another trip to the city just yet; the unpleasant episode he'd had at Liberal was still fresh in his mind.

So he thanked Sam for volunteering and then gave him some unnecessary advice: "Don't spend the night in the wagon." Sam grinned and agreed a hotel room would be a much better choice.

As soon as Sam returned from Liberal, the couples set up the beds and prepared them for sleeping.

Beulah was pleased with their dugout and couldn't wait to get to sleep in it. However, Patty was not impressed; but with reluctance, she agreed to spend the first night in the dugout with Sam.

The next morning Beulah declared, "That was the best night's sleep I believe I've ever had." Jim agreed with her wholeheartedly. Sam said his night was a restful one, and Patty even agreed that the bed was comfortable.

However, she very seldom slept with Sam. On the other hand, Beulah kept her word and spent every night with Jim, generally in the dugout. But on certain special

occasions they would sleep on blankets just outside the dugout so they could enjoy looking at the starlit sky together.

On the first night of sleeping outside under the starlight sky, Beulah asked Jim, “Honey, how many stars do you think might be up there?”

“I don’t have a good answer for that question but I suspect there are several zillion.”

Beulah laughed, “Jim you don’t even know if there’s such a word as ‘zillion.’”

About that time, a shooting star fell across the sky and Jim began to count as fast as he could: “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,” and then he stopped.

“Jim, what in the world were you doing?” Beulah asked.

“Sweetie, have you never heard that if you could count to ten before a falling star disappeared, you could have one wish come true?”

“No, I’ve never heard that. Have you ever got to ten before the star disappeared?” she asked.

“I’m sorry to say I never have.”

“Well, Jim, if you had gotten to ten tonight, what would your wish have been?”

“My wish would have been that our love for each other would never grow cold, and that we’d have a passel of kids!”

“That was two wishes, Jim, and you only get one,” Beulah said teasingly. “So which one would you choose?”

“Well, in that case, my wish would have been the first wish,” he replied as he snuggled up to Beulah, took her hand, and kissed it. Then he softly kissed her cheek. Beulah responded with a kiss followed by a slight yawn and a soft sigh of complete rest and security. In a few moments they were both asleep. It was the first of many nights that they would sleep together under a starlit sky, enhancing their love for each other.

CHAPTER 30

Beulah was anxious to learn all she could about being the wife of a farmer and rancher. She first wanted to learn how to ride a horse astride the saddle. (She knew how to ride sidesaddle, and that was one of the few things Mr. Starkey allowed his daughters to do.) She wanted to be able to go horseback riding with Jim so they could roam around the countryside and get acquainted with the topography and flora of the land.

She also wanted to learn how to shoot a pistol, a rifle, and a shotgun, how to drive a team of mules pulling a farm implement, how to shock feed, how to rope a calf and throw it to the ground for branding, how to milk a cow, and how to feed the livestock.

Jim was a patient man and a good instructor. He just took a few days off from farming to show Beulah how to do the various things. She was an eager, brilliant student, and she enjoyed doing things with her husband. Once she got the hang of doing something, she would practice and practice until she was quite proficient at it.

However, she was pretty nervous about learning to shoot the various guns, but Jim kept encouraging her. “You never know when you are going to need to protect yourself, or someone else, from a man, or a snake, or something else; so just keep on practicing.” She did, and soon became very good at handling and shooting a gun—almost as well as Jim. Aware of this, Jim said with a chuckle, “Maybe you missed your calling, honey; perhaps you were meant to be the first lady to become a Texas Ranger.”

Sam had offered to teach Patty all the things Jim was teaching Beulah, but she was not interested in anything except shooting a pistol and riding a horse. So he honored her wishes and taught her how to draw and fire a pistol. And when she got fairly skilled at using the pistol he began her riding lessons.

He taught her the proper way to saddle a horse, get on it, and control it once she was in the saddle. She really liked to ride her horse, and would often saddle it and ride off into the unfenced areas that were close by.

She wanted to ride into the sand dunes adjacent to the Beaver River, but Sam reminded her about the dangers of doing so, and politely instructed her to stay away from that area. She resented the restriction but abided by Sam’s wishes.

CHAPTER 31

The boys realized they had to have water available for their livestock. So they hired a well driller and had him drill a well and install a windmill and a stock tank at an appropriate place on each of the quarter sections. Within a week they had productive wells pumping water into all three tanks.

Jim also had the driller build a small wellhouse, about fifteen feet high, adjacent to the existing well that was near his residence. Then he had him put a supply tank on top of the wellhouse and run underground pipes from the supply tank into the house and to the inside of all the existing outbuildings (except the privy).

“I wanted it fixed so I can water all the livestock inside their shelters in case the weather turns bad and they can't get a drink from the outside troughs,” Jim said.

And Beulah really liked the new plumbing in the house because she no longer had to lug water from the windmill.

Sam liked Jim's idea about the housing for the animals and the plumbing system. So he and Jim built a barn for his livestock and special houses for the chickens and pigs.

Then Sam had the driller come back, build a wellhouse, install a water-supply tank on it, and then run underground pipes to the three buildings for the animals, and to the garden and tree nursery that the two families shared.

Patty was not at all pleased with what Sam had done. “Why didn't you build us a house to live in instead of building houses for a bunch of animals?”

Sam replied, “I'm sorry, Patty, but it takes quite a while to build a nice house, and I needed to get housing for the livestock Jim and I are getting ready to buy. I promise you that I will build us a house as soon as it's feasible. And besides, Jim and Beulah have assured me that you can keep living with them as long as it's necessary.” That smoothed Patty's ruffled feathers—but not very much!

To continue preparations for their livestock, the boys bought the necessary fence-building items and fenced off a portion of their land for the cattle they were going to purchase.

Once they had everything ready for the livestock, Jim set about purchasing chickens, pigs, and cattle for himself and Sam. He rode Daisy to several of the neighbors' homes that were within three miles. Sam wanted to accompany him, but for the sake of the girls, he agreed to stay behind with them.

Jim would ride up to the neighbor's house, introduce himself, and state his business. If the owner was willing to sell some of his livestock, Jim would bargain with him; and if they could agree on the price for whatever animals he wanted, he'd pay the owner the money for them.

He was a shrewd bargainer, and within a few days Jim had purchased enough cattle, hogs, and poultry for Sam and himself.

Sam paid Jim for his half of the animals, and then he moved them to his farm. After that Sam spent most of his time plowing up the sod on his land, but Jim divided his time between plowing up sod and sowing his spring and summer crops.

He planted some grain sorghum and forage sorghum so he and Sam would have feed for all their livestock during the winter. They also both planted some wheat for the cattle to graze on during the late fall and winter.

Then at the suggestion of the wives, they planted some corn in the early spring so they could have some roasting ears to eat, corn to can, and some corn for the hogs to eat in the wintertime.

In addition, Jim and Sam planted a garden so they could have vegetables to eat and to can.

Jim also planted several fruit trees, shade trees, and timber trees in a nursery and around the house and outbuildings—just as he'd promised Beulah. Fortunately, the rains came at the right time and everything they had planted, flourished.

Beulah was thrilled with the garden and the corn patch, and she and Patty prepared some very tasty meals of fried chicken, roasting ears, and vegetables. Of course, they had to get the boys to help them occasionally with the cooking and canning as they were still in the learning mode.

About this time Jim evaluated the situation and decided that he was going to need additional help with the farming and ranching work; so he built a cottage on his “free” quarter section of land and hired a young couple from Mexico, Ramon, and Chiquita Arcrose, to live in it.

They spoke English well, were a friendly couple, and were readily accepted by the Laneys and the neighbors.

CHAPTER 32

Thanksgiving Day was approaching. The crops had been harvested, and the forage sorghum had been bound, transported in from the field in a wagon, and stacked adjacent to the barns.

The girls had canned two hundred jars of field corn and other produce from the garden, and the boys had processed and cured the meat from a hog they had recently butchered.

When Thanksgiving Day arrived, they carried food to the dining room table until it was heavily laden with baked chicken, dressing, gravy, ham, corn, green beans, cranberry sauce, and hot coffee; and setting on the kitchen countertop for dessert was a mincemeat pie.

When everyone was seated at the table, Jim made a suggestion: "How about us all holding hands and I will pray. Then I want everyone to tell in two or three sentences the thing, or things, they are most thankful for. Is that agreeable with you all?"

It was. So Jim prayed: "Our most gracious heavenly Father, we thank You for all that You have provided for us here in No Man's Land. And now we thank You, Father, for this most bountiful meal. Amen."

Then Jim said, "All right, let's start around the table. Sam, please tell us in two or three sentences what you are most thankful for."

"Well, I'm thankful for my wife, our new farm, our livestock, and everything else the Lord has provided for me and Patty."

"Very good, Sam, thank you, and now it's your turn, Patty."

Patty dropped her head and was silent for a moment. Then she muttered, "Of course I'm thankful for Sam, and for all that we have." Then she added, "And I'm thankful for my wonderful parents."

All were silent for a moment, and then Jim said, "Very well put, Patty, thank you. Now it's your turn, Beulah."

"I'm most grateful for my wonderful husband who has been so patient with me, and who has taught me a great deal about housekeeping, cooking, farming, shooting, and how to milk a cow!" At that last remark, everybody laughed.

"Thank you very much for that compliment, Beulah," Jim said as he smiled at her and lovingly squeezed her hand. "Now I guess it's my turn. First of all I'm thankful that the Lord saved my soul, and that He persuaded Beulah to marry me." He looked at her with great adoration in his eyes, and continued, "And I'm so thankful that we have a new home and that it's paid for!" After a moment of reverent silence, Jim said, "Now let's enjoy this bountiful meal."

CHAPTER 33

A couple of weeks later the wind shifted from the south to the north and it began to increase in velocity and decrease in temperature. The sky began to take on a stormy look in the north, and blizzard-forecasting clouds began to form. Jim read the signs and sensed that a bad storm was on its way.

So he and Sam got the girls to help them round up the livestock and drive them into their respective barns. They also put some extra feed and water in each building.

After that, Jim and Sam rounded up several buckets, filled them with coal, and carried them into the house—just in case the storm lasted more than a day or two. They also carried in extra kerosene for the cook stove and lamps.

About sundown the temperature dropped some more, and the first snowflakes began to fall. Then in just a matter of a few minutes, the snowfall reduced visibility to near zero, the wind was roaring like a wounded lion, and the house was creaking and groaning.

Speaking a little louder than usual because of the noise the storm was generating, Sam said, “I’m sure glad that federal agent gave me and Jim permission to join you girls when the weather is bad. He really is a good guy, isn’t he, Jim?” Jim heartily agreed.

None of them had ever experienced a storm like this one and it was obvious that the girls were getting nervous. With an outward calmness that neither of them really felt inside, Jim and Sam told the girls there was nothing to fear; and in an attempt to take the girls’ minds off the storm, Jim told them a story.

“You all have heard me talk about my good friend, Tex. Well, this was one of his favorite tales. It goes something like this:

“Once upon a time when I was just a kid I had the occasion to visit some relatives in Amarillo, Texas, during the Christmas season. And one afternoon one of those ‘Blue Northers’ came a charging down from the North Pole just like a freight train passing up a tramp.

“When it came time to milk that evening, like an idiot, I volunteered to help. So we bundled up with all the clothes we could get on, got the milk buckets, and started for the barn.

“Uncle Joe was carrying a lantern, and their little pooch dog was trotting along beside him. The temperature was so low that the flame on the lantern would freeze and go out. Then Uncle Joe would pinch off the frozen part, throw it down, and relight the lantern. He had to do this several times before we got to the barn.

“And all the way to the barn, that little Pooch was a barkin’ up a storm hisself, but the temperature was so low that the barks froze in the air and just dropped into the snow.

“Well, when we got to the barn we were out of the snow all right, but the temperature was still way below freezing. When we’d squeeze the poor ole cow’s teat, the milk would come out okay, but it would immediately freeze and just make long, skinny milkcicles. So we just squirted the milk over one arm until we got an armload of milkcicles. Then we’d stick them down in the buckets just like they were a bunch of long, wheat straws.

“When we finished milking, we took the buckets of milkcicles into the house where Auntie thawed them by the cook stove. We ate supper, and then we all went to bed.

“During the night the wind shifted to the south and began to blow some of that Mexico heat into the area. It got so warm that those frozen chunks of lantern wicks began to thaw out, and they set fire to a bunch of tumbleweeds that had blown in with the south wind and piled up against the house.

“Fortunately for us, old Pooch’s barks also thawed out, and the racket they made woke us up. So we jerked on some clothes, rushed outside, grabbed some snow shovels, and started throwing snow on the flames. In just a few minutes we had the fire out. Then we went back into the house, shucked off our clothes, and crawled back into bed.”

Sam and Beulah laughed, and Beulah said, “Jim, that was a real tall Texas tale if I ever heard one. I just hope we don’t have a storm like that going on outside right now.”

Patty said “I’m sorry; I didn’t see much humor in that story.” Then she lowered her voice and muttered with a little whine, “I wish we’d never left Martha.”

The storm was still raging two days later, and soon after breakfast Jim said, “I’m going to check on my livestock.” Then he bundled up in the warmest clothing he had.

While he was doing so he told them his plans. “I’ll follow the fence to the livestock buildings and check to see if they have enough food and water. Of course, if they don’t I will provide them with some. And Sam, if I’m not back within a half hour or so, please come check on me.” Then he added with a chuckle, “I may have gotten in a fight with a snowman and lost.”

“Jim, don’t you want me to go with you?” Sam asked.

“Nyah, there’s no point in both of us freezing off our fannies. You stay here and keep plenty of coal going into that old heating stove. I’ll want it really warm in here when I get back.”

Then Beulah spoke up, “Be very careful, Jim; I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart; the Lord will take care of me.” Beulah was a little surprised at Jim’s reply as she had never heard him say anything like that before, and in her heart she rejoiced at his confidence in the Lord.

To make Patty feel like she was having a part in the plan, Jim asked, “Patty, will you please come over to the door, and just as soon as I get outside, slam the door behind me? That way there won’t be so much cold wind and snow get into the house.”

Patty got up, walked over to Jim, and said, “Okay, Jim, I’m ready if you are.” Jim said a hurried “Thanks,” exited, and Patty quickly slammed the door behind him.

Beulah ran to the pantry, grabbed the mop, rushed back to the living room, and mopped up the melting snow. Sam consulted his pocket watch and saw that it was eight-thirty-five.

Jim decided he’d go to the hog house first, work his way back to the chicken house, go on to the barn, and finally make his way back to the house.

He found the hogs still had plenty of water, but they were a little low on feed. So he got a few bucketfuls from the store room and put it in the feed trough. Seeing that the hogs were now happy, he made his way to the chicken house.

The chickens still had some feed and water; but just in case—Jim filled the water trough and added some grain to the feeder.

He was getting cold and his hands were beginning to feel numb. So he vigorously waved his arms and clapped his hands to stimulate circulation. It helped somewhat so he proceeded on to the barn.

Mules, horses, and cattle by nature just don’t get along well together; and the wind, low temperature, and close confinement just made them more agitated; but Jim continued his chores. He made his way to the water trough and noting that it was almost empty, he opened the spigot and filled the trough. Then he made his way to the feed trough and found it empty. So he went outside, got some bundles from the feed stack next to the barn, and dragged them inside.

The livestock were all trying to get to the feed, so Jim strewed some of the bundles across the floor so all the animals could get to it. The animals gathered on both sides of the strewn-out bundles and began to chomp away.

Jim felt very good that his plan was working so he brought in some more bundles and scattered them out; then he made a mistake.

On his way to the door to go back to the house, he approached too close to the rear of one of the nervous mules. Like a bolt of lightning the mule kicked out with both hind feet and hit Jim square in the chest so forcefully that he was thrown hard against the barn wall.

As he slipped into unconsciousness, Jim thought, “I hope Sam is checking his watch;” then a veil of darkness enveloped his mind.

In the meantime, Beulah was getting worried. She asked Sam again, for about the fifth time, “What time is it, Sam?”

Sam pulled out his watch, glanced at it and noted, “Well, it’s a little later than I thought; it’s been almost an hour since Jim left. He probably found all the animals needed feed and water, and it’s just taking him a little longer than he’d figured on. But if you’ll feel better about it, I’ll go check on him.”

“Please do, Sam, and please hurry,” Beulah urged. So Sam put on his heavy outer clothing, hastened out the door, and fought his way to the barn. Once inside he began to call Jim’s name but he got no reply. So he went on to the chicken house and hog house and repeated his calling—all to no avail.

Now Sam was getting panicky. He rushed back to the barn and started calling Jim’s name again—still no answer. So he began making his way cautiously through the livestock searching for Jim and loudly calling his name.

Finally, when he reached the back of the barn, he discovered Jim lying on the floor. He quickly knelt down by him and began slapping Jim’s face and loudly calling his name. “Wake up, Jim, wake up.” He kept up the procedure for what seemed like a lifetime, but actually it was only a minute or two. Then Jim began to groan and roll his head back and forth.

“Jim, are you okay, are you okay?” Sam asked repeatedly. Finally, Jim mumbled, “Yeah, I guess I’m okay, but where am I?”

“You’re in the barn on the floor. What in thunder happened?” Sam asked, still a bit shaky from his efforts to revive Jim.

“Sam, I sure am glad to see you. If you’ll just give me a few minutes to get my brain working again, and my hands and my fanny thawed out a little, I’ll tell you what happened.”

Sam helped him into a sitting position; then a few minutes later he helped him to his feet. Jim was a little woozy, so for a few minutes he just stood still, leaning against the barn wall.

And while waving his arms and clapping his hands to improve his blood circulation, Jim related to Sam how he came to be lying on the floor unconscious.

“How are you feeling now, Jim?” Sam asked with trepidation in his voice.

“Well, Sam, I’m beginning to thaw out some, but my head feels like somebody inside it’s trying to get out using a sledge hammer. And my legs feel kind of like they’re made out of rubber, but other than that I feel fine.”

Then he laughed a little and said, “All my life I have heard the expression ‘he’s got a kick like a mule’ and I couldn’t imagine what a kick by a mule would be like—now I know!”

“Jim, just as soon as you feel able, we need to get back to the house; the girls will be worried to death.”

“You’re right, let’s give it a try.” With Sam's arm around his shoulder to support him, the pair made their way, cautiously, through the livestock and out the door.

The storm had weakened somewhat but it was still a genuine blizzard. The boys followed the fence back to the house and in a few minutes they were inside, tired, cold, and grateful to be back inside a nice warm home.

The girls were almost in tears with joy and relief at seeing their husbands again—safe.

Jim hugged Beulah tightly then collapsed into a chair.

“Jim, what’s wrong? Are you hurt?” Beulah exclaimed.

Sam said, “Yeah, Beulah, he got kicked against the barn wall by a mule and it knocked him out cold.”

Then Jim filled in the details of his experience, to which Sam responded: “You know, Jim, if you hadn't had on all those coats and some other wraps, that mule’s kick would probably have broken some ribs.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Sam, but thank the Lord I did have on all those clothes;” Sam and Beulah replied with a resounding, “Amen!”

Beulah helped Jim out of his heavy clothing and removed his hat. “Oh, Darling, you’ve got a knot on your head the size of a hen egg, and you have a skinned place that’s bled a little. I’ll get you cleaned up and then I’ll put some of that doctor’s stuff on your head.”

While Beulah was taking care of Jim, Sam asked, “Jim, do you think I should go check on my livestock?”

Patty interrupted and said, “Sam, one accident is enough for tonight; please wait until tomorrow and the weather may be a lot better.”

Sam was surprised, and pleased, by Patty’s concern for him; so he thanked her for her suggestion and agreed to wait until tomorrow.

Jim wanted to reassure Sam, so he said, “Well, Sam, your livestock were fed just like mine, and their watering troughs were filled. And even if they are out of feed, it won’t hurt them to do without it until tomorrow.

“And I agree with Patty, wait until tomorrow before doing anything. It just may be that this storm will have blown over by then.”

Everyone was worn out by the events of the day, and the noisy blizzard; so they “banked” the fire in the living room stove, and all went to bed.

CHAPTER 34

Jim awoke early the next morning with no headache, but with a very sore chest and several sore muscles. He quietly gathered up his clothing and tiptoed into the living room. There he thanked the Lord for keeping him alive and for having only minor injuries.

Then he added some coal to the stove, dressed quickly, and made his way to the front window. He peered out and was elated to see that the sky was clear and there was no sign of any wind—the storm had passed!

In a little while he was joined by Beulah; and shortly thereafter Sam came into the room, fully dressed but still about half asleep.

“Well folks, did the storm end during the night?” he asked.

Jim answered, “I’m happy to report that it did indeed pass, and it left a winter wonderland of huge snow drifts and long icicles;” then the trio went to the kitchen.

Jim lighted the burners on the kerosene cook stove while Beulah gathered together the items for breakfast: ham, eggs, and oatmeal. Sam did his part by making a pot of coffee and setting the table.

“Do you suppose we should wake up Patty?” Sam asked.

Beulah answered, “Why don’t we let her sleep until we almost have breakfast ready?” Sam thought that was a good idea so he let her sleep.

Later as Sam was about to go awaken Patty, she appeared in the kitchen fully dressed. So after the “good mornings” were exchanged, Sam walked over to Patty, hugged her, and kissed her on the cheek; she was surprised, but pleased. Then they all sat down to eat and discuss the events of the day before.

“Boy-O-boy, we’ll sure have something to write to the folks about. I certainly hope they didn’t have this kind of storm down there,” Beulah said.

“I doubt that they did,” Jim said. “Martha is much further south and a lot lower in elevation than we are here; so I doubt that they had anything like our blizzard.”

After a few more minutes the rehash and speculations ended, and they finished eating breakfast.

The boys put on their winter outfits, went out to see about the livestock, and they were glad to find that all the animals were okay.

They refilled their watering troughs, replenished their feed supply, gathered the eggs from the hen house, and trudged back to the house through the snow.

When they got back inside the house, they shared the good news with the girls. Jim joked, “I guess I was the only casualty of the blizzard!”

Spring came and warm weather returned; so Jim suggested at the breakfast table one morning that they go to visit some neighbors. “You never know when you’re going to need some help, so I think it will be a good idea to get acquainted with

some of them.” Sam and Beulah agreed, and even Patty thought it would be a good idea.

Jim suggested that Beulah and Patty put together a lunch so they could eat “picnic like” when lunch time came.

While the girls were preparing the lunch, Jim and Sam went out to the barn and harnessed two horses, hitched them to the carriage, and drove up to the front of the house.

The girls had a basket of food and drinking water ready just as the boys drove up. They went out to the carriage, handed the basket up to Sam, and climbed into the back seat.

The nearest neighbor was only a mile away, so it didn’t make but about ten minutes to get to their home.

“Okay, folks, put on your best manners; we are going in for a visit,” Jim said as he drove into the driveway that led up to the house.

He stopped in front of the house, set the brake on the carriage, and tied the reins to the brake lever.

They all stepped out of the carriage, and Jim led the way up to the door. He knocked, and in a moment the door was opened by a middle-aged lady; she had her hair done up in a bun, and an apron around her waist.

Jim introduced himself and the other three. Then the lady said with a welcoming smile, “My name is June Robertson. Please come in and make yourselves at home. My husband is out in the barn, and if you will excuse me, I’ll run out and get him.”

In a few moments Mrs. Robertson reappeared with her husband, a pleasant-looking fellow with a ruddy face. She said, “This is my husband, Jerry.”

Mr. Robertson removed his sweat-stained felt hat and shook hands with the Laneys. Then Mrs. Robertson asked if they would like a cup of coffee; the Laneys thanked her, but declined the offer.

Then Jim spoke up, “Mr. Robertson, how long have you folks lived here?”

“We’ve been here for seven long years; we came here from Kentucky while this area was still No Man’s Land. We could tell you some mighty strange tales about what went wrong during those first years we were here. But I won’t bore you with them right now.”

Then he continued, “We came here because one day I read about the great opportunities in No Man’s Land and we decided to check out the story. I’m sorry to say, things haven’t been nearly as great as we were led to believe in that newspaper article, and some days I wish I was back in Kentucky.

“We miss the trees, the rainfall, and our neighbors.” He chuckled a little, then added, “But we don’t miss the mildew, the high humidity, the many insects, and the

backbreaking cotton and tobacco crops. And the longer we live here the better we like it. I guess it sort of grows on you.”

Mrs. Robertson abruptly changed the subject. “Do you folks have any children?” There was a brief silence and finally Beulah spoke up, “No, not yet, Mrs. Robertson. You see we haven’t been married very long, but we are planning to start a family pretty soon.” Patty glanced at her sister and mumbled to herself, “Speak for yourself, ma’am!”

“Well, when you do decide to have a family, please let me know. You see I’m an experienced midwife. Many of the families in our community in Kentucky had a bunch of kids and were too poor to afford a doctor. So I got lots of practice delivering babies and giving advice to new mothers on how to take care of them,” Mrs. Robertson said.

Beulah replied with a little embarrassment, “Thank you for your offer, Mrs. Robertson. I may take you up on it one of these days.”

They visited with the Robertsons for about a half hour; then Jim spoke up, “Well, Mr. and Mrs. Robertson, I guess we’d better be on our way because we hope to visit another family or two before we go back home. It has certainly been a pleasure meeting you folks, and we will be looking forward to seeing you again.”

They all shook hands, and then the Laneys made their way to the carriage and climbed in. As they drove away, they turned toward the Robertsons, waved, and yelled, “Goodbye.”

About noon, they found a nice, shady spot and decided to stop there and eat their lunch. Afterward they visited three more families; two of them were hospitable, but the husband at the third place was unfriendly.

He was a rancher and really did not have any use for sodbusters. As soon as he learned that Sam and Jim were in that category, he snapped “Get your sodbusting carcass’s off my property, now!”

As they rode away, Jim’s anger became obvious when he said, “Beulah, put a footnote in your mind: ‘Don’t go visit the Carpers!’” Then he added, “I certainly hope we don’t run onto anymore like that bruiser; with a friend like him, who would need an enemy?”

Having finished their visiting to two good families and one despicable family, Jim drove back to the homestead. As they were climbing out of the carriage, Sam remarked, “Well, it has been an interesting day, hasn’t it? We did meet some nice people.” Then he added, “And that last neighbor was about as friendly as a swarm of wild honey bees!”

In a few weeks the Laneys had finished visiting all sixteen families living within the three miles of their home. The ones from whom Jim had purchased livestock

were primarily farmers, and they were very cordial. But the five that were strictly ranchers were very cool, and very rude.

One morning after they had finished all their visiting and were eating breakfast, there was a knock on the door. The four looked at each other in surprise, as Jim got up and opened it. There stood a handsome young man with a smile on his face.

“Please forgive me if I have come at a bad time. My name is Rick Kearney and I’m your new neighbor to the north.” He extended his hand and Jim shook it and said “My name is Jim Laney. We are just having breakfast, would you like to join us?”

“No, thank you, sir; I have just finished my breakfast,” Rick said.

“Well, Rick, come on in anyway and meet the rest of the family. This is my wife, Beulah, my sister-in-law, Patty, and her husband, my cousin, Sam Laney.”

Rick shook hands with all of them then took a chair offered by Jim.

“If I’m not being too nosy, Rick, please tell us about yourself. Where are you from and how did you come to live next to us?” Sam asked.

