LISTEN TO THE RIVER: A NOVEL ON MODERN RANCHING LIFE

by

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ABSTRACT

Listen to the River is a novel about modern ranching life and the conflicts within a rural community over water and property rights during the course of a summer.

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This work is dedicated to
all of my sisters.

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF ARTISTIC PURPOSE

When I began the thesis process some time in the last decade, it was apparent right from the start that it would have to be a creative work. I have avoided literary theory like the plague in my academics, I can't keep track of notecards, I still don't know the proper form for endnotes, and I basically hate the facts about literature. My intentions were, in the beginning, impure. I had no artistic purpose.

But as I began to write, I began to think about how my work was going to be perceived. I was writing about rural people, cowboys and ranchers, a society that is old-fashioned and conservative, and at the same time, very free. I spoke in my prospectus about gleaning my cowboy culture for the best elements and putting them into story form, and as I did this, I discovered some new intentions.

I wanted this work to be funny. I find the ranching culture humorous, loaded with oxymorons and idiosyncrasies. I love to hear old people from the country tell stories. I

wanted a work that would make people chuckle a little, because life and people are funny. As a writer, it's my job to show this.

I wanted to be accurate and true to the history of the area and to the culture I wrote about. Some of the elements of the work are strictly experiential, and not a lot of folks have lived in the country. I had no desire to paint country life as a rosy existence, and I hope I have done a decent job of reporting things as they are. My conscience won't allow me to promote some of the more obvious redneck qualities, and the reader won't find them in the work. What the reader will find is a reflection of a summer full of crisis in a ranching community, with a slight bias against city life thrown in.

I wanted to address ecological issues in a manner that was non-judgmental. Our society is polarized about issues that do not have tangible opposites. I hoped to show an ecological question that is also rooted in culture, and an optimistic way to address it.

Finally, I wanted to tell a good story. I wanted to entertain the reader. I wanted something basic, a showcase for the culture, something my grandparents could read. If it is interesting, then it is literature; C.S. Lewis will back me up on this one.

Despite my intentions, I ended up working very hard to create a work of art with at least some literary merit.

AUDIENCE

In my prospectus, I wanted to write for folks who devalue the rural community by buying into the myth of the "country bumpkin." In retrospect, this is not the mythology I want to dismiss. After all, every culture has its share of internal diversity--people that are bright, mean, kind, quiet--and the interaction of these people are what makes a story interesting. So those readers who wish to embrace the backwardness of some country folks are welcome to, as long as they are also willing to recognize the other characteristics of the culture, such as belief in hard work, a sense of community, and intelligence beyond book-smarts. And yes, some ranchers are college-educated.

As I have stated above, I hoped to make the work enjoyable to the generations before me, maybe giving recognition to values that modern society sometimes leaves in the dust. I also hope that the technical details are clear enough for a "city person" to understand, but not cumbersome to the story line.

The experiences in the work are not specific to rural culture. Everyone has confused feelings, everyone suffers from losses, and I would hope everyone finds peace within. When I wrote, I showed differences so that the reader could find similarities. The reader does not have to live in the country to understand this work.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Influences are hard to pin down. I have been absorbing this material in the form of personal experience and conversations with old-timers most of my life. Every summer, I go back to the area I wrote about, Central Oregon, and find something new to write about.

In translating experience into words, I am indebted to many authors for their fine examples. Conrad Richter's Sea of Grass gave me a penchant for sweeping descriptions of the plains and the hills. It is a beautiful book. I have read almost all of Louis L'amour's works and a great deal of Zane Grey's novels, as have my characters. For poignancy, I draw upon Willa Cather. Annie Dillard's works gave me permission to describe nature in whatever minute details I could come up with. Patrick McManus influenced me toward comic characters and situations in the outdoors. And Ivan Doig is one of my strongest influences; after reading Dancing at the Rascal Fair, I wanted to write a book just like it, full of characters and wonderful descriptions, a complete story, where life and the culture-setting and emotions tangle themselves up and slowly untangle themselves again.

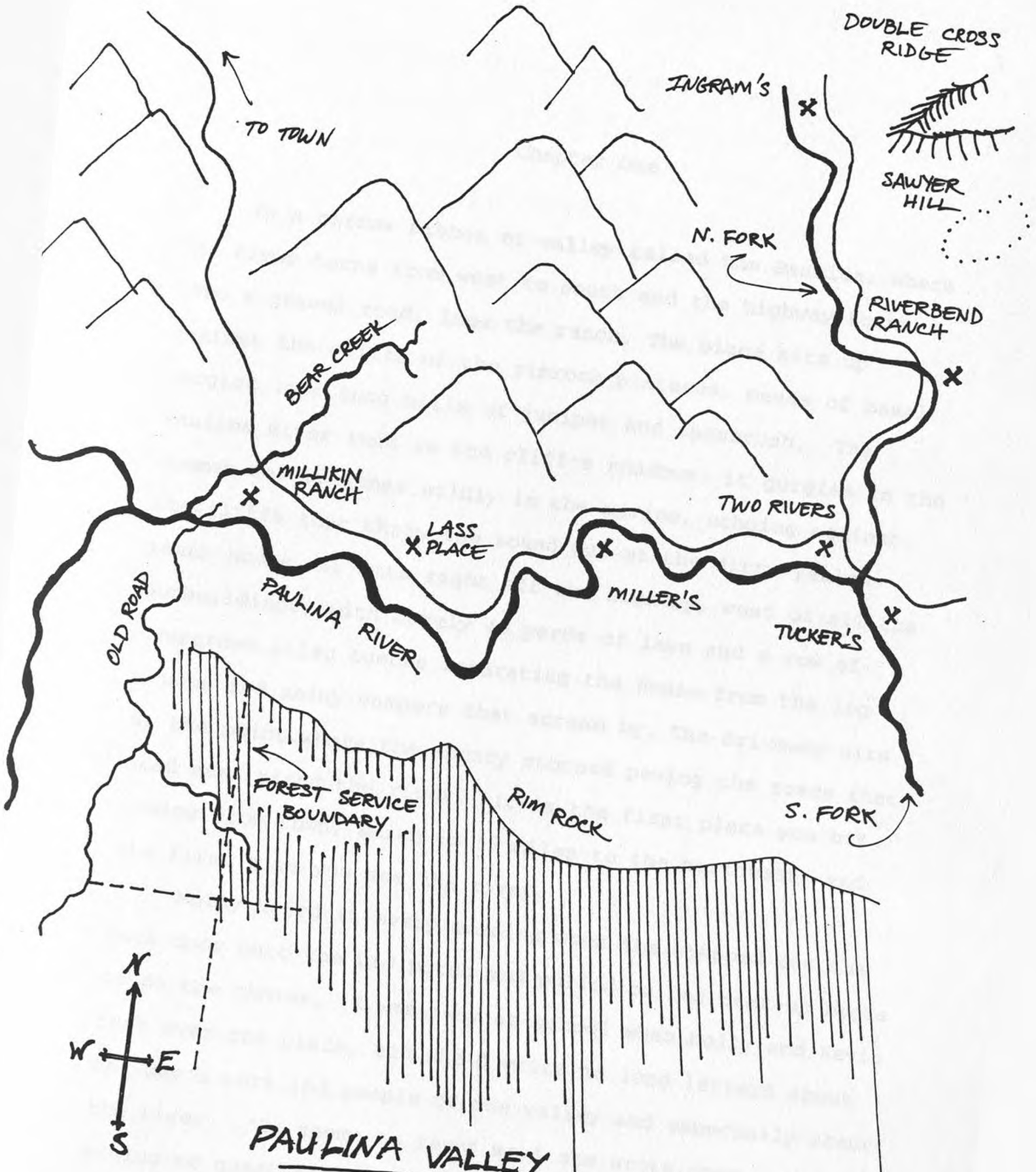
In other words, "Plagiarism is basic to all culture," as singer Pete Seeger's father said. I have borrowed something from everyone who writes about rural culture that I have read. I'm a writer; I can do that.

TECHNIQUES

As I have said before, I love literature but I hate the facts. I don't know what a novel is. I was hoping it's a series of character sketches and expositions on the horizon, tied together loosely with a bad plot. It isn't. Unfortunately, writing a novel is like having a baby; once one creates a character, one must take care of it. After sitting on Chapter One for eight months, I hammered out the other seven in a week and spent six more months taking care of my characters--marrying them off, killing them off, resolving their conflicts. I created a traditional plot and I followed it religiously, modifying my characters to fit the actions they had to take.

I found that I had a passion for adverbs. I have since quenched that fire, upon recommendation of my advisors. I also found that I didn't know a lot about my subject, and research became essential. My attempt to avoid the facts was foiled, and I think I did more research for this than I would have for a critical analysis of a literary work.

After some thought, I decided to use selective dialect to make my characters authentic. I read the dialogue outloud to test it. I wrote from the narrative perspective of a young woman who was somewhat of an outsider, but had inside information, so she could make conclusions about the others. I used every bit of poetic license I could. It was great fun. When I began, I didn't read any "How to Write a Novel" books, but I feel I could write one now.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OLD ROAD
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FOREST SERVICE BOUNDARY
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E. Mah '92

Chapter One

In a narrow ribbon of valley called the Paulina, where the river turns from west to south and the highway turns into a gravel road, lies the ranch. The place sits up against the cliffs of the rimrock plateaus, mesas of basalt merging into long hills of juniper and sagebrush. The Paulina River runs in the cliff's shadows; it gurgles in the summer and splashes wildly in the spring, echoing against the cliffs that throw the sound out at the dirty-yellow ranch house. It sits right off the highway, west of all the outbuildings, with barely 40 yards of lawn and a row of overgrown lilac bushes separating the house from the log trucks and shiny campers that scream by. The driveway sits at the point where the county stopped paving the roads that head east along the river. It is the first place you hit coming from town, which is 18 miles to the northeast, and the first time you see the river.

Molly heard it every morning when she stepped out the back door onto the big porch and pulled on her beat-up boots to do the chores. I was away at school when Molly and Kevin took over the place, and she'd write me long letters about her day's work and people of the valley and especially about the river. "It seems to taunt me," she wrote once. "It's asking me questions like, why are you doing all the work?

Why do you even stay with the son of a bitch? And I have to answer that I love him, and this place. Or at least this place--ha! Study hard and if anyone gives you a hard time, shoot 'em. I hear the river--I'd best get to work. Love, Mol." She's an amazing and practical woman, my sister. She's ten years older than me, and she got a degree in Agriculture from the same university I attended. She's tall and sturdy and beautiful, with long brown hair and fine features. Even though her skin's looking a little weathered, the whole valley is in love with her, and it doesn't seem to enter their minds that she might get older someday. "That Molly--she's a fine woman," they say. Molly's never really noticed--she has always had work to do. In the mornings, as she stepped off the porch, she would take a long breath of the cool air coming off the river and stride to her work. She would mix up formula for calves whose mothers had died during birth or organize the tack room reinforcing the rickety saddle horses. She would back a doorless pickup truck up to a mountain of hay under scant cover and climb to the top, where she would grasp hay bales half as big as herself with thick-gloved hands and heave them into the truckbed. She would drive the doorless truck down the hard, rutted mud road that ran parallel to the river. Sometimes she'd see people across the field on the highway, and they would always slow down to see who it was, because it seemed every ranch in the Paulina Valley had a doorless pickup truck, and most of them were light blue.

Satisfied it was Molly they were waving at, they would honk and roar down the highway. Molly considered this a form of social contact; she would write and tell me, "Saw Bud and Marilyn Lass today. They must be over the flu. They're looking quite healthy--from a hundred yards. Ha!"

Molly would cross the river at a low spot, if there was one, and drive up to the horse pasture--a dark, fenced-in hillside with a northern exposure, a bad place for horses but the only solid fencing on the place. She would break the bales into chunks and drop them over the fence, check on the horses' latest hoof-rot or scratched flank, tighten the fence some with the pliers she carried in her back pocket and drive back to the house. She would fix herself a pot of coffee and cheese sandwiches for lunch, start a pot roast for dinner, nail down the loose step on the back porch, mount up a horse and chase down cattle in the hills north of the highway, change the irrigation pipe on the lower alfalfa field, patch up a radiator hose on the tractor with duct tape, count the new calves, sweep the kitchen, wait until eight for Kevin to get home, finally give up and eat the pot roast, take a long bath and go to sleep, too tired to feel her muscles ache.

But she always heard the sound of the river, even in her sleep. I suppose all the ranchers heard it. The river was their sustenance. Somebody was always fighting over it. The worst cases were when someone's land separated it from another`s, or when two places ran parallel to each other

across the river. The year before Molly and Kevin took over the ranch (I have to include him even though he did nothing around the place), there was a shootout at the Two Rivers store down the road. An old rancher, slow on the draw, got hurt by another man who claimed to have rights to the North fork of the river that ran through their place. The deputy sheriff, Roy Smith, didn't know what to do; it didn't seem to be cut and dry, so he didn't make any arrests. The river permeated everyone's life, even mine during the summer I came to stay out there.

I was a history major at the university then, only nineteen, and I enjoyed the bustling city life after growing up in a cow town. I didn't miss home much, except Mom and Pop, who lived about fifteen miles north of town. Old Fred Millikin owned the ranch but he was only there on weekends. He had opened up a sandwich shop in town, which was reportedly more irritating than fun for Old Fred. "Townpeople are finicky eaters," he'd say. Once a millworker came in and placed an order: "I'd like one of them corsant-deals with extra mayo." Fred whipped out a ham and cheese croissant, and the customer sent it back; there was no mayonnaise at all. "Quit your bellyaching and eat what's on your plate," growled Fred. The dumbfounded millworker ate it. Fred started to get the best business in town. The Chamber of Commerce advertised his shop in the visitor's guide as "No-Nonsense Cooking and Good Advice." Tourists began to stop in just to listen to him. He got

surlier, business boomed, and one day in May he called Molly to tell her he wasn't coming back to the ranch. "You'll have to hire some help," he told her. "I've got my hands full baking up these corsants and kicking out the riffraff."

She wrote me a letter that night. "Kevin's too busy with his job at the hardware place-ha! Fred's son Charlie will be out in July, but I need help now. Could you give up the exciting times out at Mom's? Pay's good. Food's free." I'd never been much for ranch-work and I wanted to be a history professor, but a job's a job. Besides, Molly was taking care of my dog, Pups, and I missed them both. The more I thought about summer, the more excited I got. I finished up my first year at school, daydreaming my way through final exams.

I rode home on the bus with more luggage than they allowed; it stopped at the Texaco station in town to let me off. I stepped down and Molly immediately grabbed me. "Bones!" she shouted. She picked me up and swung me around like I was a kid; I'm at least a head shorter than her and I've never weighed very much.

"Hey! Watch the skirt!" I smoothed down my clothes.

"Nice outfit!" Molly said. "I hope you have some better shoes. My God! Don't you eat? We'd better get some food down your gullet before you blow away. Ma and Pa are camping, those lazy bums. They'll be out in a couple days." She said all this while she was loading up my three shoulder bags, one backpack and a huge suitcase. I just stood and

grinned at her. "What do you need all this stuff for? There's nobody out here to see you!"

Kevin stood by, shifting from side to side and smiling uncomfortably. "Hey, kid. How's the big city?" He gave me a one-armed hug and then tried to take some of the luggage from Molly.

"I've got it," said Molly shortly. He stood for a minute watching her as she strode to his red Camaro, then he shook his head and followed. He was duded up, with his hair slicked back and brand new jeans on. As we drove out of town, he looked at everything but Molly. I sat forward from the back seat with my chin on Molly's shoulder and watched the desert flow by while she shouted over the engine noise. Kevin didn't say much.

We grew up north of town, but I had been out in the valley many times before, on camping and hunting trips. It it had never seemed so alive. The sagebrush and rocks and juniper were so distinct that they seemed like cutouts; the windows were down and the air was hot and dry. The sky was absolutely cloudless and gigantic, blue in all directions, with no skyline borders of brown to break up the smoothness. We drove up into the hills and down over them, then we rounded the corner. The river sparkled from across a raggedy green pasture full of motley breeds of cattle. We stopped at the house; Molly and I jumped out and left Kevin in the car. "You have to see this!" said Molly. I followed her to the tack room. "Check out this bridle. Bob from the

86 Ranch makes these. Oh, you won't believe the size of Pups! Mandy, you've got to give that dog a name. You've had him for a whole year now. Where are those mutts? Pups!" she called. Her face was flushed from talking so fast. I didn't realize how bad things were between her and Kevin until I saw how happy she was to have me here.

"OK, I will. But you have to call me Amanda now," I corrected her. "I`m not a kid anymore."

"Oh, yes, you are!" She got me in a headlock and hauled me around the place, through the barn and the corral, through dirt and muck and old hay, in my mini-skirt and patent leather shoes, until I was breathless from laughing and humble again.

We came in and Kevin was reading a magazine with the TV on. They had a satellite dish but only a few channels could penetrate the mountains and hills that enclosed the valley. It was on the French-Canadian music video channel, one of Molly's favorites. My bags were in the corner of the big, dark kitchen.