“Well, I came from South Carolina. I’m a surveyor by trade and I had about run out of business there in Carolina. When I heard they were settling up a lot of quarter sections in No Man's Land, I decided to move here.

“I was able to buy my quarter section from the former resident for a good price. He was from back East and had gotten tired of the treeless plains and high winds.”

“Do you know anything about farming and ranching?” Sam asked. “If you do, we can probably use you from time to time in our operations here.”

“As a matter of fact, I spent a lot of time helping my grandpa on his farm. It was not really a ranch by standards of this part of the country, but he did raise several head of livestock. So I got well acquainted with working with cattle and horses.

“But when I finally convinced him I didn’t want to be waiting on John Q. Public all of my life, he sent me off to a trade school where I learned various trades; now you know pretty much about my life.”

CHAPTER 35

“By the way,” Sam asked, “did you by chance learn anything about house building at that trade school?”

“As a matter of fact I did learn a lot about the carpenter trade. But since carpenters became a dime a dozen in our part of the country, I chose to become a surveyor. Why do you ask about my carpenter skills, Sam?”

“Right now Patty and I are living with Jim and Beulah during the daytime because we don’t have a house yet.

“In fact, the law requires that I sleep on my own land three more years. But if I had a house built on my own land I could move out of that dugout and into the house as soon as we got it constructed.

“And for various reasons I would like to have a house of my own to sleep in—one reason being I don’t like to sleep alone.”

He knew he’d said the wrong thing the second the words got out of his mouth. He glanced at Patty and got a “drop dead” look. Sam surmised, rightly so, that that look meant henceforth her spending the night with him in the dugout would be even more infrequent.

Trying to make amends as best he could, Sam turned to Rick and said, “Rick, if you can help me build a nice, roomy house that my sweet wife could enjoy living in, I’d like to start on it tomorrow.”

Rick replied, “I would like nothing better than to help you build a dream house for you and your lovely wife, and have it located where you two would like to have it. And the sooner we get it built, the sooner you will be able to sleep in the same bed.

“Now I assume you want to start building tomorrow, so what time would you like for me to show up? I can be here at eight o’clock tomorrow morning.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow morning about eight o’clock.” Then as Rick got up and started to the door, he said, “It was very nice to meet you Sam, Patty, Beulah, and Jim.”

As he walked out the door, Patty noticed how handsome and well-built he was. And she said to herself, “I’ll play up to him a little to make Sam jealous. I’ll teach him to embarrass me in front of other people;” the downfall was beginning.

Rick arrived on schedule the next morning. Then he, Sam, and Patty walked over the quarter section and selected a good spot for the house, a little hill close to the windmill.

Then they went back to the kitchen, sat down at the kitchen table, and sketched out plans for building the new home. When they finished, Sam turned to Patty and asked, “Sweetie, are these plans satisfactory to you? If they aren’t, just say so because I plan to build this house just exactly like you want it.”

Patty was surprised because Sam had never called her “Sweetie” before, and had never asked for her opinion before. She thought, “He’s just trying awfully hard to make up for his stupid mistake yesterday;” but she answered Sam’s question very nicely.

“Yes, these plans are quite satisfactory, but I do reserve the right to change my mind later on. Okay, now what do we do?”

Rick spoke up, “I guess the next thing is to go to Liberal and get what we need for the foundation and framing. What do you think, Sam?”

“Yes, I agree. But we’re going to have to make several trips to Liberal because we won’t be able to haul all we need in just one or two loads.

“So let’s make a list of the materials we will need for starters, and I’ll go to Liberal tomorrow and get them.

“But first of all we need to decide exactly where we are going to put the house and dig the holes for the four-foot poles that I’ve made to support the house.” So they gathered up several wooden stakes and a sledge hammer, climbed into Rick’s buggy, and rode to the dugout site on Sam’s quarter section.

Although Patty would have suggested putting it in a little different place, she agreed with the idea, primarily because Rick liked it—she was beginning to really like this tall, handsome stranger with his rugged build, wavy blond hair, and blue eyes.

They got out Rick’s surveyor chain, measured and staked off the foundation area. Then they staked the locations where the four-foot-long posts to support the house would be buried.

Rick explained in great detail just what they were doing. Patty was a little bored but she feigned great interest. Sam was surprised at that because she had never before showed any interest in a construction project. But he was glad she was showing an interest because that might indicate she was in the process of forgiving him.

“Okay, Rick, now let’s make a list of the materials I will need to get from Liberal tomorrow.” He got a little notepad out of his pocket and began writing as he called off the needed materials. “Rick, if I miss something or name something we don’t need, just let me know.”

Shortly thereafter, with Rick’s help, Sam had completed a list. Then he said, “Rick, while I am gone, why don’t you dig the holes for the four-foot long support posts I have made. Make the holes two feet deep as that will give us two feet of crawl space under the house. In other words, two feet of the posts will be underground, and the remaining two feet will be above ground to support the wooden floor.”

CHAPTER 36

Just as it was getting daylight the next morning, Beulah and Jim were preparing breakfast. Hoping to see Patty, Rick arrived just as they finished.

Beulah invited him to have breakfast with them when it was ready; he eagerly accepted.

Sam was out in the feedlot preparing a team of mules to hitch to the freight wagon. When he finished, he climbed into the wagon and drove the team up to the front of Jim's house. Then he climbed out of the wagon and went into the house.

He was surprised to see Rick at the table waiting for Beulah and Jim to finish preparing breakfast.

Rick greeted him, and said, "I was ready to get to work planting those posts before it got too warm, but Beulah offered me some breakfast. And I decided to eat some of it before I started digging.

About that time Patty arrived, ready for breakfast. And surprisingly enough, she seemed to be in a good mood; this pleased Sam as he thought it might be an indication he was soon going to be a forgiven husband.

The two "cooks" finished cooking breakfast and set it on the table. And Sam hurried ate his, said goodbye to the group, and left for Liberal.

Rick didn't hurry with his breakfast as he was enjoying conversing with the rest of the Laneys, especially with Patty.

Jim finished his breakfast and got up from the table. Then he said, "Well, since I don't want any of my cattle getting out, I guess I'd better go check my fences. I'll see you all at dinner."

"No," Rick said, "you won't see me because I always carry my lunch with me when I'm working away from home. That way I save work time, and I don't get sleepy in the afternoon." Then Rick finished his breakfast and departed for his job digging more post holes.

About ten o'clock, Patty showed up at Rick's work site riding in Sam's buggy. She had a jar of cool water and a small basket full of freshly-baked cookies.

She waved at him and said, "Good morning Rick, I thought you might need a break and some refreshments so I brought you some."

"That was mighty thoughtful of you, Patty. I sure can use some refreshing," Rick said as he strode to meet Patty. "I would offer you a chair if I had one," he added with a big grin, "but the best I can offer is my hand to help you find a seat on one of these piles of dirt."

Patty giggled a little and took his hand as he helped her out of the buggy. "This is an old dress that I'm wearing, so a little dirt on it won't hurt a thing."

Rick squeezed her hand lightly as he led her to a mound of dirt and helped her get seated on it. Then he sat down beside her.

She uncovered the cookies and held them out to Rick, who took a couple and thanked her for them. Then she opened the quart jar and handed it to Rick. "You'll have to excuse me for bringing you the water in a quart jar; that's not very uptown, but at least I didn't spill any of it."

Rick laughed. "Water in any container you bring me will be just fine. I consider it a great privilege just to have you as a very special friend;" Patty enjoyed the flattery.

After a few minutes of idle chatter, Patty said, "Well, I guess I'd better get back to the house or Beulah will be getting concerned about me; she's a real worrywart. But perhaps she will let me bring you some more water and cookies this afternoon—if I'm a good girl," she added with a little sarcasm.

"Then by all means be a good girl, Patty, because I'm sure I'll really need refreshing again about mid-afternoon. And thanks again for bringing the refreshments to me this morning."

With that comment he arose, extended his hand to Patty, and helped her get up. She feigned a stumble, fell into Rick's arms and exclaimed, "Oh, Rick, please excuse me for being so awkward!"

She lingered in his arms for only a second or two, and then she pushed herself away from Rick and pretended to be embarrassed. "I really must go now," she said. So Rick helped her into the buggy and said goodbye as she drove away.

Patty's heart was racing and her cheeks were aflame from the excitement of her close contact with Rick. There was a tinge of guilt trying to beset her but she held it at bay by proclaiming to herself, "I'll teach Sam to embarrass me before a stranger!"

About four o'clock that afternoon, as Patty was preparing to take the refreshments to Rick again, Beulah asked, "Patty, aren't you getting a bit too friendly with Rick?"

Patty replied, "I don't think what I do is any of your business, big sister!" With that, she stormed out of the house carrying the refreshments. She climbed into the buggy and rushed off to see Rick again.

Beulah was hurt by Patty's cruel remark, but she decided maybe she had been too controlling with her little sister and now the "worm had turned."

Beulah muttered to herself, "I hope this is just a passing fancy that will quickly end. Perhaps this is just her way of getting even with Sam for his remark about her not sleeping with him. In any case, I hope the new home will prompt her to forgive him and cause her to actually show him some genuine affection."

When Patty arrived at the work site, Rick hurried over to help her out of the buggy. She took Rick's outstretched hand and allowed him to help her down.

"Hello again, Patty," Rick said with a laugh. "I was beginning to think you had been a bad girl and Beulah had forbidden you to bring me some more refreshments." Patty lied as she replied, "Oh no, Beulah and I get along just fine."

“I’m glad to hear that, Patty. You are both charming ladies and I wouldn’t want to be the cause of any trouble between you two.” Patty thought, “If only you knew the truth;” but she was so glad he didn’t.

Rick took the refreshment basket from Patty; then he took her by the hand and led her to the mound of dirt where they had previously sat. He helped her get seated and then sat down beside her. After a moment of silence, he asked her how things were going, to which she replied, “Fine.”

Then she asked him to tell her about his life before coming to No Man's Land. He made a few noncommittal remarks about himself, and then shifted the attention back to her.

“Please tell me about your life—where did you live before coming to No Man's Land, are your parents still alive, do you have any other sisters or any brothers and....”

Patty politely interrupted him. “Whoa, that’s too many questions all at once. Just give me a little time and I will tell you more about myself than you really want to know.”

“I seriously doubt that, Patty, I am eager to learn all about you—you’re such a wonderful lady.” Rick never passed up an opportunity to flatter Patty because he knew how much she liked to be flattered by him.

Patty proceeded to give him a thumbnail sketch of her life, then said, “I guess I’d better get back to the house and see if Jim needs me to help with the chores. He hasn’t only his chores, but he attends to Sam's stock while he’s gone.”

Then Rick said, “Thank you for the refreshments and your life’s story. The refreshments were very good and your story was very interesting. I sort of envy you of your upbringing. Mine was not...” and his voice trailed off into silence.

Patty was aware that he did not want to talk about his past so she started toward the buggy. Rick came alongside of her and took her arm. She looked at him and smiled, but she didn’t attempt to free herself.

When they got to the buggy, Rick put his hands on her shoulders, drew her close, and gazed deeply into her eyes. For a moment, Patty thought he was going to kiss her, but he didn’t. She was disappointed because she was wondering what it would be like to be kissed by this handsome stranger.

“I’m sorry, Patty, forgive me,” Rick apologized as he released her. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s all right, Rick; I understand. Now please help me into the buggy and I’ll be off for home.” He did as she requested, and with a flick of her whip, she started back to the house—her mind racing. “What would I have done if he had kissed me? Would I have kissed him back? No, I would not have done that—after all I’m a married woman.” But deep down inside she knew she had enjoyed the attention; and

she justified her actions and thoughts by saying to herself, “I haven't made Sam suffer enough yet for his cutting remark. Perhaps next time I will...”

CHAPTER 37

Sam and Rick were making real progress on building the house. Rick was quite skilled as a carpenter and seemed to be a very conscientious worker. But his real objective was to keep Patty involved by asking for her opinion about some detail; like “How high do you want the counter tops?”

Patty also found a justification for staying around. She told Sam she needed to be there while they worked so she could make decisions about where they were going to put the closets, how big the kitchen was going to be, and so forth.

Sam was so eager to appease her that he let her have her way; he was still working toward getting Patty's forgiveness.

Rick was careful in his behavior toward Patty when Sam was around; he did not dare arouse his suspicion. But when Sam would leave to feed his livestock, make a trip to Liberal, or some other chore, Rick would take advantage of the opportunity to talk to Patty.

He would ask her to hold one end of his measuring tape, or have her hold up one end of a board while he nailed the other end. Patty was intelligent enough to know exactly what Rick was doing, but she didn't mind—in reality she was enjoying all the attention she was getting. In fact she was beginning to have a twinge of romance deep down in her spirit, and she was really enjoying Rick's attention. She assuaged her feelings and actions by simply recalling Sam's unkindly remark.

After about two more weeks of working on the house, Sam had to make another trip to Liberal for more building materials. Rick decided it was time to test his progress toward his ultimate objective—a complete conquest of Patty.

As soon as Sam was out of sight, Rick made his first step toward his goal. “Patty,” he asked, “would you please help me hang these doors on the kitchen cabinet?”

“I'd be glad to do that, Rick; just show me what to do.” So Rick showed her how to hold the door in place while he fastened the hinges to the frame. When he finished with the nailing, he turned around and “accidentally” bumped into her. He dropped his hammer on the floor, took her in his arms, and kissed her long and passionately.

Patty stood breathlessly as he held her tightly in his arms; then she gently pushed him away. “Oh, Rick, I'm so confused. I don't think what we are doing is right, but I really don't want our relationship to end.

“And what if Sam should find out? I don't think he would try to kill us, but I don't like the idea of him finding out what we are doing. What do you think we should do?”

Rick responded immediately, “Why don’t we just run off from this place and go to Mexico? I think there we could get your marriage annulled and I could marry you.” He was not sincere, just testing Patty's level of devotion to him.

“Oh no, I could never do that; after all I am married to Sam.”

Patty was beginning to realize the seriousness of her little game, but she didn’t know exactly how to go about cooling their relationship without making Rick angry. So she said, “Give me a few days to think through this situation and perhaps I can come up with some sort of solution.”

Rick didn’t like her idea, but for fear he would drive her off he said, “Well, okay, but please don’t take too long to make up your mind, because not being able to hold you close is going to be very painful for me.”

She replied, “Rick, I feel it best for me to go back to the house now. When I come up with some solution or decision I will come back to see you.” With those words she started toward the buggy.

Rick caught up to her, took her by the arm, and escorted her to the buggy. Then he tried to take her in his arms, but she gently, but firmly, resisted him.

“I’m sorry, Rick, but this is not the time.” She climbed into the buggy, turned toward Rick and said, “Goodbye for now,” and drove away.

The next day Sam returned with a wagon load of materials. As they were unloading them he said, “Well, Rick, I believe this will be enough materials to finish the house; then I guess I’ll soon have to lay you off.”

“I understand, Sam, but it sure has been a pleasure working for you.”

Sam was thinking, “Yeah, I bet it has been a pleasure—with your being able to flirt with my wife.” He was unaware that Rick was trying to seduce Patty, and he had no clue that their relationship was so intimate. But because he needed Rick's help so desperately, he put up with the situation.

Following a hunch, Sam visited with the federal marshal at Liberal on his last trip up there. He had told him about his suspicions concerning Rick, and wondered if he could find out anything about him.

Two weeks later, Sam got a letter from the federal marshal.

Dear Sam, in response to your recent request I made inquiries about Rick Kearney at the federal sheriff’s office in South Carolina. They had no record of a man by that name, but they did have on file the record of a man fitting Kearney’s description. The man is wanted in South Carolina for robbery, criminal assault, and intent to rape. This particular man has a definite identification mark: a three-inch scar on his left shoulder. I hope this information will be of value to you. Sincerely, Hugh Marlow, Federal Marshal, Liberal, Kansas.

Sam read and re-read the letter, trying to decide what to do. Finally he decided to confront Rick and give him a chance to defend himself against those charges.

But just in case Rick was the wanted man, Sam strapped on his pistol and checked to be sure it was fully loaded. Then he went to Patty and told her that he had some news about Rick that he needed to share with him and he wanted her to be there when he did. Patty couldn't imagine what kind of news it could be, but she reluctantly went along with Sam.

As they were riding along in the buggy, Patty asked, "Why are you wearing your gun, Sam?"

"I've been seeing a coyote around the place and I thought I should start carrying my pistol in case I get a chance to shoot it." That seemed to satisfy Patty and she asked no more questions.

When they arrived at the house, Rick came out to meet them. He was a bit puzzled and surprised to see that Patty was with Sam.

"Hello, Patty, it's nice to see you again," Rick said. "It's been a while hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has," Patty replied as she climbed out of the buggy.

"Rick, I need to talk to you so why don't we go inside to get in the shade, and have a little chat," Sam said. So the three of them made their way into the house and sat down on some makeshift chairs.

"What's on your mind, Sam?" Rick asked with suspicion in his voice.

"Rick, I just got some news that made we wonder if you have been being honest with us all this time. Would you mind taking off your shirt?"

Rick went on the defensive. "Why should I," he asked defiantly as he leaped to his feet.

At that reply Sam quickly jumped up and drew his pistol. "I need to look at your left shoulder, so take off your shirt, now!"

Rick knew that Sam had discovered the truth about him, and that he had no choice but to flee. Knowing that Sam had the drop on him, Rick quickly decided he had to somehow disarm and overpower him. So he sneered, "I know, you're just trying to get even with me for wooing your wife away from you. I just figured that the little wench needed a real man to go to bed with her!"

At that remark Sam lost his cool, dropped his gun, and jumped on Rick with the intention of beating the devil out of him. Rick fought back and a bloody fight was underway.

Almost in shock at what she was now witnessing, Patty picked up Sam's pistol; and in a daze, she watched the battle between Sam and Rick.

After a few seconds, it became apparent to Rick that he was losing the battle, but he managed to pick up a piece of two-by-four lumber and strike out at Sam. Sam

ducked but the board hit his skull with a glancing blow that knocked him unconscious.

Rick stood over him, breathing hard, and dripping blood. He looked at Patty who was standing a few feet away, and started to speak. But Patty cocked the pistol and shouted, "Get yourself out of here before I kill you, you lying devil!" Rick picked up his hat and fled out the door.

Then Patty dropped to her knees beside Sam and began loudly repeating his name as she tried to awaken him. "Oh Sam! Sam! I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," she sobbed as she held his bloody head in her hands.

Getting no response from Sam, she panicked and ran to the buggy and climbed in. She took the whip and began lashing the horse as they raced toward the house.

When she arrived at the house she reined the horse to a stop, jumped out of the buggy, and raced toward the house screaming, "Sam's dead! Sam's dead!"

Jim and Beulah rushed to the door to meet her. Patty flung herself into Jim's arms still screaming "Sam's dead, Sam's dead!" Jim began to shake her, trying to get her out of her hysteria.

In a few moments, she had calmed down enough to say Sam was lying dead on the floor of their house. Jim instantly put Patty into Beulah's arms, got into the buggy, and raced to the house where Sam was lying.

He rushed inside and saw Sam lying on the floor with his head in a pool of blood. Jim immediately prayed, "Oh God, please don't let him be dead!"

He knelt beside Sam's body and put his ear on his chest. He heard a heart beat and cried out, "Thank you, God! He's not dead!"

He found some clean rags, carefully dragged Sam's limp body out of the pool of blood, and wrapped up his head in an effort to stop the bleeding. As he was pondering about what he should do next, the girls arrived on their horses. As they rushed into the house, Patty asked through her tears, "He's not really dead, is he?"

"No, Patty, he's not dead but he's lost a lot of blood. We need to get him to the house where we can put him to bed so we can look after him."

So the three of them picked him up, took him out to the buggy, and laid him across the seat. Not having any place to sit in the buggy, Jim said, "Beulah, you and Patty ride Patty's horse and I will ride yours and lead ole Betsy and the buggy back to the house."

Jim's plan worked well and in a short time they had Sam in Patty's bed. By now Patty had regained her composure enough that she could help Beulah clean Sam's wound. The bleeding had stopped but he had not shown any signs of regaining consciousness. "I wonder how long he'll be in this coma," Patty said with great concern in her voice.

Jim answered slowly, "Patty, only the Lord knows the answer to that question.

CHAPTER 38

Patty was so remorseful and guilt-ridden that she would not leave Sam's bedside unless it was absolutely necessary. Periodically, she would wipe his brow and face with a wet wash cloth, and drip a few drops of water into his mouth with a spoon. At night she would sleep beside him, hoping that he would awaken.

Beulah and Jim were both curious as to what led up to the fight and Rick's sudden departure. They finally asked Patty if she could explain why it happened.

At first Patty was reluctant to discuss the issue, but thinking it might help her get over her guilty feelings, she told in considerable detail just what had happened.

When she finished, she asked, "Do you think Sam will ever be able to forgive me—if he lives?"

Jim and Beulah looked at each other, and then Beulah replied, "Patty, what you did is almost unbelievable. If Sam is able to forgive you, it will be by the grace of God. Perhaps you need to get right with the Lord and then ask Him to intervene on your behalf. That is your only hope for Sam's forgiveness."

Patty followed Beulah's advice and that evening as she was sitting beside the bed, she prayed: "Dear Lord, I confess my sin of flirting with Rick, and I ask for your forgiveness. And please don't let Sam die; help him to be able to forgive me and to love me again. Thank you, Lord. Amen."

Periodically during her waking hours Patty would whisper in prayer: "Please don't let him die, Lord, please don't let him die."

Sam didn't die. After a week in a coma, he opened his eyes to see his wife sitting beside the bed with tears in her eyes. Sam weakly asked, "How long have I been out of it?"

Patty replied with a shrill, "For a week!" Then she leaned over the bed and gave Sam a kiss and an attempted hug. Sam responded by encircling her with his arms and squeezing her with what little strength he had.

Patty began yelling, "He's okay, he's okay!" Jim and Beulah rushed into the room hollering "Hallelujah, Hallelujah!"

After a few minutes, they regained control of their emotions and began to answer Sam's questions, one of which was, "Have you got anything to eat—I'm starved, and I need a drink of water!"

Patty and Beulah rushed to the kitchen and prepared a little food and some water for Sam. When they brought them into the room they cautioned Sam to go easy on the food and water because his body might upchuck because it had not had any nourishment for a week.

As soon as they were assured that Sam was going to be all right, Jim and Beulah excused themselves and left the room, closing the door behind them.

“I’ve got a feeling Patty has a lot of confessing, and a lot of pleading to do,” Jim speculated. Beulah nodded in agreement.

After a couple of days of Sam’s recovering, Patty decided it was time for her to confess and apologize to her husband. “Sam, there’s a lot I need to tell you, so please let me have my say before you respond to what I have said—is that okay?”

“Yes, I will listen. At least I’ll try not to butt in while you’re talking, but I can’t promise.”

“First, I want to tell you that I really do love you despite my actions to the contrary. You see, Sam, I really didn’t want to come to No Man’s Land, but for your sake I said I would. I guess there was some resentment in me about having to leave my folks and the security and comfort that I’d had there in Martha. I even doubted a little that you really loved me. I guess I thought you only married me because you were going to need a ‘servant’ to help you out when we got to No Man’s Land. So I was cool toward you and you responded by being cool toward me—what a fool I was.

“And as we made the journey I was constantly reminded by the bumps in the road that I was leaving behind a lot of comfort and security with no real promise for the future. I envied and resented Beulah because she was so happy to be going to No Man’s Land and starting her married life under primitive conditions.

“I guess I thought if I was cool enough toward you, you would finally get the message and take me back to Martha. But when you seemed to be oblivious to my hints I decided I needed to do something drastic. That is when I got the idea of making you jealous by playing up to Rick.

“I must confess that at first it was a bit of a thrill to have him hug me, hold my hand, and compliment me on my looks and my mannerisms. Those were things you seldom did for me. I’m so sorry, Sam. I should have been honest with you from the start and told you how I felt, but I guess I was afraid you would get angry with me, and I was too afraid to speak up.

“But as I sat beside your bed and prayed for your recovery, I realized that you really did love me—you loved me enough to risk your life to defend my honor, even when you weren’t sure that I had any honor left to defend. And as I held your hand in bed, I also realized how much I loved you. And it seemed with each passing day that the love grew stronger.

“I began to realize that if you died I would be lost without you. You had always seen to it that I had everything I needed, and even some things I didn’t really need, things I just wanted.

“I did a lot of soul-searching while sitting by your bedside, and I promised myself and the Lord that if you survived I would do my best to become the wife that you need and deserve.

“Now I want to assure you of a most important thing—Rick never seduced me. He tried but I resisted him because I came to my senses and realized I was a married woman who had made sacred vows before God in our marriage ceremony. I did not want to break those vows, and I did not want to commit adultery.

“Now having said all of that, I beg you for your forgiveness, and I will understand if you refuse to give it to me; and I will do whatever you want me to do to prove that I’m really sorry about what I did.”

There was silence for several minutes as Sam pondered all that he had just heard. Patty was sitting close, weeping softly.

Finally Sam broke the silence. “Patty, I am shocked by your affair with Rick. And I admit that I suspicioned that you were flirting with him and he was flirting with you. I should have done something about it, but I didn’t because I wanted to finish your new house as soon as possible; but now that is all in the past.

“Now I want to thank you for staying with me throughout my coma. There were times when I sensed you were there, and that you were praying for me. I just wasn’t able to shake off the fog in my brain so I could really respond to your attention.

“But I have done some thinking—I want you to be sure that you really desire to be the wife of a man who had the audacity to marry you and immediately drag you off to the end of civilization.”

Sam continued, “And I don’t want to live with a woman who will always be thinking about how good it was back home in Martha. To keep you here against your will, so to speak, would not be fair to either of us.

“So I suggest you go home for a month. If at the end of that time you have decided that you want to live with me ‘until death do us part’, and that you are sure you will not ever bring up the past, then drop me a letter and I will come and get you. And in the meantime I’ll do my best to forgive you for your indiscretions and your transgressions.”

Patty was somewhat smitten by what Sam had just said, but she realized she was partly to blame. But she did agree to his suggestion, and shortly thereafter she took the train back to Martha.

The month dragged by for both parties. Sam struggled with his unforgiveness because he realized he had to forgive Patty for the sake of both of them. He was also aware of the penalty the Bible said about unforgiveness. So he kept asking the Lord to enable him to forgive Patty, and to love her with an unconditional love.

In the meantime, Patty was doing a lot of praying and soul searching. And as time went by she began to have a “certainty” come into her heart that she had not experienced before. The certainty was that she really loved Sam and that she would, with the Lord’s help, make him a wife of which he could be proud of “until death do us part.”

By the end of the month Patty was sure that she wanted to go back to Sam and prove to him that she loved him unconditionally, and would make him the kind of wife he wanted her to be. So she sent him a letter stating she was eager to get back to him and to No Man's Land!

Sam then took the train to Martha and spent two days visiting with the Starkeys' and enjoying the "new" Patty. Then they packed up Patty's things and some blankets Mrs. Starkey had made for them.

"Patty, I know from what you have told us that your winters are very cold; so we wanted to give you some blankets to keep you warm. And every time you snuggle down underneath those blankets with Sam, we hope you will just say a little prayer for us," Mrs. Starkey said.