"I thought I'd put you out on the sleeping porch so you could sneak out at night." Molly winked at me. "But you can take the spare room if you want. In fact, you could bunk with me and not cause much of a stir." We sat down at the kitchen table.

"Not good, huh?" I nodded in the direction of the livingroom.

"Nope. He's never home. Remember the letter?"

"Yeah." Molly had written to me a couple weeks ago that Mom had thought she'd seen Kevin with a woman at Dairy Queen in town. "But he wouldn't...do that! I mean, you're married."

Molly looked out the window. Her eyes glistened in the dim light of the kitchen. "You really are a kid still." She sighed and turned back to me. "He would do that; he probably already has."

I didn't know what to say. "Well," she finally said, "time to check on Joey. Did I tell you I rode him right through some barbwire and he's all cut up. You can come if you want, but you'll have to change those damn shoes," she grinned.

We rode up in the jeep to the horse pasture and put ointment on poor Joey's leg. When we got back, Kevin was gone. He left a note that he was playing cards in town with the guys. I put my stuff away in the utility room; it was screened in on the porch side and it had the extra fridge and the washing machine. I fell asleep with cool air freezing one of my ears, listening to the river.

* *

The next morning I had biscuits and coffee for breakfast out on the back porch, the only redeemable feature of the house. There had been an old homestead on the site, but Fred had torn it down and built a one-story crackerbox.

It was dingy inside and out, even though Molly kept the floors clean. The porch became my favorite place to be over the summer. There was a bench and a rickety coffee table with no varnish left and two torn-up lawn chairs, and it was cluttered with shoes and boots and dogs. Pets come and go in the valley, especially at homes near the highway. This bunch was relatively new; I hadn't learned their names yet, but there were four of them, and the smallest, spotted in black and white, was a gift from Molly to me for high school graduation. He remembered me, it seemed, and flopped down on my bare feet.

I had awakened at seven and Molly wasn't around. Kevin wasn't around either; I wasn't looking forward to what would happen when he came back. Already the air was hot, with little clouds in the sky like cotton puffs. It was looking like thunder. The puffs would gather in larger and larger clumps till they towered over the land. Now it was eight, and Molly was nowhere in sight; I figured she was out changing irrigation pipes because the doorless pickup truck was gone.

I was on my second cup of coffee when a small red pickup drove up. A tall man with a lean face and thinning red hair stepped out. He had a big belly, which he balanced on spindly legs, shifting from side to side until he settled into his stance. Once he found it, I was to learn, he could stand and talk for hours.

"Howdy. You must be the Mandy I've been hearing about." He grinned and cracked his gum.

"That's me." I came to the end of the porch. "And you are...?"

"William Lass. Call me Bud."

"Oh, you're Bud! I've heard of you from my sister." Bud looked pleased. He and his wife, Marilyn, owned the next place down the road. It was pretty small, only five thousand acres, but his grandparents had homesteaded it. Bud was supposedly one of the descendants of Paulina, the Indian chief who owned the county a hundred-odd years ago; but then again, everyone in the valley claimed an Indian Princess great-grandmother of his own. It was a major factor in the fight for access to the river. In truth, the only claim on Indian heritage most of them had was a collection of arrowheads mounted in the hallway and a Navajo blanket over the back of the sofa. "It's good to meet you." I stepped down to shake his hand.

"Where's that old sister of yours?"

"I'm not sure. I just got here yesterday--I haven't seen the whole place yet. She's probably up in the hills somewhere. I suspect she'll be back to pick on me soon. You want to wait? There's bad coffee," I offered.

Bud grinned. "That'd be good, thanks."

I went inside and got some coffee for both of us. Molly still made it in a tin pot on the stove; she insisted it tasted better. I wondered what it would be like without

grounds in it. Bud didn't seem to notice; we sat on the porch and chatted as he drank cup after cup.

"Molly told me that you are related to Chief Paulina," I said.

"Yep, that's right." He ducked his head modestly. "He, uh...well, he was one hell of a warrior."

"Yeah, I've heard. I'm a history major so I've been studying up on the area."

"Have you?" Bud leaned forward with an interested look. "Then you probably know the legend of Chief Paulina's favorite daughter."

"No, I've never heard it." I pulled my legs up onto the chair and listened.

"Well, Paulina had five daughters and about a dozen sons. One of the girls was his favorite child. He taught her to run and hunt and scout just like he did, and on her fifteenth birthday, he gave her his favorite horse, a big grey stallion. Well, one day she was out scouting in the hill country south of here and she came across some lost beaver trappers. Them beaver like the juniper, did you know that?" I nodded. Bud squinted with one eye and raised the other brow. "They thought she was mighty keen. But she wouldn't have nothing to do with them. Hee, hee!" He let out a cackle and stretched out in his chair. "Nope. She thought they were mangy mutts. But they had guns, see, so they started taking potshots at the ground around her to scare her. She took off through the puckerbrush while they

shot at her back. She rode on and on, forever, until she came to the edge of that cliff, right-up-there." Bud pointed to a spot on the rimrock.

"Well, they was willing to let her live if she'd give them a little you-know-what. She looked down over the edge, and the spirit of the river called out to her and said it would protect her soul if she jumped. So she did--kicked that big grey horse in the side and plunged right to her death." He breathed the last word. He was silent for a moment, I think for effect, and then he said, "Well. That's it. That's the legend. It's a mighty powerful river. My ancestors had a lot of respect for it, unlike a lot of these idiot farmers around here."

I nodded in agreement. "Molly talks about the river a lot," I said. "She says it speaks to her." I laughed but Bud was serious.

"I wouldn't doubt it. She kind of reminds me of an Indian princess, all regal and purty and tough." He smiled a little.

We sat on the porch for another half-hour or so before Molly came out of the hills to the West that closed off the end of the valley. She drove the truck across the river and through a small pasture and a gate that opened onto the alfalfa field. She pulled up with a smile on her face and hopped out. She was shiny from working and there was a cut across her arm.

"Hello, Bud. Hey, Bones, did you get your beauty rest?" she said.

"Howdy, Ma'am," said Bud. "Say, what happened there?" He came down off the porch and took her arm in his huge hands. She pulled it back out.

"It's nothing. Scratched it on a nail this morning. What brings you by?" She was cheerful but she sounded wary.

"Oh, just thought I'd do some visiting." He pulled a pack of gum out of his pocket. "I quit the Copenhagen and now I can't get enough of this here Doublemint. Want a stick?"

"No thanks." Molly bent to pick some weeds off her boots. "How's Marilyn?"

"She's pretty good, a little under the weather, but ain't we all. She's been meaning to drop by, but she's pretty busy. She's quitting the Amway business."

"Well, tell her to stop by before she does. I'm out of laundry soap. Has Mandy kept you properly entertained? Well-fed and the whole works?" She winked at me.

"Oh, yeah. She fed me coffee and she listened to me. Guess that's all I could ask for." They laughed. "Marilyn thought I ought to stop by and warn you; there's a mean pack of feral dogs running around the valley, chewing on the livestock. One of them bit Old Ingram's three-year-old boy. Tore his arm all to hell. We know you spend some time alone out here, and we was concerned," he said.

Molly frowned but her tone of voice was pleasant. "I'm not alone. I have Bones here to protect me." She didn't say anything about Kevin, and I had a feeling Bud was implying that he knew what was up.

"Well, I just want you to be careful."

"Thanks, Bud. I'll keep an eye out. How wild are they?"

"Looks like second-generation. These mutts have been around a long time, and they're mean sonsabitches. They've been spotted up on the plateau between the river and Bear Creek, right near the forest boundary. Thought you might want to move them cattle down so you could keep an eye on 'em."

"I might just do that."

"I could give you a hand," he said enthusiastically.

"Oh, I can handle it," Molly said swiftly.

"Molly." Bud cleared his throat. He looked back at me; I had picked up a Louis L'amour sitting on the bench beside me and I pretended to be engrossed in it. "I know things are getting out of hand," he said gently. He looked out upon the alfalfa field toward the river. Molly's eyes followed his. Sage-rats popped up and down out of their burrows; they made holes big enough for the stock to step in and break their legs.

"It may not seem like it to you, Bud, but I have this place under control. It is a lot of work, I'll admit that, and it sure doesn't help get the work done if I stand around

and visit. You'll excuse me." She tried to brush by, and he stopped her by putting his arm out.

"Molly, just hear me out," he pleaded. "I know he ain't treating you right, and I guess it's no secret that I would if I could. If he ever lays a hand on you, I'll kill him!"

"It's not your place to kill him, Bud. It's mine, because it's my business. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave now." She stood at the edge of the porch with her arms crossed. The wind lifted her ponytail and wrapped it around her face. Bud looked at her with his eyes big and sorrowful. Finally he shrugged. He got back in his truck and roared away in a cloud of dust. Molly sighed loudly and strode over to the clothesline. The wind was really picking up now, and the sky had gone dark.

"Looks like the storm's come early," she said.

* *

It was three nights later when we saw the wild dogs for the first time. We'd been up every morning before the sun and working until the thunder drove us inside, trying to get the fences secure at the east boundary of the property, up on top of the rimrock. I'm not sure why; it wouldn't keep the dogs out. Maybe it was for another kind of security. I was faint at the end of the day from working so hard, and I was eating a lot more than when I was away at school. We had eaten most of a big pot of chili, saved some for Kevin

in a tiny bowl (he said he was playing cards in town), watched a few music videos and gone to bed. The night was clear for the first time in three days, and three-quarters of a moon shone in through the screens. It was bright enough to read by, but I was exhausted and sleeping soundly.

Molly woke up first to the sound of the garbage cans out back falling over and our dogs whining like they'd been whipped. My dog, Pups, was sleeping with me, and he was watching out the screen, wired with tension. I pulled on some shorts and went out my door. Molly was standing on the edge of the porch, a shotgun in her hand. The place where the garbage cans stood was alive, a wriggling, snarling mess.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

"It's that pack of dogs," she said quietly. She sounded calm, and I was, too, until she flipped on the porch light, a flood lamp that barely reached out to the garbage cans. Five pairs of eyes flipped on, like headlights in a dark lot. I could only distinguish one dog, something resembling a black lab with shaggy hair. He kept our gaze long after the other dogs had gone back to scavenging. The dogs weren't scared of us at all. Molly flipped the light back off and I drew closer to her, shivering. Now I could see their bodies as they rooted and grunted like pigs, growling. One found a paper bag with chicken bones; it tore into the bag viciously with its teeth and paws, shaking it high in the air. I kept thinking of Bud's words:

"...chewing on the livestock...tore his arm all to hell...." My skin turned to goosebumps as I watched them. The dogs looked up frequently, their gazes threatening and defiant.

Finally, Molly shouted, "Git! Go on, get out of here! Go on!" They looked up briefly and went back to their business. I knelt and hugged Pups. Our dogs seemed so fierce when strangers drove up, but they only watched with their ears pricked forward. Molly pumped the gun and fired into the air. She did it again. "Go on, you mutts!" They didn't move. She sunk into a lawn chair, defeated.

We finally went back inside, locked the door and sat at the kitchen table. Molly put a pot of water on the stove for tea. I was really worried. "What if they attack the horses? Or the dogs?"

"I think they're just hungry this time. If they come back, I'll shoot them. I don't want to, but I will." Her voice was calm but her eyebrows were working like inchworms. "I wish Kevin were here."

I knew she didn't mean for comfort. "Me too. Just to have more people on our side."

"Or more guns," said Molly. "He's never here when there's work to do," she laughed.

"Molly?" I asked. My voice surprised me--it sounded so young. "Do you love him?"

"Ohhh," she groaned, "don't ask that, Bones." She rubbed her forehead hard. "Doesn't matter anymore. It's more a matter of convenience than love. I'm in a real tight

spot with him. See, if I kick him out, he'll say I'm overreacting, and if I don't, I'm letting myself be fooled."

"I think it's simple. Tell him to clean up his act and if he doesn't, eighty-six him," I said.

"It's not that simple, Mandy. He's my husband. And he owns the jeep." She gave a wry laugh. We ate the rest of the chili, had some tea and went back to bed.

Chapter Two

Ranch people are an interesting lot. I have seen men sob at the death of their favorite horse, and then turn around and leave their wives sitting in the truck with the door open, the warning bell sounding ding-ding-ding, while they shot the breeze with perfect strangers. Gert Stockton was much like these rancher types; you never knew when or where her compassion would shine through, or if it could make it through her thick skin. Gert owned the Two Rivers General Store, Post Office and Tavern. She was deemed "a tough old bird" and she ran the place by herself. It was the hub of activity for the valley, if it needed one at all. We drove to Gert's all that summer just to chat with the old-timers and catch up on the latest news, even though town was closer by two miles.

The store was on a short, dead-end road that came off the highway and ran parallel to it. It resembled an old-fashioned mercantile, with a false front that had been built near the turn of the century. On the highway side of the road was a dance hall and a church. On the river side was a little schoolhouse and Gert's home. There were a couple other nondescript buildings here and there, and that was it. Off the side of the store was a stretch of dirt that caught up with the highway again; log trucks would drive over it

rather than try to turn their trucks around, so the road really wasn't a dead-end. In fact, everyone used the stretch of dirt. Gert was thinking about having it paved to cut down on dust.

If I thought Molly's life was hard, Gert beat her hands-down. She used two alarm clocks set at different times to pull herself out of bed at four a.m. One of them was a battery-operated digital with a snooze button that was cracked in half from one of her fists. She carried this one to the store with her and set the alarm for closing, at eight p.m., so that nobody could argue with her when she shut down the tavern. Her face was small and veined with purple, and she wore glasses--they're children's frames, and still they look too big on her dainty, sloping nose. She was in her mid-fifties when I met her, but she went gray at about 35, and she used to have long silver tresses that she braided and wound around her head. When her husband Ed ran off with a bartender at the Moose lodge in town, she cut her hair short. She started growing it again, though, and she bundled up what was left of it with combs and bobby pins in an odd pile on top of her head. I have never seen her without at least one flannel shirt on; even in the heat of summer, she would let one hang loose over a tank top.

Every day since Ed left, she has opened the store at 5 a.m. and run it herself, occasionally taking the flatbed into town for supplies. The store is pretty dilapidated and there's hardly any paint left on it. It looks like a ghost

town's store; I can't imagine approaching its gaping windows alone every morning in the dark. But Gert's tough. I never heard anyone say a bad thing about Gert, other than her coffee is a bit weak.

The lights inside the store were dim fluorescent tubes hung from the high ceiling; the floor was made of bare wood, rubbed soft and dull by dust and boots and more dust. When Ed and Gert first bought the place, the floor had been shinier than the pews of the church, and there was a sign that said, "NO HOBNAILS IN HERE". It was Ed's job to keep the floor polished and beautiful. He lost interest when the big flood of '71 came through. Gert would talk about the beautiful floors when she drank a lot, but she would rarely mentioned Ed.

Gert had an old dog named Susie who followed her around silently. Susie sat on the porch in an old red dinette chair with a ripped-up seat. The old-timers and an occasional bored youngster would sit out on the porch on a bench in the evenings and have a beer or two. Someone always tried to get Susie to take a swig; she would swing her head away and roll her eyes.

Even the log truck drivers that would roar in at five in the morning all knew Susie by name. They gave her pieces of beef jerky--her favorite--while they drank Gert's weak coffee and Gert got them fuel, lunch food, and beer for after work. A couple hours later, the Forest Service folks would stop by for the same things. Then the campers and

fishers would come through, and finally the locals would arrive some time after lunch. Susie would greet them all with a nod of her head and sometimes a tail-wag if they happen to be carrying food.

Gert sells more beer per fluid ounce than leaded gas in the summer. That's really why everyone goes there. Molly and I had been in the land North of the ranch house tracking down some lost cattle when we decided to make a run one day. We'd gone up on horseback and found most of them, but guiding them back down the hill was rough work. The branches of juniper were at eye-level when we were on horseback, and the trees were dense in gullies and sheltered spots. The cattle seemed to be teasing us, weaving in and out of the juniper, waiting for us to catch up and then taking off in a new direction. When we got done, we were hot and scratched up by the dusty branches. We hopped in the jeep and roared off with some loud country music drowning out the engine.

I was looking forward to meeting Gert, but I didn't get the chance immediately. When we arrived, there were four cowboys sitting on the porch, chatting. I didn't see any women. Molly walked up the stairs ahead of me; I was suddenly conscious of just how sweaty I was.

"Hi, fellas. Hey, Susie!" Molly knelt and patted her head. The men had straightened up when Molly reached the porch; one of them, a small guy with a droopy mustache,

stood up and took off his hat. From her crouched position, Molly said, "Gentlemen, meet my baby sister, Amanda."

They nodded and grunted all around. Molly stood up. "Amanda, this is Dan Miller, Ned Miller, Robert Lass and Josh Miller. The Millers own the valley and Robert just thinks he does." They laughed, and I think Molly told me she would be right back, because suddenly I was standing without her on the porch.

The man with the droopy mustache shook my hand. "I'm Josh, case you didn't catch that. It's real good to meet you."

"Thanks, you too." I felt silly. I smoothed my hair down in back.

"I'm Robert," said one. He tipped his baseball hat and smiled. He was the only one whose age I could guess--about thirty, maybe older. He looked a lot like his brother, only his eyes sparkled and he was shorter. "Bud mentioned that he met a pretty girl a couple days ago."

"Oh, who was that?" I said. They all chuckled. Ned and Dan introduced themselves to me.

Josh said, "So you're in college. What are you studying?"

"History." They looked at me, puzzled, and nodded. Then conversation resumed without me. I attached myself to Susie and concentrated hard on massaging her ears until I could think of a graceful way to go inside.

"Looks like a dry summer," said Ned. He was stocky man with short brown curls cut in a bowl-shape. His brothers had the same hair, like they cut each other's.

"Yep. Looks like it," said Josh.

"Yep," said Ned. It was quiet, and then they chuckled at the outcome of that subject.

"What it looks like, said Robert, is there's going to be a big stink over the river this summer. Them damn Californians is trying to take over the whole river."

"Now, Robert, they ain't all Californians," said Ned.

"That Riverbend outfit is. I don't know about you guys, but I'm taking up residence of the banks of the creek--me, a tent, a case of beer and my sawed-off shotgun," said Robert.

"Robert, it's not your river to guard," said Dan. He added, "Despite your great ancestry." His brothers grinned.

"Well, damn it!" Robert slammed his hand down on the bench. Susie and I started. "I'm sick to death of pretending nothing is wrong around here! You know, I got this stretch of fence that just won't stay up. I put new wire on it, put new metal posts in one day and somehow half my damn herd is out on the highway by morning. I've lost two calves to truck drivers this spring. You tell me nothing's wrong!" His face turned red as he spoke.

Josh said, "I agree, Robert. Something's a little fishy--"

Robert interrupted. "We have a drought season on our hands, and I get barely a trickle to irrigate with. Who's using all the damn water?"

"Ah, simmer down. Here, have a beer," said Dan, holding out a Coors.

"What about the poisoning out at Tucker's? Tell him to simmer down. He lost eighteen head. Hell, he's talking about selling out. He can't take the heat. He's got four kids to feed. Simmer down, my ass!"

The men fell silent. The heat made a noise of its own, rising up from the highway, carrying flies and dust like a wind. A truck shifted down in the distance, and inside I could hear women's voices and a radio. Finally, Ned said, "Well, I see your point. But I can't feel sorry for Tucker; he's just gullible, letting folks hunt on his place all the time, letting nearly anyone wander through. He's been kissing up to them California dudes ever since they come here. I'm not against outsiders, but all they come to do is steal our water and overgraze our land. Tucker's a fool, and look what they're doing to him."

"You don't know it's them that did it," said Dan.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure it is," said Ned. "You can't deny Tucker's an idiot for letting so many folks screw around on his place. He don't even have a gun!"

Robert snorted with disdain. "I can believe it."

"It could be anyone. You don't know for sure someone from the Riverbend did it," Dan said.

"Oh, the hell I don't!" Ned raised his voice. "We may cuss and fight over irrigation rights but we don't poison our neighbor's cattle out here! Dan, what's got into you? They paying you to say this?"

As soon as the words were out of Kneads mouth, Dan was at his throat. They rolled around on the dusty porch, straining and cussing. Josh seemed a little embarrassed; he shrugged and smiled. "Boys will be boys," he said to me. Then he jumped up from the milk crate he sat on, reached down with his powerful arms and somehow separated them. They stood back from each other, panting and wiping sweat off their contorted faces. "Shake hands. I said, shake on it!" Josh commanded.

Dan and Kneads hands met sloppily, then they sat back down and cracked open a beer each. "Now apologize to the lady," Josh said.

I rolled my eyes. They both gave me lengthy apologies for their conduct and offered me a beer. I took it.

Josh said, "Tangs a little sensitive. He's been seeing a young lady from the Riverbend. They treat him right out there--"

"But I don't take bribes," Dan interrupted emphatically.

"That's right, he don't take bribes," Josh said. He turned to the men and resumed conversation. "Robert, how's that old Cadillac running?"

"Think I'll go meet Gert," I said and ducked inside.

Molly was leaning on the counter, her arms folded on top of a half-rack of beer. "Bones! What's going on out there?"

"A little scuffle between brothers, no big deal. Thanks for stranding me out there."

"Oh, I knew you'd be fine. Gert, this is Amanda, my baby sister."

"Howdy," said Gert.

"Hi." I was a bit disappointed that this was all I got after hearing so much about Gert. I looked around; the store had one or two of everything. There were even T-shirts for sale, saying "Two Rivers Rodeo--Plenty of Accommodations--No Reservations Necessary"; they showed an unshaven cowboy laying next to a campfire and a horse tethered to a bush.

There were racks of video movies, cans of spices labeled "half price" and a table full of old western novels. In the back of the store there was a partition painted bright red and blue, with POST OFFICE across the top in white. It had a cutout for a window and a slot that was labeled "outgoing". Gert's ex-sister-in-law, Sandi, still staffed the partition.

Near the door was a freezer case with every kind of ice cream bar imaginable. I picked out a nut sundae bar and ate it while I walked around the store. Gert and Molly talked in high-pitched voices.

"Well, he's wanting to move home. I told him I don't need the help, but he don't listen."

Molly laughed. "Well, you can always send him down to our place if he gets uppity. I'm sure I could find something for him to do."

"I'm not sure he'd be of any use to you. He's goodlooking, but not too bright," said Gert wryly.

I heard the "goodlooking" part but I didn't want to appear too interested, so I went back out on the porch. I sat on the steps, half-facing the ranchers as they talked.

A king-cab truck drove up in a cloud of dust. Two men got out; they were dressed better and cleaner than any of the fellows on the porch. One of them held out a hand and a small young woman took it and slid off the seat. She landed with a bounce and her hair, glossy black ringlets halfway down her back, rebounded like a handful of copper coils. Dan stood up and took off his hat, holding it in both hands, his body leaning forward. It was obvious that this woman was his girl from the Riverbend.

She wore a white t-shirt and tight pink jeans and flat-heeled roping boots, and she took dainty steps toward the store. The dudes followed, their eyes lowered defensively, ready for a conflict. But the ranchers didn't even glance their way. The dudes went on inside.

This woman walked differently, but the ranchers responded to her just as they did to Molly; they all

straightened their backs and sucked in their bellies. Dan cleared his throat and said, "Howdy, Chrissy."

"Hi, Dan," she breathed. The others said flattering things to Chrissy while I sat on the steps, thinking that I should've changed before we came. My attire had seemed appropriate--a rubberband that used to hold broccoli holding back my hair and wearing a pair of Kevin's old jeans belted with a piece of twine--until she showed up. Nobody introduced us.

Finally, thankfully, she went inside. Dan pretended to faint and the others exchanged knowing glances.

"She's got a fine...pair of new Wrangler's," said Josh.

"Hey, that's my girl you're talking about!" said Dan with a frown.

"I meant no disrespect, Dan--on the contrary. She is a fine woman, nice and polite, and those jeans...!"

"From the way she walks, I'd say they were a bit of a hindrance to her," I heard myself say.

They looked at me, unsure of how to react. Ned decided to let out a loud guffaw, and the other joined in.

"Yep, you're Molly's sister, all right!" said Ned.

Ben glared at all of us until the laughter died away. "Oh, all right Our deepest apologies, Dan," Ned mocked. "Fellas, fellas, this is Tangs girl we're talking about. You all forgot to bow down when she walked by--" Dan dove for his brother's throat.

I picked my way around the wrestling brothers to the door of the store. There was a little blood, not enough to worry about. I started in and Josh stopped me, "Hey, Mandy, I hope we didn't piss you off."

"Not at all," I said indifferently.

"We like girls like you better, anyway."

"Gosh, thanks," I said. I stuck my head inside the door. "Molly, can we go now?"

Chapter Three

Life on the Millikin Ranch remained quiet and undemanding for quite some time. Mom and Dad stopped by to visit for an evening on their way to another camp-out. They spent a lot of time traveling now that I was out of the house. Other than that, we didn't have any company.

I would arise every day at about nine, apologizing for sleeping in. Molly would already have three or four hours of work done and would define the rest of our day in simple sentences like, "Forest Service called--someone left the gate open at Bear Springs. There's about 30 head wandering around the campground," or "Truck won't start," or "Want to ride up to that old homestead?" I would either pack us a lunch or start planning one to appease my guilt about not working very hard. I'd been sitting still for nine months during school, so I could be winded by a bumpy jeep ride, but Molly never seemed tired, save for a sigh as she sat down to dinner.

She was a bit worried about the wild dogs. They had been roaming our place on the south side of the river and had traveled from corner to corner, it seemed. Everywhere we went, even on the land leased from the Forest Service, we saw torn-up animals. We knew it wasn't coyotes: they eat almost all of their prey, even small bones. Once we came

upon a fawn near the old shed on Bear Creek; one of its hind legs was torn clear off, and from the looks of its neck, the fawn had been taken down at the throat.

The color drained from Molly's face. "I hope they leave our stock alone," she said quietly. Her eyes glowed dark blue in the overcast light. "And I hope they don't get ahold of our dogs."

"We'll just shoot them dead next time we see them," I said roughly.

"Yeah, and what if we miss?"

"Hell, we won't miss!" What was wrong with her?

"I hope not. They have no fear. They'd just as soon rip our throats out as not." I hated seeing her scared; this was my big sister who could do anything. A sour feeling formed in my stomach.

I tried to write letters to my college friends that week; they wrote that they were shopping like mad, in dimestores and big resort gift shops and open craft markets and giant city department stores. My letters were considerably shorter; I wrote that I was shopping at the Two Rivers General Store and that I'd bought a rodeo T-shirt and lots of beer. My friends wrote that they were sorry to hear my summer was so boring, and I tried to explain that what constituted boredom in the big city was fine entertainment out here. "You have to really love the sky," I wrote to them, "and you learn how to spin yarns. Not everybody can spin yarns, you know."

Summer was shaping up to be very calm, I thought. I was learning things that I never paid attention to on the farm at home. I didn't like the animal work when I was young, so I did a lot of other stuff like planting the tomatoes and fixing machinery and cooking. Molly and Dad and the people he hired took care of everything else. That's where Molly met Kevin. Dad hired him to help change pipe in the great irrigated alfalfa field because Molly had Future Farmers of America meetings. Kevin had a mill job he went to after he changed the pipe. After Molly had graduated from college, she and Kevin got married and Fred hired them to manage his place.

Upon moving in, Kevin announced that he was through changing pipe and wading through cow-muck; he'd done it for six years for Dad and he'd had enough. He kept his job in town and let Molly work herself to the bone while she fought off every eligible cowboy and bored married rancher in the valley. I am certain that Molly said no to every proposition thrown her way, because the ranchers, wives included, respected her. Kevin, it seemed, fought off nobody.

He came and went as he pleased; I got used to seeing his head poke around the kitchen doorway near lunchtime, saying, "Keep it down out here, will you?" I couldn't play the stereo at all until after noon when he was gone for work. He never smiled and he was always hung over.

I was short on tact in those days, and almost once a day I would ask Molly, "Why don't you kick him out?" Molly had a reason other than her vows: Fred Millikin didn't quite trust that Molly could run the place by herself, even though she already did. Kevin acted as a figurehead so that Molly could do what she loved most.

So I pretended Kevin wasn't there, for Molly's sake. One morning as I tiptoed around with a cup of strong coffee, waiting for Molly to plan our day, the phone rang.

Molly answered it and talked for a few minutes. "Howdy! How you doing? No. Oh, no! Jesus! How is she? Yeah? Well, shit. I'll ask her...she's probably getting tired of rustling cattle by now."

Molly hung up and changed my whole summer: "Gert's falled off a ladder and broken her back, and she's laid up for a month at least. Her son wants to know if you want to work at the store for a while. Pay's good."

* *

I got up the next morning at four, shivering in the cold damp that was usually gone by the time I rolled out of bed. Molly and I brewed two pots of coffee and made sandwiches out of last night's roast. Then I warmed up the truck, which we'd taken to calling Old Doorless; on the ranch it seemed fine, but I was a little embarrassed to take it out on the highway. I had to give it a boost that morning with a little gasoline on the carburetor. Molly strapped me

in with a couple bungee cords, as well as my lunch, and I started off cautiously.

The air was visibly cool. Strands of fog weaved in and out of the hills, and the air that rushed in from all sides brought the odor of wet juniper and sage, a strong scent like medicine. I ground the gears trying to shift down on the corners, and I couldn't see because my hair swirled around my head. When I pulled up, I was chattering with cold and windblown, but the sun was nearly up and the fields and the rimrock gleamed in the light.

I wore clean jeans, a white shirt and my patent shoes--I wanted to look nice for my first day. Susie slunk across the road toward me, but I didn't see anyone else. I did hear grunting; I started around the north corner of the building and nearly ran into the noise. He was tall and broad, a big man with blond hair and sun-darkened skin and bright blue eyes. I stopped, breathless; he looked up from a 50-gallon barrel that he was wheeling around, panting.

"You Amanda?" he asked.

"Yes--um, I'm here to work--" I stopped short.

"No kidding. Here, take this around to the other side of the store." He tipped the barrel back onto its bottom. A breeze blew toward me; he smelled like pine needles made hot by the sun. "Nice shoes," he snorted.

My face flushed. "You must be Gert's son?" I asked.

"Yep." He turned to walk away.

"I don't know your name," I said insistently.

He turned back. His eyes were like ice in the bottom of a blue bowl. "John." He stomped away.

The air stood still for a moment; my heart pounded in my ears. Then I drew a breath and glared at the barrel. Ten minutes and a torn sleeve later, the barrel was in place beside the three that John had moved in that time.

I sat on the porch, massaging my back. I looked down and groaned. My pretty left shoe was scraped and scuffed.

"Should've worn different shoes," John said flatly.

"Well, nobody said anything about heavy labor! I would have been better prepared if I'd known."

"What the hell are you doing in those fancy things out here, anyway?" John loomed in front of me.

"I like them," I said in a small voice.

He ignored my answer. "I'd better show you how to run the cash register before we get a customer." He stepped up and stomped inside. I couldn't tell if he was angry or not; some people just walk loudly.

"Mom really doesn't like this place and it shows," said John. He looked up and around. "While she can't see us, we're going to paint the shelves, and I haven't decided what to do about the floor, but we've got to do something. This place looks like a horse barn. I hope we'll get it done before she's up and about." He looked as excited as someone can without smiling. "And if she still doesn't like it, I'll buy it from her and run it myself. What do you know about cash registers?"

I knew nothing. He gave me orders rather than teaching me, but I tried not to get angry. "There. Push that, push two-point-oh-oh and push that. What do you do if you screw up?" I shook my head. "You write it down on the receipt and keep it. Till money is fifty, everything else is in the safe, till money underneath. Everyone out here has a tab--see the filebox? OK! You got it. You're on your own." He walked behind the counter and into the bar.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I've done my work." He appeared in the doorway with a folding chair and a book in his hand. He put his feet up on the doorjamb and grinned without looking at me.

I flushed again and tears blurred my vision. What nerve! Ordering me around like that and then sitting with that book in his hand! He was watching me, not reading. I handled sales well all morning--two six-packs of beer, a beef jerky and a five-pound sack of flour. Other than that, I dusted shelves and fumed.

The drive home calmed me down a little. Again, I was driving into the sun. Even with the evening haze on the valley, it was beautiful. The colors of the high desert aren't for those who glance; a person has to go high into mountains to find intense primary colors that strike the eye. These hills are for connoisseurs of color, those who find the color of sagebrush soothing and see twelve different shades of brown in the rocky hillside. The only exceptions to the delicate shades are the occasional green

field and the peerless sky. My teeth chattered from the chill of the wind; I reminded myself to wear a down jacket for the drive. Deer crossed the road twice on the twenty-mile trip--once, a doe and two skinny fawns, and the other time, a four-point buck who turned his head to catch the last of the sun on his rack so I could admire it.

Molly was on the couch, her feet up, her boots tossed across the room. "Hey, kiddo! How was it?"

I collapsed into an overstuffed chair near the door. "It was awful!" I almost began to cry, but recovered. "He yelled at me and made me dust the shelves and move 50-gallon drums full of god knows what--and just look at my shoes!"

Molly glanced down at my flats and laughed. "Real shitkickers, Bones! Very practical!"

"Leave me alone!"

"Amanda, I'm just kidding."

"Well, what's wrong with them? Huh? I love these shoes, and I'll wear them any place I damn well please!" I stomped off the back porch and sat there, grumbling, with my arms folded tightly. Molly didn't follow; later she started banging around in the kitchen, and then she came out on the porch with two beers and a box of crackers. She sat down beside me on the bench and handed me a beer.

"I know you're not yelling at me," Molly said. I didn't speak. She talked through a mouthful of crackers. "I think I can fix your shoes with some boot-black and a little Vaseline." I remained silent, but I sipped the beer.

One short, cool breeze moved over us and then stillness resumed. Molly examined her socks, stained red-brown from her boots. "Johnny's pretty goodlooking, isn't he?"