Patty replied, "Thank you so much, Mom; I will always remember you and Dad for your graciousness and your love. And when we get settled into our new house, we want you to come to visit with us."

Mr. Starkey said, "Oh, you can be sure that we will do that. Now that they have a railroad to Forgan, the journey will be a pleasant one, and we will indeed look forward to visiting you in No Man's Land."

The trip homeward for Patty and Sam was a happy one, and the couple made it with a joy in their hearts that they had never had before.

When they arrived in Forgan they went to the livery stable where Sam had left their horse and buggy. He paid the owner, and the couple started home, laughing and singing as they rode along, happy as could be!

Once back on the farm, they drove to Jim and Beulah's house where they were greeted with shouts of joy and tears of happiness.

"Oh, Patty, it's so good to see you again. It seems like it has been years, not weeks, since I last saw you," Beulah said through her tears.

Jim then took Patty into his arms, hugged her, and said, "Welcome home, Patty. It's so wonderful to see you again, and you look so happy." Then he turned to Sam and continued, "Sam, never before have I seen your face so lighted up!"

Sam replied, "Jim, never before have I had so many reasons to be full of joy and love, and it's a really great feeling!"

"I know it has been a long day for you two, so why don't you come in and have supper with us?" Beulah asked.

The couple accepted the invitation and they were soon eating a hearty meal, followed by a piece of apple pie and a hot cup of coffee.

"Beulah that was a super deluxe meal. Thank you so much for asking us to stay and eat with you. I'll bet Patty will say Amen to that," Sam said. Patty agreed with a lilt in her voice, "Amen!"

Then Sam said to Patty, “I have something I’d like to show you if you will come with me.”

“Oh, yes, Sam, I’m ready to go,” Patty exclaimed. But before they could leave, Jim spoke up. “I’ve got some good news for you two. Yesterday I realized our five years are up!” Sam and Patty started shouting “Hooray, hooray” as they danced a little jig there in the kitchen.

“No, Jim, I had not remembered. Thanks for reminding me that we are now free to sleep wherever we please,” Sam replied. “Now, Patty, my love, let’s go for a little drive.” As they drove away, Sam hollered back, “We’ll see you later!”

They pulled up in front of their new house, and Sam got out of the buggy and tied the horse to the hitching rail. Then he helped Patty out of the buggy and walked her to the front door. Suddenly, he opened the door and with one swoop he picked Patty up and carried her over the threshold.

Patty giggled, “Oh Sam that was so sweet.”

Patty didn’t know that in her absence Sam had finished building the house and installing the new furniture he’d bought. So she was truly surprised and excited by what she saw as Sam led her through the two bedrooms, a bathroom, the nursery, the pantry, the kitchen, and the living room.

When she caught her breath she hugged and kissed Sam and said, “Oh, Sam, it’s all so lovely—and it even has a nursery!”

Sam laughed and said, “Yes, I do plan for us to have a family of boys and girls one of these days.” Patty smiled and nodded in agreement.

Jim and Beulah were also very confident that they would have a house full of young ones at some time in the future; but Jim knew that he would have to have more income before they could start a family. And one way to do it, he thought, was to have more land.

So after Rick’s hasty departure from the area, Jim drove to Beaver. There he talked with the federal agent about Rick’s supposed property. He found that the quarter section Rick had been living on was owned by the local bank. So Jim went to the bank and expressed his desire to purchase that quarter section. The bank officials agreed to let Jim have the land if he would assume the note they held against it.

Since that bank was the one that Jim had been doing business with for several months, he had no trouble convincing them he’d be able to meet the yearly payments of five hundred dollars. The papers were drawn up, Jim signed them, and left the bank happy—convinced he had made a good deal.

Back home he told Beulah that he had acquired Rick’s former quarter by assuming the note against it. Beulah agreed that Jim had made a good bargain. She had always marveled at Jim’s ability to make profitable deals.

“What are your plans for the land, now that you have it?” inquired Beulah.

“Well, since it has been put back to pasture land I’ll just leave it that way and increase the size of our herd. I might be able to find a young couple who would be willing to come on board for a fair wage and the home that is there.

“He could take care of all of our cattle, and also help out with the farming on the other two quarters. And we can probably get his wife to babysit for us when the need arises.

“Oh, by the way, I’m going up there tomorrow to see what kind of shape Rick left the house in. Do you want to go along?” Jim asked.

“I’d love to go, honey. And I’ll fix us a lunch so we will be able to spend as much time as you want to look the place over.”

After breakfast the next morning, Jim and Beulah rode to their newly acquired house. It looked a bit run-down as did the barn and other outbuildings.

“Guess we’re going to have to do some repair work and apply some paint to the house and the rest of the buildings,” Jim said. “Well, let’s go into the house and see how it looks inside.”

“What if the door is locked?” Beulah asked.

“The bank gave me a key just in case I might need it,” Jim replied.

They walked up to the front door, Jim turned the knob, the door opened, and they walked into the living room. What a sight! It was evident that Rick was a poor housekeeper and had made no effort to clean up anything before he left.

“Well, sweetie, it looks like it will take a few days’ work to get this place back into a livable condition. Maybe we can get Sam and Patty to help out.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Beulah replied.

They wandered through the remaining rooms of the house and found them in disarray also. It was evident that there had been no woman living there as there was not a single “womanly” item to be seen.

Jim was opening and closing drawers on the dresser when he exclaimed, “Honey, come look at this,” as he held up an old newspaper. On it was a story about Rick and his lawbreaking episodes under his fictitious name.

“He must have really been in a hurry or he wouldn’t have forgotten to destroy this newspaper, or to take it with him.”

As they read the story together Beulah said, “Oh, Jim, how fortunate Patty was; she could have been a victim just like the woman in this news report. I think we should destroy this paper and not say anything about it to Patty and Sam. It would only upset them again.”

So Jim took the paper outside, ignited it, and watched it slowly curl up, writhe, and finally turn into a small clump of black ashes.

Then Beulah asked, “What do you suppose became of Rick?”

Jim answered, “Based on the fact that he had suggested to Patty that they run off to Mexico, I suspect that’s exactly where he is. But sooner or later his past will catch up to him, or he’ll commit another crime and get caught and killed.”

After an inspection of the outbuildings, Jim and Beulah rode back to Sam and Patty’s home and dropped in for a visit. Jim told them where they had been and told them about the condition of the farmstead.

“Sam, we were wondering if you and Patty would be willing to help us get the place back to looking like it should—a place where anyone would be glad to live.”

“We would be glad to help out, wouldn’t we, Patty?” Sam inquired.

“Yes, I think it will be fun to be working together on a project like this. Beulah and I could fix a dinner for us each day—providing there’s a working stove on the place.”

“There’s a kerosene cook stove in the kitchen that looked like it was in working condition,” Beulah replied. “And there were a lot of pots and pans around so we shouldn’t have to take anything up to the place except the food to be prepared.”

In anticipation of a question, Jim spoke up, “And we did check the windmill; it was pumping water and the barrel in the well house was full. In fact the overflow from the barrel had filled the stock tank. So we’re in good shape for water.”

They put their clean-up plan into motion and in a week they had the place looking neat outside and inside, just like someone lived in it.

As they stood outside and looked around at the buildings, Jim said, “Well, thanks to you beloved people, we now have a second place that could qualify as a good place to live. And I’ll bet that I will be able to find a couple who will be glad to lease it.”

Jim guessed right; in a short time he was able to lease the homestead to a retired couple for a nominal yearly fee. Then he purchased additional livestock for Ramon to take care of on the native grass there on the quarter section.

CHAPTER 39

A few days after they had fixed up Rick's former residence, Patty rushed into Jim's house and screamed through tears, "They're going to lynch Sam!"

Jim jumped up from the breakfast table, took Patty into his arms, and tried to calm her. "Patty, get a grip on yourself and tell us what you are talking about!"

In a few moments she managed to get herself under control enough to tell her story. "Just a few minutes ago four men wearing masks came busting through our door just as we were finishing breakfast. They grabbed Sam and one of them said something like, 'Okay, sodbuster, we're going to make an example out of you. When the rest of the sorry sodbusters hear that you got hung, they'll leave No Man's Land like a covey of scared quail.' Then they tied his hands together, put him on a horse, and then rode away leading the horse Sam was riding on."

"Patty, was one of the men really tall?"

"Yes, the one who did the talking was at least six feet tall!"

"I'll bet it was that ugly rancher, Simon Carper. I remember that we tried to get acquainted with the Carpers a while back, but he made it very clear that he hated sodbusters and he ran us off."

"What are you going to do, Jim?" Beulah asked.

"Well, as I remember it, there was a big tree in the Carpers' front yard, and I'll bet that's where they're planning to hang Sam. Unfortunately, in this lawless land, they could probably get away with hanging. But I know just where they live and I'm going after them—and I will stop that hanging job," Jim said with determination.

As he was getting his binoculars, pistol, and rifle down from their racks on the wall, he quickly said, "Beulah, will you please ride up to Ramon's house, and tell him to buckle on his pistol and come to the Carper's, house as quickly as possible? Ask him to saddle Sam's pony and bring him along and be sure to warn him to approach the Carper's home cautiously, because I don't know what we will find when we get there."

He kissed Beulah goodbye, and said as he was going out the door, "Pray for me while I'm gone."

He rushed to the corral, swung onto his horse bare-back, and raced off toward the Carper ranch. Fortunately the area around the Carper's homestead had a number of hills.

As Jim approached the homestead, he dismounted at the base of one of the hills, crept to the top, and through his binoculars, surveyed the scene in the Carper's front yard.

He was relieved to see that they hadn't yet put a rope around Sam's neck; apparently they were having some sort of hot argument among themselves. "They're probably arguing about just how to do the hanging," Jim thought.

But about that time he saw them fling a rope over a branch of the big tree and drop a noose over Sam's head. "Oh, Lord, it's now or never." He drew a bead on the man who was standing beside the horse with a stick in his hand, ready to swat the horse's rump. He fired, the man fell to the ground, and the other three rushed to his side, wondering what had happened as they hadn't heard the shot.

Then one of the men grabbed a stick and swatted the horse. It jumped and ran, leaving Sam swinging by his neck.

Jim quickly shot at the rope where it was hanging over the branch, but Sam kept swinging. So he jumped on his horse and started for the tree, praying as he went, "Oh, Lord, please don't let him die."

The men saw Jim coming and panic set in. Then Carper's friends leaped on their horses and fled like the devil was pursuing them, leaving Carper and the wounded Sam behind.

Then Carper's wife came rushing out of the house with a butcher knife in her hand, and began hacking at the hanging rope that was tied to the tree trunk. Carper turned and saw her. "Get away from that rope you stupid fool!" But she kept on hacking.

Simultaneously, as the rope came apart and Sam fell to the ground, Carper shot his wife. Then he quickly turned toward Jim who was approaching him on his horse, and recocked his pistol. But before he could fire, Jim put a bullet in his chest and he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Jim dismounted, removed the rope from Sam's neck, and untied his hands. Then, between gasps and with a raspy voice, Sam managed to say, "Thank you, Jim, for saving my life again."

Then they both rushed over to where Mrs. Carper was lying in a pool of blood; she was holding her hand over the wound, weeping and gasping for air.

Jim sat down on the ground and tenderly cradled Mrs. Carper in his arms, ignoring the blood. "Thank you, Mrs. Carper, for saving my cousin's life. I'm sorry all this had to happen, but your husband and his friends were about to commit murder, and I couldn't let them do that."

Struggling to get out the words, Mrs. Carper whispered, "He was a good man when I married him twenty years ago, but when the sodbusters began to move in, he became a changed man." She hesitated a moment, trying to get her breath, then she continued. "He became obsessed about driving them all out of the territory. I cut that rope because I didn't want to see him in Hades or in prison for life for committing a murder."

She struggled to get out her last words: "Hatred can drive a man out of his mind." She went limp and Jim carefully lowered her to the ground, looked up at Sam, and slowly shook his head. A few minutes later, Ramon rode up, leading Sam's horse.

“Thank you for coming, Ramon,” Jim said. “You are just in time to give me a hand with this dear lady and these two wounded men. Sam is all right, but weak from his near-death experience.” Ramon dismounted and helped Jim carry Mrs. Carper into the house and put her on her bed.

Then they carried in the two wounded men, still unconscious, and laid them on the bed in another room. Jim made a perfunctory examination of their wounds, turned toward Ramon and Sam, and said, “I believe they’re going to be okay. Ramon, if you’ll rustle up some rope I’ll help you tie the hands and legs of these two thugs.” Ramon left the house but reappeared a few minutes’ later, holding four pieces of rope.

“I found a rope on a saddle in the barn, so I just cut four pieces out of it. Will they do?” Ramon asked.

Jim replied, “Yes, Ramon, they will be just fine.” Then he and Ramon tied the hands and legs of the men, and Jim commented, “That should keep them from trying to escape.”

Then Jim turned toward Sam and asked, “Sam, do you feel strong enough to ride back home by yourself?” Sam assured him that he was, so Jim continued, “I hate to let you go alone, but I want you to get back home as soon as possible because I know our wives are pacing the floor, wondering if we’re still alive.”

Jim went outside with him, helped him on his horse, and sent him on his way—with Sam thanking the Lord that he was still alive.

Jim went back into the house and said to Ramon, “Watch those two men carefully, and if they give you any trouble shoot them in the legs and that will keep them in line. I’m going to Beaver after the sheriff and doctor—just be careful. I’ll be back as quickly as I can.” He hurried out the door, mounted his horse, and started toward Beaver.

About an hour later, the two men began groaning and trying to become conscious; Ramon warned them to remain still and they wouldn’t be harmed.

A few minutes later, Carper hollered, “Bring me a drink of water!” So Ramon took some water to Carper and his friend. After they had quenched their thirst, they began raving and cursing Jim.

Ramon shouted, “Be quiet, you two, or I’ll gag you!” Evidently they believed him because they became silent and remained that way.

In the meantime, Jim had arrived at Beaver and had gone directly to Sheriff Adam’s office. He introduced himself and told the sheriff just what had happened that morning.

“Jim, I’m so glad you were able to rescue your cousin from a horrible death.” He turned to his deputy and said, “Bill, have Jack and Roy get a wagon and some blankets and drive to the Carpers house to pick up Mrs. Carper’s body and the two

wounded men. While you are arranging for that, I'll get the doctor and go on out there so he can examine the wounded men before you get there." He turned to Jim and said, "Jim, you can ride along with us, or you can leave now; I know you're anxious to get back to the Carpers to see how Ramon is making out."

"Thanks, Sheriff, for taking charge of the situation. I believe I will ride on back to the Carpers now, just in case Ramon needs some help." He hurried outside, mounted his horse, and galloped away. He soon arrived at the Carpers house, dismounted and went inside.

"How is it going, Ramon?" Jim asked.

"Okay, I guess," Ramon replied. About ten minutes later, the sheriff and the doctor arrived. And while the doctor examined the wounded men, Jim and the sheriff discussed the ramifications of the disastrous incident.

The doctor soon finished his examination and said the men would survive. Then a few minutes later the two men from Beaver arrived with the wagon.

As the sheriff and Jim helped them load the two men into the wagon, the thugs began cursing them. Jim removed their bandanas and gagged them. Then they put Mrs. Carper's body in the wagon and covered it with a blanket.

Sheriff Adams spoke up and said to Jim and Ramon, "Thanks for your help with this case. I can assure you that we will soon have under arrest the two men who fled the scene. And when Carper and his wounded friend recover sufficiently, I will see to it that all four of them get a fair trial. My hope about all of this is that the news of the incident will discourage the rest of the ranchers from trying to scare off the so-called sobbusters."

A few weeks later, the sheriff sent a letter to Jim telling him Carper's three cohorts were found guilty of attempted murder and were sentenced to fifty years in prison. Carper was tried on the charge of first degree murder and sentenced to be hanged.

As a result of Mrs. Carper death, the long sentences, and the hanging of Carper, the ranchers changed their attitude toward the sobbusters and never again harassed them in any way; what Jim and the sheriff had hoped for came to pass.

Tranquility came to the Laney's again and life became routine.

CHAPTER 40

A few months later, Jim went to the pasture to examine the fences and to see how the cattle were doing. While he was still gone, a stranger appeared at the door of Jim's house and knocked. Beulah went to the door and opened it and was surprised to see a mean looking stranger standing there with evil written all over his face.

"Does Jim live here?" he asked in a raspy voice.

With hesitation, Beulah answered, "Yes, sir, he does." But before she could ask him why he wanted to know, he stepped into the house, pushing Beulah back as he entered. He slammed the door and drew his pistol. "Woman, if you make a sound of any kind I'll shoot you dead! Sit down in that chair and don't move." He pulled out a short cord and tied Beulah's hands behind her back.

"Where's your husband, wench? Speak up or I'll cave in your skull with the barrel of this gun," he growled.

Beulah stammered, "I think he went to the pasture to check on the fences."

"Okay," the stranger snarled, "I'll just wait for him to come back; I have a score to settle with him." Then he laughed as he pulled an old dirty rag out of his pocket and gagged Beulah with it.

She was terrified and prayed silently, "Oh, Lord, please help us!"

After about ten minutes, she heard a horse whinny and she knew that Jim would be coming through the door at any minute—but she was helpless to warn him.

Jim appeared in the doorway and saw the stranger standing beside Beulah with a pistol barrel against her head.

"Close the door, mister, and stand right there. One false move out of you and I'll blow your wife's head right off her shoulders."

"What do you want, sir, and why are you here?" Jim asked.

"Don't you remember me, Jim? We met in a bar in Columbine, Louisiana, several years ago. You had a young punk called Tex with you."

"But how did you get my name, and how did you find me?" Jim asked out of curiosity, but more as a means of borrowing time.

"Well, it was easy to get your name. I just went to the hotel where you had signed up for a room. I just waved my pistol in the clerk's face and he was more than glad to get your name off his registration list and give it to me.

"Now finding you was not so easy, but I was determined to do it. You remember that you shot my brother in the shoulder, don't you?" Jim was silent so the man repeated himself, "Don't you?"

"Well, I'm sure the scenario will come to you in a minute or two. But I want you to know that the bullet wound you caused got infected, and my brother died a terrible death from blood poisoning. That's when I swore I'd find the man who shot him and take revenge for his death.

“So I found out from the clerk that you boys were headed for East Texas, so I struck out in that direction. But by then there was no trail to follow.

“I didn’t have much money so I had to work my way along as I continued my search. I was tempted to give up many times; then I’d remember how my brother died, and I’d keep on looking.

“After three years of looking I found your friend, Tex, there in Atache. I visited him one night and asked him where you were living. He refused to tell me so I commenced to work him over with my gun barrel. I was enjoying the job because I figure he was partly responsible for Hank’s death. But he was a tough nut and wouldn’t crack. His wife saw that I was going to beat him to death, so she told me what I wanted to know.

“I rode day and night to get here, because I wanted to be sure I got to you before any letter from her would, and I guess I made it.

“Now, would you like to know how I’m going to see you die? Well, I’ll tell you. I’m going to shoot you in the gut so you’ll either bleed to death or you’ll die like Hank did—with blood poisoning!”

He laughed, and then added, “It sure is too bad you’re going to be a widow so young, wench. Maybe I should just take you on with me. I could use a pretty woman like you as my housekeeper.”

Jim made a movement like he was going to approach Bart, but Bart warned him again. “One more step and your wife is dead!”

Jim sensed that Bart was not bluffing because he had that determined-killer look in his eyes. And it seemed that Bart was just prolonging the situation because he was enjoying the mental torture he was inflicting on them.

In the meantime, Sam stepped out of his house to go to the field to do some work and he noticed the strange horse tied up in front of Jim's house.

Since he needed to talk to Jim about some work for Ramon, he decided that would be a good excuse for him to satisfy his curiosity. So he stepped back into the house and told Patty he was going to ride over to Jim's house, but he would be back shortly.

Sam saddled his horse, mounted, and rode to Jim's house. He got off, tied his horse to the hitching post, and made his way toward the house. Then through the window he saw Bart holding the gun to Beulah's head. He didn’t have his gun so he was momentarily at a loss as to what to do.

Then a plan came to him: “If I can distract the man, Jim might be able to jump him.” Sam knew the plan would be risky, but he couldn’t come up with a better spur-of-the-moment idea.

So he found a large rock and heaved it through a side window with all his might. The noise was like a shotgun blast, and Bart stepped back from Beulah, whirled, and

trained his gun on the window. That was all that Jim needed. He lunged across the room and knocked Bart to the floor.

Then with the fury of a wounded grizzly, Jim began pounding on Bart's face. Sam rushed in and saw that Jim had everything "well in hand." So he quickly stepped over to Beulah, ungagged her, and untied her hands. She began sobbing with relief as Sam took her in his arms and comforted her. Bart was lying on the floor unconscious from Jim's beating; Then Jim got up off of Bart, breathing hard and with two bloody fists.

"Thank God you came down to the house when you did, Sam. If you had been a little later I'm sure I would have been shot, and there is no telling what would have happened to Beulah," Jim declared, still panting.

Beulah turned from Sam and flung herself into Jim's arms, ignoring the bloody hands and blood-stained shirt.

"Oh, Jim, what are we going to do with that horrible man?" Beulah asked.

"Well, for the time being I'm going to tie him to a post in the barn, and tomorrow I'll take him to Beaver and file charges against him for attempted murder. That should put him out of circulation for many years."

So the next day Jim rode to Beaver and filed an attempted-murder charge against Bert. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to life imprisonment; Jim was satisfied with the sentence.

A few days later, Jim got a letter from Tex's wife, Margareta, asking for forgiveness for divulging their location. She went on to say that Bart had left Tex for dead, but by the grace of God he had survived.

Beulah immediately sent Margareta a letter saying there was nothing to forgive; and she added "I would have done the same thing if I had been in your place."

CHAPTER 41

A few weeks later Jim and Sam were talking about going to the County Fair that was soon to be in Liberal. The Flier they had received listed the various contests that would be held during the week of the Fair. The two contests that most interested Jim were the Quick Draw-Target Shoot and the Rifle Shoot.

Sam declared he didn't have a real interest in anything except the livestock exhibits and something good and different to eat; and Beulah and Patty indicated they were enthusiastic about visiting the Women's Building and riding the Fares Wheel.

So the couples got together and discussed the possibility of them attending the Fair.

Jim said, "Ramon and Chiquita could look after things while we are gone, so we wouldn't have to worry about being away from home for a few days. And won't it be fun to go to the Carnival and ride the rides, eat hotdogs and popcorn, and drink root beer?"

"Yeah, I'm ready to go," Sam replied, "and how about you girls?" The girls agreed it would be real fun; so they all began making plans for what they would do at the Fair and the Carnival— which would start in three weeks.

Jim decided if he was going to enter the shooting contests he should do a lot of practicing. So he spent about thirty minutes each day practicing his quick draw and target shooting, and about fifteen minutes practicing for the rifle shooting.

He was encouraged by how fast he again became an expert marksman with both pistol and rifle. The trio would watch him practice from time to time, and they were amazed at how good Jim was with his firearms.

"Jim, I believe you're going to be a blue ribbon winner in both shooting contests, and we will certainly be there cheering for you!" Sam exclaimed.

Their excitement mounted with each passing day. And finally it was the day before the Fair was to begin, so they started making preparations. This included packing extra clothing, jerky, canned fruit, homemade bread and cookies, filling the water jugs, and getting the carriage seats padded with some of the blankets Mrs. Starkey had given them.

After supper the night before their trip, Jim suggested, "Sam, why don't you and Patty spend the night with us, and that way we would all be on the same time schedule." Sam said that was a good idea; so Jim set the alarm for five o'clock and everyone went to bed.

Bright and early the next morning they all got up and dressed. The girls set about getting breakfast ready, packing lunches, and filling jars with extra drinking water.

The boys went to the barn, fed and harnessed the mules, hitched them to the carriage, and loaded some sacks of oats into the back of it.

“Well, Sam, I’ll bet the girls have breakfast ready by now, so let’s go eat it before it gets cold.”

“I’m more than ready,” Sam replied with a chuckle. “This early rising and hard work has really given me an appetite.”

The boys made their way into the house and on to the kitchen, and found that the girls had breakfast on the table. The boys washed up and took their seats at the table where the girls were waiting patiently for them.

When they got seated, Jim asked the Lord's blessing on the food, for protection for the group as they travelled, and for a good time in Liberal. They all said, “Amen.”

They began eating and talking at the same time, especially the girls, as they were excited about the trip. Neither Beulah nor Patty had been to Liberal before, so they were especially excited about the upcoming journey and the prospects of visiting Liberal for the first time.

By daybreak they had everything loaded into the carriage and were on their way to the Fair, laughing and chatting like a flock of magpies. There was a bit of fall in the air so they spread some of the blankets over their laps and buttoned up their jackets.

At noon they stopped at a grove of trees near a creek, unhitched the mules, and led them to the creek for a drink of water; then they fed them some oats and hooked them back to the carriage.

In the meantime, the girls had unpacked some jerky and bread and had filled some cups with water for everybody.

“Isn't this adventure going to be really exciting and a lot of fun?” Patty asked.

“It certainly is,” Beulah replied. “I just wish we had started doing this a couple of years ago.” The boys nodded in agreement as they devoured their jerky and bread and swigged down their water.

“Yeah,” Sam said around his mouthful of food, “I vote that we make this an annual event,” and the rest agreed.

A little later, they were in the carriage and on their way to Liberal. As they were travelling along, Patty noticed a weather-beaten building a few yards from the road and asked, “What is that odd-looking house off to the left?”

Jim replied, “Patty, that’s a refuge house, and there are several along this road. They were built as shelters for people caught out in a thunderstorm, dust storm, or a blizzard. Fortunately, as many times as I have travelled this road I’ve never had a reason to use one of them, and I hope I never will.”

They arrived at Liberal a little before sundown and drove to the hotel. After getting rooms for two nights they walked the short distance to the area that included both the Fair grounds and the Carnival. As they passed by the shooting contest site,

Jim said, “All right girls, make a mental note of the location of this place because this sign says the contest starts at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning, and I want you girls to join me and Sam here at this spot to root for me when my turn comes.”

“Don’t you worry, Jim; we will be here with bells on,” Beulah promised.

They finished their tour of the premises and started back towards the hotel. On the way, Sam said, “Sure looks like we’re going to have a big day tomorrow, with lots of things to do, and lots of things to see.”

“I’m tired,” Jim said as he yawned, “and just as soon as I get back to the hotel I’m going straight to bed. I want to get a good night’s sleep because I will need to be cool, calm, and collected when I enter those shooting contests tomorrow.” The other three declared they were also tired, and they all went to bed just as soon as they got back to the hotel.

The next morning they all went to a café and ate breakfast. Sam gave Patty his watch and told the girls to meet them at eleven o’clock at the shooting site.

“As soon as the contest is over, we’ll go find some place to eat lunch with you girls, if that’s okay with you,” Jim suggested. The girls said that would be acceptable. Then they departed to go to the ladies’ barn to view the various exhibits of canned fruits and vegetables, needlework, weaving, and cakes and pies.

The boys went back to their rooms where Jim checked his pistol and rifle to be sure they were loaded. Then he buckled on his gun belt with his holster on it, put his pistol in the holster. Then he picked up his rifle and he and Sam went back to the Fair grounds.

They wandered around the Carnival, killing time and observing the various places where the hucksters were trying to lure people into spending their money on everything from seeing a bearded lady to throwing darts at balloons.

Jim looked at his watch and said, “It’s almost eleven o’clock, so I guess we’d better get back to the shooting-contest site and wait for the girls.”

A crowd was already gathering so Jim stepped up to the registration booth, registered for both shooting contests, paid the two, five-dollar entrance fees, and got a ticket for each contest.

A sign adjacent to the registration booth listed the prizes for the first, second, and third-place winners: First prize was the famous and coveted Sharps rifle (named for the inventor, Christian Sharps), second prize was a Colt 45 pistol, and third prize was a Bandolier.

“I certainly hope I can win that Sharps rifle,” Jim said. “I love my little Henry because it’s a fast and accurate rifle, but its range is not as great as I’d like it to be. From what I’ve read about it, the Sharps is one fantastic rifle. With the extended barrel, like this one here has, it can kill a buffalo up to five hundred yards away. They also say that since a man is much easier to kill than a buffalo, the Sharps is

deadly for eight hundred yards or more, depending on where the bullet hits the man.”

The girls arrived just in time to stand with the boys and hear the contest official begin his announcement: “Listen up you shooters; here are the rules for the Rifle Shoot contest. Each man will get five shots at the target, and the shots must all be fired within fifteen seconds. The overseer will time the shooting, collect the target, add the shooter’s name, and pass the target on to the judges. These judges will go through all the targets, pick out the three winners, and award the prizes: first prize, Sharps rifle; second prize, Colt 45 pistol; and the third prize is a Bandolier.

“And remember, after the Rifle Shoot contest ends, we will begin the Draw-and-Shoot contest right here. If you want to participate, you must sign up and pay another five-dollar entry fee, if you haven't already done so. And by the way, the rules and the prizes will be the same as those for the Rifle Shoot.

“But right now, form lines behind each of the five stands and have your ticket ready to give to the overseer when it comes your time to shoot. Any questions?” There were none so the men began forming the lines; Jim was fourth in line at his shooter’s stand.

The trio got as close as possible to Jim and began cheering him on. He turned, waved at the three, and smiled confidently.

His turn came and he stepped up to the firing line and shouldered his rifle. The overseer said to Jim, “When I say ‘Go,’ I’ll start my stopwatch and you will start your firing. Go!”

Jim commenced firing and finished his five shots well before the fifteen seconds were up. He stepped back to allow the next contestant to step up to the firing line, and then turned and joined the trio.

“Well, Jim, how do you think you did?” Sam asked.

“I believe I got all the bullets inside the bull’s eye,” Jim replied. “I guess in due time we will find out how well I did. In the meantime, I’m just going to trust the Lord and not fret about it.”

Finally, the shooting ended, the chattering ceased, and all eyes became focused on the judges’ stand. The only noises were the sounds of people shifting from one foot to the other and clearing their throats. In just a few minutes the judges finished going through the targets, and the contest official announced the winners through his bullhorn: “First prize goes to Jim Laney, second prize goes to Jack Freemont, and third prize goes to Lance Bigalow. Now let’s give them all a big hand.”

There was much whooping, hollering, and whistling by the crowd for the trio. The girls and Sam were hugging Jim and congratulating him for winning.

When the crowd quieted down, the contest official said through his bullhorn, “You prize winners come on up and collect your prizes.” Jim went forward, got his

prized Sharps rifle, and returned to the trio who took turns examining the prize and congratulating him again.

A few minutes later the contest official took up his bullhorn again, got the crowd to quiet down, and then said to the shooters, "Gentlemen, the rules and the prizes for the Draw-and-Shoot contest are the same as those for the Rifle Shoot. Would anyone like for me to repeat them?"

No one spoke up, so the contest official said, "All right then, you shooters line up behind the five shooting stations and listen to the overseer."

Jim quickly got into line and this time he was in first place. "Well," he muttered to himself, "this time I won't have to sweat out the waiting." The trio was again close by and calling encouragement to Jim.

"Jim, we'll be praying for you again, so just be calm and rely on the Lord just like you did before," Beulah said.

Jim stepped up to the firing line, turned to the overseer and said, "Sir, I'm ready anytime you are."

The overseer reset his stop watch, and said, "When I say 'Go,' draw your pistol and start firing." Jim was gripping the handle tightly, and when the overseer said "Go," Jim drew it in a flash, fanned the hammer, and instantly he had fired all five shots.

Sam called out, "That a way to go, Jim. I'll bet you get that first prize again!"

Jim stepped back away from the line and joined the three who were again proclaiming victory for him.

The rest of the contestants took their turn and finally the last shot was fired. In just a few minutes the contest official picked up his bullhorn, quieted down the crowd, and announced the three winners. "Winner of first prize is Hugh Marlow, our own federal marshal," and a round of applause followed. Jim recognized the winner as the man who had gotten the information about Rick for him and that made his failure to get first prize a lot easier to accept. "Winner of the second prize is none other than our sharpshooter, Jim Laney." Again there was a round of applause and cheering. "And winner of our third prize is Bob Stover."

After another round of applause, the contest official said, "You prize winners please come to the judges' stand and collect your prizes." Then he continued, "Thanks to all of you for coming and making this a great event; now go back to the Fair and have a great time!"

Jim collected his second prize surrounded by his loyal supporters who were hugging and congratulating him. He turned to Beulah and said, "Honey, now you will have a really good pistol to keep in the house to use in case a snake, or some other varmint, should invade your territory."

“Thank you, Jim. And now I’ll no longer have to borrow your pistol when I go out to practice my target shooting.”

The conversation then turned to the rides they could take. They discussed whether or not they should ride the Ferris wheel and the Roller Coaster before or after eating. It didn’t take but a minute for all of them to agree that riding the rides before they ate would lessen the chances of any “upchucking.” So they bought tickets and got on the Ferris wheel.

They were all pleasantly surprised at the view from the topmost position of the Ferris wheel as it turned; they could literally see for miles in any direction.

“Sure aren’t any mountains to block a fellow’s view,” Sam quipped to Patty. “You can almost see into next week from here.”

“Yes,” Patty answered, “and it isn’t nearly as scary as I thought it was going to be.”

After several rounds on the Ferris wheel, the two couples got off and rejoined to discuss what ride to try next.

“Well, are we or aren’t we going to ride the Roller Coaster before we eat?” Beulah asked.

A quick vote was unanimously “We are;” so they walked over to the ticket window and got their tickets. In a few minutes the Roller Coaster stopped in front of them and they climbed aboard, the girls in one seat, and the boys in the seat behind them. Then the conductor fastened the safety bars across in front of them

Then the string of cars started the climb toward the top of the structure. Again the view of the countryside was awe-inspiring. But just as they were commenting about the slowness of the ride, the bottom dropped out of the seats and they were hurdling down and up and around curves, hanging on to the safety bars for dear life. The girls were screaming and the boys were tempted to, but decided that would not be very manly; so they just bit their lips and gripped the safety bar with white-knuckled hands. In a few seconds the rolling coaster came to a stop back at the starting point. They got off the seats, wobbly, white-faced, and breathless.

“Man O man, what a ride!” Beulah exclaimed, “You will never get me on one of these things again, even if I live to be a hundred!” And the other three laughed and agreed it had been a hair-raising ride.

While they were discussing their never-to-be-forgotten ride, Hugh Marlow walked up and extended his hand to Jim. “Hello, Jim, it sure is good to see you again. And congratulations on your winning that Sharps rifle and the Colt 45 pistol. By the way, could I speak to you privately for a moment?”

“Sure,” Jim replied, “let’s step over to the lemonade stand; I’ll buy you a glass and we can talk. And by the way, congratulations on winning that first prize for pulling your pistol and shooting the bull’s eye at such a great speed.”

“Thanks, Jim, and congratulation on winning that Sharps rifle. I believe a cool drink of lemonade would really hit the spot.

“Here’s what I want to talk to you about. Beaver is getting a federal marshal the first day of next month, and he’ll need a good gunslinger as a deputy; I believe you are just the right man for the job. The pay is good, somewhere between two and three dollars an hour, or more, depending on the type of work you’re doing. Are you interested?”

“Well, yes, I’m interested. When can I get the full details about the job?”

“I would recommend that you be at the office of the new sheriff there in Beaver the day he gets there. Then you will be able to get all of your questions answered,” Hugh said.

Jim replied, “Let’s see, the first of next month is five days away, and during that time my wife and I can discuss this offer. Thanks so much for bringing this opportunity to my attention, Hugh. And if you’re ever down our way, be sure to drop in and visit with us.”

“I’ll do that, Jim, and the next time you’re in Liberal look me up.”

“You can bet I will, Hugh, and thanks again,” Jim said to Hugh as he walked away.

Jim went back and joined the three who were dying of curiosity about what the marshal had to say.

Jim filled them in on all the details, and the response from them was varied. Sam thought it would be a good job for Jim, but Beulah was not so sure.

“Jim, when we get back home we can talk more about this, but right now I’m ready to get something to eat,” Beulah said. “Then we can resume our wandering through the Fair grounds and the Carnival. Who knows, we may find another ride that we will want to take—maybe the Merry-Go-Round?” They all laughed as they made their way to the nearby café.

After they ate their lunch, they did indeed take a ride on the Merry-Go-Round and the girls enjoyed it much more than they had the ride on the Roller Coaster. The boys, however, felt a little embarrassed by riding it, but they took the ride because their wives pleaded for them to do so.

That evening during their meal they decided that they’d had enough of the Fair and Carnival, and that they should start home early the next morning.

CHAPTER 42

After an early breakfast, the girls began packing things for the journey home while the boys went to the livery stable, got the mules and carriage, and drove back to the hotel. The girls had everything ready to go, so they loaded their belongings into the carriage and started back home.

The sun began to peer over the horizon just as they got out of the city. It was a multicolored, breathtaking scene, and it inspired Beulah to exclaim, "Oh how beautiful! It's sunrises like this that make me glad I live in No Man's Land."

The group travelled along in silence as they watched the sky metamorphose into various shapes and brilliant colors. Finally, it became a fiery-red whirlpool, swirling and contorting while the Laney's looked on with amazement and a hint of apprehension.

"I have never seen anything like that before!" Jim exclaimed. "All my life I've heard the expression 'Red in the morning, sailors take warning.' Do you suppose we're in for some really rough weather?"

"Jim, by 'rough,' are you talking about tornados?" Sam asked.

"As much as I hate to even think about that kind of storm, it's not out of the realm of possibility."

The girls were getting upset by the conversations, so Jim tried to put their concerns to rest.

"I don't think we have anything to worry about. The odds of our being in a tornado are probably at least one-hundred to one, but we may run into a thunderstorm. And if it will put you ladies' fear to rest, we will stop at the first refuge shack we come to." At that he hollered "Giddyup," slapped the reins on the rumps of the mules, and they started galloping down the road—and the sky began to darken.

After about a mile of galloping, Jim reined in the mules to a walk. "As much as I want to find shelter, I don't want to wind-break these poor animals; and anyway, we should be getting close to a shack."

No sooner had Jim said this, than it began to sprinkle. "Pull that old tarp out from under the seat and use it as an umbrella," Jim suggested.

Sam pulled it out, unfolded it, and stretched it over the heads of the group.

A few minutes later the wind shifted from the north to the west, and increased in velocity. The sky continued to get darker and to take on a greenish color; the rain became heavier and heavier until it was a real downpour.

Jim repeatedly slapped the mules' rumps with the reins until they were galloping full speed down the muddy road, flinging mud up into the carriage; then small hailstones began to fall. "Oh, Lord," Beulah began to pray, "please help us to find a shack quickly!"

The storm intensified, and the wet, muddy occupants of the carriage were becoming almost panicky. Then Jim spotted the outline of a shack just a few yards ahead. He reined the mules toward the structure and thanked the Lord for the quick answer to Beulah's prayer.

Jim stopped the mules just a few feet from the shack's back door, rushed to the door and opened it. Then he returned to the carriage, took the tarp out of the hands of the trio, and shouted, "Grab a piece of luggage and a blanket and run into the shack!"

They did not have to be told twice, and in a moment they were all in the house, dripping mud and rain, and panting for breath. Jim shut the door and turned around to view the three. Between gasps he said, "You all look like drowned rats!" Despite the seriousness of their predicament, they all managed a weak laugh.

The cabin roof was leaking but that was not a real concern of the group. But the increase in the intensity of the storm did concern them because the shack began to creak and groan, and the noise of the hail and wind grew louder and louder. Then suddenly, complete silence!

The group looked at each other with bewilderment and Patty spoke up, "I have read that sometimes just before a tornado strikes it becomes very quiet."

Jim shouted, "All of you, get down on the floor in the middle of the room and cover with the blankets and tarp!" They did; and just as Jim joined them there was a loud roar; the roof of the shack was ripped off and rain and hail poured in.

The girls screamed and began to cry, so the boys tried to protect them by lying on top of them and holding tightly onto the coverings. And just as quickly as it had begun, the destruction ended, and the noise, rain, and hail ceased.

The boys got to their feet and gathered up the blankets and tarp off the girls who were still near hysteria. Then the boys took their wives into their arms and tried to comfort and reassure them.

"It's all right now girls, the storm has passed, and thank God none of us is hurt," Jim said. In a few minutes the girls ceased weeping, but still clinging to their husbands.

Jim asked, "Beulah, are you okay now? If you are I will go outside to see if we still have the carriage and mules." Beulah replied, "Yes, I'm okay."

Jim exited, but in a few moments he returned and announced, "Miracle of miracles, and praise the Lord, the mules and carriage are okay. They were on the lee side of the shack and apparently were protected from the tornado. Our luggage is still in the carriage, but of course it's soaking wet."

Sam said, "Thank the Lord we were using mules instead of horses. If we'd had horses they would probably have tried to outrun the storm, and they would still be headed for kingdom come."

The boys brought in the luggage and opened up the bag that had the food in it. After Jim offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the protection the Lord had provided them, and for the food; then Beulah passed out some jerky and soggy bread.

“Let’s hurry and get back on the road so we can get home before it gets too dark,” Jim suggested. In a few minutes they finished their “cold-camp” meal, repacked their belongings, and were on their way again.

Soon the sun was shining, and there was a warm, gentle breeze. “It didn’t rain very much,” Sam said, “because the road isn’t very muddy.” By noon their clothes were dry, and Jim said they were more than halfway home.

They stopped briefly to stretch their legs and open up the food bag for some more jerky and bread. Then they resumed their journey and were at Jim and Beulah’s home just as it was getting dark.

“Sam, why don’t you two spend the night with us? You can go on home after breakfast in the morning.”

“Thanks for the invitation, Jim. We’ll accept it, won’t we, Patty?” Patty nodded in agreement.

After a quick meal of jerky and bread, they all cleaned up a bit and “hit the hay;” sleep came quickly.

Sunrise found the two families at the breakfast table reliving their adventures at the Fair and their near-disaster on the way home. After every one had had their turn “on the stage,” Patty and Sam excused themselves, thanked Beulah for the breakfast and bed, and then departed for their home.

As soon as Patty and Sam departed, Jim began his oratory. “Okay, Beulah, let’s talk about the marshal job. Frankly, I think it’s a Godsend. I haven’t said anything about this earlier because I didn’t want you to worry; but I’m having a real hard time making the payments on the north quarter. As you may recall, I assumed the unpaid balance on Rick Kearney’s note to the bank in Beaver after he fled the country. In fact, I’m a little behind in my payments, but the bank has been understanding about my situation and has extended the note. From what Marshal Hugh Marlow said about the wages, I should be able to make enough money in a few months to pay off the loan.”

Beulah was silent for a few moments as she mulled over Jim’s argument. Then she said, “Jim, you have a good case for taking the job, but I wish there was some other way we could raise the money, like selling some of the livestock.”

“I discussed that possibility with the banker, but he suggested that is not the best of ideas because that would be a little like killing the goose that laid the golden egg.

“He recommended that I find an outside job and went on to say that in the long run I would be glad I hadn’t sold the cattle. I guess the first thing I need to do though, is to go to Beaver today and see if I can get the job; and if I can, I will find

out about the pay and about the working arrangements. Then we can make a final decision.”

Beulah finally agreed with Jim's logic, so he saddled Daisy and rode off to Beaver. He had no trouble finding the sheriff's office, and as soon as he introduced himself and got the young man's name, he began asking him the questions he had formulated in his mind while making the ride to Beaver.

“Mr. Bradford, I need to know if I can have the job, and if I can, then I'll need to know what all is involved in it.”

Mr. Bradford said, “Before I get into that, how about us getting on a first name basis. ‘Mister’ just sounds too formal, so how about ‘Dean’ and ‘Jim’?”

Jim laughed and replied, “That just suits me fine, Dean.”

“And now back to the job. Jim, based on what I've learned from Hugh Malone, you meet the requirements for the job, and I'd be very glad to have you as my deputy marshal. But I understand you want to know the details about the job before you accept it, right?”

“Yes sir, Dean,” Jim said.

Then Dean explained the duties and details of the job. “First off, your working assignments will be varied and unpredictable, so the government will furnish housing here in Beaver for you and your wife. If the work is light, you will get two dollar per hour; if it's an out of town, or an overnight job, you'll get three dollars per hour. And if it's a dangerous job, the pay will be four dollars per hour. If the job requires going out of town the pay will be five dollars per hour and I'll go with you; and probably ninety percent or more of the jobs will be out of town.

“Most of the jobs will be to arrest claim jumpers, thieves, or fugitives from justice. Some criminals will have a bounty on their head and can be brought back to jail dead or alive, preferably alive. As government employees we can't collect the bounties, only bounty hunters can do that. Do you have any questions?”

“Well, Dean, at the moment I have only two questions: Where will we be staying, and when do I start my job?”

“You and your wife will be staying at Carter's rooming house, and you'll start to work next Monday. By the way, you will get a nice food allowance in addition to your free living quarters. Normally, you will be able to go home for the weekends. Now come on and let me show you the Carter's rooming house.”

The Carter's rooming house was nice, and Jim hoped Beulah would be satisfied to live in it. After the inspection was finished, he thanked Dean for the job, shook his hand, and started home.

Beulah met him at the door and began bombarding him with questions. “Whoa, Beulah, just give me a little time, and I will explain the whole business to you;” and he proceeded to do so.

“Well, honey,” Beulah said, “I have mixed emotions about moving off the farm for a week at a time, but I guess between Ramon and Sam they should be able to take care of it during our absence.”

Then Jim dropped a bomb shell: “Beulah, I did some rough mental calculations on the way home, and I figured it would probably take at least a year for me to make enough money to pay off the note if I took the job of deputy marshal. But I thought about another option: bounty hunting.”

At that, a look of horror crossed Beulah’s face, “Jim, you shouldn’t even think about taking a job like that!”

“Please, Beulah, just think about it for a moment. As a bounty hunter, I would be doing exactly the same thing I’d be doing if I were a deputy marshal. The only difference is, if I do it as a deputy marshal, I will not get any of the bounty money. But if I do it as a bounty hunter, I get to keep all the bounty money. I figure that it would not take more than five or six arrests as a bounty hunter to make enough money to pay off the note at the bank. In addition, we wouldn’t have to move to Beaver, and I could more or less choose my own hours to work. Please, just give it a little thought, Beulah, and I believe you will agree with me on this.”

Beulah was silent for several minutes. Then she said, “I never would have thought about it that way, Jim, but your idea does make sense.”

CHAPTER 43

The next day Jim rode back to Beaver, explained his decision and why he made it. Dean acted like he was a little disappointed; then he offered Jim a proposition.

“Jim, so far as I know, there’s nothing in the law that says a peace officer can’t use the help of a bounty hunter, or that they can’t give the bounty hunter information pertaining to the fugitive. I think their philosophy is that putting a high bounty on the head of a criminal will encourage bounty hunters to seek out the criminal, and in so doing the bounty hunters may, in effect, be preventing additional crimes by the fugitive. And if the bounty hunter is aided by the peace officer, that will improve the odds that the fugitive will be captured.

“So here is my proposition: If I get a wanted poster for one of those tough, murderous desperadoes with a big bounty on his head, would you be willing to go along with me to help arrest him? You will get to keep the bounty, and I will have the assurance that I have the help of a real sharpshooter.”

Jim replied with a question: “Dean, let me get this straight. If I go after a fugitive and you go with me, or if you go after a fugitive and I go with you, either way, I will get to keep the bounty?”

Dean had a quick response, “That’s correct, Jim, either way you can't loose and I can't either.”

“One final question: How are you going to get word to me that you have a fugitive and want my help?”

“Well, Jim, I’ve got a surprising answer for that question. I’ll send a man on a motorcycle to get you. I’m sure I can make a deal with Vic to fetch you for a nominal fee. He’s doing all sorts of things to get money to make the payment on his new motorcycle.

“Knowing approximately where you live, I figure that Vic can make a round trip in less than an hour, if it doesn’t take you too long to get ready, and if the roads are in fair shape.”

“Sounds like you have a good plan, Dean; I'm willing to give it a try. I will go home and make me a ‘bounty pack,’ including my guns and bullets, so I will be ready to travel at a moments notice.”

“Good idea, Jim, but before you leave, I need you to fill out an application for a bounty hunter’s license. I will approve it and give you a copy. Then you’ll be all set to go.”

Jim filled out the application papers and Dean approved them. Then he filled in the date blank on the license, signed it, and made Jim a copy. “You are now a duly licensed bounty hunter, Jim.”

The men shook hands and Jim started for the door. Then he turned around and addressed Dean. “One big favor, Dean, please don’t tell anyone that I have become a bounty hunter. As you well know, bounty hunters are often considered riffraff.”

“Don’t worry, Jim. Your secret is safe with me.” Jim thanked him for his consideration and left.

When Jim arrived home he told Beulah all about his talk with Dean and that he was now a licensed bounty hunter. Beulah congratulated him, but was really not at peace about the matter. So she asked, “Jim, you know the Bible says, ‘Thou shall not kill.’ How are you going to deal with that?”

Jim pondered the question, and then answered, “Beulah, I have never killed a man, even when I was in the war, and I will never intentionally kill one. When I shoot a man, I shoot to disable him so he can’t shoot me; I don’t think God will hold that against me. And by the way, I’ve read that the commandment ‘Thou shall not kill’ can be translated as ‘Thou shall not murder.’” Beulah was somewhat relieved.

About mid-afternoon ten days later, Jim heard the roar of an engine and rushed outside. Approaching on a motorcycle was a young man wearing a black cap, goggles, tan leather jacket, red scarf, black leather gauntlets, and high-top black boots. He brought the motorcycle to a skidding halt right in front of Jim—creating a cloud of dust. He cut the motor, and as the dust cleared, he extended his hand and greeted Jim. “Howdy, my name is Vic, and I’ll bet yours is Jim.”

Jim took a good look at the young man’s outlandish getup, and almost laughed, but instead he shook Vic’s hand and replied, “You’re right, Vic; I’m Jim. Just give me a few minutes to change clothes, get my bag and guns, and I’ll be right back.”

Jim rushed into the house and hollered, “Sweetie, I’m going to be leaving in a few minutes. The man on a motorcycle is here to get me.”

In a few moments he had changed into his special, bounty-hunting gear: heavy-duty, light-colored shirt and trousers, red neckerchief, light-tan jacket, high-top cowboy boots, and a tan-colored, broad-brimmed cowboy hat. Then he kissed Beulah and gave her a big hug. She took his arm and walked to the door with him.

As they walked out onto the porch, Jim turned toward Beulah and said, “Don’t worry, honey. Just pray that the Lord will keep me safe and I will be okay.” He picked up his bounty bag and rifle and climbed on behind Vic.

With tear-filled eyes, Beulah waved goodbye and prayed, “Lord, please keep him safe and bring him back home soon.”

Vic wanted to impress Jim with his prowess as a motorcycle handler so he kept revving up the engine and changing to a higher gear. Jim was sitting behind him, eyes closed, holding on to his rifle and bag with one hand, gripping Vic tightly with the other arm, and wondering if he would survive to become a bounty hunter.

Vic turned his head to the side and shouted, “Are you all right back there, Jim?” Jim managed to reply with a rather weak, “Yeah.”

In about fifteen minutes the pair arrived at the sheriff’s office, parked the motorcycle, and went inside. Dean took one look at Jim and asked, “Jim, are you okay? You look a bit white around the gills.”

Jim responded, “I’ve ridden a lot of wild, bucking horses in my time, but I never rode one that would match the ride I just had! That Vic really knows how to speed up your heart rate!” Vic just grinned sheepishly.

Dean chuckled lightly, and then said “I guess we had better get down to business, Jim, because we’ve got a serious problem on our hands. And, Vic, stick around; I may need you again.

“Jim, these two outlaws we are going to be after are the worst kind. Their names are Cliff Radders and Carl Rooper, and they’re part of a gang of five men wanted in several states for rape, murder, and bank holdups.

“Last week these two escaped from a jail in North Platte, Nebraska. The lawmen ‘persuaded’ one of the rest of the gang to talk, and they learned these two were likely headed for Mexico as that had been the plan of the gang before they got captured.

“When I got a letter and the wanted-poster details about the two thugs, I figured they might come through Beaver as it’s on one of the shortest trails to Mexico. And I figured they would be arriving in Beaver pretty soon after I got the letter and posters—if indeed they were going to come through here.” Unfortunately, Dean did not know what had already happened.

The bandits had arrived early that morning needing fresh horses. So they went to the corral of Jack Tower and picked out three fresh-looking horses.

They had decided if they kidnapped somebody, and then told the rest of the family that if the law tried to follow them they would kill the one they had kidnapped; and that threat would keep the law from chasing them.

So they went to Jack Tower’s house, kicked the door in, and went inside with their guns drawn. They found Jack Tower, his wife, and their teenaged daughter, Sherry, eating breakfast.

“Aha,” Boozer said, “The perfect family for our little kidnapping.” So he tied Jack and his wife to their chairs while the other thug held a gun on them and the daughter.

Then Boozer said, “Me and Lucky are going to take your daughter to Mexico with us, and sell her for a good price. And if you send the law after us, we’ll kill your daughter in a heart beat.”

Then they took Sherry outside and put her on the horse they had brought for the girl to ride. Then they mounted up and galloped out of town, leading the horse Sherry was riding.

In the meantime Jack managed to get free from his chair. Then he untied his sobbing wife and said, "Mom, I going to see Dean right now, and hopefully he can come up with a plan to rescue our Sherry;" and then he rushed out the door. In a few minutes he was in Dean's office hurriedly telling him what had happened. When he finished, Dean quickly spoke up.

"Jack, I have an associate who is a real brilliant fellow and a great sharpshooter. His name is Jim Laney. I'm going to send Vic after him right now, and they should be here in thirty minutes or so; and I'll bet Jim can come up with a good plan for rescuing your Shelly."

In about thirty minutes Jim and Vic appeared at Dean's office, and he hurriedly told Jim about the kidnapping.

Then he said, "Now, Jim, you know why I sent Vic after you. Do you have any suggestions as to what we should do?"

"Dean, do you believe what those outlaws said about taking the girl to Mexico and selling her?"