I blushed and laughed involuntarily. "That's it, isn't it?" Molly said in my ear. "You think he's cute and you're pissed off because he bosses you around! Ha! I knew you'd like him."

"Oh, Molly, it was awful! Why didn't you warn me?" I wiped at my eyes, half-laughing, half-crying. "He called my shoes fancy. He thinks I'm an idiot! Never mind." My tone changed. "I am there to work, and I don't need some pompous horse's ass to mess up my summer! No way. Think I'll go read a book." I went inside. Molly chuckled and munched on the crackers.

"Shut up!" I yelled. She chuckled louder.

The next morning I wore a T-shirt and tennis shoes. Molly strapped me in again and I pealed out of the driveway. I felt giddy and I drove at breakneck speed. I was going to kill him with kindness. I was to tend the bar that evening. I would work every day except Thursday, when Gert's ex-sister-in-law would take over. The bar and the store usually closed at the same time, eight p.m., except when Gert couldn't get the patrons to leave. During rodeos and weddings, Gert just stayed up all night.

As days went by, I got to know the locals pretty well, except John. He remained elusive, reading a book here, pounding nails there, never speaking to me.

Everyone else was very friendly to me. Forest Service crews, state road crews, tourists and locals all said the some things: "Hot today, isn't it?" and "Are you a student?" The big building stayed moderately cool and Gert had strategically placed three fans on high shelves in the corners. In fact, that's how she hurt her back. I tried to visit her, but she'd look me up and down with a skeptical eye. John said she thought I was a poor choice for hired help but there weren't very many families willing to let a kid go during the summer. Molly, I deduced from all her ribbing, only let me work at the store with the hope that I would get together with John.

In the meantime, Molly took on Charlie Millikin, Fred's 40-year-old nephew, to get some of the heavy work done. He moved into the tack-room for the summer. He fixed it up by cutting a hole in the wall, nailing some screen over it and making a cot out of two sawhorses and an old door. Molly invited him to stay in the spare room, or to switch with me and live on the porch, but he wouldn't do it. "Girls, I love you dearly, but you cramp my style." He might have been referring to our suggestion that he wash his hands before supper or maybe brush the twigs out of his beard.

Charlie was an excellent worker. He'd ride every day for hours without complaining, and when Molly talked of fencing, he'd day, "Yahoo! Let me at 'em." But there were years of work to be caught up.

Molly also had the Ingram kids come work for her on occasion. Lester and Sally Ingram were descendants of the first homesteaders in the valley, who settled there in 1892; they also had first water rights on the North Fork. Their place was in a narrow valley a few miles up from the Riverbend Ranch. With all their kids, the Ingrams had been kidded about trying to build an empire. These days, they were accused of selling out.

At the store, the men and women (but mostly the men) sat around on the porch in the late afternoon much more often than I had originally thought. When John wasn't watching me like a hawk or assigning me some ridiculous duty like dusting the shelves (as if it made a difference out there!), I'd sit with them. John came out and handed me a paycheck one evening.

"Why, thank you! I don't know how I'll spend it all." The folks on the porch laughed.

"Why don`t you start with a decent pair of shoes," said John, his voice unpleasant. I was wearing the patents again because my tennis shoes were wet. The porch was silent; I reddened. Somebody coughed. Then the ranchers rescued me.

"Ah, come on, what's wrong with them? I like them! I think they're sexy. She has pretty little feet, I think. How can you not love her shoes. A gentlemen would compliment those shoes!" came the chorus of protests. I held my face like stone.

John ignored them. "Enjoy your pay. It may be your last if you don't get to work." He strode off the porch and around back quickly. All our eyes followed him.

"Now what the hell has gotten into that boy?" said Old Ingram.

"Why is he so mean all the time?" I asked.

"Don't take it personal, Mandy. He don't like any women. His wife up and divorced him for a real estate guy in Idaho. I think it's festering in him," said Dan. He was perched across from me on a milk crate. He stuck his great paw out and patted my arm. "We just love your shoes. Don't listen to him."

"Oh, I don't listen. He's just afraid of me, that's all. And if he isn't, he ought to be," I said loudly and stood up, stretching.

I was about to go inside when a brown jeep squealed around the bend, drove over the dirt stretch from the highway and stopped with a jerk in front of the store. Robert Lass sat in the driver's seat, fiddling with the door latch. He looked up once, face contorted, shouted, "Damn you, Ingram," and bent back to the latch.

"Oh, Christ, Robert's been drinking again," said Ned without humor. The men all rose to their feet. Robert pushed one last time on the door and stumbled out onto the road. He was wearing a belt holster and he pulled out a .22 pistol.

"God damn it, Ingram! I heard, and I'm not happy!" Robert brandished the pistol in the direction of the porch. The men all took a step back.

"Mandy, get inside," said Ned. I ignored him. Dan Miller looked over at his truck, right beside the porch; there was a rifle hanging in the back window.

Robert swaggered toward us, then he stopped and backed up to the jeep. He stuck his free hand under the seat while he faced forward and clanked out a fifth of Wild Turkey. He took a long swig. Dan thought to move aside, closer to the truck, but Robert saw him and spit out a mouthful, shouting, "Uh-uh! No, you don't!" He raised the pistol high into the air and fired a shot. Everyone flinched. John came running from inside the store, and he stopped when he saw Robert.

Then Lester stepped forward. "OK, Robert. What did I do this time?" he sighed.

"Damn you! Steal our land first and then sell it to butchers and thieves so you can get rich. Money--that's all you care about. You greedy son of a bitch! I'm going to--" He stepped forward with the wrong foot and fell on his face.

Ned and Jack, Ingram's oldest son, jumped off the porch and onto Robert. Jack held him steady while Ned wrestled the gun out of Robert's hand. Robert struggled and shouted for a few seconds, then he lay still. The Wild Turkey bottle was still in his hand.

The men dragged Robert to his feet. He seemed subdued but he still mumbled threats at Lester Ingram. They guided

him to the porch. Dan dug a quarter out of his pants-pocket and tossed it to me. "Get this idiot a cup of coffee, will you?"

When I came back out, it appeared that Dan was conducting an investigation. "I'm not implying that I believe this fool, Ingram, but I want to know what the hell's going on."

"Who died and made you sheriff?" said Jack. He was seventeen and his voice cracked.

"Shut your trap, Jack," said Ingram.

"No, Dad! I don't like to hear people accusing you--"

"I said knock it off!" Ingram snapped. He was pretty shaken up; the rings of dried sweat under his arms were soaked again, and his face was red and moist. "All right, Ned. You want to know." He turned away and looked off in the distance. Then he turned back to the crowd and looked at each one of us, even me, in the eye.

"It's true. They've made me an offer."

"Who has?" I had to interrupt.

Robert looked at me. "Riverbend." He spat off the porch.

"I never said I accepted it," said Ingram. "Before you go and pass judgment, I suggest you take a look at the size of your families. Hell, most of you on this porch are bachelors! You may be broke, but you're the only one who suffers for it! Just try having six kids--another coming and--"

Nobody spoke. They looked at the ground, at their hands, anything but Ingram with tears in his eyes. Finally someone cleared his throat and said he had to get going. The group slowly broke up. Robert asked to use to phone. He handed the whiskey to Ned, who tucked it behind his pickup seat. Ingram watched them leave and he saw me watching him. When everyone else was gone, he and Jack slowly got in their truck and left.

Robert came out. "I called Bud. He'll pick me up when they come back from Marilyn's doctor appointment." We sat on the porch a while longer. As he sobered up, Robert's ravings made more sense. He explained to me that the Ingram homestead was the first to file water rights on this river. They lived a few miles above the Two Rivers junction, on the North Fork. The South Fork was short, just over a mile long, so whoever controlled the North Fork controlled everybody.

Gradually, other settlers had filed, too, and claimed the land on the riverbanks as theirs--sometimes across the river from each other, which caused a lot of problems. Both forks of the river got so low that the trout and catfish that Chief Paulina's tribe relied upon for sustenance in the summers all but disappeared. The people who claimed to be descendants of Paulina had lived like nomads along the valley long before the Ingram clan had come along. They believed the land and the river were for everyone's use. Most were outraged that their fish and other wild game was

depleted and that they couldn't irrigate without Ingram's permission. Some of them, like the Lass people, claimed first rights and didn't want to share the river with new settlers at all. Worse still, none of the tough, independent farmers, except the Ingrams, believed the state should have ultimate control over the whole situation, so they took the matter into personal hands.

In 1909, a fire swept through town and burned the county courthouse, where all the state records of the area were kept. Any record of who settled when and where was destroyed. The ensuing battle, as the ranchers jumped at the chance to restake their claims, was long and bloody. Just two years before my summer in the valley, a cowhand named Gene Smith accused Josh Miller of illegal irrigating at night. He challenged Josh to a gunfight. Josh said no, but Smith shot at him anyway. The bullet clipped Josh's new hat, and that made him mad, so he shot Smith in the knee. Josh got off on self-defense and Smith moved to Arizona. Josh was really shaken by the thought of hurting someone; he wouldn't even plink at beer-cans after that.

Robert and I lapsed into silence when the story reached this point. Then he said, "There's an old Indian legend about Chief Paulina. It's said that on his deathbed, three bald eagles flew overhead. He pointed at them and said, `North, south, and the river that joins them. That is your legacy, my children.' And he shut his eyes and died. That night, the moon was half-eclipsed, and the medicine man said

the eagles had blessed Paulina's children, and cursed any man who'd try to take their legacy away." He sighed. "I'd say this valley's in for one hell of a hard time."

"You believe in curses?" I said.

"I believe it all comes around, Mandy." He looked out at the land, washed to the color of dust by the hot sun.

After a while, I said, "I haven't met Marilyn yet--it'll be nice to."

"She hasn't been feeling too well lately, else she would have visited you by now," said Robert.

"Yeah, aren't they at the doctor's right now?"

"Yep," said Robert. "I don't think it's going to be good news, either. They think she's got cancer of the, uh, feminine nature." He looked down.

"Oh no. That's really awful!" I said.

"Sure is. She's been in for tests every week since May. Don't know how Bud's going to afford this. He hasn't got insurance or nothing. Fact, he had to borrow money from me not a week ago for groceries."

As he spoke, Dan Miller pulled to an abrupt stop in front of the store. He hopped out, explaining, "Forgot to get a movie."

Robert and Dan looked at each other for a few moments, then Dan said, "Sorry I had to wrestle you down like that. No hard feelings?"

"Oh, no, not at all!" Robert said cheerfully. They shook hands enthusiastically.

"Robert, I wouldn't be too hard on Old Ingram. He's got his hands full. You know, his second cutting got rained out."

"I know, I know. It's just that when I get to drinking, old feelings surface."

"Yeah, sure, I can understand that. You know, he ain't the only one who's had an offer made. John Tucker got propositioned last week."

"Jesus! Marshall sure knows how to hit a man when he's down, don't he?" Robert shook his head.

"Sure do. And I saw that big ugly flunkie of Marshall's parked on the roadside, eyeing that valley of ours up Bear Creek like it was prime rib. They want it all --the whole damn valley."

Robert sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I've seen what they do to the land. Have you seen their pasture up Spring Road? It's nothing but dirt."

"Yeah, I've seen it. They have grazed their pastures to death. It's a wonder the stock don't lay down and die."

"Can't they irrigate it or replant it?" I asked.

Dan looked at me like I was crazy. "Hell, no! It's so dusty that most of the topsoil's blown away. And the only plant life left is a few patches of thistles. They'll pay hell trying to get those out. They gotta buy more land because the property they got right now isn't worth a damn."

"Besides, they ain't got water rights," added Robert. "They have only been here three years, and the rights on

that old place are way down the list, even below Tucker. That's one of the reasons they are trying to buy everyone out."

"This old valley's been grazed to death anyway," sighed Dan.

"I've seen pictures in my history books of how the hills used to look," I said. "There were a lot more trees."

"And wildlife, and grass, and opportunity," said Dan. "We, I mean my brothers and I, are real careful with our land, but you can't get around it--this place used to be gorgeous. Marshall ain't using his resources wisely," he said.

"Well, none of us are going to stop raising cattle, so we'd better be careful, and watch out for creeps like Marshall. He gives ranching a bad name." Robert shook his head.

Bud and Marilyn pulled in a new blue sedan. I had never met Marilyn. Their faces in the car were tight-lipped, almost stony. Marilyn stayed in the car so I decided to take a chance and go to her. She saw me coming and opened her car door and swung her legs out. She had on jeans and pink aerobic shoes and a Western blouse, and her hair was brown and permed in tiny curls close to her head.

"You must be Mandy," she said. Her voice was sweet and melodious but her eyes were tired-looking.

I shook her hand. "It's nice to finally meet you, Mrs. Lass."

"Now, you know better; call me Marilyn." We chatted for a few minutes about Molly and running the store while the two brothers and Dan and John said their goodbyes.

"You'll have to come out sometime and take a swim in the swimming hole--that is, if we can keep the cows out," said Marilyn.

"That would be great!" I said.

"Well, we'd love to have you. We don't have kids of our own, so it's nice to have neighbor kids over." She looked up at me sweetly. She reminded me of Mom in a good mood.

Bud and Robert came over to the car. Marilyn smiled up at Bud and said, "If William was around more often, I wouldn't be so desperate for company."

"We haven't seen much of you as of late, either," I said. "Where have you been hiding yourself?"

Bud swiped at a persistent fly near his face. "Working," he said. Robert fell into the back seat of the car.

"You, working?" said Dan, who had come over to the car. "Is this the same Bud Lass we all know and love?"

"I get a wild hair once in a while. Well, I'd better get Robert home before he redecorates the upholstery."

"Where are you working at?" Dan asked.

"Oh, here and there, helping a couple outfits up north. I'll see you all later," Bud said. He got in the car and we went back to the shade of the porch.

They left fumes in their wake. John leaned against the door frame, and he and Dan watched them go. "That's a damn diesel," John commented.

"He's a fool," said Dan. "He'll have to spend a fortune getting it fixed. Of course, he won't need to for a while--it's brand new."

"How did Bud buy a new car? I thought Robert said he was broke," I said.

"Ain't we all," said Dan, and he and John chuckled. But I couldn't dismiss it like that, not after what Robert told me. I went inside to ponder the issue and dust some more shelves.

Chapter Four

"Do you think you could wipe this down again?"

I looked back at Gert darkly.

She was up and about within a few days of the incident with Robert and Ingram, on heavy painkillers that did nothing for her mood. She chose to spend the hours that she was free of pain making trouble in the store. Every time I turned around, she'd be standing behind me, mouth open and poised to correct my shelf-dusting or method of bagging someone's candybars. I tried not to get upset--it was clear that she missed the action and the gossip, and it would only be an hour or two before the pain would get to her and she'd have to take a couple of pills and a shot of whiskey and go back to bed. She didn't even notice that we'd painted the back shelves white.

Remembering her condition, I summoned up some patience and brightly said, "Sure!" I wiped down the ice cream freezer once again while she pointed out spots.

The phone rang. John took down an order to be delivered to the Riverbend Ranch.

John loaded up the groceries for me in the back of his truck. It was a fairly big load but there wasn't any beer. "Here," he said and gave me the keys.

"Why can't I take my truck?"

"Because we don't want to embarrass ourselves."

"Hey!" I glared at him. "There's nothing wrong with my truck--just looks a little well-used, like I've done some work in it."

"Your sister did all the work in that truck," he said. He opened the door, I climbed in and he shut it.

I drove away grumbling. "Doesn't like my shoes, doesn't like my truck..." It wasn't until I hit the turnoff that I realized he'd been smiling as he heckled me.

I headed East a mile or less, then I followed the river up the North Fork Road. It didn't seem like much of a river; at times it looked more like an irrigation ditch. A few miles up, the ditch took a sharp turn to the west and I crossed it. I saw the sign: Riverbend Ranch. It was huge, with several colors of blue and gold trim, and behind it lay an odd sight. On either side of the long gravel driveway leading to the house and shops, there were fenced-in pastures of what should have been lush fields but instead were patches of bunch grass scattered among expanses of bare dirt, a few thistles near the fenceline, and hundreds of cattle. Robert and Dan weren't kidding. The driveway had more foliage than the pasture.

The house was also many colors of blue; it was old-fashioned but it was so nicely painted that I couldn't tell if it was an old homestead or not. There was a cement fountain to the right side of the house, with fish that spit

water; I realized when I got closer that the fountain came out of the side of a swimpool.

Two men stood on the front steps. One was one of the guys that had accompanied Chrissy to the store, and the other was medium-height with the same blue-black hair as Chrissy's, but straight as baling wire and slicked down with pomade.

I stopped the truck well back from the house so the dust wouldn't choke them. "Mr. Marshall?" I said to the man with the black hair.

He didn't answer right away. He stepped down and walked to where I was parked. "My goodness," he finally drawled. "You're the spitting image of your sister." He stood too close, looming over me.

"I wish," I said, stepping back and smiling. "Where do you want your groceries?"

"Oh, Roger'll get them," said Marshall. He motioned to his man on the steps, who walked very fast to the truck. Marshall looked me up and down. "How did a pretty little thing like you get this job anyway?"

"I showed up." I kicked the tires and pounded a little on the hood of the truck.

Marshall leaned his head back and let out a hearty laugh. Then he moved closer. "But you're such a sweet thing to be driving a big old delivery truck around the countryside. Now what if you got a flat tire?"

"I'd change it." I looked at him levelly. I could smell his after-shave; it made me queasy.

He persisted. "But what if a pretty thing like you got in an accident--"

"Mr. Marshall!" I interrupted. "I'm not a `pretty little thing.'"

He leaned closer, his small eyes darting around my face. "I guess you ain't," he said.

He turned away. "Roger! Hurry up and unload this kid's truck." He walked to the house and dusted his boots with a rag at the door before walking in. Roger pulled the last four boxes off the truck and I drove away wordlessly. A half-mile down the road, I passed Bud Lass heading the other way. I was so distracted that I forgot to wave.

Back at the store, I stomped in. "What's wrong with you?" asked John.

"Marshall tried to intimidate me or flirt with me--I don't know what. He's so weird!" I sat down hard on the folding chair.

"What did he do?"

"Oh, he just tried to convince me I was incapable of delivering groceries, called me a `pretty little thing.' I guess it's no big deal."

John didn't say anything, but his usual frown deepened and he paced for a minute. Then he picked up the phone and dialed furiously.

"What are you doing?" I asked. He wouldn't answer. His face was reddening.

"Marshall," he said into the phone, "My delivery gal's just come back from your place and she feels she was treated rudely. I don't know who said what, but if it happens again, you won't be welcome at this store again! You understand?" He slammed the phone back in its cradle.

I looked at him, my eyes wide. Without looking at me, he went into the back room.

* *

The Fourth of July was only a day away. We sold safe fireworks in plastic net bags to the tourists. Behind the counter in the bar was the real stuff, the roman candles and bottle rockets and large explosives. We saved those for the locals who would come in and wink and say, "Hey, Mandy, this is kid stuff. You got any fireworks for grownups?" I had fixed up brown paper bags full of a mixture of these firestarters; I'd pull one up and say, "Ten bucks." It was my own idea; we were making quite a profit and Gert was beginning to smile at me. Even the folks out at the Ranger Station stopped by to pick up a few.

Gert informed us that on the Fourth, we would stay open until about five and then we could do as we pleased . She and her ex-sister-and-law, Sandy, were planning a trip to town to watch the fireworks show at the fairgrounds. And all morning, she'd been egging John on to do something--I couldn't tell what. He was looking mighty irritated by

noon. I went to the restroom in the bar and when I came back, Gert was poking him in the kidney, saying, "Go on, ask her!"

He frowned. "Quit trying to run my life!"

"Ask who what?" I said.

John looked at me and then at Gert. "Thanks, Mom," he said. His face was beet-red.

Gert smiled and backed away.

"Ah, shit," he mumbled. He scuffed his foot against the front counter and let out a huge sigh. "Well, you want to see some fireworks?"

"Do you?" My heart rate tripled. I didn't want to like him, but I couldn't help it.

"Yeah," he said defensively. "I mean, yeah, I do. We'll go after closing?" He looked at me almost shyly.

"Um, OK, sure. I'd love it." I picked up the feather duster with shaking hands and frantically dusted the beef jerky container. I wasn't sure if he was happy about it, but I didn't care--I was ecstatic.

I brought a pair of sandals, a denim skirt and Molly's white peasant blouse to work in a paper sack the next morning. We really didn't speak much to each other, and if we did it was in the most polite tones. At five, we closed up the store efficiently and quietly. I excused myself to the restroom and changed. We walked around back to his big pickup truck. "Mount up," he said. I got in on the

driver's side and scooted over. We sat as close to our respective doors as we could.

He drove quickly into the lowering sun. He cut corners on the twisting, fifty-mile highway to town, and fiddled with the cassette deck while I watched the passing countryside with intense interest. "It's strange to have a door to lean on after driving my doorless wonder," I said once.

"What?" he said and turned down the stereo. I repeated what I had said and he answered back enthusiastically, "Yeah, I bet!" That was the extent of our conversation.

Once he caught me looking at him. He had clean but faded blue jeans on, and a striped canvas shirt that zipped at the neck. His boots were grey, and around his neck he wore a sky-blue bandana; when he glanced over at me, his eyes were crystalline and piercing. I turned quickly back to the window.

We pulled into the park at the far end of the fairgrounds and nervously sat on a picnic table amidst the crowd. We couldn't find Gert and Sandy, and I didn't see anyone I knew except Charlie. He was stinking drunk, lurching around on the arm of a short woman in red jeans. I didn't expect him back at the ranch that night.

John didn't look at me once during the show and only occasionally did he comment on the fireworks. Again, we sat as far from each other as possible.

Following the light show, we stopped for a soda at a convenience store and drove back out in near silence. He drove fast, and I was sure we would hit a deer. John wasn't grumpy like usual; in fact, he was more than polite. I took it as a bad sign. He took me back to the store because I'd parked the truck there.

I wanted to make my exit as painless as possible for both of us, since we didn't seem to have anything to talk about. I hopped out on the passenger side and fumbled for my keys. He got out as well.

"Well, thanks for the ride," I said.

He leaned on the side of his truck. "Oh, no problem, I'm sure. Well, see you tomorrow, bright and early." He began backing away from the truck.

"Yeah, see you." I turned casually away as I spoke. He said nothing. I got in my truck, and then I looked at John. He was still facing me, but his face was turned toward the hills. I gave up and stuck the key in the ignition.

"Mandy!" said John suddenly.

"Yeah?" I looked at him again. The streetlamp cast light on him, cutting his features out clearly.

He began to speak, stopped and started again. "You sure scrub up fine when you try."

"Thanks." I tried not to smile but I had to. "You looked nice tonight, too."

"Yeah, well...see you tomorrow."

I drove home like the wind, rushing past fields and houses with no fear of hitting deer at all, and the river twinkled along beside me. What a wonderful night! I was ecstatic. I had found a crack in John's brick wall.

The kitchen was light, which was unusual. Molly had reserved a hotel room, and she and Kevin were going to have dinner and watch the fireworks. She was standing at the counter with her back to me when I came inside.

"Back kind of early aren't you?" I said. She didn't reply. "Boy, have I got a story for you!"

Molly said quietly, "Me, too."

"Hey, how did your surprise go? Molly?" She didn't answer; her shoulders shook. "Hey, Mol, what's going on?"

Molly turned around to face me at the table. Her eyes were swollen from crying. I hadn't seen her like this since the night Grandma died. "Oh, hell!" she sighed. She sat down at the table. "Well, I surprised him, all right. Caught him with a girl."

My jaw dropped. "You mean, <u>with</u> her?"

"Thank God, no, but you could tell he has been before. I ripped my new black jeans this morning, so I went in early to buy a new pair, and I got thirsty. Walked into the Good Time Saloon and there they were. He had his arm around her. She couldn't have been much older than you!" She laughed and sobbed at the same time..

"Is he coming home?" I asked.

"I told him not to bother, the son of a bitch." No sooner had she said this than we heard a squeal and Kevin's Camaro shudder to a stop. Molly rose and went out the back door. I stayed at the table.

The car door slammed. "Who is she?" Molly shouted.

"Nobody! She's the girlfriend of a guy at work. Don't be such a nag." Kevin yanked the back door open and stormed through the kitchen. Molly followed him into the bedroom."

"Isn't it a shame, I've gotta nag my husband to be faithful to me!"

"You're overreacting, Mol," Kevin said. He opened and closed dresser drawers.

"Well? Do you love her, Kevin?"

"God damn, Molly! I never--look. I have a lot of friends in town, and some of them you don't know. She's a friend, and that's it." They walked into the livingroom.

"Why is it you need all those friends, Kevin? Why is it you choose friends over spending time with your wife?"

"We've been over this one, Molly. I just like it in town."

"Then I suggest you stay there, 'cause I don't want you here. I have had it with your fooling around!"

"I never, ever fooled around! I'm not gonna take this. I'm gonna get some stuff together and go stay with Ken in town until you simmer down." I could hear him getting his boots and a gun out of the case. They came through the kitchen.

"You go right ahead, and get everything you need and don't come back! I've spent six years out here, working my butt off, wondering about who you're with every night. I'm through, Kevin!"

"Fine!" Kevin yelled at her on the porch. "I will get everything I need, including a woman who understands me!"

"Fine!" Molly shrieked. Kevin revved his engine and backed out of the driveway recklessly. I sat at the table still, amazed.

Molly stayed out on the porch for quite a while. I figured she was listening to the river, gathering herself together. But then she called out, "Hey, Bones, come out here!"

She stood at the east end of the porch, peering out at the pasture through the clotheslines illuminated by the kitchen light.

"What's up?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away. I looked where she was looking, but it was dark. "Did you see anything weird when you drove by the lower field?"

"No, but I was mighty distracted," I said.

"There's something odd out there. I thought I heard snarling. Bet it those damn dogs again. Come on, let's go check it out." She brushed past me, calm and full of purpose, as if the fight hadn't happened. We gathered our jackets. I put on a pair of rubber boots. Molly took the shotgun out of the gun case in the livingroom and stuck a

handful of shells in her pocket. Then she pulled a bottle of whiskey off the top of the refrigerator and took a long, hard swallow. She thrust it out at me while she grimaced. I obeyed and took a swig.

We got into the jeep and turned on the spotlights. We entered the fields from a gate near the barn and headed out east, racing across the field, bouncing in and out of tractor ruts and chuckholes.

"Would you consider a lower gear?" I asked.

"Why, you scared?" Molly's grinned.

"Yeah, driving on two wheels tends to do that to me." But then we arrived at the gate leading to the lower East field. I opened the door to go get the gate, but then I stopped. The spotlight shone on ghastly dead cattle, lying with legs stiff and parallel to the ground. Some were nearly on their backs, as if a sudden wind had tipped them and they were frozen there. The spotlight cut them out like strange paperdolls against the darkness; I half expected them to bellow for help.

The wind caught my loose hair and blew it across my eyes; when it fell away, I saw the dogs, tearing into the throat and the belly of a far-away calf. Panicked, I looked at Molly. She was silent, staring at the scene.

Like last time, the dogs ignored us. They growled as they ripped the skin and the flesh of the tiny calf and pulled out its tender organs. The night was silent, save the river trickling a few yards down, and the growling, and

my heart pounding in my head. I looked around at the other cattle. I couldn't bear it. "What the hell?" I finally said.

Molly didn't look away from the calf. "Poison," she said. I unfastened the gate and we drove inside. The dogs didn't move. She parked the rig between two dead, pregnant cows.

"You count dead cows," she said, handing me a flashlight. "I'm going to kill these dogs." She drew out the shotgun and stalked toward the meal site. Of course, I wasn't about to walk around the field with those dogs up and about, and I couldn't take my eyes off my sister. Kevin was lucky he left when he did. She gazed at the dogs fearlessly and walked steadily toward them, stopping about fifteen feet from the calf, gun held high and ready to aim.

"Mol, be careful! What if they jump you?"

She replied evenly, "There's a pistol under the front passenger seat. Shoot them."

If Molly had no fear it was because I had taken it all for her. I shook as I got the pistol out of the truck. Molly pumped the shotgun and sighted on first one, then another dog. They finally looked up from their late supper. I thought I saw foam at the mouths of a smaller, brown-spotted mutt and the large, shaggy black one. My own mouth was bone-dry. "Molly!" I said hoarsely. The spotted dog crouched low to attack. "I think they're rabid!"

Molly didn't reply. She settled into a stance, brought the gun low and pulled the trigger. The spotted dog was thrown back into the calf's insides.

I was breathing fast and sobbing a little, still unable to move from my spot. The dogs scattered like chaff in the wind, except the shaggy black dog. He and Molly began almost circling around each other, but slowly. She kept the sight on him and moved with him, but she didn't back away. Neither did the dog. I don't know why she didn't just shoot.

I had a flashlight in my pocket; I turned it on the dog, trying to scare or confuse him, but to no avail. He shook the light out of his eyes and continued his strange dance. His eyes rolled wildly and I could clearly see foam around his jowls. "He is rabid, Molly," I said, done with crying. "Make it quick."

She did. The shot blasted out and a breeze carried the noise away; the shell caught him in the chest and tossed him back like a rag-doll. His eyes were on Molly, even in death.

Molly lowered her gun, walked back to the jeep and stuck the gun in back like nothing had happened. Then she asked me for the flashlight. I knew she was on auto-pilot now.

We spent the rest of the night counting the dead animals, recording the numbers on their ear-tags and looking for signs of poison. We couldn't find any. They seemed to

have just toppled over. Sometimes the kids around the area would go cow-tipping, catching cattle asleep on their feet and pushing them over, but they didn't stay tipped. I drove the perimeter of the pasture in the jeep to check the fence for clues; there was nothing. Finally, when we were sure we had accounted for all the cattle--80 head, 14 dead, all of them pregnant except the poor little calf--we headed in.

I got ready for a couple hours sleep while Molly called the sheriff, asking for someone to be out first thing in the morning. She walked around the kitchen like a zombie. When I said goodnight, she was sitting at the table with a glass of milk.`

"I'm sorry, Mol." I hugged her head. She squeezed my back.

"It's OK. Could've been a worse night." I turned for a minute at the door, watching her hair shine under the dim kitchen light. She sat motionless, deep in thought.

When I woke up three hours later, she was still there, but something was different. Kevin's things--clothes, guns, tapes, books, even his toothbrush--were in a mountainous pile on the back porch.

* *

At about seven a.m., the county sheriff's deputy for the valley, Roy Smith, and a veterinary examiner who worked for the state came to the house. The examiner was a bland guy, his lips the color of the rest of his skin, and very quiet. I never did catch his name. That wouldn't have been

possible with Roy, even if I hadn't known him all my life. Besides being a big guy with a strong, gap-toothed smile who boomed instead of talked, Roy wore his name everywhere--ROY on his belt, ROY on his belt buckle, ROY on a cheap gold necklace. That day he was in uniform, but off-duty, he had ROY shirts, hats, jackets, even a ROY license plate on his blue truck.

Roy and the vet stepped carefully around the pile of Kevin's things. The vet raised one eyebrow delicately but Roy said nothing. He and Molly had gone to high school together, and he knew about Kevin's wild behavior. Everyone in town did, and they weren't afraid to ask me about if they met me at the store. Thankfully, Roy was excited about the "murder," as he put it, so he didn't say a word.

"You mean you drove right by the field without noticing?" he asked me. "I mean, I know it was dark and all, but I would've noticed twenty dead cows."

"Well...I had other things on my mind."

He grinned. "That's right. I heard about your date. How did it go?"

I was astonished. "How did you hear?"

He waved his big hand with the ROY signet ring on the pinkie. "Oh, everyone around here knows. Now, when did you gals notice the dead cattle?"

"It must've been around one or so?" I looked at Molly.

She nodded in agreement. "Yep, about one. I was out on the porch and I could barely make out the field, but I

could hear those dogs, you know, that wild pack." Roy nodded. He had been the person who took Ingram's little boy to the hospital. "We drove out to check it out and there they were, twenty head just lying dead in the field. The dogs were ripping apart a calf. I got a couple of them. The other curs ran off."

Roy made notes on a small pad imprinted with "From the desk of ROY" while the examiner fidgeted, picked his fingernails and surveyed the kitchen. When Roy finished, he picked up his hat and said, "Let's go check it out."

Molly and I came along to show them our tracks and where we'd moved the stiff beasts to check them out. The examiner took blood samples from each one. "I'm suspecting strychnine," he said, looking up from where he squatted by a dead cow.

"The funny thing is how they seem to be picked out so damn carefully," said Molly. She kicked at the spine of a cow. "Nearly all of them were ready to give birth." For the first time, I saw the devastation sink in for her; her eyes were more sorrowful than I'd ever seen. She looked around the field, her strong hands hanging helplessly. Then she snapped out of it suddenly, saying, "Oh, God, I forgot to call Fred!"

We went back to the ranch house. I had called the store earlier with no answer so I did it again. I took a bath while Molly called Fred Millikin to tell him his prize cows had been killed, likely by poison. He took it well and

wasn't mad at Molly. She blamed the whole thing on herself. He told her he'd be out right away with Charlie.

I traded places with Molly and came out to the kitchen just about the time Kevin showed up in his shiny boots. I saw him through the screen-door; he looked with wide eyes at the pile of his possessions, then he frowned and came inside. "Where's Molly?" he asked.

"In the bath," I said.

He didn't answer me or go to the door. Instead, he grabbed a box of garbage sacks out of a kitchen drawer and got to packing.

Roy and the examiner came in shortly; they looked at Kevin but didn't stop their conversation.

"This is getting pretty damn weird, all these cattle murders," said Roy. He helped himself to coffee and poured the vet and I a cup without asking us. "Kevin," he hollered, "you want some coffee?" Kevin grunted a no; he was stuffing clothes into a bag. Roy grinned. "I could've told Molly this would happen," he said quietly, gesturing at the porch.

I pulled my knees up onto the chair. "Do you think this is the same stuff that was used on the cattle out at Tucker's?"