"Frankly, yes," Dean replied. "I believe what they said. Knowing the kind of thugs we're dealing with, I would not be surprised if they take her to Mexico and sell her. And I understand that a young girl like Shelly will bring a very high price, particularly if she's still a virgin."

"Well, Dean, do you have a plan?"

"No, not really. But I figure they'll head for Canadian, Texas, which is about seventy-five miles south of here. The chances are the folks there have not received any posters about them, but in any case we might be able to catch up with them before they get to Canadian."

"But what about Shelly?" Jim asked, "Don't you think they'll kill her if we try to arrest them? I suggest we get Jack and his wife in here and let them make the decision as to what we should do."

"Good idea, Jim. Vic, please ride to the Towers' house right quick, and tell them to get down here as soon as possible. Tell them we need their opinion about whether or not we should try rescuing their daughter."

In seconds, Vic was off with a roar on his motorcycle. In just a few minutes he returned and said the Towers were on their way in their buggy.

When they arrived, Dean explained the situation and asked them if they would be willing for a rescue attempt to be made.

But while they were pondering the question, Jim spoke up, “Before you decide what to do, please let me explain a plan that I believe might enable you to get your daughter back unharmed.”

The Towers looked at each other for a moment, and then Mr. Tower said to Jim, “We’d like to hear your plan.”

“This is my plan: The outlaws probably won't be in a big hurry because they have Shelly, and they think that her parents won't allow anything to be done that might jeopardize her life. But if I follow them alone, and at a respectable distance, they'll think I'm just some lonesome cowpoke. Then at an opportune time I can shoot both of them before they realize what's happening.

“I know that seeing two men get shot will be very traumatic for Shelly, but what's the alternative? Mr. and Mrs. Tower, the decision is up to you. Do I implement the plan, or do we let the thugs take your daughter to Mexico?”

Mr. Tower turned toward his wife, who was sitting nearby in a chair, weeping softly and wiping her eyes, “What do you think, Marie?”

After a moment she replied, “Jack, do we really have any other choice? I've heard about how expert Mr. Laney is with his rifle, and I'm willing to put my confidence in him and the Lord.”

“Okay, Marie.” Mr. Tower turned toward Jim and said, “I'll get the strongest and fastest horse we have in the stable for you to ride. Shall we go get him now, or do you want to eat something first?”

“I'll eat some jerky while I'm riding, Mr. Tower; the most important thing right now is for me to get on the trail and catch up to these outlaws. They already have over an hour's head start on me.”

So Jim got his rifle and ammunition saddle bag, climbed into the buggy with the Towers, and rode to the stable.

Mr. Tower picked his favorite horse out of the herd, put the bridle and saddle on him, then handed the reins to Jim and said, “Jim, I have ridden Sparkey in several races, so I can tell you that he is not only fast, but he is very long-winded.”

Jim thanked Mr. Tower, and started on his way to rescue little Sherry.

He soon found hoof prints from three different horses, and that gave him confidence that he was on the right trail.

The outlaws were so confident they wouldn't be followed that they were travelling relatively slow, as indicated by the tracks of their horses; and they weren't making any effort to cover their tracks that were leading toward Canadian.

CHAPTER 44

Jim was riding hard, but stopping occasionally, dismounting, and briefly walking beside his horse. He remembered that using this technique in the past was the best way to cover more distance in less time.

Periodically, Jim would get out his binoculars and scan the area in front of him, hoping to catch sight of the bandits; finally he did. They were about two miles ahead of him, riding on either side of Shelly and travelling at a leisurely pace. Jim slowed his horse to an easy lope, not wanting to close the gap between him and the bandits too fast.

When he had finally closed the gap to about five hundred yards, he dismounted, drew a bead on the rider to the right of Shelly, and squeezed the trigger. While rapidly reloading his rifle, he saw the bandit fall from his horse. Jim sighted his rifle and fired at the other bandit. A second later he too fell from his saddle. Shelly, in a state of shock, just sat still on her horse, not knowing what had happened or what to do.

Jim quickly remounted his horse and galloped toward Shelly, hoping she wouldn't panic and try to flee from him, but his hopes were doused. She turned around in the saddle and looked back. Seeing Jim approaching at a rapid pace, she turned forward, and began kicking the horse's flanks and whipping his rump with the reins. Her horse was not nearly as fast as Jim's and within a quarter of a mile he caught up to her. He grabbed her horse's bridle and began pulling on it while shouting, "Shelly, I'm a friend! I'm a friend!" Shelly pulled back on the reins and soon both horses were stopped.

Jim quickly dismounted and pulled Shelly down into his arms. She grabbed him around the neck and began sobbing. Jim comforted her as best he could and assured her that everything was going to be all right. Finally, she quit crying, and Jim helped her remount her horse.

"Well, Shelly, I guess we should start back to Beaver. I know your mom and dad will be overjoyed to see their little girl again, unharmed. Now I have to decide what to do with those two outlaws I shot back up the trail a ways, but I guess I will make that decision when we get back there." Jim remounted and they started back toward the outlaws.

When they arrived where the two men had fallen, Jim got off his horse and checked each outlaw for heartbeat while Shelly watched with an apprehensive look on her face.

"Mister," she asked in a low voice, "are they dead?"

"No, I think they will live," Jim replied. He removed their pistols and then bound their hands with some rope he had on his saddle.

Suddenly Shelly exclaimed, "Look!" as she pointed back down the trail.

Jim turned to see what she was pointing at, and saw a team and wagon approaching with two people in it.

As soon as the wagon got close, the man saw the two bandits lying on the ground and said in an unbelieving voice, “What in the name of Pete has happened here?”

Jim answered, “These two bandits kidnapped this young lady earlier today and were headed for Mexico with her. I caught up with them and was able to rescue her; but I had to shoot the thugs in order to do it.”

“What are you going to do now,” the man asked, fearing he already knew the answer.

“Well, sir,” Jim said, “I’d appreciate it if you would help me load them into your wagon so we could take them to the sheriff in Beaver.”

The man’s wife hastily spoke up, “Clem Atherton, you’re not about to put those bloody thugs into the back of our wagon! Seems to me you should just leave them here for the buzzards! It would save us taxpayers the cost of a trial and two hangings.”

“Now lookie here, Lila,” Clem countered. “These men may be thugs and deserve to die, but the Christian thing to do is to take them to the law in Beaver and let them decide what to do. We can open that tarp and put them on it so they won’t get blood on the wagon bed, and it’s big enough that we can fold it over them if you want to do that.”

“What if they should come to on the way to Beaver and work their hands loose—what then?” Lila asked.

“If that should happen, I’ll simply pull out my pistol and shoot them,” Clem said. “Would that satisfy you?”

The wife gave no answer, so Clem got down out of the wagon and spread out the tarp. Then he helped Jim lay the men on the tarp and fold it over all but their heads.

Clem climbed back onto the wagon’s seat and popped the horses’ rears with the reins, and soon they were on the way to Beaver; Jim and Sherry followed close behind on their horses.

Boozer regained consciousness, and asked, “What in the devil happened to us? I never did hear a gunshot!” Lucky stirred, and growled, “Yeah, what in the hell is happening?”

Riding close behind the wagon, Jim spoke up and said with a voice of authority and a bit of cynicism, “Gentlemen, you are on your way to jail in Beaver.”

The shock was beginning to wear off, and the bandits were starting to hurt. “We need a doctor, bad,” Boozer said. “Are we going to get one?”

“That will be decided by the marshal when we get to Beaver. In the meantime I recommend you keep your mouths shut and lie still. If you don’t, your wounds will

open, and you'll bleed to death," Jim warned; the outlaws never uttered another word.

The group arrived at the sheriff's office shortly before sundown. Hearing the whinny of the approaching team, Dean rushed out of his office and called out, "Jim, Shelly, I'm so glad to see you!" Then turning to the couple in the wagon seat, he introduced himself, and asked, "And who might you fine folks be?"

Mr. Atherton introduced himself and his wife, who was relieved to be at the sheriff's office. Then to his surprise, his wife said, "Mr. Bradford, we are so glad we were able to help in bringing in these two outlaws. I just hope they get a fair trial and then you hang them! And what do we do now?"

"If you'll follow me," Dean said to the Athertons, "I'll lead you to the jail house. Once we get these men unloaded, you will be free to go. And thank you for your help in bringing these outlaws in." Seeing that Dean and his deputy had the situation well in hand, Jim and Sherry rode to her home.

"Mom! Dad! I'm home!" she shouted as they rode up to the porch. Her folks appeared, and with tears they greeted her as Jim helped her off her horse. Then after a few moments of more tears, hugs, and a shout of "Thank you, Lord and thank you Deputy," the group went into the house.

After Sherry and Jim shared their experiences with her parents, Jim excused himself and rode back to the sheriff's office.

Dean said, "Jim, I'm very proud of you for your role in apprehending those two outlaws. And according to the posters I have on them, you're due to get four thousand dollars in reward money. Congratulations! I will file a report at the local county treasurer's office tomorrow and they'll go about getting the money for you. And when they do, I will get it and have Vic bring it to your house.

"That will be right nice of you, Dean, and I certainly appreciate your help in this whole affair. Perhaps I'll be able to do you a favor one of these days. But now, I guess I need to get back home to my wife. I know she's been concerned about my safety on this venture." The men shook hands, and Jim started for the door.

CHAPTER 45

When Jim got home Beulah rushed out the door to greet him. Jim quickly dismounted his horse and hugged his wife. Then they went into the house and Beulah hugged Jim and said. “Now please tell me all about your adventure, and don’t leave out any details—unless it gets too gruesome.” Jim complied and Beulah sat spellbound as he related the story.

When he finished with the part about the reward, Beulah gasped, “Are you really going to get three thousand dollars in reward money?”

“I’m happy to say that’s exactly what Dean told me I would get. And now we will be able to pay off the note in full. Praise the Lord!”

“And you won’t have do any more bounty hunting, will you, Jim?”

“I don’t expect to, but I did tell Dean I hoped that I might be able to do him a favor some day.”

About a week later, Vic arrived with a draft for three thousand dollars for Jim. He also told him the outlaws had survived and would be tried for their crimes in a few weeks.

Jim thanked him and waved goodbye as he whizzed off in a cloud of dust on his “motorized steed.”

Then Jim kissed Beulah goodbye and headed for Beaver on Daisy to deposit the reward money.

CHAPTER 46

The banker was a little surprised when Jim presented him with the draft but politely didn't ask him how he came to have that large amount of money. Since the draft had a U.S. Government watermark on it, he thought perhaps Jim had sold the government some land. He got out his record book and found that Jim only owed one thousand dollars. Jim paid off the note and received the title to the quarter section formerly owned by Rick. Then, at Jim's request, the banker deposited the balance in Jim's account. Jim thanked the banker, shook his hand and departed, feeling relieved.

He went from the bank to the dry goods store and bought a beautiful dress, matching purse and hat for Beulah. Then he rode home feeling as high as the moon, and thanking the Lord for what He had done for him.

Beulah met him at the door and greeted him in her usual fashion—a big hug and a kiss. Then she noticed the package Jim had been trying to conceal behind his back.

“What's in the package, Jim?” she asked.

“Oh, it's just a little something for the most beautiful and sweetest girl in the world,” and he handed her the package.

She opened it carefully, as though she thought it might be something fragile. But when she got it open, she let out a squeal of delight, deposited the clothing on the sofa, grabbed Jim around the neck, and kissed him. “Oh, Jim, they are so pretty, and I sure do love you, Sir Galahad!” Jim was so glad that he had made a right decision about what to purchase for his wife.

One evening while they were eating their supper, Jim and Beulah decided to have a dinner for Sam and Patty. They had not seen them for quite a while. So they rode over to their house, visited with them for a few minutes, and then invited them over to have dinner with them next Sunday.

Sam thanked them and promised they would be over next Sunday; they kept their promise.

And after they had finished eating, Jim said, “Now would you folks please tell us if any thing unusual happened while we were gone?”

“Well, Jim,” Sam said, “everything went very well—no rustling, no sickness, and some good rains. The pastures are nice and green, and the stock is really putting on the weight. Also, Ramon and I got caught up with all the farm work.”

Then Sam dropped a bombshell. “Jim, Patty wants to move back to Martha. As you well know, Patty has always wanted to move back there so she could be close to her parents.

“I checked with her dad and he said he would be glad to have me be foreman for his entire operation. So I'd like to sell you my quarter section and everything else.”

Jim and Beulah looked at each other—dumbfounded! Then finally Jim said, “I don’t know what to say right now, Sam, but let me and Beulah talk this over this evening, and we will give you an answer tomorrow. Would that be okay?”

Sam said that would be fine. Then after saying their goodbyes, they left for their home.

Jim and Beulah spent several hours discussing the pros and cons of buying Sam's quarter section and everything else; and finally they decided they would.

“That would make us owning a complete section of land—six hundred and forty acres!” Jim exclaimed. “And that should make it easier for us to make a living if hard times happened to come our way. Also if it becomes necessary for us to hire another couple, we’d have a good place for them to live.”

CHAPTER 47

The next morning, Jim rode over to Sam's and told him their decision to buy him out, lock, stock, and barrel—if they could reach an agreement on the price.

“Well, Jim, Patty and I have done some figuring and have concluded that we could sell everything to you for five thousand dollars. Does that sound like a fair price?”

“Yes, Sam, that’s close to the figure Beulah and I came up with last night. When would you want to make the move back to Martha?”

“Patty and I discussed this last night, and we figured the sooner the better. She is so eager to get back to her folks; and Mr. Starkey said he’d like for me to start my new job as foreman as soon as possible.”

“Okay Sam, let’s plan to go to Beaver tomorrow and get all the paper work taken care of. Then Beulah and I will help you get off to Martha.”

They got the title to the land transferred, and Jim paid Sam the five thousand dollars they had agreed on.

Then Jim and Beulah took Sam and Patty and their personal belongings to Forgan to catch a train to Martha.

Parting was very tearful, but the ladies mutually agreed they would visit each other at least once a year. The husbands agreed with their decision, and the goodbyes were said.

As the train began its departure, the families waved and shouted goodbye to each other. Then Jim and Beulah returned home to make plans for the days to come.

CHAPTER 48

A few days later Jim said to Beulah, “Sweetheart, I believe we should start going to Forgan for our groceries and other things we need from time to time. It’s somewhat closer than Beaver and has about everything we need in the way of stores. Also, I think I’ll establish an account with the First State Bank there in Forgan. It won’t hurt to have an account in both places—do you agree?”

“Yes, I firmly believe we should not put all of our eggs in one basket. You never know when a bank will get robbed, burn down, or go broke.

Time went by and everything was going well at the Laney’s. Then Beulah got pregnant, and she was a little nervous about the ordeal of giving birth. But she recalled their visit to Mrs. Robertson and felt a little better. Beulah’s pregnancy went well and she actually got eager for the little one to be born.

So they visited Mrs. Robertson to be sure she was still available when delivery time came. She assured them that she still delivered babies, and when the time came for Beulah to deliver, Jim would need to come get her.

About five months later, Beulah woke up early in the night with contractions. So Jim quickly hitched a horse to the buggy and sped over to Mrs. Robertson’s home. Upon arriving, he knocked loudly on the front door. In just a few moments, Mrs. Robertson appeared and asked, “Is the baby on the way, Jim?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jim replied, “Beulah is having some strong contractions and pains.”

“Well, don’t worry, Jim, it usually takes a few hours for the little one to come after the pains start. Just let me get into some other clothes and gather up the things I will need; then you can take me over to your house.” In just a few minutes Mrs. Robertson was ready. So Jim put the needed things into the buggy, helped her get in the buggy, and then started for his home. And when they arrived they found Beulah in bed with a look of pain and anxiety on her face.

“I’m so glad you got here so soon, because my contractions are almost constant, and I was afraid I was going to have to deliver this baby all by myself,” Beulah said with a little laugh and a forced grin.

“Well, Beulah,” Mrs. Robertson said, “you don’t have to worry now; Jim and I will take good care of you.” Then she continued, “Jim, would you please boil some water as quickly as possible, put at least five washcloths in a pan, and pour the boiling water over them. I will need some sterile cloths when I go to clean up the baby and Beulah.”

Jim rushed to the kitchen, put the tea kettle on the stove, and turned the burner on high.

“Now, Beulah,” Mrs. Robertson said, “if you’ll pull up your nightgown to expose your abdomen, I’ll slather it with some disinfectant. Some midwives don’t feel this

is necessary, but I have not had a single infection occur since I started using it as part of the birthing preparation.”

About the time Mrs. Robertson finished applying the disinfectant, Jim appeared with a pan full of sterile washcloths.

Mrs. Robertson turned toward Jim and said, “Now we’re ready for the baby, and judging from the strength of Beulah’s contractions, it shouldn’t be very long until the little one gets here.”

She turned her attention back to Beulah and continued, “And now, honey, when a contraction starts, bear down on it to help push the baby into the birth canal and out into the world.”

Beulah did as instructed and in a few minutes the baby arrived. “It’s a girl,” Mrs. Robertson said as she picked up the baby and carefully laid her on a small blanket next to Beulah.

“Congratulations to you Mr. Laney, you have a beautiful little daughter,” she exclaimed. Then she looked at Jim and said, “Jim, please hold the wee one a moment while I tie and cut the cord.”

Jim picked up the baby gently and held her in front of Mrs. Robertson who carefully tied a string around the cord close to the baby’s abdomen; then she cut the cord in two. The baby began to cry loudly with a tone of protestation, much to the delight of Jim and Beulah. “She’s sure got a good set of lungs,” Jim said with a grin on his face.

Mrs. Robertson cleaned up the little girl and handed her to Beulah, who announced, “Welcome into the family, Hazel;” (This was the name Jim and Beulah had agreed on if the baby was a girl.) In just a few minutes Hazel was nursing while Jim knelt by the bed, proudly admiring his beautiful little daughter.

After Beulah recovered from the birthing process, they sent letters to the Starkey’s and Blaine and Sally, telling them that they had a darling little redheaded granddaughter for them to come to see.

The grandparents did indeed come to see the little doll, bringing gifts of all sorts. And as they later departed, each set of grandparents elicited a promise from Jim and Beulah that every time Beulah gave birth, they would be promptly informed so they could come, admire, and deliver gifts to the wee one. That was a promise that was easy for Jim and Beulah to keep.

The next ten years passed swiftly for the Laney’s. Jim kept busy with his farming and ranching enterprise and Beulah was busy giving birth to Virginia, James, and Joseph, and raising them along with Hazel. All of the youngsters were bright and healthy, full of energy and always getting into mischief—especially the boys. And in keeping with their mutual agreements, every year Blaine and Sally would travel

to Forgan to visit with Jim, Beulah, and family; or Jim and family would travel to Martha for a visit.

Visiting with parents was good, but several years later Beulah decided that she, Jim, and their children, needed to have a family vacation—their first. So Beulah approached Jim about the subject.

Jim's response was, “Beulah, after I make enough money to hire another hand to help Ramon, I’ll have a lot more free time, and then we can talk about taking a vacation.”

The following year Jim hired Ramon’s brother, Ralph. As part of the deal, Jim allowed Ralph and his wife, Maria, to live rent free in Sam’s former home which had been well maintained.

It was not long until Jim was sure he had two skilled and trustworthy men working for him. So one evening he suggested to Beulah that now might be the time to take that vacation. He further suggested that they take the vacation in Ruidoso, New Mexico, as soon as school was out.

He was rewarded for his proposal by a lot of hugs and kisses from the kids and Beulah.

Hazel, eleven, and Virginia, nine, were eager to get ready for the trip. James, seven, and Joe, five, were also excited and wanted to help with the preparations; so all of them were assigned some duties. Three days after school was out, the family was ready for the journey, and the children were bubbling over with anticipation and excitement.

CHAPTER 49

So early on the fourth day after school was out, they loaded their luggage, camping equipment, miscellaneous items, and food and water into their Buick touring car. Jim had secured a map appropriate for their journey, had passed it on to Beulah; and he had designated her as official “navigator.”

They had traveled a few miles and Beulah asked Jim, “About how far is it to Ruidoso, Jim?”

He answered, “About four-hundred-fifty miles. I hope we can make it to Hereford, Texas today; that would be about halfway. Then we could finish the trip the following day.”

The first day was uneventful. The kids behaved, and the group only stopped as necessary for potty breaks or gas. Beulah had prepared lunches and water bottles for everyone, so they could eat while on the road.

They did make it to Hereford that day, found a cottage court, and paid for one night. Early the next morning they went to a nearby café and had breakfast. Then they took a potty break back at the cottage court, reloaded everything, and resumed their trip.

The thrill of the trip was beginning to wear off and the kids were starting to quarrel. After a few unsuccessful threats, Jim pulled off the road and applied some discipline to the seats-of-learning of the older kids; peace reigned for the rest of the trip.

Along in the afternoon Hazel said, “Daddy, what’s making those big, black clouds I’m seeing ahead of us?”

“Honey, those aren't clouds, they’re mountains. We will get to them when we get to Ruidoso, and we will get to go picnicking and camping in them while we’re staying there.” This excited the kids, and they began discussing all the things they were going to do in the mountains.

They arrived in Ruidoso just as the sun was going down behind the mountains, and it was a beautiful sunset.

Jim found a nice cottage court near a café. So they their belongings into the cabin, cleaned up a bit, and went to the café for supper.

After some conversation about the trip, they finished their meals, went back to their cabin, and went to bed. The kids were so excited they had a hard time ceasing their chattering, but after a few admonitions from Jim, they quieted down and drifted off to sleep; Jim and Beulah soon followed suit.

The next morning the family arose rather late as all of them had been pretty tired from the traveling. Beulah prepared a good breakfast, and they were about to finish eating it when the door burst open and two men appeared with pistols in their hands.

“Don’t anybody make a move or I’ll shoot to kill,” the taller man barked. With a bogus smile that revealed his tobacco-stained teeth, he added, “We don’t want nobody to get hurt, and nobody will if you’ll follow orders. Now you all get over on that couch, sit down, and be quiet.” The family did as ordered without a word, but the boys began to whimper.

“Shut them brats up, woman, or I’ll shut ‘em up for you!” Jim started to protest but was gently restrained by Beulah. So Jim simply said, “What is it you want from us, sir?”

“Well, we figured anybody who could drive a new automobile like that Buick sittin’ outside is bound to have a bunch of money and we’re just fixin’ to glom onto a right smart amount of it, ain’t we Shorty?”

Shorty was well nicknamed. He was about five feet tall, overweight, and with big ears that flared out underneath his old, beat up cowboy hat. “Yeah, Badger, we’re fixin to get rich, and I’m ready!”

Badger growled, “Here’s the plan, mister. I’m going to take you down to the bank and you’re going to draw out a thousand dollars. I found out from experience that if you ask a bank for too much money they get suspicious; so we’ll settle for a thousand.

“Shorty is gonna stay here and hold a gun on your family. And if I’m not back in an hour, he’s going to shoot all your family, dead.”

“But, sir, my bank is in Oklahoma, not here,” Jim explained.

“Well, if that’s the case you’ll just have to phone your bank in Oklahoma and tell ‘em to okay a check here in the Ruidoso bank. Come on, mister, let’s go.”

Jim and Badger went outside, climbed into the Buick, and drove off with Badger holding a gun on Jim.

All was quiet in the cabin for several minutes and then Joe said in a hushed voice: “Mama, I’m thirsty.”

“Sir,” Beulah asked, “could I go to the kitchen and get Joe a drink of water?”

Shorty thought about it for a moment, and then replied, “Yeah, I reckon it’ll be okay; just don’t try anything stupid. And while you’re at it, bring me a glass of water too.”

Beulah went into the kitchen, mind racing, “What can I do?” Then an inspiration came to her. She got the cast-iron skillet off the stove and set it on the counter near the hand pump. Next, she got two colored glasses and a small container of hot sauce she had brought along for flavoring their beans.

She poured a couple of tablespoonfuls of the hot sauce into one of the glasses, moved to the hand pump, and added water slowly so it would not mix with the hot sauce at the bottom of the glass.

Just as she was starting to pump a glass of water for Joe, Shorty appeared and growled, “What in thunder is taking you so long, woman?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m not used to pumping water so it has taken me a little longer to get the glasses full.”

Shorty said, “Gimme a drink,” held out his hand. and Beulah handed him the glass with the hot sauce in it. He cautiously took the glass to his lips as he said, “I just wanna be darned sure you didn’t try to poison me.” He took a sip, stopped, smacked his lips, and said. “Well, I guess its okay.” Then he chugalugged the rest of the glass. Then he let out a yell, dropped the glass and his gun, and started toward the pump. Beulah snatched up the skillet and hit him on the head—he dropped like a pole-axed steer, landing on the floor with a loud thud, bleeding from the wound on his head. The kids heard the noise and rushed unto the kitchen, wide-eyed and aghast.

Hazel looked at Shorty’s inert body on the floor and asked with a whisper, “Is he dead, Mama?”

“No, sweetie, he’s just knocked out. Now you girls run to the storage room outside where our camping gear is stored and get some tent rope so we can tie him up.”

Beulah dragged Shorty a few feet further in the kitchen so he couldn’t be seen by someone coming through the front door.

The girls appeared with the rope and Beulah bound Shorty’s hands behind his back, and tied his legs together. Then she took the dirty neckerchief off the still-unconscious Shorty and gagged him with it.

“Get back on the couch, kids, because your dad and that Badger man should be getting here soon. And when they do get here, don’t let on like anything has happened.”

After giving Joe his drink, she grabbed the skillet and Shorty’s gun, and seated herself in the chair by the front door. Beulah muttered to herself, “If the skillet doesn’t do the job, I guess I’ll just have to shoot him.”

It seemed like an eternity, but it was only a short time until she heard the Buick pull up in front of the cabin. She put her finger over her lips, motioned for the children to be quiet, and stood up with her back against the wall where she would be hidden behind the door when it was opened.

The door opened and Jim walked in, followed closely by Badger with his gun in his hand. Beulah brought the skillet down hard on Badger’s head; he fell to the floor unconscious, blood oozing from the wound.

“Beulah, you probably just saved our lives! Where’s Shorty?”

“He’s in the kitchen, tied up and gagged.”

While the kids gathered around Jim and exchanged hugs with him, Beulah quickly told him what had happened.

Jim was amazed at her story. “Beulah, I doubt that there’s a man alive who would have come up with the clever scheme you did. The way you carried it out took a lot of guts, and I’m so proud of you!”

Jim then got some rope and bound and gagged the still-unconscious Badger. “There, that ought to take care of those two thugs until I get the sheriff out here.” With that statement, he picked up Badger’s gun and handed it to Beulah.

“Honey, everything should be okay. But, if the need arises, shoot to kill!” Jim hugged Beulah, threw a kiss to the kids, and departed.

Jim soon located the sheriff’s office, went in, and introduced himself. The sheriff responded: “Pleased to meet you, Jim. My name is Alan Weisman. What can I do for you?” Jim told him about the two thugs and how Beulah handled the situation.

“Sounds like you have a really brave and clever wife; I doubt that any man would have had the nerve to do what she did. But let me strap on my gun and I can follow you back to your cabin in my truck. I can bring the intruders back to the jail in the truck’s bed.”

In a few minutes they arrived at the cottage and went in. Jim introduced the sheriff to Beulah and the children.

“Pleased to meet you, Beulah, and your fine looking youngsters. Now, Jim, if you will give me a hand, we will load these scoundrels into my truck bed.”

By now the two bandits had regained consciousness and were trying to speak but the gags prevented it.

“I’ll just wait until I get these robbers behind bars before I remove their gags,” Alan said, “because what they’ll have to say would probably not be fitting for a lady and children to hear.”

While Jim held a gun on them, the sheriff untied the men’s hands and handcuffed them behind their backs. Then he untied their legs and made them climb into the truck bed. Once there, he retied their legs together again so there was no possible way they could escape.

“Jim, if you will follow me to the jail I will get you to file charges against these men. That way everything will be clear and legal.”

They arrived at the jail and Jim helped the sheriff get the prisoners into individual cells.

“I’ll get the doctor to check out their wounds; I don’t believe in making a man suffer, even if he is a criminal,” the sheriff said. “By the way, Jim, I think I may have a poster on these two scallywags; just give me a few minutes and I’ll find out.” Sure enough, the two were wanted in several states for robbery, assault, and murder.

“Jim, you folks were very lucky; according to the poster, these men sometimes shoot their victims to prevent identification. And by the way, there’s a five-thousand-dollar reward for apprehending them.

I’ll fill out the paperwork this afternoon and you will be able to get your reward money tomorrow at the bank.”

With a little grin, Jim said, “I have heard all my life that ‘crime doesn’t pay.’ That certainly is true for the criminal, but it’s not true for a bounty hunter or someone who just happens to apprehend a criminal.” He then told the sheriff about his short time as a bounty hunter, and why he became one.

The sheriff listened with interest and amazement as Jim relayed the circumstances under which he had brought down criminals that had come great distances from their starting point.

“Well, Jim, it’s quite evident that you are a great sharpshooter, but not a typical bounty hunter. You certainly did mankind a favor by bagging those gangsters. Thanks for sharing with me.” He then thanked Jim for his help and told him to thank his wife for her help in getting the bandits; then he sent him back to the cabin where he and his family were staying.

CHAPTER 50

Jim got into his Buick and drove back to the cabin. He was greeted by a hugging wife and four adoring children as soon as he got inside.

Once inside Jim proclaimed, "I sure am very proud of your mother for what she did. And I am proud of you children for being so good and not getting terror stricken. And if any of you had misbehaved, Shorty might have killed the whole bunch.

"Now let's all get ready and go find a place to have some dinner." That suggestion met with immediate and loud approval by the kids. In due time everyone was appropriately dressed, and they all went outside and climbed into the Buick.

After a few blocks of driving they located a nice-looking café, parked, and went inside. About an hour later, everyone had finished eating and was ready for a venture into the surrounding forested area.

They soon came upon a rustic building near a small lake. Scribbled on the side of the building were the words: "Fish here. Success guaranteed."

"Oh, Daddy, let's go fishing here!" Hazel pleaded, and the other three joined in the plea. So Jim pulled into the front of the building and parked.

An elderly man with a weather-beaten face, wrinkled like a relief roadmap, appeared, and with a big smile said, "Welcome folks, would you like to do a little fishing? You don't pay anything to fish, you just pay ten cents for each fish you catch, so you can't lose; I'll throw in a holding-bucket for an extra fifty cents. By the way, my name is Homer Brown."

"Glad to meet you, Homer. We're the Laneys from Oklahoma, and I'd like to get a fishing pole for each of us; perhaps we can catch enough fish for our evening meal."

In just a few minutes the whole family was sitting near the water with a fishing pole in their hands. About five long minutes later, the corks began to bobble on everyone's line except Jim's. So he lay down his pole and helped Joe and James bring in their fish; Beulah quickly landed her fish, and then helped the girls bring in their catches.

"Wow," Jim exclaimed as he removed the fish from the hooks and deposited them in the bucket of water. "We already have enough fish for supper, so let's pay Mr. Brown, and go back to the cabin."

"Oh, no, Daddy; we're just getting started. Can't we catch just a few more?" Virginia pleaded.

"What do you think, Beulah? You realize we are going to have to clean these fish once we get back to the cabin."

"Well, since this is their first time to fish, why don't we let them catch one more each?"

“Okay, one more, and no more,” Jim stated.

Within ten minutes, each child had landed another fish. So Jim paid Mr. Brown while Beulah got the kids and their fish loaded into the car. They drove back to their cottage and unloaded kids and fish.

“How about a nap before supper?” Beulah asked. Jim was all for it, but the kids were a little reluctant. However, after a little persuasion from Jim, the youngsters climbed onto their cots and were soon fast asleep; Beulah and Jim followed suit.

About an hour later, Jim awoke and soon had the rest of the family awake.

“All right youngsters, let’s have a lesson in preparing fish to eat,” Jim said. So he set about scaling, gutting, and beheading the fish, while the kids watched with varying amounts of interest.

“Now, who wants to try their hand at cleaning a fish?” Jim asked.

“I’ll give it a try, Dad, if you will promise to help me and not laugh if I make any dumb mistakes,” Virginia said.

Jim promised, and soon Virginia was cleaning fish like a pro. She looked around at the other family members and smiled triumphantly.

“Well, who wants to be next?” Jim questioned.

Hazel held up her hand and said, “Daddy, I’ll give it a try. Please hand me a fish and I’ll get started.” In a few minutes she had cleaned two fish.

“You girls did great! Dad is proud of both of you.”

Not to be outdone by a couple of girls, James stepped up next to the cleaning vessel and proclaimed “Well, if those dumb girls can clean fish, so can I!”

Jim handed him the scaling knife and cautioned, “Be careful, James. We don’t want you to cut yourself.”

“Oh, I won’t,” James replied trying to display a confidence he didn’t really have. “Just watch me.” To the surprise of everyone he soon had a fish properly prepared for frying.

“Well done, James,” Beulah commented, “we’re very proud of you, but don’t let your success go to your head.” Everybody but Joe laughed at the puffed-up-with-pride look on James’ face.

Thinking he could do anything Big Brother could, Joe loudly interrupted the laughter and said, “Now it’s my turn!” Everyone chuckled at the determined look on his face, and Jim said, “We are proud of you too, Joe, for just being willing to try to clean a fish. But, son, you’re just a little too young to be cleaning fish now; perhaps next year when we go on vacation you’ll be big enough to clean one.” Joe was disappointed but he accepted his daddy’s statement without any argument.

Beulah started cooking the fish while Jim quickly finished preparing the remaining ones. She also assigned tasks for each of the children: set the table,

arrange the chairs, put on glasses of water, put a napkin by each plate, and get bread and canned fruit from the box of food they had brought along.

In just a short time, supper was ready and they sat down to eat. Jim asked the Lord's blessing on the food, thanked Him for having spared them from harm, and thanked Him for all the other blessings He had bestowed on them. Then they began eating with gusto, talking about the events of the day between mouthfuls.

Hazel spoke up, "Daddy, you should write a book about your life and the lives of our family. I'm sure it would be a best seller."

Jim laughed and answered, "You know, Hazel, I just might do that when I retire. Then you kids would have some interesting stories to read to your children."

The next day Beulah prepared a picnic lunch. Then Jim loaded the family into the Buick and drove around the area and up into the mountains. The kids were fascinated by the beautiful sights, particularly those seen from the vantage points of the mountainside: flowers of all shades of red, yellow, purple, violet, and other rainbow colors. They were also captivated by the different sizes, shapes, and colors of the various trees and shrubs.

With wisdom beyond her years, Hazel said, "God certainly created some beautiful scenery for His children to enjoy, didn't He?" Jim and Beulah looked at each other and agreed, "Yes, Darling, He did."

Little Joe asked with a puzzled tone, "Mommy, why didn't God make flowers and trees like these grow back home?"

"Well, Honey, I suspect if we had all these plants back home, we would get to the point that we would not really appreciate their beauty. You know we have a lot of beautiful things back home that they don't have here. I'm sure the Lord knew exactly what He was doing when He made the earth and all that is on it, and it's up to us to appreciate His creation, wherever we live." Little Joe didn't understand everything his mommy had said but he understood enough to be satisfied.

Jim picked a lovely spot in a grove of trees and announced, "All right my beloved ones, and here is where we're going to eat our picnic lunch." He parked the Buick, and then took the tarp and blanket several yards into the trees and spread them on the ground. Soon everyone was enjoying the luncheon Beulah had prepared.

In the midst of the chattering of the children, Hazel broken in, "Dad, are there bears in this area?"

"Yes, there are. But why do you ask?"

"I think I just saw one over there in the bushes." Everyone turned to look in the direction Hazel was pointing.

Jim commanded, "I see him. Run for the car!" With that warning, he grabbed James and Joe by their hands and started running toward the car. Beulah grabbed the two girls by their hands and fell in behind Jim, running with all her might.

Before they could get to the car, the grizzly bear came charging out of the bushes and raced across the open space that separated him from the Laney's.

When it became obvious to Jim that he was the bear's target, he swung the boys away from himself and shouted, "Run for the car!" The boys didn't need any prompting because they were running as fast as their little legs could carry them. Beulah veered to the right of the oncoming bear as she sprinted toward the car, pulling the girls on either side of her.

While trying to elude the bear, Jim screamed, "Beulah, get the rifle!" Jim's eluding attempt was unsuccessful, and he went down under the bear's onrushing charge, flailing his arms in an attempt to protect his head from the bear's jaws. Not to be thwarted, the bear snapped his jaws onto one of Jim's arms, and the blood began to spurt as Jim screamed in pain.

By now Beulah had retrieved the rifle from the Buick and had turned toward the bear and his victim. Then she made a split-second decision: "I must kill that bear NOW or it will kill Jim!" She shouldered the rifle, drew a bead on the bear's head, and prayed for the Lord's help. She fired, and the bear fell, releasing Jim's arm but partially pinning him with his huge body.

Beulah screamed to the children, "Come help me get this bear off your daddy!" All four children joined her as she ran to the bear and began tugging on its hairy hide, trying to roll it off of Jim. As all of them were supercharged by adrenaline, and with the cooperative help of Jim, they managed to set him free.

He was bleeding profusely from the arm wound, so Beulah tore a strip of cloth from her petticoat and bound up the wound. Then with the help of the children she was able to get Jim into the passenger seat of the car. Beulah got behind the steering wheel, started the Buick, and headed back to Ruidoso.

Jim was trying to fight off unconsciousness, but he kept passing in and out of darkness. Beulah told the kids to cling to one another and huddle down between the front and back seats as she was skidding around curves and dodging ruts in the road.

Fortunately, they arrived back in Ruidoso without an accident, and she stopped at the first service station and asked for directions to the hospital. The attendant was able to give her clear and simple directions. She thanked him and sped off to the hospital, arriving there in just a few minutes, honking the horn as she approached the front door.

Two men appeared, took one look at Jim, and began easing him out of the car. Another pair of men in white coats appeared with a gurney, and the four men carefully laid Jim, now unconscious, on it and wheeled him into the hospital and into the surgery room. A nurse began carefully uncovering the wound. A moment later a doctor appeared and ordered the wound cleaned so he could sew it up.

Beulah had left the children in the car with Hazel in charge and had accompanied Jim into the operating room. The doctor requested that she wait outside in the waiting room while he attended to Jim's wound.

"I will come to you when I finish getting your husband sewed up and into a room," the doctor stated. Then, as he was waiting for the nurse to get Jim's wound ready for the procedure, he asked, "By the way, what is your husband's name, and what happened to him?"

Beulah told him Jim's name, introduced herself, and then explained the incident to the doctor. He shook her hand and said, "I'm Doctor Harris, and I will be tending to your husband."

With that Beulah exited the room, went out to the car, and moved it into the adjacent parking area. Then she led the teary-eyed children into the waiting room and had them sit down on the couch. She was too nervous to sit still so she paced back and forth across the room.

"Mama, is daddy going to be okay?" Hazel asked with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, Honey, I'm sure he will be okay. Now don't you kids worry; everything will be all right. And I want to thank you precious children for your help in getting that bear off your daddy. I don't think I could have done it without your help. I'm so proud of all of you and I know your daddy is too."

After what seemed like an eternity, the doctor appeared. "Do you want me to discuss your husband's condition in front of the children or should I have a nurse escort them to the children's playroom?"

"Perhaps it would be better if they were taken to the playroom. I will tell them all about how things are after you inform me about my husband's condition," Beulah replied.

The doctor summoned a nurse who kindly escorted the children out of the room while they were saying goodbye to their mother.

Then the doctor said to Beulah, "Ma'am, the Lord must have been looking after your husband; most people don't survive a bear attack. Your husband does not have any broken bones, and thanks to your petticoat bandage, he's not lost a lot of blood. I cleaned out the wound, applied some antiseptic, and put in several stitches, but he will be very sore over most of his body for several days—bears are very heavy.

Then he continued, "Your husband appears to be a robust gentleman, so if you will keep the wound clean and washed carefully in a weak solution of carbolic acid, he should heal up nicely in a couple of weeks or so.

"I will give you written instructions about how to do all of this; and if everything goes as expected, you might be able to take him out of the hospital tomorrow."

Beulah thanked the doctor, took the instructions, paid the bill, and collected her children. As they drove back to the camp ground to retrieve the picnic items, she explained their daddy's condition, and assured them he was going to be okay.

"The doctor said I might be able get him out of the hospital tomorrow. He also said that your daddy will probably be completely well in three weeks or so," Beulah said.

Beulah went down to the hospital the next day, and with the doctor's permission she took the children in to see their daddy. They each carefully hugged him and told him how much they loved him. With tear-filled eyes, Jim expressed his love for them and for their mother.

Then he turned toward Beulah, took her hand, and said, "Beulah, darling, I'm so glad I taught you how to shoot that rifle. I feel sure that if you hadn't shot that bear the very moment you did, his next bite would have been my neck and jugular vein—and I would have been dead in about two or three minutes!"

Beulah was permitted to get Jim out of the hospital that afternoon, but he was not strong enough to make the trip home just yet. So they stayed overnight in Ruidoso, and then started home the next day with Beulah driving.

The trip home was without incident, and all were glad to be back on the farm. They were greeted warmly by the hired hands and their wives.

Ramon filled Jim in on all that had transpired in his absence; fortunately, everything had gone well. Then Beulah and Jim, with some "help" from the children, related the events of their vacation.

Jim finished the narratives by stating: "Well, it was a real experience, but there's some of it that I don't care to repeat, such as the encounter with the bandits; and I'm certainly not much on bear hugging anymore;" and then he added, "especially if the bear is going to be doing the hugging!" He grinned and everybody laughed.

CHAPTER 51

A few months later while Jim and Beulah were discussing various topics, Jim said to her, “We certainly have been blessed, haven't we, Darling? When I think of all the Lord has done for us, I'm so grateful.”

“Yes, Jim,” Beulah replied, “the Lord has been more than gracious to us in all aspects of our lives; our parents have been very blessed also. Oh, by the way, speaking of our parents, isn't it about time for us to go see them?”

“You're right, Beulah. It's time. So as soon as school is out, I think we should load up the kids and go visiting,” Jim proposed.

Beulah and the kids were all in favor of this, and though school vacation didn't start for another week, everyone began making plans for the trip.

Jim traded his Buick in and bought a new one with all the latest improvements: better ride, quieter, more horsepower, easier steering, and so forth. The kids were pleased and proud that they were going to get to make the trip in a brand new Buick.

The appointed day arrived and the Laney's loaded up the Buick and set off for Hominy. The trip was uneventful but not dull. They all enjoyed the change in scenery, and the kids and Beulah really enjoyed eating in a café.

Jim, however, missed his wife's superb cooking, but he kept his opinion about the food to himself; he was glad to have Beulah getting a break from her household duties.

Jim and family arrived at Hominy in the afternoon, and soon arrived at the home of Jim's dad and his wife.

Blaine and Sally were glad to see Jim and Beulah and their youngsters again.

“My how those kids have grown since the last time we saw them. You must be keeping them well fed, Beulah,” Sally said.

“It's a bit of a challenge to fill them up three times a day,” Beulah answered with a laugh, “but they earn their keep by doing chores around the homestead. And I would like to brag a bit on them; they are good students, their grades are mostly A's and Bs.”

Blaine grinned and said, “Well, we are mighty proud of them too. Not only are they smart but the girls are very pretty and the boys are very handsome. Thank you, Beulah and Jim. You have provided us with some mighty fine grandchildren.”

“Changing the subject a bit, have you folks had any exciting experiences since the last time we saw you?” Blaine inquired.

Jim and Beulah looked at each other and laughed. Then Jim said “You might say we have. Beulah, why don't you tell them about our adventures at Ruidoso, and if you need any help, I'll dive in.”

Blaine and Sally were kept spellbound by the story that Beulah told about the encounter with the bandits; then Jim told of their encounter with the bear.

“Beulah, you have saved Jim's life—three times,” Blaine said! “We are so proud of you for all the things you did to save him from the bandits, the bear, and bleeding to death.

“You are one brilliant lady, Beulah. The way you handled those bandits is amazing, and I wish I could have been there to see that!”

After a couple of days of reminiscing and visiting with Blaine and Sally, the Laneys loaded up once again, drove to Martha and spent three days visiting with the Starkeys'. And while they were there they shared with them their adventures while in Ruidoso.

The Starkeys' were amazed at the stories of Jim and Beulah, and Mr. Starkey thanked the Lord for bringing them through the crises alive.

They also spent some time with Sam and Patty, and their two children.

And after an hour of visiting, Jim and Beulah once again shared their stories about their Ruidoso adventures.

“Jim, I bet you really were glad you had taught Beulah how to be a superb marksman. Undoubtedly, if you hadn't, you wouldn't be here today to enjoy our company,” Sam said. “And the way Beulah handled those two bandits is absolutely amazing. Jim. You are very blessed to have such a fantastic wife.”

“Yeah, Sam, I'm glad I taught her how to shoot, and I'm so glad she was willing and eager to learn to be an excellent marksman. And the way she handled those two bandits was indeed incredible. She's really a special lady in many ways. I feel so blessed to have her as my wife, my best friend, my private nurse, and as a fantastic mother for my children.”

Beulah turned toward Sam and said with some embarrassment, “Sam, I thank you for those kind remarks; I really appreciated them.”

Then she turned her attention to Jim who was seated beside her on the sofa. “Jim, I thank you for all those flattering remarks you made. You are just a bit prejudiced, but I love you for saying all those sweet things. Now let's talk about the weather or some other important topic,” she jested.

The Laneys spent the next two days visiting and riding around the range and farmland, recalling some of the amusing incidents that occurred when Jim and Sam were trying to figure out a way to persuade Mr. Starkey to relent and let them date his daughters.

The children enjoyed visiting with their cousins, and they really liked riding around the property in the Buick and on horseback. They also enjoyed the picnic they had on their last full day of the visit. It was held in the family picnic area where Jim and Sam first got into the Starkey family circle.

While at the picnic grounds, Patty said to Jim, “Jim, do you remember the first time you were here for a picnic and I asked you to look at a special tree with me?”

Jim was caught off guard but he managed to answer Patty in a nonchalant tone, “Well, yes, I do remember.”

“Just for old times sake, Jim, how about you and me going to see if that old tree is still there—you won't mind will you Beulah?” Beulah shook her head and said, “No, you two go right ahead.”

“Well, come on, Jim! Let's go,” Patty said.

With a little reservation, Jim replied, “Okay, you lead the way, Patty, and I will follow.” Patty started into the grove with Jim trailing behind. Surprisingly enough, they did find the old tree, and it was still alive.

“It still makes strange looking figures, doesn't it, Jim?” But before he could answer, Patty continued, “But the real reason I wanted you to come here with me was so I could apologize for what I said to you that day long ago.” Then she laid her hand on Jim's arm, looked up into his face, and tearfully said, “Jim, please forgive me; I was wrong, I was rude, and I was angry.”

Jim gently took her in his arms and said, “Patty, you are forgiven—I forgave you years ago, and I have come to look upon you as my sister, and I truly love you.”

Patty hugged Jim. “Thank you, Jim, and I have come to love you like a big brother.”

Jim took out his clean handkerchief, gently wiped Patty's eyes, held the handkerchief over her nose, and said, “Now blow your nose, and we will go back to the rest of the family.” Patty did as instructed, regained her composure, and then they slowly made their way back to the group.

“Did you find the tree, and was it still alive?” Sam asked.

Jim answered, “Yes, it's still alive and still has all sorts of strange shapes in it; I'm so glad we went to see it.”

Beulah and Sam had no clue as to what had happened at that old tree years ago, nor did they ever come to know what had happened at that old tree that very day.

To shift the conversation back to previous topics, Jim said, “Not much has changed about this picnic area—it's still a beautiful place. I just wish we had something like this back home.”

Beulah replied, “Oh, Jim, in a few more years our special purpose tree and woodlot area will be really pretty.” And with a laugh she added, “Of course we won't have the creek, unless the Lord works a miracle.”

The next morning, goodbyes were said and promises to return next year were made. As Jim drove away, he relived the scene of himself and Patty in the grove, and thanked the Lord for the special love that he and Patty now had for each other.

A few months after returning home from their visiting, Jim noticed that Beulah was not her usual energetic self. “Darling, are you not feeling well? You look kind of washed out,” Jim asked with concern in his voice.

“Well, Jim, to be right honest about it I’ve not been feeling up to par the last month.”

Jim's face took on a worried look, and he asked in a near-whisper voice, “Beulah, you’re not pregnant again, are you?”

After a moment of silence Beulah replied, “Jim, I was hoping to keep my condition from you a secret until I could no longer do so. Yes, Darling, I’m about four months pregnant, but don’t you worry; I will be all right.”

But Jim couldn’t help being worried about Beulah’s condition so he took her to the family doctor. After an examination and blood tests, the doctor said Beulah’s kidneys were not functioning like they should and she was probably suffering from Bright’s disease. However, she might live long enough to give birth to the baby.

Then, at that point, they decided Beulah should move to the Starkeys’ home where she would have access to better medical care. Also, she could get full-time attention from them.

Jim was at a loss as how to break the news about Beulah’s condition to the children, so he avoided telling them the whole truth and simply told them that he was taking their mother to her parents’ home because they could look after her better than he could.

He assured them that as soon as the baby was born and their mother was able to travel, he would bring her and the baby home. That seemed to satisfy all but Hazel; she had a feeling that her mother was a whole lot sicker than her dad let on, but for the sake of the other kids she kept her feelings to herself.

With feelings of helplessness, mixed with unwarranted guilt, Jim took Beulah by train to Martha, and out to the Starkeys’ home. After a discussion about the doctor’s diagnosis and prognosis, the Starkeys’ persuaded him to return home because the children were probably feeling somewhat alone, even though Chiquita was staying with them.

The Starkeys’ promised to keep in touch by phone, and if anything came up that would warrant Jim's immediate attention, they would call him.

On the way back home by train, Jim's mind was in a whirlpool of thoughts: “How will I be able to live without my beloved Beulah, where did I fail, how will the children take the news that their mother is dying; is this punishment from the Lord for something I have done?” Jim went to the men’s restroom and wept.

When he arrived at home, Jim put on his most cheerful face and greeted his children with hugs, trying to not breakdown in tears. Then he answered their questions as honestly as he dared, but refrained from telling them their mother was dying.

When he could bear it no longer, Jim would call the Starkeys’ to inquire about Beulah’s status. The answer was always, “She’s about the same.”

This was encouraging news to Jim, and he began to believe she was going to be all right.

Then one day he got a phone call from Beatrice. “Jim, Beulah has started having labor pains; get here as fast as you can.”

Jim called Ramon and asked if he and his wife could look after the children for a few days while he went to Martha to be with his wife who was having a baby.

Ramon said they would be glad to, so Jim packed a suitcase with essential articles, kissed the children goodbye, and promised he would call them periodically. Then he had Ramon drive him to the Forgan depot where he caught the train to Martha.

When he arrived there, a hired hand was waiting for him with a car. On the way to the Starkeys’ Jim asked the fellow if he knew anything about Beulah’s condition. “Well, when I left the Starkeys’ about an hour ago, she was trying to slow her contractions so you would get there before the baby was born.”

As soon as they arrived at the residence, Jim rushed into the house and ran to the room where Beulah was. The doctor was there and so were Beatrice and Patty.

Jim knelt down by the bedside and took Beulah’s hand. She turned her face toward him, and smiled weakly. “Hello, Jim darling, I’m so glad you could make it in time for the baby’s arrival.”

Doing the best he could to keep from crying, Jim answered, “Hello, Sweetheart; I’ve come to give you all the support and encouragement that I can. I’m sure everything is going to be okay.”

“Now that you’re here, I know that everything will really be all right,” Beulah whispered with a forced smile. “But there’s one thing I want you to do, Jim, if I do not survive this ordeal. The Bible says ‘It’s not good for man to live alone,’ and our children will need a good mother. So please promise me you will do your best to find and marry a woman who will love you and the children, will be the wife you need, and the mother our children will need.”

“I promise,” Jim said with tears in his eyes as he gently squeezed her hand and began to whisper words of encouragement in her ear.

Moments later, Beulah groaned loudly as she tightly gripped Jim’s hand, and strained to help the baby enter the world—a beautiful little redheaded girl. The doctor performed the usual after-birth procedures while Beatrice carefully washed the infant and wrapped her in a blanket.

“What shall we call her, Jim?”

“Beulah and I decided if the baby was a girl, we would name her ‘Maxine’.”

A few moments later, Beulah was sweating profusely, and gasping for breath. So Jim quickly got a wet washcloth, gently wiped her sweaty brow and face, and then resumed holding her hand. A few minutes later she seemed to be recovering a bit,

and she weakly squeezed Jim's hand and whispered, "Jim darling, I love you; how is our little Maxine?"

Jim responded with tears in his eyes, "Darling, I love you too, and our beautiful little redheaded girl is doing fine."

Beulah sighed and murmured, "Thank you, Lord." Then she closed her eyes and began breathing irregularly and with great effort, a sure sign she was dying.

Then the doctor took the baby from Beatrice, stepped outside the room, and asked the rest of the family to go in and gather around the bed.

Jim was holding Beulah's right hand and Beatrice was holding her left hand. A few moments later Patty leaned over Beulah, kissed her on the forehead, and began singing Beulah's favorite song: "Amazing Grace." All but Jim joined in the singing; he wasn't able to sing a note. But as he watched his wife's face, he noticed she was mouthing the words to the song in perfect synchrony with them.

After three verses the family ceased singing, and Beulah's mouth ceased moving. Then she opened her eyes but they were not seeing anything of this world; they were seeing into the Great Beyond. For a few seconds her lips again moved, and then they ceased moving and her hand went limp in Jim's. Then he said, "I believed she just saw her angels coming after her and she told them she was ready to go."

The doctor leaned over Beulah's motionless body and checked for a heart beat; he straightened up and quietly announced, "She's gone."

Jim tenderly closed her eyes, got up and went to Beatrice and Jesse, embraced them and held the weeping couple tightly; he was too numb to cry. Sam and Patty stood close by, clinging to each other, crying. But after the couples had cried themselves out of tears, Jim excused himself and went outside to the barn; the numbness wore off and Jim fell to his knees, his body shaking as he sobbed.

By late evening the group had brought their emotions under control enough to have a discussion about funeral arrangements and what to do with the baby. The Starkeys' had an employee whose wife was a wet nurse, so they suggested that the baby remain with them until Jim could find a wet nurse close to his home.