"That would make it cyanide. Can't tell for sure until all the tests come in," the examiner said. "Oh, I almost forgot the salt block--be right back."

"You know--" said Roy. He squinted speculatively at the ceiling. "Hmmm. Where there's animals, there's feed and where there's feed, there's rats. Maybe someone used rat poison on the poor buggers. Anyone could've done it then, even yourselves."

"You mean, on accident?" I said.

"Yeah, or even on purpose," Roy said.

"Who would poison their own stock?" I asked.

"Well, maybe someone whose place was going belly-up and was too chicken to just up and sell. Someone who needed insurance money. Someone who was trying to frame a body. Could be a hundred reasons. Now," Roy paused to drink, "I'm not saying Molly did this. And I'm not saying that Tucker and all them other fellas didn't."

Molly came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair. She looked at Kevin briefly and ignored him. "Come on, Roy, you know who did it."

"I don't know nothing of the sort, Mol."

"You're a suspicious old S.O.B., aren't you?" Molly said, grinning.

"Yeah, well, that's my job," he said roughly. Then he smiled and punched her in the shoulder. They looked like a happy couple for a second; Molly told me that at one time, Roy was sweet on her.

"How many poisonings does this make?" I asked.

"Only four cases, but there's other sorts of foul play going on. Everyone around here but you, Molly, has had a fence cut."

"Well, we did, too. Remember, Bones?"

"Yeah, up on the north side. The wire was cut and there were some bootprints," I said.

"People ride their dirt bikes up the Forest Circus roads all the time up there. I was a little annoyed but I didn't think anything of it--I figured it was some biker," Molly said.

Roy frowned at her. "Should have told us anyway."

"Well, I didn't think you'd care," said Molly.

"Oh, he'd care a whole lot," said Kevin as he came through the door. He stomped into the bathroom.

Molly looked at him, angry. "You don't need to be in there--all your shit's on the porch."

"Wanted to make sure you didn't miss nothing. Wouldn't want to have to come back or anything," Kevin sneered.

It sounded like Kevin was rooting through every drawer and cupboard in the bathroom. While he was occupied, Charlie came in with Fred. Behind them came the examiner, lugging the pink salt block. He set it down hard on the table.

"Hey, Charlie, how was your evening?" I said.

"MMMM," he groaned and scratched his beard. "Where's the coffee?" I made another pot. Roy and the examiner went outside to confer while Fred talked with Molly.

"Now, Mol, you know I don't hold you to blame," he said.

"I should have kept a better eye on things," she said.

"Now, now--"

"Well, hell, Fred! You put a lot of trust in me! I know you must be pissed off."

"Hush up," he said. "How can I hold you responsible for a vicious crime? You know who did it." He lowered his head and looked up at her sideways.

"The Riverbend did this, Fred. That's a given. But I should've been watching out!"

Fred took a long slurp of coffee. "That Riverbend outfit is in for a fight if they ever ask me to sell out! Fact is, I ought to go down and tell Marshall to stick it where the sun don't shine!" He slammed his flat palm down on the table and our cups jumped.

Then Fred looked toward the bathroom, as if he had noticed the commotion for the first time. "Say, Molly, what is all this?"

"Kevin's outstayed his welcome," Molly said loudly.

Kevin finally came out of the bathroom holding a garbage sack with a few things poking out in the bottom. "I think I've got it all," he said casually. He walked out the door and Molly followed him.

Fred and Charlie were silent. I covered the discomfort with words. "I'm getting mighty hungry. Anyone for a cheese sandwich?" They politely accepted and I got busy,

chattering as I cooked. For some reason, I felt like crying, and I was glad not to be alone.

Kevin was gone and Molly was walking toward the river through the field when we all migrated to the back porch to eat and watch the field of dead cows. We speculated freely on the perpetrator.

"So you think Marshall did it," I said to Fred.

"Oh, no, he'd never get his hands that dirty. He probably had one of his goons do it."

"I can't believe them worthless guys would have the guts," said Charlie through a mouthful of grilled cheese.

"Roy said it could be any one of our neighbors," I offered timidly. "Everyone has rat poison."

"Like who?" Fred sniffed. "I ain't feuded with a-one of my neighbors. Course, I did shoot Dan Miller in the butt with a pelletgun full of rock salt for kissing my daughter once. Maybe he's getting his revenge."

"I don't think so," said Charlie.

"Well, he is sweet on Chrissy Marshall," I said.

Fred tapped on the top of a can of snuff. "Dan don't want to make waves, I don't think. I'd say he wants everyone to get along so he can marry into that money." He stuffed a wad of chew in his lower lip and offered it to me with a wink. I said no. Then Fred's eyebrows raised up. "Well, well. There's that rich son of a bitch as we speak."

He looked West toward the highway. A shiny black midsize truck had driven past the house and slowed down near

the hay shed. It entered the yard there and drove back across the dirt to the house.

Jordan Marshall parked behind Roy's rig and got out. "Morning!" he called.

Charlie and Fred didn't answer so I figured I should. I took a stance like Molly's. "Morning, Mr. Marshall. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, I saw the sheriff parked here and thought I'd best check up on you, see if everything's all right."

"Right neighborly of you," growled Charlie under his breath.

Marshall either didn't hear or ignored him. " What's going on?"

"Just a little trouble in the East pasture. You drove right by it," I said, smiling.

"I thought I saw a bunch of folks out in the field," he said and moved closer. "What's the trouble? "

Fred spat across the porch, over the rail, and looked at him. "Dead cows."

Marshall's squinty eyes widened a little. "Jesus, that is trouble. What--what happened?"

"You tell us," said Fred. He was still looking at him.

"Huh?" said Marshall. "That sounds a lot like an accusation, Fred. Now I know folks around here are a tad bit resentful of me--that's only natural since I'm an outsider--"

"Maybe it's because you talk too much," cut in Charlie.

Marshall took a breath. "Look here, I've been nothing but a good neighbor to the folks around here! I'm starting to get tired of all the horseshit!" His voice had the same tone that he'd tried on me when I made that delivery. But Fred wasn't intimidated.

"What about you trying to buy out Tucker? And the Smith place?"

"I was trying to do those men a favor! They don't know jack about business. I was trying to help them so their families wouldn't starve, and I made them good offers. Oh, to hell with it--I'm not going to stand around and take this!" He stomped back to his truck and backed out of the driveway.

"Well, look at that--he's going the wrong way for town," I said.

"I'll be," said Charlie. "He must've known. He must have, or else why would he drive out this way?"

"Yep. It was him," said Fred, and he spat off the porch again.

Chapter Five

To outsiders, every summer in the valley looks like a drought season. Amidst the green, irrigated fields and towering poplar trees are chunks of desert, rocks and sand and lizards, and the air is always dry. But this summer's drought was real. Not even the snakes could find enough water. In June the ranchers had spoken of the water shortage that was to come nonchalantly, but now, in the last week of July, they looked and sounded worried. The drought was on, full force, drying up the creeks and people's patience at once.

Roy Smith dropped by one day to deliver a letter confirming that the cows were poisoned with cyanide. "It's a real good one to use, because it takes the oxygen out of the blood cells and it disappears from the blood stream in a snap. Now, if I could only pinpoint the source," Roy said. He searched the place for good measure, and he didn't find any poison, to his relief.

Molly spoke wryly of her "Independence Day," but she didn't show any regret. Mom immediately packed her bags and came to stay at the ranch, cleaning long-neglected corners and making us wear jackets in the morning. She didn't like it when I tended bar at the store. "Don't mean to be old-fashioned, but it's not exactly what I dreamed of for you."

She towered over me, but I wasn't afraid of her frowns anymore, having gotten used to Gert and John's countenances by now.

"Pay's good," I'd reply. I loved this job. I was putting away quite a lot for school, since there was nothing to spend it on out there. Besides, if this stretched-out valley had a center, the Two Rivers General Store was it. "You just don't like me working Sundays," I'd add.

But Sundays were the most exciting times, what with all the feuding ranchers attempting to be civil to each other in the little white church next to the dance hall. Chrissy and Jordan Marshall attended regularly; that created quite a draw for unmarried ranch hands and bitter owners alike. From my high stool behind the register, I would hear the young men screeching out "Precious Lord, Take my Hand" as if to echo across the hills, and I would think about the grim looks to the back of Jordan Marshall's head.

Since the incident with our cows, Roy had taken a bold stand on the treatment of animals. He threatened to report Marshall, who had been running 70 head on 200-acre sagebrush flat in the dry heat. Marshall had retaliated by irrigating the field, day and night, robbing everyone else of desperately-needed water. Our place was the hardest hit; it was at the end of the valley. The Lass boys blamed Ingram, of course, who got mad at Roy for following procedure. Ingram wasn't even irrigating most of his land, and it was looking doubtful that anyone was going to get a second

cutting out of the hay. Gert's little potato patch had turned dry and hard as a brick--bad news for me, since I had to weed it--and some of the more shallow wells were delivering significant amounts of sand through the taps.

John hadn't shown any new signs of affection. I resigned myself to earning his respect alone. Gert and John grumbled about the store; I was convinced they were picking on me. One breezeless Sunday I heard them talking about me while I cleaned the tavern.

"You should be nicer to her," said Gert. I held my breath and scrubbed quietly.

"I've never been rude to her."

"I didn't say you had. You know what I mean by `nice'." I could see Gert from where I stood.

"You mean she's sweet on me and I ought to indulge it. That'd be more mean than nice."

"She's a pretty girl..."

"So was my wife!" John said roughly. "I don't have time for pretty girls."

Well, fine! I didn't have time for him, either. Never mind that my pulse shot through the roof every time he looked at me. I brushed tears away with my thumbs and stomped through the store with my wash-bucket sloshing.

"You shouldn't assume so much," I said to them both. I threw the water off the porch, soaking my leg in the process. I didn't look at either one of them the rest of

the day, and in fact openly flirted with Josh Miller after church.

I had a bunch of deliveries to make that afternoon, which was good; I could avoid their patronizing looks. But I missed Marshall asking two Ingram boys to come work for him, and those same boys spitting very near his boots.

Gert told this with animation, but I just said, "Hmmm." I was still mad and I had stories of my own to report. I didn't feel like sharing, but I couldn't resist dropping this tidbit on my way into the restroom: "Marilyn Lass is wearing a wig now."

When I came out, John asked, "What did you say?"

"I said, Marilyn Lass is sporting a wig."

"What for?"

I snorted and brushed by him. "Obviously, she's losing her hair."

"I figured that, but...is it that female thing?" John looked puzzled and interested.

I rolled my eyes. "It's called ovarian cancer. How clueless can you be?" I sorted the mail furiously, slapping down letters in piles on the long counter.

"Amanda--"

"I'm trying to concentrate, John." I had never called him by his name before.

He sighed loudly and bit his lip. "Amanda," he began again, "You heard me and Ma talking, I know. I didn't mean anything by it."

"No apologies necessary. I'm very clear about where I stand," I said.

"You work for me."

"I know that."

"And you're six years younger than me, and you're off to college in a month..."

"Did I say I expected anything?" I looked him squarely in his crystal-blue eyes. He looked away.

"I had a wife once," he said thickly. I looked at him again and he held my gaze this time, for moments, until a pile of mail slid to the floor. We both bent to the floor to pick it up.

"So what happened?"

"She ran off."

"Kind of like your dad," I said, then stopped, embarrassed at myself.

"Kind of like that," he answered calmly. I gathered the mail again and continued to slap it into piles that didn't mean anything.

"Just didn't want to start anything I couldn't finish," he said.

"Fine with me. I've got a boyfriend at school, you know."

"Oh." He looked surprised. "Didn't know that."

"Yep."

Gert, who had been slyly dusting the cracker shelves, decided to end this and jump in. "Mandy, did you take the last box of Ritz out to Bud and Marilyn's?"

"Yes, I did," I said loudly. "It's in the notebook. They paid up, too." John moved away. I vowed to forget about him. Maybe, I thought, I'll take home a bottle of whiskey tonight, for me and Molly.

* *

That was the night of the break-in. Gert almost slept through the alarm, thinking it was one of her clocks. John was up and running, though, in a sheet and a pair of boots, a pistol in his spare hand. Sandy, Gert's ex-sister-in-law, heard the alarm and, storming outside with a .22 rifle, almost shot him as the burglar.

Gert called me at three to come in early. I wandered in about 45 minutes later in Mom's car (she wouldn't let me drive Old Doorless while she stayed at the ranch) Gert's eyes were swollen and red. "G'morning. What's up?"

"They wiped us out," said Gert slowly. She gazed around her.

John walked in, his face contorted, the frown deeper than ever. "They didn't wipe us out, Ma. Don't say that! That's just what they want us to think!"

"Who?" I asked.

"Don't you get it--this is like killing the stock," he said. "Marshall has to be behind this."

"Oh my God," I groaned and looked around, hoping for a clue. The beef jerky stand was scattered on the floor in front of the counter and the safe swung open to show its emptiness. Nothing else seemed out of place. "Well, should we touch anything? Can we open up or what?"

"No. Go on home," barked John.

"Oh, lay off, John," said Gert. She seemed to have pulled herself back to reality. She turned to me and put a cool hand on my arm. "Will you stay a while until Roy Smith gets here? He'll want to talk to you, since you know the combination to the safe."

"Yeah, you do," said John. I had no response to that. I said yes to Gert and went outside to watch the sun rise.

Roy arrived soon after and talked to me on the porch. He believed my innocence, of course, but John remained surly. For lack of something better to do, I went out back and pitched horseshoes. The sun was shining in angles through the willow and poplar trees and over the hills that were cut by the river. The heat rose up almost immediately; I worked up a sweat as I threw and threw.

I felt at peace for the first time since I'd started working at the store. Something about the day before had cleansed me; I breathed deeply, felt no worries.

"Amanda!" I turned from the horseshoe pit. "There's some cleaning to do, and you've got four deliveries to make," said John. "Mom's back is bothering her; she's going back to bed."

I dropped the horseshoe and walked slowly to the back door where John was standing. "Well, get to work," he said without expression. In fact, he didn't even look at me. I felt yesterday's anger boiling back up.

"You know, I didn't hear you say `please'."

"I don't need to say anything to you," he said.

"I guess you don't, do you? I forgot, you're the boss. Forgive me." I bowed at the waist.

"Don't be a smartass; just get to work." He gave me a look of disdain.

"Something else that's really interesting: You don't trust me. You actually think I might have broken in. You don't trust anybody, do you?" He didn't answer. "You don't trust anyone, you don't like anyone...I think you're kind of a pain in the ass."

He looked at me, incredulous. "What did you say?"

"You heard me! You're a pain in the ass! I can't work for you," I sighed, shaking my head. I fished the car keys out of my pocket and started toward Mom's car.

"Amanda! Get back here!"

I only turned around. "You can't be cruel and expect a person to stick around. I would hope you'd have learned that lesson by now." I was shaking and I couldn't stop--I was on a roll. "You know, I really liked you. I didn't want romance so much as I wanted your respect, and I worked hard for it. But you couldn't even share that." John

frowned, his face reddening. face looked explosive. "I'm needed at home. Tell Gert I'm sorry."

I felt detached from my body on the drive home. The road was sunny; grasshoppers danced off the windshield regularly, one every mile and a half. I hit a jackrabbit without blinking. I didn't want to face Molly and Mom and Charlie. I'd failed to punch down the brick wall; even the crack was repaired, and me with a broken fist....

Rounding a corner where the road snaked through some small hills, I saw a huge black cloud to the west. I'd seen grass fires before, and I thought maybe Bud was burning a field. But there was a statewide ban on burning because it was so dry. As I got closer, I could tell it was coming up from over the hill west of Bud's. From behind me, Roy screamed by with his lights on and the siren blaring. Suddenly everything was back in focus. The cloud was building, rolling higher as I watched.

I brought the car up to his speed. Roy passed Bud and Marilyn's road; I realized it had to be our place.

The smoke column was huge and black as we rounded the last curve. It stretched endlessly into the calm blue, puffing and boiling harmlessly at the top, masking the base. It was our hay shed.

Roy parked in the road before we reached the house, and I pulled alongside him on the shoulder. The smoke not only rose up, it billowed out from the sides of the mountain of hay. I started to run toward the house but Roy grabbed my

arm. "Mandy!" he said; he talked into a handheld radio, said "standby," and put his seat forward. "Take these, set them up a hundred yards apart and around the corner." He handed me three emergency flares.

"What--how? What about Molly?" I said, frantic.

"Calm down. They work like matches; just drag the end on the ground." He got back on the radio and motioned me back down the road. I ran, nearly in tears. I didn't know if anyone was hurt; I couldn't see through the smoke. I stopped at what could have been fifty yards or two hundred and did what Roy described. The flare fizzled like a roman candle and then flared steady and red. I dropped it and ran up the road to do the next two.

Already a truck was coming through. The driver stopped and yelled out the window. "What's going on?"

"Our hay's on fire!" I dropped the last flare. "Can you give me a ride back? She said yes and I got in the back of the truck. When she pulled up behind Roy's rig, I jumped out and ran.