Beatrice spoke up, "The ideal situation would be for you to find a woman who would be willing to become a wet nurse, a housekeeper, and babysitter for the children."

Jim was not in favor of adopting any of the options, but he realized that he was going to have to choose one of them if he was going to be able to move Maxine to his home anytime soon.

"I'll tell you what I will do. I will go back home after the funeral and discuss this matter with the kids after they've had some time to get over the shock of their mother's death. Speaking of the kids, should I have them come down here for their mother's funeral?"

Beatrice thought they should and the others agreed with her. She added, "I know that it will be a traumatic event for them, but in the long run I believe they would resent not having been given the right to decide for themselves." The others agreed.

Later that evening, Jim got a firm grip on his emotions and called home. Hazel answered the phone, and Jim told her about Maxine's arrival. Then as gently as he could, he told her of her mother's sudden death. There was a long pause; then between sobs, Hazel managed to say, "Dad, let me talk to the other kids; then I will call you back."

"No Sweetheart, I need to tell each of them about their mother."

"But, Daddy," Hazel managed to say, "they have already been told the truth and are hugging each other and crying almost hysterically."

"Okay, Sweetheart, give them all a big hug and a kiss for me, and tell them Dad loves them. Please call me back when the kids get calmed down; I will be waiting for your call. Goodbye, Honey." Jim hung up the phone and returned to the barn for another time of weeping and another talk with the Lord.

About two hours later Hazel called back. "After we had all cried ourselves dry-eyed, I asked them if they wanted to go to Martha for Mom's funeral; they all said they did. Then we all had another spell of crying and hugging, but right now, we're all doing okay."

"Thank you, Hazel, you are a very brave and grown-up young lady, and I'm so proud of you. Now here is what I want you to do: Tomorrow pack three-days worth of clothes for yourself, and help the others pack theirs. Then get Ramon to take you to the train at Forgan and buy your tickets for you. Tell him I will repay him when I get home. We will meet you at the train station tomorrow. Goodnight, Sweetie, and give each other a hug for Daddy, and know that I love you all very much."

The children arrived the next day, and spent the day visiting with their dad and the rest of the relatives. From time to time there were weeping and comforting sessions among both the children and the adults.

The following day, both the children and the adults went to the open-casket funeral at the Baptist church. The songs were comforting, the preacher's message was appropriate, and the eulogies from Patty, Sam and various members of the church were most fitting.

After the service the congregation was ushered out, the doors closed, and the family left to say their final goodbyes to Beulah. Then they took her to the family plot on the Starkeys' farm, and buried her alongside the parents of Jesse and Beatrice.

"I will see to it that she has an appropriate headstone very soon," Jesse stated. Then the family went back to the church for the customary dinner and time of visiting with family friends.

Back at the Starkeys' that evening, the matter of where the children would live came up. So the children were taken to the basement and given various games they could play. Then the discussion among the adults was resumed.

The alternatives discussed were splitting the kids between Jim, the Starkeys, and Sam and Patty, or having all of them remain with Jim.

There was much debate between the families, and a unanimous decision couldn't be reached. Finally Jim made a proposal: "Let the children choose with whom they want to live."

The group agreed with that proposal, and the children were brought up from the basement and the alternatives were explained to them. Then they were taken back to the basement and were told that when they had individually decided on which alternative they wanted, they were to come back upstairs and each one was to tell their choice. In a short time the children appeared upstairs.

"Well, youngsters, have you all made your choices?" Jim asked.

"Yes," Hazel answered, "we have all decided that we want to stay with you, Daddy."

"That speaks mighty highly of you, Jim, but do you think you can adequately care for all five of them?" Beatrice asked.

Before Jim could answer, Hazel interrupted, "I can help Daddy; after all I'm almost a grown woman." Jesse thought, "That's a mighty confident statement for a twelve-year-old girl to make," but he didn't say a word.

Jim then gave his answer to Beatrice. "Yes, with the help of Hazel, and the cooperation of the rest of the kids, I believe we can make it all right. Besides, I have high hopes of finding that "perfect" lady we talked about a while ago: a wet nurse, housekeeper, and babysitter all in one. I can offer a pretty high salary and I believe that will attract just the one we need."

CHAPTER 52

The next day the Starkeys' and Sam and Patty, took Jim and the children to the train station. Jim bought the tickets and in a short time the train arrived. After much hugging, many tears, and a lot of goodbyes, Jim and the kids boarded the train. In a few moments the train pulled out of the station with the kids and Jim standing by the train windows, waving goodbye.

As soon as the family got settled in at home, Jim sat down with the children and the group made plans for living under the new circumstances. The children were cooperative and a schedule of chores was made for each child and for Jim. Then Jim assured them he was going to do all within his power to find a lady who could oversee the household and take care of Maxine.

Jim went to see Ramon and Chiquita with the hope they could help him find a woman who could meet his qualifications. After Jim explained what he would expect of the woman, Chiquita spoke up, "I have a sister, Rosa Atkins, in Mexico who just might be who you are looking for. She's twenty eight years old and a widow. She lost her husband and their little baby in a flu epidemic a short time ago, and since then she has been taking in washing and wet nursing for a friend to make a living. I feel sure she will be interested in the job.

"Would you like for me to go to see her and find out if she is willing to come up here to talk to you about the job?"

Jim was interested and said to Chiquita, "I will be glad to pay all the expenses for you to get her up here, and if for some reason she, or I, decide she is just not right for the job, I'll pay her expenses to return to Mexico. Does that sound fair?"

"Yes, it does," Chiquita replied. "I will leave for Mexico tomorrow. Ramon can take me to the train station and come to get us when we get back to Forgan."

Within a week Chiquita was back home with her sister, Rosa, and as soon as they got rested up, Chiquita took her to see Jim and the kids.

Rosa was an attractive young lady with a winsome smile. She had long, brunette hair done up with several barrettes, was slender, had dark brown eyes, and was a bit on the short side. She extended her hand to Jim and to each of the children while smiling and introducing herself: "I'm Rosa."

After a few minutes of getting-acquainted conversation, Hazel muttered to herself, "She's not bad looking, but she isn't as pretty as my mother was, and I bet she's not as good a cook and housekeeper as Mom was. And it's a cinch she can never be as sweet and as good at mothering as Mom was."

Tears filled Hazel's eyes as she thought about her mother, so she excused herself and retreated to her room.

A look of dismay crossed Rosa's face and she looked at Jim and asked in a lowered tone, "Did I say or do something wrong?"

“No, Rosa, she is still grieving the loss of her mother,” Jim explained. “She was our firstborn and she and Beulah had a very close relationship. So please bear with her and the other children and give them a chance to get better acquainted with you.

“I’m sure you realize you will have a very challenging job, but I feel confident that in a relatively short time you’ll win the youngsters over to your side. I also know that since you have lost your husband and a baby that you can identify with all of us in our grieving.

“I’ve said all of that with the assumption that you will stay with us a while and give us a chance to get better acquainted with you; of course you will also need some time to get acquainted with us. So before we go any further, I feel we need to discuss the requirements you’ll need to fulfill. Then I would like for you to tell me what you will expect of us.

“I need to warn you that my first requirement will be a strange one; if you feel you can’t fulfill it I will understand. Now let me explain why I’m making this particular requirement.

“As you know, my wife passed away a short time ago just after she gave birth to our child, Maxine. At the present Maxine is being cared for by a wet nurse who is the wife of an employee of my father-in-law. Of course we don’t know how long she will be willing, or able, to nurse Maxine. So my requirement is this: Would you be willing to become a wet nurse for Maxine?”

“Yes, Mr. Laney I believe I would be able to be a wet nurse for your baby daughter; I’m certainly willing to try. You see, I’ve been wet nursing for a friend since my son died, but their baby is now old enough that he no longer needs to be breast fed. But I am still able to nurse a baby and will nurse Maxine if you desire me to do so.”

“Thank you, Rosa. Your willingness to nurse Maxine takes a big load off my mind. Now for the rest of the things I will expect you to do: I guess in a nut shell I will expect you to do the household chores that my wife did and take care of the children. Hazel can help you get acquainted with those chores as she had been helping her mother for several months before she died. Now what will you expect of us?”

“Well, Mr. Laney I will expect to be treated with respect, and given the privilege of asking questions about the various chores if I don’t understand them clearly. Is that too much to ask?”

“Absolutely not, and if at any time one of my children is disrespectful I will expect you to come to me privately and explain just what had happened. Then I will question the child, and if I’m convinced the child was wrong, I will see to it that the child apologizes to you. Also, I will administer punishment in keeping with the severity of the child’s act. Does that sound fair to you, Rosa?”

“Yes, Mr. Laney it does, but I choose to believe that such a problem will never happen.”

“Now that we understand what will be expected in our relationships, how about this proposition: You stay with us for five months; then at the end of that time you and I can make a decision about extending your time here.”

Rosa pondered the question briefly and then replied, “I believe that is a fair proposition; I agree to stay the five months.”

“Fine,” Jim responded. “I’ll drive you back to Chiquita’s and help you get your belongings. And when we get back here I’ll help you move into the guest room.”

Then Jim thought, “The ice has been broken, and there is one rather large piece that is going to need thawing in regard to Hazel's relationship to Rosa.”

When Jim and Rosa returned from Chiquita’s, he carried Rosa’s belongings to the guest room; then he went to Hazel's room and knocked lightly.

“Come in,” Hazel responded, and Jim entered the room.

Hazel was sitting on her bed, red-eyed but no longer crying.

“Honey, could I talk to you a few minutes, please?”

“I guess so Daddy, just don’t preach to me.”

“I won't do that; I just need to ask some favors from you. Is that okay?”

“Daddy, I can't make any promises right now but I will listen to your requests,” Hazel replied with some hesitation.

“I want you to help Rosa get familiar with the routine and chores that your mom had, and I expect for you to do so without complaining or in any way sulking. Rosa lost her baby and her husband last year and she’s going through a grieving time just like we are. Please be as friendly as you can while you help her get settled into her new life in this household. Can you do these things for your dad?”

After a few moments of hesitation, Hazel answered, “Yes, Dad, I will do my best.”

“Thank you, Sweetie; I appreciate so very much you’re doing this for me.”

Later that day, Jim got all four kids together in private and explained to them exactly how he expected them to treat Rosa—with respect and with helping hands. Then he asked them if they thought they could do this, and they all replied with a “Yes.”

He then added, “By the way, as Hazel already knows, Rosa lost her baby and husband to flu a short time ago, so she’s grieving just like we are. We need to show compassion to her just like we will show to each other.”

The next day Jim and Rosa took the train and travelled to the Starkeys home to get Maxine. Although there was a good deal of reluctance on the part of the Starkeys, they placed Maxine into the arms of Rosa, knowing that that was what was best for Maxine.

After Jim thanked his in-laws and the wet nurse for having taken such good care of Maxine, he and Rosa took Maxine to the train, and the trio traveled back to Forgan. When they arrived, Ramon was there with the car to take them back to the homestead.

When they got home, they were met by Chiquita and the four children. Rosa was surrounded by the greeters who wanted a closer look at the new arrival.

They oohed and awed at the sight of the cute little redhead who was smiling up at them from Rosa's arms. Even Hazel was impressed, and she asked if she could hold her. Rosa carefully placed Maxine into Hazel's arms, and to the delight of Hazel she continued to smile—a lifelong bond was established. And Rosa was nursing the little baby and establishing a loving relationship with her.

The next few days seemed to be a little stressful as the family tried to adjust to life without Beulah and to life with Rosa. But as the days rolled by, the tension began to dissipate and adaptation began to set in.

Rosa was proving herself to be a capable, fast-learning, and loving lady. And the children began to see her as a motherly figure, and warm relationships began to develop—with the exception of Hazel. She treated Rosa with respect and helped her with the household chores, but she just couldn't think of her as a replacement for her mother.

Aside from the moments of grieving, which were becoming less frequent and less intensive, things were going well with Jim and his children. The family had adjusted well to the presence of Rosa, and Rosa had adjusted well to them during the five months of trial time. In fact, at the end of the five months, Rosa asked Jim if she could stay on indefinitely. Jim said, "Yes," much to the delight of Virginia and the two boys. They had become fond of Rosa, and were showing their love for her by their actions and words. With her blessing, these three had begun calling her "Mom," or "Mother." Hazel was warming up, but still had a ways to go before she could honestly say she had really accepted Rosa as her mother's replacement.

Jim was also glad Rosa wanted to stay on as deep down inside he had developed a real liking for her and was very glad that she could nurse Maxine; and Maxine and Rosa had developed a strong relationship. Maxine was precocious and had begun calling Rosa, "Mommy," much to the delight of Rosa and the family.

After several months of recovery and readjustment, disaster struck the family again. Hazel was in the garden picking green beans for the evening meal, and as she reached down to pull the pods from a plant, she heard a buzzing sound, but before she could react, the rattlesnake struck and fastened itself to her forearm. She screamed with pain, flung the snake loose, and rushed to the house screaming, "It bit me! It bit me!"

Rosa was in the kitchen and rushed to meet her as she entered the house. She had Hazel lie down on the sofa and tried to calm her, knowing that her rapid heartbeat was only making the matter worse.

“Was it a rattlesnake, Honey?”

“Yes,” Hazel replied between gasps.

“It’s going to be okay, Sweetie, just lie there with your arm hanging down beside the sofa; try to be as calm as possible while I get some medicine for you from the kitchen.”

Rushing to the kitchen, Rosa reached up on the shelf where the cooking materials were kept, pulled down a can labeled “Herbs.” She opened it, took out a handful of the herbs, and placed them in a small stew pan sitting on the stove. The tea kettle was on an adjacent burner and nearly full of boiling water. Rosa grabbed the tea kettle and poured some water over the contents of the stew pan. While the mixture was steeping, Rosa ran to the rag bag in her bedroom, got a large piece of muslin, and cut it into a long strip.

She returned to the kitchen, put a small piece of the muslin over a cup, and poured some of the brew through it. She added a little water to cool down the brew; then she carried it into Hazel and told her to start sipping it.

Next, she placed the rest of the muslin in a large pot and poured the remaining brew over it. After the muslin had soaked for a few moments, Rosa carefully lifted out the muslin and let the liquid drain back into the pot. She waved the muslin back and forth a bit to cool it down; then she wrapped it around the snakebite site on Hazel’s arm.

Rosa noticed that Hazel was having difficulty breathing, had a rapid pulse, and was becoming drowsy—sure signs that she had been injected with a dangerous amount of venom.

“Oh, Lord, please don’t let Hazel die,” Rosa fervently prayed, “and please send Jim to the house quickly.” (Jim was out on the range checking on the cattle.)

While waiting for Jim to return, Rosa kept the poultice on Hazel’s arm wet with the solution she had brewed.

A short time later, Jim arrived in the living room. His face turned pale as he saw the ashen face of his semicomatose daughter and the anxiety on Rosa’s face. “What happened here, Rosa?” Jim asked anxiously.

“She got bitten by a rattlesnake,” Rosa replied, trying hard to control her emotions. “I have given her some tea brewed from herbs I brought from Mexico, and I’ve also kept her bandage wet with some of it. People in Mexico use these herbs all the time for poisonous bites from snakes, spiders, and other poisonous critters. It always seemed to help them overcome the poison.”

“I pray that it will work for Hazel as well,” Jim said, almost in a whisper. “Why don’t you go on to the kitchen and prepare some supper. The kids will be awake from their naps pretty soon and, as always, they will be very hungry. I’ll stay here and keep Hazel’s bandage moistened.”

Rosa stood up, turned, and started for the kitchen but Jim stopped her. “You are a very brave, intelligent lady with a loving heart, and I’m so proud of you.” With that comment he took Rosa into his arms and hugged her gently.

She returned the hug, looked up into Jim’s eyes, and quietly responded, “Thank you, Jim.” That was the first time she had addressed him as “Jim” instead of “Mr. Laney.” Jim’s heart skipped a beat and a strange, inexpressible feeling permeated his entire body. Could it be that ...?

As Rosa walked toward the kitchen, Jim sat down in the chair next to Hazel. He silently prayed for Hazel; then random thoughts of Rosa began to whirl in his mind. “What’s coming over me?” Jim thought. “I have not had thoughts like these since Beulah’s passing nine months ago.” And with a feeling of guilt, he struggled to put the thoughts out of his mind.

After Rosa had nursed Maxine and put her down for the night, she prepared a new poultice for Hazel’s arm and carried it into the living room.

“Mr. Laney I will put this new poultice on Hazel’s arm and spend the night with her. I will keep the poultice wet and keep cooling her feverish head with a cool, damp wash cloth so she will rest better.” Jim protested, but Rosa persuaded him to go on to bed and leave her to tend to Hazel.

As Jim started for the bedroom, his thoughts shifted from Hazel to Rosa. “Why did she go back to calling me ‘Mr. Laney’ instead of ‘Jim’? Perhaps she’s ashamed that she returned my hug.” But he found himself trying to think of a way to justify hugging Rosa again, as he had so enjoyed embracing her and feeling her hug in response.

The next morning Jim arose, dressed and walked into the living room, not knowing what he’d find. To his delight he found Hazel awake and with color back in her face. Rosa looked tired, but she was smiling.

“Mr. Laney she’s going to be all right—thank the Lord! Now, if you will stay here with her, I’ll go prepare breakfast for the family.”

At this point Hazel looked at Jim, then at Rosa. Then through tears, Hazel whispered, “Rosa, you saved my life; thank you so much.”

At that declaration, Rosa knelt down by Hazel’s side, hugged her, and replied, “Hazel, I love you, and am so glad you will soon be as good as new!”

That day a mother-daughter bonding between Rosa and Hazel began and Jim was delighted. He also was aware that his attraction to Rosa was becoming stronger daily, and he hoped that the feeling was mutual.

Hazel remained in bed and soon drifted off into sleep. After a few minutes Jim and Rosa decided it would be okay to leave her alone to sleep. So they quietly left the room and went to the kitchen. Jim then suggested, politely but emphatically, that Rosa nurse little Maxine while he prepared the breakfast for the family.

Then he gave Rosa a loving semicommand: “As soon as you finish nursing Maxine, and have eaten your breakfast, would you please go to bed so you can get some rest and some sleep? The kids and I will take care of the dishes and all the other chores you usually do.”

Rosa smiled and replied, “Thank you, Mr. Laney; I will do as you wish.”

At this, Jim took Rosa’s hand and asked, “Rosa, would you please call me ‘Jim?’ Mr. Laney sounds entirely too formal.”

“Yes, I will,” Rosa replied with a pleased smile. “It will be my pleasure to do so—Jim.”

Rosa noticed the change in Jim’s behavior, and she expressed her gratitude to him for his help. Also, the children noticed the changes in the relationship of Jim and Rosa, were delighted with the changes, and among themselves they began to speculate when they would be getting married.

CHAPTER 53

Jim decided that if he was going to propose to Rosa, he should first learn more about her background. He didn't want any surprises if they did marry. So at an opportune time he asked her, "Rosa, forgive me for asking, but could you please tell me all you want me to know about your background and family?"

"Jim, I'm so glad you want to know more about me, and I will be happy to tell you about my life and my family.

"My grandparents immigrated to the United States from Spain. They were farmers and ranchers in Spain, so when they got to the United States they sought employment by someone who was a farmer and rancher.

"They found just the right fellow, a Mr. Bower, and went to work for him. He was a wealthy American with a good family. They were all Christians and lived a life that would honor their Lord. As a consequence, my grandparents became Christians also. Their religion and lifestyle were passed on to their children, all of whom remained employed by the Bowers.

"So you see I was brought up helping with farming and ranching activities. Also, Chiquita and I were educated right along with the Bower children.

"When I was twenty six years old, I married a neighbor's son, Ronald Atkins, who worked for his father. We lived on his farm, and twelve months ago I gave birth to Randy.

"Then a little later a flu epidemic hit the community and Ronald, his parents, my parents, and our little Randy all died. The bank foreclosed on our farm, and I was forced to move out.

"Since my parents had died without leaving Chiquita and me any inheritance, I had to live on my own. So I moved to Mexico and rented a little house and took in washing and wet-nursing a friend's baby to earn enough to pay the rent and keep food on my table.

"In the meantime, Chiquita had married Ramon and they had come to work for you; and now you know the rest of the story. I hope it will not make any difference in our relationship."

Almost in tears, Jim responded. "Oh, Rosa, your story has only increased my affection and admiration for you. Despite all the tragedies in your life, you're not a bitter person. Indeed you are the most mature, well adjusted and loving person I have ever had the privilege of knowing."

A few weeks later, Jim left Hazel in charge of the other children, and then took Rosa for a ride in the buggy just as sundown was approaching. He drove to within two hundred feet of the playa lake there in his pasture. They sat silently, content to be with each other; Jim's arm was around Rosa, and her head was resting on his shoulder. As the sun started sinking below the horizon, it began to display a plethora

of rainbow colors; each color dominated for only a few seconds, then yielded to a brilliant successor until finally a beautiful shade of red overruled all the other colors.

“Oh, Jim, wasn’t that a glorious display of God’s handiwork?”

“Yes, it was, Sweetie. That is one great thing about living here in No Man’s Land—beautiful sunrises and sunsets occur rather frequently.”

As the twilight deepened, a full moon began to rise, and creatures of the night began to appear around the lake, drawn to the water. Fortunately, the lake was large enough that “enemies” could all drink at the same time.

As Jim and Rosa quietly watched, they saw several creatures appear: badger, coyote, deer, and even a skunk. On the lake swimming peacefully in a small group were several teal ducks.

The animals didn’t loiter, but drank and then made hasty retreats, only to be replaced by more animals. But after a while the nocturnal animal population had all disappeared, leaving only the ducks, and they soon waddled upon the shore to spend the night.

“This has been an enjoyable learning adventure—seeing so many different creatures, and seeing them up so close. Thank you, Jim, for bringing me out here this evening.”

“Yes, Rosa, scenes like this make me glad I live here in the country, and in No Man’s Land.”

Then Jim put his other arm around Rosa and drew her close. “Rosa, I brought you out to this lovely place because I wanted you to enjoy seeing the night creatures up close. But much more importantly I wanted to ask you”—Jim had to get a grip on his emotions before he could continue—“I wanted to ask you to make me the happiest man alive. Will you marry me?”

Without hesitation, Rosa put her arms around Jim, hugged him lovingly, and looked into his eyes, and then slowly and with emphasis, she replied, “Oh, yes, Jim, becoming your wife has been a deep desire in my heart for months.”

Jim tightened his embrace, drawing Rosa even closer, and in a voice filled with tenderness and affection, he whispered: “Rosa, I love you with all my heart, and I will see that you have the most magnificent wedding this community has ever seen.”

Rosa gently freed herself from Jim’s embrace, lowered her head slightly, and said, “Jim dearest, you know that I love you deeply and dearly, and you have just made me the happiest woman in all creation. But, Darling, I have a special request; it may seem strange to you, but please hear me out. I do not want a big wedding. I would prefer to have what is called an ‘Immediate Family’ wedding. I would want only our kids, Ramon and Chiquita, and Ralph and Maria present.”

Jim pondered her request for a moment and then replied, “Rosa that will be just fine with me.”

After a brief pause, Rosa faced Jim again and said with some hesitation, “Jim darling, there’s something else I feel I should tell you now, rather than wait until we’re married, because after I tell you, you might not want to marry me.”

With alarm in his voice, Jim asked, “Rosa, what is it?”

“I had a very troublesome time while carrying Randy and the doctor told me I would be unable to get pregnant again; Jim, I would not be able to have a child for you.”

Without hesitation, Jim replied, “Rosa dearest, the way I look at it you already have five babies: Hazel, Virginia, James, Joe, and little Maxine. And in my heart I know that your love for them couldn’t be any greater, even if they were truly your own flesh and blood. So please don’t feel guilty because you can’t have a child by me; I look upon you as the mother of my children.”

“Thank you, Jim, for being so understanding and loving. Now I have a final request: Would you be willing for me to join your church? I have been a Christian since I was eleven years old. I know you and your children worship the Lord as a family every Sunday, and I would like to be a member of your church so I could worship the Lord with all of you. If you are agreeable, I would like to join the church before we are married; I just feel that’s the proper thing to do.”

Jim was pleased with her request and told her so. Again she gave a sigh of relief.

Then after a few moments of cuddling, Jim suggested that they go back home and tell the children they had decided to get married. Rosa was enthusiastic about the idea, so Jim turned the buggy around and they started back home.

All the children, but Maxine, were still up, so Jim started to tell them the good news. But before he could tell them what it was, Hazel blurted out, “You’re going to get married!”

“Yes, children, we are going to get married very soon,” Jim announced, and immediately the kids gathered around the couple, began hugging them with great enthusiasm and trying, in their childish ways, to express their joy.

Finally the youngsters settled down so Jim said, “Little ones, it’s past your bed time, so give us a goodnight hug and kiss and run off to bed.” The children obeyed their father’s request and were soon tucked into their beds, still excited from the wonderful news.

After the children were bedded down, Jim and Rosa sat on the sofa and discussed future plans. Jim suggested, “The first thing we should do is to tell Ramon and Chiquita, and Ralph and Maria the good news about our decision to marry. Then we should check with our preacher to see when he can conduct the ceremony.”

“I think that is a good plan, Jim. Let’s just hope he’ll be able to do it really soon—I’m so eager to become Mrs. Laney!” With that she turned toward Jim,

closed her eyes, and tilted her head. Jim understood her signals perfectly, pulled her closer, and gave her another passionate kiss.

For several minutes they just sat quietly and held each other in a tender embrace. “Darling, as much as I want to stay up all night and hold you, I know we should go to bed because we have a full day ahead of us. So Sweetie, give me another hug and a big kiss, and I will escort you to your bedroom. Then I will check on the children and go on to bed myself.”

They stood up and Rosa gave Jim the requested hug and kiss; then Jim walked beside Rosa to her bedroom. Once again Jim enfolded Rosa in his arms, whispered sweet phrases to her, and then gave her a goodnight kiss.

“Goodnight, Sweetheart, I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.” With that he turned and made his way to the children’s bedrooms. They were all sleeping soundly, so he tiptoed down the hall to his bedroom.

Jim was having a difficult time getting to sleep, and so was Rosa. The events of the evening were still running rampant through their heads. But as their thoughts about tomorrow gradually faded, they both drifted off to sleep.

Jim arose early the next morning and walked out the front door to greet the new day. The eastern sky was filled with a lovely sunrise of colors only God could produce; the air was fresh and pleasantly cool, and there were scattered clouds with patterns that only one Artist could draw.

“Lord, I thank you for the night of rest and for this lovely new morning; may we walk faithfully in the paths You will set before us.” Then he turned and reentered the house, only to see his beloved Rosa, fully dressed, coming toward him. After a “Good morning, my Love,” and a kiss and embrace, Jim escorted Rosa to the front porch so she could enjoy the beautiful scenes and the pleasant breeze.

“Oh, Jim, isn’t it wonderful to be in love, and in God’s beautiful world?”

“Yes, Rosa, and your love for me and my children is what makes life so complete and so full of joy.”

They stood for several moments with their arms around each other, enjoying their closeness and the lovely morning.