The fire roared loudly, like the rush of a train. The heat was suffocating and all-encompassing. Mom stood with a garden hose, watering down the house. "Where's Molly?" I shouted.

"Getting the horses out," Mom answered. I could see her, wrestling with two of the horses we'd brought up to the barn. The dogs ran wildly back and forth, barking and prancing, as if they liked this. The hay shed's metal roof

had fallen in, and the fire was churning underneath it, the convection sending chunks of flaming straw into the air. Already the timbers of the corral next to the shed had begun to smolder, and I could see patches of fire in the field to the south. Once the corral burned, the barn would be next.

Roy came back toward the house. "Evacuate the house," he yelled. Molly was trying to push the horses through the gate to the field. They would run away from fire, but in a panic they might go right down the road.

"Mom, go in and get your stuff," I said.

"No, I don't have anything important. You go get your things and I'll stay here." She calmly sprayed down the house.

The vehicles seemed a lot more important that my clothes, so I moved them. The keys were already in the jeep and Old Doorless, and they were parked in front of the barn. I got in the jeep and drove it out to the road, where I nearly ran into a Forest Service pump engine, weaving its way through the trucks and cars and curious people who had begun to stack up behind Roy's rig. The engine's lights flashed brightly through the smoke that was drifting in all directions.

I parked the jeep and ran back to the doorless blue pickup; then I stopped. Was it worth saving? I stood, sucking in bitter smoke; the air burned my eyes, and tears and mucus ran down my face. I coughed weakly. I couldn't decide what to do.

"Get back!" shouted Roy. He was pushing Molly back toward the highway. The Forest Service rig parked by the shop and ran their hoses toward the hay shed. The water just created more smoke, it seemed. "Mandy! Get back on the road, by my rig. You, too, Mary," he told my mother. She set down the hose and turned off the spigot obediently. Molly, however, broke free from Roy and moved back toward the fire, determined to help, not realizing how fast the fire was spreading. Roy went after her.

I heard new crackling and popping noises; the barn was on fire. Pretty soon the shop with all the farm equipment would go; and then the tack room with Molly's prize saddle from high school rodeo and the bridle I gave her for Christmas and the silver spurs she had made in New Mexico would burn; and then the house would go up like so much kindling.

I stood on the highway. More federal engines arrived. Somewhere on the other side of the smoke and flames were more police holding back traffic, more fire crews, spraying uselessly at the mountain of flames. Now the grass on the north side of the highway was burning.

Pups found me and jumped up on my legs, yapping. I stood, paralyzed by the sight, while Mom spoke with excited neighbors. The flames were beautiful if terrible, some of them curling upward ten, maybe twenty feet, some of them leaping off the top of the heap to become airborne and start new fires elsewhere. There weren't any real winds, only the

ones created by the heat. The fire did as it willed, swirled and ducked and mocked the people with their hoses.

Then, suddenly, the main fire was out of fuel. It died to a couple hot spots here and there. The barn roof still burned. The smoke remained thick, but there was less of it. A snaky line of creeping fire partitioned off patches of burned grass on either side of the road and the paint on the side of the metal shop had buckled. The smell of burned grass lingered, along with some other acrid smells. Most of the yard and the driveway was covered in a fine, white ash. The people in cars and trucks started up their engines and slowly continued on their way, like a crowd of folks going home from the rodeo, weary from the action.

Fred came from the other direction in his red sedan. He pulled in near the fire rigs and staggered as he got out of the car. I saw the place again through Fred's eyes--thousands of dollars worth of hay gone in a charred mess, the corral he'd built fifty years ago destroyed, a lone trailer wheel smoking in the ruins. He said, anguished, "Who did all this?"

Roy and a couple firefighters spoke with Fred. The caravan of curious folks continued by, and I sat on Roy's hood, staring at the wreckage, not seeing anything.

"Hey!" One of the trucks stopped. I turned and it was John; he flashed a sympathetic grin--the second smile I'd ever received from him--and pulled up in front of me.

"What happened?" John looked around.

All I could say was, "Fire."

"You OK? Anyone hurt?" he asked."

"Everything's OK," I said and looked away.

"Thought you might want this," he said. He held out a chamois shirt I had left at the store weeks ago. I took it silently.

"I reckon you wouldn't have quit if I hadn't made you mad, so if you want to come back, Ma says it's fine," he said quickly. He smiled and nodded at me, prompting me. When I didn't speak, he grinned even harder.

"Come on, Mandy. I'm trying real hard here. Cut me some slack. I'm sorry," he said pointedly. "That ought to count for something."

I looked back at the mess. It seemed like everything had gone up in flames--my idyllic summer with Molly ruined. What happened to the friendly neighbors, the feeling of trust, stable marriages, romance? A thin cloud of smoke wafted over us, and my eyes filled again.

"Hey," said John. He put his fingers on my chin and drew my face back toward him. His eyes softened. "You OK?" he said again. The floodgate opened; the next thing I knew I was pressed against his flannel shirt, sobbing. He held me and didn't say a word.

I didn't want to stop, but Mom was watching, so when my sobs turned to hiccups, I pulled away, trying to hide my nose. It must swell to seven or eight times its original size when I cry. He wouldn't let me turn away; he untied

the bandana around his neck and handed it to me. "You know somebody's a friend when he lets you blow your nose on his favorite neckerchief," he said.

Mom was already busy opening all the windows of the house to air it out. John and I walked down to Fred, Molly and the firefighters.

"You OK, Bones?" asked Molly. I nodded. She patted me on the back.

"I'm beyond crying," said Fred. "Fifty-two years of peaceful living in this valley, no trouble except a few fistfights...folks helping each other out and getting along for decades, and all of it pissed away in a single summer!"

"Now, Fred, it could've been anything, a cigarette butt from some tourist, green hay, you name it," said one of the firefighters.

Fred didn't hear him. "Marshall won't get away with this one!"

"I understand your anger," Roy said," but you haven't got any hard evidence. Don't make this any harder for the rest of us--please keep your accusations to yourself."

"Jesus, Roy!" said Fred. "You sound like you done been paid off."

Roy's face grew hard. "I'll pretend you didn't say that, Fred." They glared at each other.

I hated to see more distrust. "I need some water," I sniffled. John walked me inside the house, which hadn't been touched by the fire.

When we came back out, I stared hard. Jordan and Chrissy Marshall were in the yard. Marshall and Fred seemed to be in a stand-off. They faced each other, stance wide and hands on their hips. Thankfully they had no guns strapped around their waists. Other than that, it looked like a duel in an Old West movie. We all stood back.

"You sure got a nose for trouble," said Fred. "Always showing up just after something shitty happens."

Marshall smiled, but not with his eyes. "Just looking after my fellow man."

"Or checking on your handiwork," growled Fred. The veins on his neck and temples were popping out. He was ready to burst.

"Now, now, that's just not fair, Fred," said Marshall. He scratched his head. The shiny black hair didn't even move. "I just don't understand your animosity toward me. I'm here to help you."

"How?" said Fred. "Are you going to replace my hay? How about rebuilding the corral? Took me a month of hard labor fifty years ago. You going to put up a new hay shed for me?"

"I would," said Marshall, his head low, "if we were partners." He looked up at Fred, his hair shining like the wing of a vulture.

Fred stared at him with contempt, his eyes dull slits of hatred. "You son of a bitch."

"What?" Marshall threw his hands up and looked around for supporters. "I'm trying to help you out--"

"You're trying to buy me out!" Fred walked toward Marshall.

"You're starting to tick me off, Millikin! I come down here, all concerned about you, trying to make a kind and Christian offer__"

With that, Fred let out a roar and charged at Marshall. Noiselessly, his fist hit Marshall's face, and Marshall dropped flat on his back in the ashy dirt, a bloody mess where his nose belonged.

Chrissy shrieked and rushed to her dad. He lay there for a moment, then he jumped up, knocking Chrissy over, holding his nose. "AAAAH!" he shouted. "Arrest him! Arrest him!"

Roy towed Marshall over to the woodpile and pushed him down onto the chopping block by his shoulders. He checked Marshall's face out, muttering in Fred's direction "Jesus Christ, Fred! You had to go and do that right in front of me, didn't you. Couldn't make it easy and order him off your property. Nooo, not you. Thanks a lot."

"Arrest him," sniffled Marshall. Chrissy was crying only slightly louder.

"I will. Lay down and be still."

Chrissy said, "I demand you arrest him now, before he gets away!"

Roy looked at her, annoyed. "Relax. He's not going anywhere. Damn, Fred! What were you thinking? It's like arresting my own dad." Roy put Marshall's hand up to the handkerchief pressed against his smashed nose, told him to hold it there. He arrested Fred and read him his rights. Fred seemed to take pride in being cuffed. He asked the fire investigator, who was taking photographs of the ruins, to get a shot of him and Marshall. The investigator wouldn't do it.

"Haven't done that in nearly twenty years. Damn, it felt good!" He flexed his swelling hand and smiled.

"You should be ashamed!" wailed Chrissy, who was kneeling beside her father.

"Oh, no, you got it all wrong, honey," said Fred. "In some places, being charged with assault is a shameful thing, but out here it just means I won the fight."

Roy brought his rig closer to the house and loaded them up, Marshall laying in the back seat and Prisoner Fred in the front. They headed for town at breakneck speed, lights and siren going. The rest of us looked at each other, not knowing whether to laugh or be sad. Molly's face looked strained.

"We didn't lose any stock," I said.

She sighed. "No. Not this time."

"What happened, Mol?"

"I don't know. Mom and I were having some coffee, and I smelled smoke. Came out and the damn hay was on fire. We

tried to stretch the hose out but it wouldn't reach. By then it was too hot to beat it with a sack."

"You think Marshall set it?" asked John.

"All I can say is, if it was a cigarette butt, whoever tossed it had pretty good aim."

Some folks pulled in; I didn't recognize them. The day had returned to normal, the sky blue and the air hot, except for a charred hole where the hay had been. I was exhausted. I turned to John. "You probably need to get back to the store."

"Yeah; Mother's watching it, but she gets tired really fast."

"Thank you," I said.

"No, thank you," he said. "I'm real sorry I was such a hound dog."

"Well, I'm sorry, too. I didn't need to be such a jerk." We smiled at each other.

"So will you come back?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Maybe part-time. I think I'm going to be needed here." We looked around the ruins.

"I understand. Well, we`ll miss you!" he said, with an exaggerated handshake. Then he looked at me keenly. "Stop by sometime. I'll have your check ready."

He was rather close; I could kiss him, I thought. I stepped back. "Thanks for the job. It was fun."

"You're very welcome," he said. He backed away, then he stopped and sighed. "Well, if you don't get a hundred

good offers, I'd like to take you to the rodeo dance. It's a month off, so you'll have plenty of time to find a real date."

I grinned. "I'll let you know."

John drove away just as Bud pulled up. He jumped out of his blue car and strode over to Molly faster than I'd ever seen him move. "You OK?" he asked Molly.

"Yeah, everything's all right. Nobody's hurt. Bud, what's wrong?"

He looked all around, his hand over his mouth. Beads sweat spread downward from his hairline. "I was real worried, that's all. Molly, I--"

"What, Bud?"

He touched her arm. "You know I would never let harm come to you."

"Of course not, Bud; you've told me so before. Why do you say that?" said Molly. She put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him intently. "What is wrong?"

"God, I wish I could tell you, Mol. Just know that, well, I love you, and I would never hurt you, OK?" His brows knit together as he backed away. "I gotta go. Everything's OK, right?" Molly nodded yes, and Bud left heading east.

"What was that all about?" I said.

"Oh, Bud's a little lovesick, that's all. Don't tell anyone what he said, OK? I don't want Marilyn worrying over

nothing." I nodded, and we walked down to help Charlie and the firefighters look for clues in the ashes.

Chapter Six

Charlie and I didn't drive in to bail out Fred until that evening, after a significant amount of standing around staring at the wreckage. Charlie chuckled all the way to town, and I suspected he'd stalled for a while just to make sure Fred actually sat in the jail cell.

"What took you so long?" asked Fred when we got there. "I'm rotting away in here." He rattled the door.

Charlie laughed and said, "Uncle Fred, the convict! Don't that beat all."

"Shut up, you varmint! Post my bail and let's get out of here."

"I thought you liked it," I said.

"I had my first prison food. It's lost its glamour for me." Fred belched. "I could teach these cooks a thing or two."

We drove to Fred's house in town and he picked up some clothes. He stayed out at the ranch for the next week, cleaning up debris and grumbling. My dad came out for a couple days, too. At night, we would munch on snacks and desserts that neighbors had dropped by and put whiskey in our coffees, Fred more than the rest of us. His face would get red and shiny and he would bluster loudly about the inequities of this life as we sat around the kitchen table,

killing mosquitos that managed to breed without any water around.

"Damn this life!" he'd say. "Cursed is the life of a rancher! You bust your ass twenty-five hours a day, and for what? To see your life's work go up in smoke! I'm just glad my dear wife Belle ain't alive to see this." Then he'd shed a tear into his coffee while Dad toasted to his sentiment and took a drink. During the day, he would work without any bitterness, but at night he let loose.

Mom didn't really approve of all this. The first night, when we got back late and started in on the Jim Beam on top of the fridge, she didn't want me to have any. "I'm not sure I want you exposed to all this yet," she said with pursed lips.

"Mom, you can't shelter me forever. I've already seen a lot worse than this."

"That she has, Mom," Molly said. She let the bottle flow freely into my cup.

"I just don't want you girls getting, you know, freaked out," Mom said. But I was done freaking out. I didn't feel like anything could ever shock me again. And I knew I was going to need strength. Molly was looking worse, less together. She blamed herself entirely for the fire. She hadn't been combing her hair too well, and she was very quiet. Mom had reason to worry about her.

One night after Charlie and Molly and I had drunk a half-bottle of whiskey with water, we took Old Doorless for

a spin out in the alfalfa field. We drove it off the bank trying to cross the river and got it stuck, so we hiked back to the house. Mom was on the porch, frowning.

"Howdy, Ma'am; would you care to dance?" Charlie asked. He traipsed around the porch while Molly and I laughed hysterically. Mom gave him a dirty look and took Molly inside by the arm. "Grouch," said Charlie.

Mom and Molly went in Molly's bedroom and shut the door. I had another drink. Charlie's eyes were reddened, but they were still blue, and it got me thinking about John. I sat with half-closed eyes, thinking about him, wondering how I'd ever face school. The valley had grown on me. I had everything I needed, even a pair of boots I'd found in the back room of the store when I'd cleaned it out. Shopping meant nothing anymore and when I had called my friends last week, we'd had nothing to talk about. They really weren't interested in the weather the way I was, or how the fencing was coming along.

"You know," I said, my eyes popping wide open, "It's kind of nice out here. Kind of simple."

"Yep," said Charlie. He slumped in his chair with his hat over his eyes.

"I mean, if something bad happens, you grieve a little, stomp around and then you get back to work, simple as that."

"The world don't stop, Mandy, not for nothing," said Charlie. "Don't matter what happens in life. The day we buried my daddy, we was expecting a storm and the hay needed

cut. So I saw him to the funeral home and went back out and cut the damn hay all day. It rained like a cow pissing on a flat rock for the next two days. We got it done barely in time. The rain wasn't going to stop and wait for no funeral." He took a drink and smacked his mouth a couple times.

"God, Charlie, that's pretty callous!" I said.

"Oh, Daddy would've understood. My ma was a different matter, though. She's still riled up." He chuckled with his eyes shut.

Fred dragged himself in from the livingroom. He had passed out in an old chair long before our joyride. "You spinning yarns, Charlie?" He yawned.

"I'm telling true stories tonight," said Charlie. "You know any?"

"Not a one." Fred got a soda from the fridge. Molly and Mom emerged from the bedroom, both red-eyed and smiling.

"Fred," said Mom, "I'm going to take Molly away for a couple days to help with the canning."

Fred's eyebrows raised and he looked at Molly. "OK," he said mildly.

"It'll be nice to be close to town for a while. I need a little break." Molly smiled apologetically at Fred.

"I hope you're leaving Joe," said Fred as my dad walked in from the livingroom. "Even though he's not worth a darn for work."

"I'm here to supervise, you know that," said Dad. "Nobody said anything about work."

"We all pull our weight around here. It's good for the soul," I said.

"Yeah, but not for the back." Dad stretched and rubbed his lower back.

"The world doesn't stop for a bad back, does it, Charlie?" He didn't answer. "Charlie?" He moaned.

"Well," said Mom, "I certainly hope you won't be getting my youngest wasted every night. I can trust you four to get something done around here, can't I?

Fred belched. "Oh, yeah. You bet."

"Bones, I'll expect you to have that fencing done when I get back," joked Molly.

"No problem." I thought, wouldn't it be nice to actually surprise her and get it done. "I'd better hit the hay if you want to see me before noon." I said my goodnights and went to bed, pondering this vacation of Molly's. She looked old sometimes, and she was beginning to walk differently, a little slower, less like she had somewhere to be.

I got up earlier than everyone and warmed up the doorless truck. I felt like I was taking over for Molly; I even pulled on a pair of her old boots. I drove out across the field to the west--it was usually marshy, but now it was bone-dry.