Finally, Jim said reluctantly, “I guess we should go prepare breakfast as the kids will soon be getting up.” Then he added with a grin, “Also, we have some calls to make today, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do, darling, and I’m anxious to make them, especially the one to the preacher so we can set the date for me to join the church and for us to become ‘one flesh.’”

With that proclamation, they went inside to the kitchen and started breakfast. By the time they had it prepared, all the children were up; Hazel was carrying Maxine, who was now able to eat “grown-up” food and no longer nursed Rosa.

One by one the children, even little Maxine, hugged Jim and Rosa, and said, “Good morning, Mom and Dad!” Jim and Rosa responded: “Good morning, you Sweeties.”

Hazel placed Maxine in her highchair, and sat down at the table. Then when all hands were folded, and all eyes were closed, Jim asked the Lord’s blessing on the food and the family.

After breakfast was finished, Hazel, Virginia, and James volunteered to do the dishes so Jim and Rosa could begin their mission sooner.

They expressed their gratitude, hastily got dressed in their Sunday best, and were soon on their way in the Buick, leaving Hazel in charge. (Hazel actually enjoyed her position of responsibility.)

They first went to the preacher in Forgan to see about Rosa’s joining the church and to set the wedding date. As soon as the social greetings were concluded, Rosa asked Mr. Maxey about becoming a church member the next Sunday. He heard her testimony, and then stated he’d be glad for her to join the church next Sunday.

Then Jim turned to the subject of the wedding and asked Mr. Maxey if he would perform a very short service for them the Monday after Rosa joined the church.

He said he would be honored to perform the ceremony. To the delight of Jim and Rosa, he didn’t have a prior commitment the following Monday morning, so he’d be able to perform the ceremony then. The time for the ceremony was set at 10 a.m. Then Jim told Mr. Maxey how they would like for the wedding ceremony to be conducted.

“We will simply stand before you at the altar, holding hands, as you conduct the service. For Rosa’s sake, please make it as brief as feasible. And by the way, Rosa and I will have the rings.” Mr. Maxey smiled and promised, “I will make it as brief as I can and it still be legal.”

After thanking the preacher, the couple drove to the home of Ramon and Chiquita, made the announcement about the wedding, and invited them to attend.

The Arcrose’s were happy about the affair and hugged the Laneys while exclaiming their joy. Shortly thereafter, Jim and Rosa left and drove on to the home of the other Arcrose family, Ralph and Maria.

After a few moments of exchanging greetings, Jim said rather nonchalantly, “By the way, we came by to share some good news: Rosa and I are going to be married in the church next Monday and we want you to attend the ceremony.”

The responses to this announcement were hugs and congratulations. After several minutes of further discussion about the affair to come, Jim and Rosa explained that they needed to get back to the children as they were alone. Ralph and Maria said they understood, and they waved goodbye to the couple as they drove away.

The love birds rushed home and gave the details of the wedding arrangements to the children. (From then on, Rosa was “Mom” to all the kids, and the kids became her “children.”)

The children were pleased with the news about the wedding details, and little Joe asked with childish anticipation, “Am I going to get to sit on the front row?”

Jim answered with a chuckle, “No, all you children will get to sit with the Arcroses on the second row from the front. Rosa and I will sit on the front row with the pastor and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Maxey.

Then Rosa said, “Now we are all going to have to go through our closets and find our finest clothes to wear to the wedding.”

“Well,” Jim said, “actually I’m planning to take all of us to Beaver tomorrow so we can purchase the finest clothing available for all of us. I think we all should look our best even if it’s going to be a short ceremony. Is that all right with everyone?” The response was a simultaneous, resounding, “Yes!”

As planned, the family traveled to Beaver the next day and spent several hours purchasing clothing. They finished their shopping shortly before noon so Jim took the family to dinner at the finest eating establishment in Beaver.

Upon finishing their dinner, Jim and Rosa took the children to a frozen custard shop, bought them all a treat, and left them with Hazel in charge.

Then they went to a jewelry shop and purchased beautiful, gold wedding rings for each other. After being sure they were the correct sizes, they paid for them and returned to the frozen custard shop. The youngsters had just finished their treats and were ready to go home

Once they got home, Rosa suggested that everyone take a little nap, a suggestion everyone agreed with. They were all tired from the day’s events, and soon the children were asleep. However, Rosa and Jim sat together on the sofa for a little while, reliving the joyous events of the last two days.

“Oh, Jim, I’m so happy I could float away in a cloud of pure ecstasy—that is, if you would go along with me.”

“Darling, you know that I will go with you anywhere you want to go; and wherever that might be, we will surely be in that cloud of ecstasy.” A few moments later they were sound asleep in each other’s arms.

An hour or so later, Jim awoke and gently freed himself from Rosa’s loving grasp. She slept on as Jim lowered her to a prone position on the sofa. He then carefully checked on the children and found all of them still asleep. So he retired to his bedroom and thanked the Lord for all the blessings he and his loved ones had received. Then he studied the Bible as that was his custom.

A while later he heard a soft knock on his door, and upon opening it he saw Rosa standing there with her arms open. He gathered her into his arms, kissed her, and

whispered, “Rosa, I love you with all my heart, and I thank the Lord daily for putting you into our lives; you were truly sent by the Lord to be our ministering angel.”

Rosa responded with a kiss, and then she whispered, “Jim, you and your children are truly answers to my many months of praying. Oh, how blessed I am.” Their moment of enchantment was suddenly interrupted by the sound of the children yakking as they awakened.

“Well, Darling,” Rosa said, “I guess I should go start supper as I know the children will be very hungry in a short time.”

“I’ll go help you,” Jim said as he stole another hug and kiss. It just seemed to him that his desire to hug and kiss Rosa was insatiable—but he certainly didn’t mind, and neither did she.

The following Saturday was dress inspection time for the kids and Jim. Rosa saw to it that everyone’s clothes fitted properly; when they didn’t, she would alter them until they did. Fortunately, there was a need for only a few minor alterations.

After Rosa was satisfied with how everyone else looked, she took the older two girls into her bedroom and let them help her get into her beautiful silken bridal gown and veil.

When she had finished with the dressing, the girls gasped, and Hazel said in a near-reverential tone, “Mom, you are so beautiful.”

Virginia agreed, “Mom, you do look heavenly, just like an angel.”

Rosa was moved to tears by her daughters’ loving comments so she gathered them into her arms and said through the tears, “My dearest daughters, thank you; I do love you so very much.”

In a very low, tender voice, Hazel slowly replied, “Mom, we really love you too, and we’re so glad that you are willing to become our mother.” Then they hugged their Mom and kissed her tenderly on both of her cheeks.

After a few moments, Rosa released them and wiped away her tears. “Well, my darlings, I guess I’d better change back into my everyday clothes and go start dinner. Would you girls like to help me?”

The girls quickly assured their mother that they would be delighted to help her. So Rosa quickly changed her clothes and they all proceeded to the kitchen.

Thanks to the help of the girls the meal was soon prepared and on the table. Hazel went into the living room and announced to Jim, “Come and get it before it gets cold!”

Almost instantly, the family was seated around the table with bowed heads and clasped hands, waiting for Jim to ask the blessing.

There was silence for a moment, then Jim began his prayer: “Oh, Lord, we thank You for manifesting to us Your love, mercy, and grace, and we thank You for

meeting our every need. And we thank you for the food you have provided. Please bless it, we pray, so it will give us the nourishment we need. And we thank You for all our blessings; and in the name of our Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.”

Jim lifted his head, slowly looked at all of the faces around the table, and then he said, “I have never seen so many beautiful and radiant faces before.” Then he added with a mischievous grin, “Is there some good reason for them?”

Hazel responded, “Dad, you know very well why we are all so happy; in two more days from now you will get a lovely lady as your lawful wedded wife, and we will all get Rosa as our lawful mother to love and cherish forever!”

Fighting back the tears, Rosa replied, “Thank you, Hazel, for those tender and gracious words, and I will try my very best to be the loving wife and mother that you beloved ones deserve.”

After the meal was finished, one by one, the four older children filed by Rosa and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Again Rosa’s eyes were brimming with tears of love and gratitude. When the last youngster had filed by, the older children went out to play, leaving Jim holding Maxine on his lap and sitting at the table with Rosa.

Jim reached out his free hand and grasped Rosa’s hand. “Darling, I can hardly wait for Monday to arrive. Just in two more days we will really be man and wife, ‘until death do us part.’”

With a loving tone in her voice, Rosa replied, “Oh, Jim, if I’m dreaming, please don’t wake me up because I want this dream to last forever.”

The next day the entire family attended church, and Rosa was welcomed into the church by the pastor. Then the congregation filed by her, shook her hand, and welcomed her as a new member.

CHAPTER 54

The next morning after breakfast was finished, all the family got dressed in their new clothes. “My,” Jim proudly proclaimed, “what a striking family we have here.”

Then the family paraded out to the car, got in, and Jim drove to the church. When they arrived, Jim and Rosa went into the church, walked down to the front row and sat down with Mr. and Mrs. Maxey. The children followed them in and walked to the second row of pews from the front and sat down with the Arcroses.

As soon as everyone was seated, Mr. Maxey arose, stepped forward, and then turned to Rosa and Jim and asked, “Are the bride and groom ready to begin the service?” They replied that they were.

So Mr. Maxey stepped to the front of the altar and motioned for the couple to take a position in front of him; then he began the service.

“We are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses and Almighty God to unite you, Jim and Rosa, by the sacred ties of matrimony. And now, if you know nothing, either legal or moral, to forbid your union in marriage, and you wish to take its vows and obligations, please indicate your wish by joining your right hands.

“Will you, Jim, have this woman, Rosa, whose hand you hold, to be your wedded wife, and solemnly promise that you will loyally fulfill your obligations to protect her, honor her, love her, and cherish her in all circumstances, and keep yourself unto her alone, so long as you both shall live?” Jim answered, “I will.”

“Then place the ring on her finger as a sign of your vow.”

“Now, Rosa, will you have this man, Jim, whose hand you hold, to be your wedded husband, and solemnly promise that you will be unto him a tender, loving, and true wife in all circumstances, and be faithful to him so long as you both shall live?” Rosa answered, “I will.”

“Then place the ring on Jim’s finger as a sign of your vow.”

He continued: “I now pronounce you man and wife. Jim, you may now kiss your bride,”

Jim gently lifted the veil from Rosa’s face and bestowed a tender kiss on her lips. Then the pastor had them turn around and he announced, “Friends and family, I now present to you, Jim and Rosa Laney.”

When the hugs and congratulations from the Arcroses and the children were finished, the preacher announced, “Mrs. Maxey and I would now like for all of you to come with us to our home next door where we will serve you punch and angel food cake.”

After the reception party was over, Jim, his new bride, and “their” children, drove home.

CHAPTER 55

Chiquita and Ramon were there to stay with the children while Jim and Rosa journeyed to Liberal for their honeymoon. Rosa had never been to Liberal and she was looking forward to visiting the city.

After a day of exploring Liberal and its surrounding area, and a morning of shopping for some household items, Jim and Rosa got homesick for the children and returned home.

They were greeted with a warm welcome from Ramon and Chiquita and with hugs and kisses from five loving children.

“You would think we’d been gone for a month,” Jim said with a grin, “and it kinda felt like that to us; we sure did miss you all;” Rosa smiled and was in complete agreement with Jim.

Life went along smoothly with the Laney’s the first year after Jim and Rosa got married. The kids were generally well behaved, even though occasionally there would be arguments over who was going to milk the cows, feed the pigs and chickens, gather the eggs, etc.

Jim and Rosa adapted to married life quickly, and initially there were no arguments. However, that all changed as a result of a visit from Dean Bradford, Beaver County’s Federal Marshal.

After the usual small talk, Dean got right to the point. “Jim, I realize that you’ve retired from your job as bounty hunter, but my deputy is out of town on vacation, so I desperately need your help to bring in Marvin Slotske. This outlaw is a clever thug and has eluded the law in several states. He’s wanted for murder, assault, and bank robbery.

“I didn’t have any idea he was anywhere in this area, but I found out that he probably is, and here’s why. Mr. Jones, the local grocery store owner, came in this morning and asked to see the wanted posters. I was puzzled by his request, but I didn’t ask him why he wanted to see them; I just handed the posters to him.

“He leafed through them slowly, and finally selected one. He asked for a pencil and began to black-in a beard on the man; then suddenly he exclaimed, ‘That’s him! He came into my store just at closing time last night and bought some groceries, but not items a man would ordinarily take on the trail. I thought his face looked familiar, but I couldn’t put a name with it. Then during the evening I got the idea I had seen him on a wanted poster around town, and sure enough I had, but now he has a beard.’”

Dean said, “The fact that he didn’t buy food items that a person would get if he were going on a trip, but he bought groceries like he was living somewhere close.

“Do you think you might be able to help me out? Oh, by the way, there’s a three-thousand-dollar bounty on his head, which indicates to me that he’s a dangerous criminal, so I really do need your help.”

Jim pondered a minute, then said, “Dean, I’d like to help you out, but before I agree to do so, I need to discuss this with my new bride. So just make yourself comfortable while I go out to the garden and talk to her about this.”

Jim approached Rosa and said, “Honey, I need to discuss a very important matter with you, so why don’t we sit in the back-porch swing and talk a few minutes.”

Rosa got a quizzical look on her face, but walked to the swing with Jim without saying anything.

“Rosa, I’ll get right to the point: Dean Bradford wants me to help him capture an outlaw that apparently is hiding out somewhere close to Beaver.” He then gave Rosa the details about the bandit and waited for her reply.

Rosa looked at Jim in disbelief, and said with indignation, “Jim, I can’t believe you would even consider getting involved in this; we don’t need the money, and you might get shot or killed.”

“But, Rosa, I’ve had some experience with thugs like this, and I will not take any unnecessary chances. I will be with Dean and he’s a capable man, so you really won’t have anything to worry about; besides, I owe Dean a favor. And I will give you my word that I will never go on a man hunt again.”

“No, Jim!” Rosa said in a demanding voice, “I don’t want you to do this! Do you want to go after this criminal because you owe Dean a favor, or do you want to do it because of the thrill you will get?”

Jim replied angrily, “That was hateful of you to accuse me of such a thing! I’m not doing it for the money, or any thrill, or any glory! I’m doing it as a public service!” With that explosive reply, he hastily walked into the house, grabbed his bounty-hunter gear, and then walked out the door with Dean.

Rosa immediately appeared in the doorway and hollered after them, “Jim, I love you, and I’m sorry I was so hateful!” Jim did not acknowledge that he heard her; he just turned toward her with a grimace on his face, then he climbed into Dean’s car. They drove off leaving Rosa standing alone, waving, with tears running down her cheeks. “O Lord, please protect them,” she prayed as they disappeared in a cloud of dust.

On the way back to Beaver, Jim and Dean discussed various plans for the capture of the outlaw. They agreed that Slotske was probably hiding out in an old deserted shack as there were several fairly close to Beaver. So they decided to rent a couple of horses and explore the area.

“I know where most of the shacks are around Beaver since I’ve done a lot of bird hunting in the county over the years,” Dean said, “so it shouldn’t take us too long to check out the shacks.”

They rented the horses and started their search for the outlaw. After they had checked six shanties, Jim was getting discouraged and said, “Dean, I’m about to believe he just pulled a fast one on us so we’d waste our time looking for him in the vicinity when actually he was hightailing it toward Mexico.”

“Jim, you may be right, but can we take the chance of missing him because we didn’t keep checking shacks? And if he is on the way to Mexico, the chances of us catching up with him are zero and none, right?”

“Yeah, you’re probably right, Dean, but let’s keep on looking until it gets dusk.”

Fortunately, a short time later Dean suddenly exclaimed, “Jim, look here, these tracks look like they were recently made.” The men dismounted and carefully examined them.

“These definitely are fresh tracks, Dean, and I believe I’ll be able to follow them, thanks to my young Indian friend, Jake.”

“Great! I’ll lead the horses behind you while you follow the trail on foot. If I remember correctly, there’s a shanty not far from here so we need to be very quiet—we sure don’t want him to know we’re coming, as that could be very deadly.”

A few minutes later, they came to the edge of a small clearing and in the clearing was a shanty with an old barn nearby.

“I’ll bet he’s in that shanty and his horse is hidden in that old barn,” Dean whispered.

“I’ll bet you’re right, Dean,” Jim whispered in reply. “What do you suggest we do now?”

“How about this: We’ll tie our horses in the brush back a little ways, and then you sneak around behind the shanty. I’ll stay here and be ready to shoot Slotske if he makes a break out the front door. But I figure he won’t do that; instead he’ll try to get away out the back door when he hears me hollering for him to surrender. If he comes out that back door, Jim, shoot him.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me, Dean,” and they moved back into the brush and tied up their horses.

Jim slipped around behind the shanty, and in a few minutes he heard Dean holler, “Slotske, we’ve got you surrounded; come out with your hands up!”

Just as Dean figured, Slotske rushed out the back door and ran toward the barn. Jim quickly drew a bead on him, and fired; Slotske fell to the ground, and lay there motionless.

“He’s down and out,” Jim called to Dean as he came rushing around the shanty.

The men cautiously approached Slotske with their pistols in hand. With his boot, Jim nudged the face-down body and got no response. He holstered his pistol, turned to Dean, and said, “Well, Dean, I guess I have just killed my first man.”

Instantly, Slotske rolled over on his back, pistol in hand, and fired; Jim dropped to the ground, unconscious. Dean immediately shot Slotske in the chest twice, crying loudly, “Take that, and that, you devilish thug!”

Then he knelt beside Jim and yelled, “Jim, Jim, wake up, Jim!” But Jim did not respond; he just lay there bleeding profusely from the chest wound.

Dean unbuttoned Jim’s shirt, then ripped off his own and stuffed it inside Jim’s shirt, and rebuttoned it.

He then rushed to the old barn and went inside. In a few seconds his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he spied an old carriage over in a corner and a set of harness hanging on the wall. He immediately put the harness on Slotske’s horse and hitched him to the carriage.

He drove the horse and carriage to the side of Jim, gently hoisted him onto the back seat of the carriage, climbed into the front seat, popped the rump of the horse with the reins, and hollered, “Giddyup!”

Fortunately, it was only a couple of miles to the Beaver hospital and soon Jim was in the emergency room.

“How did this happen?” the doctor inquired. Dean gave the doctor a brief explanation of the circumstances while he watched him remove the bloody shirts, cleanse the wound, and apply a clean dressing.

“This young fellow must have had the Lord looking after him because the bullet just grazed a rib and then exited his back, but he has lost a lot of blood. He probably would be dead by now if you hadn’t pressed your shirt onto the wound.”

“What are his chances, Doctor?”

“Well, if he makes it through the night he will probably live—barring any infections.”

“Doctor, do you have a phone in your office? I need to call Jim’s wife and let her know what has happened to him.”

“Yes, I do. Just give the operator the number you want and she will connect you with it.”

“Thank you, Doctor, I will do just that.”

The operator put the call through in just a few minutes. “Hello, Rosa, this is Dean; I’ll get right to the point. Jim has been shot, and has lost a lot of blood but the doctor thinks he will live. I knew you would want to know about it.”

There was a gasp as Rosa struggled to control her voice; she finally said, “Thank you, Dean; I will be down as soon as I can.” She called Chiquita, told her about the situation, and asked her to come and stay with the children; she agreed to do that.

Then Rosa grabbed her coat and hat and ran to the Buick. In a moment she was speeding toward Beaver.

The roads were not smooth, but Rosa didn't care. She pushed that Buick to sixty miles an hour, fighting to keep it in the road. In about ten minutes she arrived at the hospital, parked the Buick, and raced into the hospital. She rushed up to the receptionist's desk and between gasps she asked for Jim's room number. "Its room ten," the nurse replied, "but you need to have permission from the doctor before you can go into his room."

Rosa ignored the nurse, ran down the hall to Jim's room, and rushed in. The doctor turned to Rosa with a frown on his face, put his finger on his lips, and whispered, "Please be quiet, the patient should not be disturbed; I will talk to you in the conference room."

Rosa followed him into the hall and down to the conference room. They went in, and the doctor closed the door.

"Ma'am, I assume you are Jim's wife. I apologize for my rudeness, but complete rest and sleep are the best medicines he can have at this time." He then explained to Rosa about Jim's condition and the prospects for his recovery, repeating what he'd told Dean.

Rosa then asked the doctor if she could stay the night in Jim's room. "I'll be very quiet, and I promise I won't try to awaken him."

The doctor pondered a moment and said, "Well, I guess it will be okay. If he becomes conscious for any reason, or begins moaning, please go immediately to the nurses' station and inform them of the situation. The nurses' station is just the other side of the receptionist booth."

Rosa thanked the doctor, returned to Jim's room, and sat down in the chair at the side of his bed. She did not sleep any that night; she spent it weeping and praying.

Morning arrived and the doctor came in to check on Jim. "How did you and Jim make out last night?" he asked.

"Well, Doctor, I didn't sleep any, but Jim didn't do any groaning; he just laid there motionless. Is he going to be all right?"

"Let me examine him and take his vital signs; then I can give you a better prognosis. While I'm doing that, why don't you go to the kitchen and get something to eat? When I finish my examination I will come there and get you."

Rosa thanked him and made her way to the kitchen. The cooks were understanding and prepared a good breakfast for her. She didn't have any appetite, but she forced herself to eat anyway. And soon after she finished eating, she began to feel her strength coming back.

About that time, the doctor came, got her, and took her to the conference room. "I have good news, Mrs. Laney; your husband is going to live. But it will take several

days for him to fully recover his strength because he'll have to generate a considerable amount of blood. Having said all of that, I think he will be able to go home in three or four days, and you can continue nursing him back to health there—if that okay with you.”

“Oh, yes, Doctor, that will be just fine with me,” Rosa said with a smile on her face and a rejoicing in her heart; she looked heavenward and breathed, “Thank you, Lord!”

“I believe your husband will be coming around really soon. So if you want to wait in his room that will be just fine.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I would like to be there when he wakes up.”

About an hour later, Jim began to move his head and arms, and mumble. Rosa immediately took his hand and said, “Jim, darling, you are going to be all right.”

Jim opened his eyes, blinked a few times and weakly asked, “Rosa, is that you?”

With tears running down her cheeks, Rosa bent over and kissed Jim's forehead and answered, “Yes, my beloved husband, it's your loving wife, Rosa!”

After hearing Rosa repeat what the doctor had told her, he said, “Thank you for staying with me last night and for filling me in on what the doctor said. But right now, do you think you could find something for me to eat? I'm hungry as a bear just out of hibernation.”

Rosa assured him she would get some food for him and rushed down to the kitchen and requested some. The cooks replied that they would take some food to his room in just a few minutes. So Rosa returned to Jim's room and told him food was on the way.

Then she went to the receptionist, borrowed the phone, called her sister, and told her the good news. Chiquita said she would pass the word on to the children and to Ralph and Maria.

In the meantime the doctor had heard Rosa's exclamations, and returned to Jim's room.

“Young man, I'm certainly glad to see you awake and hungry; those are two very positive signs of recovery. I have told your wife that I expected you to be able to go home in three or four days. However, you may be able to go home sooner than that. I will have a much better idea about it by tomorrow morning. But in the meantime, we will just have to wait and see how you do.”

The next day Dean visited with Jim for a short time. “Jim, I'm so sorry that you got shot. I just thank the Lord that it was not a fatal wound. And by the way, I have submitted the paper work for you to receive the bounty. When the money comes in I'll bring it to you.”

That afternoon Rosa drove back home to clean up and get some much needed rest. The children were so happy to see mom again and to hear first hand about their dad's condition.

Rosa did not give them any details about the shooting; she just told them that their dad was going to be all right, and would probably be coming home in a day or two; that satisfied the children and they didn't ask anymore questions.

After Rosa had had a long nap and had gotten freshened up, she drove back to Beaver to spend the night with Jim. The hospital staff had moved a cot into Jim's room so Rosa would not have to spend the night in a chair.

After Jim had his supper, he and Rosa visited for a short time; then Jim began to nod. So Rosa kissed him and told him to go to sleep. Then she assured him that she would be there in the room in case he needed something during the night. With that assurance, Jim was soon fast asleep.

Jim had a good night, and the next morning he was much stronger. After the doctor examined and questioned him, he decided Jim could go home the following day.

The next morning the doctor wrote instructions for Jim on how his wound was to be treated. He also told Jim if there were any signs of infection he was to return to the hospital immediately. He told Jim to eat his breakfast and then he'd be free to go home.

So when Jim had finished his breakfast, Rosa helped him out of the hospital and into the Buick, and then she took him home.

The kids were overjoyed to see their daddy again, and wanted to give him hugs, but Rosa cautioned them that they might hurt their daddy's wound. So they each carefully hugged Jim's neck and kissed him on the cheek. Then they wanted him to tell them all about his experience.

"I'll tell you all about it when I get rested up—if Rosa thinks it would be okay for me to do so." Privately, Rosa told Jim she did not think it would be a good idea for him to recount the experience in detail as it might cause the kids, especially Maxine, to have nightmares. So a week later Jim told the children about his experience, very carefully leaving out the details about his getting shot.

Since there was virtually nothing to tell because Jim omitted the part about getting shot, the kids wisely realized Jim didn't want to tell them about the shooting part; so they ceased their questioning and the incident was not brought up again by the kids. But Jim had some things he wanted to say to Rosa in the absence of the children.

"Rosa, I want to thank you for your loving care and attention while I was in the hospital and after I got home. I can't tell you how much that meant to me. And I

want to tell you how sorry I am about what I said to you that fateful day when I went with Dean to capture that bandit. Please forgive me.

“You were absolutely right in what you said; I should not have gone on the hunt. You’re too sweet to say ‘I told you so,’ but you have every right to do that, because, to be honest about it, I did want to go for the thrill of the hunt. But I can assure you that I have learned my lesson—I will not go on another hunt!”

“Oh, Jim, my dearest husband, let’s make a bargain. I will forgive you for what you said to me, if you’ll forgive me for what I said to you.”

“Done! You know what; it just now dawned on me that that was the first argument we’ve had since we got married, and I pray that it will be our last.” Jim continued, with a twinkle in his eyes and a grin on his face, “Now, if you’re agreeable, I’d like for us to kiss and make up.”

Rosa carefully placed her arms around Jim's neck, looked into his eyes, and whispered, “I’m agreeable.” Jim returned the embrace and tenderly kissed his beloved wife.

Later that evening, Jim took Rosa by the hand and led her to the swing on the back porch. “Sweetie Pie, there’s something I forgot to tell you earlier. The three-thousand-dollar reward I got for helping Dean capture that outlaw is all yours to spend as you see fit.”

“Oh, Jim, that’s not necessary; but if it’s all right with you, I would like for you to deposit it in the fund we have established for the kids’ education.”

“That’s a great idea, Rosa; I will do just that.” Peace and harmony once again reigned in the household.

The years rolled by with ever-increasing speed, or so it seemed to Jim and Rosa. Jim’s farm and ranching activities, and wise investments, had gotten them through the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl years in good financial condition. Also, the education fund had been adequate for all the kids to get good educations.

After World War II ended, Jim retired from the farming and ranching business and he and his beloved wife moved into a splendid retirement center in Liberal, Kansas. For a few years they were visited by their children and grandchildren. Then the time came for Rosa to go to be with the Lord. Jim was heartbroken and went to join her three months later.