Across the river was an old road that went up a draw. We never used it; if we went up this way, we usually did it on horseback. It was steep and bumpy and the blue truck wasn't four-wheel drive, so it was slow-going. About two miles up the draw, it leveled out somewhat and I was on top of the rimrock. I turned east on another road and headed out into the sunrise. It was almost instantly hot from the sun. I had to take off my jacket five minutes into working.

Once I got this fixed, we could run our stock up here and increase our range by close to four square miles. It ran north to south for miles on the forest boundary; we had begun on the southwest corner and inched our way around, propping up rickety fenceposts, stretching and twisting the wire tight, adding new sections across a ravine that split the rimrock, ripping out shirt-sleeves...fencing wasn't tedious but it was a big hassle.

Our wire gates didn't seem to hold up or stay shut; we figured that tourists left them open on their way through. But today I saw sections pulled loose from the post and flipping around in the light morning breeze. No animal could have done it, and no tourist would need to. I sighed and got to work. I looked around for clues but I didn't see any. This was just more of the mischief someone was doing to drive everyone nuts and out of business. "As if burning up thousands of dollars worth of hay wasn't enough," I said to myself.

I worked for a few hours before I got hungry, then I bounced back down to the house. Charlie was at the kitchen table, contemplating a cup of coffee.

"Come on," he said. "I've been waiting for you."

"What for?"

"I need to go to the store. I need some aspirin and I need it now." Roy knocked just them and let himself in.

"Howdy, all! How are you today?" He looked at Charlie and said "Hooey, forget I asked. Is Molly up yet?"

"She's up and gone," Charlie said. "She's gone to her folks' place."

"Oh," Roy said. "Guess I can catch her there this evening. How about Fred?"

"He's in bed yet. Wake him and you will have raised the dead," said Charlie.

"I guess I'll give you guys the news, then. The investigator found a couple tracer bullets in the mess."

"What are they?" I asked.

"They got phosphorus in 'em. They burn real hot. The military uses them for all sorts of night maneuvers. Forest Service sometimes uses them to burn out rotten stumps.

"I`ll be damned!" said Charlie. "Well, can you track down the sharpshooter?"

"We got a real good chance of it now," said Roy. He sneezed and pulled out a handkerchief with ROY embroidered on it. "By damn, I've got a nose full of ashes! Well, I

gotta run out to the South Fork and rescue a tourist with a flat tire. Just thought I'd let you know"

Charlie and I left for the store; he made me drive. As we pulled in, Jordan Marshall passed us rapidly. His nose was bandaged over with a bunch of white tape. I raised my hand, but he didn't wave back. "Friendly guy," I said.

"Have you forgot? He's the enemy," said Charlie.

"Well, he's always waved. I guess he's given up on pretending to be friendly," I said.

Inside, Gert swept the floor far too furiously for her condition. "Howdy," Charlie said. She didn't answer. "I see Marshall stopped by to make your day."

Gert stopped and looked up. "I can't believe he did it. I just can't believe it."

"Did what?" I asked.

"The no-good S.O.B. asked me if I would sell!"

Dan and Josh walked in. "Hey, Charlie, Mandy," Josh said and tipped his cap.

"I hear Uncle Fred gave Marshall quite a nose job the other day. Congratulate him for me," said Dan.

"He should've broken his neck!" said Gert. She leaned on her broom.

"Why, Gert, you sound hostile," said Josh. "I thought he was one of your best customers. Thought you was staying neutral."

"I can't believe it. I just can't," said Gert. She swept away from us and around the corner of the shelves, muttering to herself.

Josh and Dan looked at Charlie, their eyebrows raised. "He asked her to sell," Charlie said.

"Well, what did she say?" asked Dan.

Gert burst out. "What did I say? I've been running this place for over thirty years. The flood didn't drive me out, Ed leaving didn't drive me out, Marshall ain't going to buy me out!"

"Good for you," I said.

"Then he threatened to shut me down. He's got friends at Liquor Control. If I can't serve beer, I'll go belly-up," Gert said.

"Damn it!" Josh slammed his cap down on the floor. "This has gone too damn far. We've got to do something about this jerk!"

"Well, what the hell can we do?" said Dan. "I don't like the guy either, but there's other people involved and I don't want to see them hurt."

"You mean them clowns he has working the place? They ain't worth spit!" said Charlie.

"No, not them. It's Chrissy I'm worried about."

"We're not going to shoot her," said Josh.

"We're not shooting anyone," I said.

They ignored me. Charlie and Josh looked at Dan expectantly. "Go on," said Josh. "What's on your mind?"

Dan sighed. "If you must know, I'm planning on marrying her."

Charlie snorted. "That ain't no big surprise. Question is, is she planning on marrying you?"

"The question is," said Josh loudly, "Are we going to stop this bastard or not?" He slammed his fist on the counter. The pickle jar lid slid off to the floor.

"Listen, Josh. I don't like to sit by and watch our neighbors get bullied around like they have been. But I don't want to stoop to Marshall's level either. I'll go along with any of your bright ideas, so long as they involve no violence of any sort," said Dan.

"I swear, since you met Chrissy, you've turned into an old maid--" began Josh.

"No, he's right," I interrupted. "It's not right to do what Marshall's done. Besides, the law's involved already. You could get in trouble."

"Ha!" said Josh. "Losing our land is trouble."

"Have a meeting," I said.

"A meeting?" asked Dan.

"Yeah, a meeting of all the ranchers in the valley. Maybe together you can think of some way to stop Marshall that doesn't hurt anyone." They thought it over for a minute.

"Not such a bad idea," said Charlie finally.

"Just so it don't turn out to be a lynching mob," Dan said grimly.

"Oh, Danny, you'll get your Chrissy, just relax," said Josh. "That's a damn good idea, Mandy. We'll get everyone to come and at least clear the air between neighbors. And you can do all the invites," He grinned and messed up my hair just in time for John to walk in and see it.

"Howdy, all," John said. "What's up?"

"We're having a meeting," said Josh. "Want to come?"

* *

The Millers, along with John, met at our place the next day to plan. The men paced and I sat at the kitchen table with my reading glasses on and a pencil behind my ear. "How's this sound, hon?" asked Josh, leaning over me to dictate. John frowned at him. "Community meeting, seven-thirty, be there or lose your pants."

"Too much like a poker game," I said.

"Yeah, but we want to have some humor or something in it," said Ned. He was starting to sweat; he tugged on his bandana.

"Let's just be straightforward," I said. "Everyone will know why we're holding this thing. Let's just say: Community Meeting--All Landowners Welcome."

The men nodded their approval. Then Josh said, "You`ll letter the signs, I suppose."

I sighed. "This is your meeting, Josh. I can't do everything."

"He's too ignorant to run a meeting. Better let one of his brothers do it," said Ned. They punched each other.

"OK--I'll do the signs, but you have to do the calling," I said to Josh.

"Calling?"

"Well, not everyone is going to see the signs in three days. You'd better get the phone book out and get to it." Josh nodded meekly. "Now, where's the meeting going to be held?"

They looked around. "Dance hall," said Dan.

"Who's setting up chairs?"

"He is," said Josh and Dan, pointing at each other.

"Who's setting up chairs?" I said sternly.

"I will," volunteered John.

"And what about coffee? Snacks?" Nobody spoke.

"We all figured you'd take care of it," Ned finally said.

I sighed. "OK, here's what you need to do: Get people to come, write up an agenda, have a person to lead the meeting, get the chow organized and that's it. I'll do the signs; you guys do the rest." I left the table with my paper and pens. "Oh, and don't forget to call Molly at my mom's place. I know she'll want to be there. What are you all grinning at?"

"We're going to make you the chairman!" said Dan.

I shook my head and went outside to draw up some hand-made flyers to be posted here and there. The breeze had picked up; it was two in the afternoon and clouds were still forming in the sky. It's going to storm today, I thought,

and then I remembered the jacket I had taken off and left by the fence. It was Charlie's. I finished up the posters as quickly as I could and took them inside.

"Nice work, Ma'am," Josh said. "Here's our plan: Charlie's providing the vittles," Josh read. Charlie snickered; that meant I would be baking cookies for three days. I gave Charlie a look that told him better. "Ned has decided he is the only one good enough--"

"That's smart enough," interrupted Ned.

"--to lead the meeting. Our agenda is simply to discuss the notion of being neighborly. We'll see where that takes us."

"Are you checking guns at the door," I asked skeptically. They laughed.

"Don't you worry, Mandy; one look from you and they'll all behave," said Charlie.

"I hope so. I'm going out for a little drive. I left Charlie's jacket by the east fence yesterday and it looks like rain, believe it or not. I'd best go get it."

"Don't worry about it, kiddo," said Charlie.

"Oh, no, I insist. I'll be gone all of twenty minutes." I left before he could protest more, smiling at John, who was distant to me that day. I wished he'd make up his mind.

Up on the rimrock, the land had taken on an interesting look. The sun shone in underneath the clouds from the west, lighting up the landscape against the dark storms to the

south. The sagebrush-covered plains looked like dirty sheep's wool. A few drops of rain fell here and there, but it looked like the storm would pass to the east. I always watched the sky, everywhere I went; Molly said that's why I never got any work done. But the river had begun to strike me the way it did her, like a constant or a guiding force. It was always there, even when it was only a strip of rocks and dried-up mud dividing the land. The problem was, when I listened to the river, I didn't hear anything.

I lumbered cross-country toward the fence and parked about fifty yards away when I got there. I couldn't remember where Charlie's jacket was so I walked along, not paying much attention to anything, but then I stopped. There was a footprint on the other side of the fence like ones Molly and I had seen the first time the wires were cut. A shock went through my body and I squatted to look closer. It was definitely a boot print, pressed in the sand, pointing toward me, the edges slowly blowing away. This was the same kind of print Roy had found out in the pasture. The wind gusted a little harder and I lost my balance and fell backward. I looked up, and Bud Lass was standing on the other side of the fence, a shotgun in one hand, a pair of wire clippers in the other.

Chapter Seven

"Howdy, Bud," I said weakly. My stomach was in my throat. I was afraid to get up.

"Good afternoon," he said. His face was pale, his lips tight. He set down the gun and scratched his head. I stood up.

"Well," I said. I looked at his wire clippers.

"Well," said Bud. We were silent, then he burst out, "I didn't burn down the shed, Mandy. I was trying to tell your sister the day of the fire. That dirty son of a bitch did it! I said I wouldn't, and he went right on ahead and did it." He wiped his forehead. "I would never burn a person's hay."

"Is cutting fence any better?" I said.

"Hell, yes! I don't hurt anyone."

I looked at his shotgun. "And poisoning the stock. Is that better than arson?"

He ignored me. He said, "You gonna turn me in?"

I shook with anger. "Jesus, Bud, I don't know! Why are you putting all this on me? Why didn't you hide when you saw me coming?" I stomped on the ground.

"I thought if I could just explain, you wouldn't tell about the footprints. You got to understand, Mandy. I love these people and I love this land. My ancestors--"

"To hell with your ancestry!" I said. "Why don't you make your confession to someone else?"

"I never hurt nobody...I just clipped some wire and...your sister means more to me than the air I breathe. But my wife is dying, Mandy. I had to have money for the treatments. Marshall offered me more cash than I make in two years. And--and I never hurt nobody." His eyes pleaded wildly with me. I didn't say a word.

"Mandy--" Bud began, frustrated. "I have been poor all my life! I have never owned a new car until now. I have no money. My wife is dying. What would you have me do? What would you have me do?" he repeated.

I shivered. The sun was gone now; rain was scattering its way toward us. Out in the open like we were, Bud was a walking lightning rod with his gun. "The storm's coming. We'd better get inside."

"Are you going to do it?" asked Bud. I couldn't answer. He took a step toward the fence. "Tell me!"

I looked up. The clouds felt like they were pressing in on me. "This is too much for me," I said quietly. "You betrayed everyone."

Bud winced. "What can I do? You want money? Tell me! I'll give you anything you want--just keep quiet. Please," he said.

"I can't do that, Bud. You've betrayed everyone. I don't know what to do. Please, just turn yourself in.

Don't make me do it. I'll have to if you don't," I said. I turned toward the truck.

"There's no way I can stop you, then," said Bud. I looked at him over my shoulder.

"You could shoot me," I said. I walked away. I hoped he couldn't tell that my legs were shaking so hard I almost fell down.

I drove back in a daze. If I turned Bud in, which I had to do, he would be locked away for life. What would happen to Marilyn then? I had no wish to be in the middle of all this. I had just come home to spend a summer with my grown-up sister, having grand times and too much beer. Suddenly, people's fates rested on me and my conscience. I felt very old.

The truck stalled in the middle of the narrow river. The storm was upon me now, and I sat for a minute, listening to the quiet. The rain pattered on the windshield and on my seat. The river trickled by under and all around me. I thought I felt what Molly felt, that voice that gurgled quietly in the water, nudging me toward the right thing. "You should turn him in, you know." A thunderclap punctuated the thought.

"I'll give him until the meeting, but I'll have to do it after that," I answered the river. A flash came from behind, followed by close thunder, so I cranked the key. Nothing happened. I figured that being in a truck with no doors in the middle of a body of water wasn't the safest

thing I could do. I jumped out into the shallow water and walked through the grey to the ranch house.

The Millers were still there. "Hey, kid, you're all wet," said Ned.

"Truck stalled in the river," I said. I peeled off my boots and wiped my face on a kitchen towel.

"Did you get the jacket?" asked Charlie.

"Forgot," I said. They looked at me. My T-shirt and jeans stuck to me. "Gotta change-I'll be right back." I came back in with a pair of sweatpants and new T-shirt on.

"Thanks for your work on the flyers, Mandy, but we're not going to use them because we don't want Marshall to show up," said Josh.

"Oh, no problem. Just make sure you call everyone," I said.

"We've got it all figured out. Charlie's taking A through G. We'll do the rest," said Josh. Then he looked at me sharply. "You OK?"

"Yep. I'm a little tired."

"I can tell; you're even more unpleasant than usual," Charlie said.

That made me grin. "On that note, I think I'll take leave of you all and take a nap."

"Go on, get out of here. We'll do all the work today," said Charlie.

"That'll be a nice role reversal," I said and went to my porch.

I didn't sleep but I stayed in bed, even when I heard Dad and Fred come in. They had been out fishing in an effort to cheer up Fred. It sounded like either the fish had been biting or Fred had been hit by lightning--he actually laughed once or twice. I lay with Pups in the storm-darkened sleeping porch, wondering what would happen at the meeting. My stomach clenched like a fist when I thought of standing up and telling a valleyful of people that one of their favorite friends had turned on them. Telling Molly or Roy alone was inconceivable. Right is right, I thought, and I have to do it. I wondered if they would even believe me.

I couldn't sleep, so I came out to the kitchen, yawning. I made small-talk and tried not to appear to be in a bad mood. It turned out that they didn't get any fish; Dad wanted to get hamburgers so I offered to do dinner. Fred was almost giddy with excitement about the meeting.

"By damn, that's a fine idea you come up with, Mandy! Why didn't we think of it sooner? You're as bright as they come. Hate to lose you to the college this fall. This'll solve the whole problem! He'll never know what hit him, the greasy son of a bitch!"

"How do you like your burger?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, well-done, please. It's just like I always say, United, we stand, divided, we get our butts kicked!"

"At least we'll feel like we're doing something," said Charlie. "Give some of those fellers back their dignity."

I knew he was thinking of Tucker, who'd had to ask around for work on other ranches. At least he stayed honest, even though he suffered. The thought of Bud's eyes, sorrowful and desperate, came back to me; I felt crying coming on so I concentrated hard on the burgers.

Molly came home the day of the meeting. She looked rested and she laughed when she walked in and saw our meeting mess spread out on the kitchen table.

"Looks like you really missed me," she said.

"Oh, we've somehow kept busy." I said. I hugged her. "Hey, you got a perm." Her hair was a little curly.

"Nope. Just a trim. Give it some body."

Charlie, in an apron and up to his elbows in cookie dough, said, "Goodness, I hardly noticed the change--so subtle! Your baby sister's just about taken over the empire."

"She has, huh?"

"Yep. The meeting was her idea, you know."

"Yeah, but did she finish the fencing?" Molly said. Of course, I hadn't. I couldn't bring myself to go back up there; Bud might be waiting in ambush.

Molly sat down with a sigh and rubbed her face. "I just about went crazy at Mom's. She wouldn't let me do anything!"

"You OK, Mol?" I said.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I talked with Kevin. We decided that a divorce would be the best thing for both of us," Molly said.

"Divorce!" I said.

"Yep. I'm gonna talk to a lawyer next time I'm in town. So, tell me about the meeting."

The day wore on nervously, punctuated by phone calls from Josh and Ned. Dan had removed himself from the heated discussions and planning because of Chrissy. He had confided that he planned to elope with her, but he wouldn't fill me in on details. He said I'd find out soon enough.

Dad left for home in the family car that Molly has just driven to the ranch. We had eggs and bacon for dinner since Charlie had used everything else making refreshments. Fred was still gleeful. I couldn't eat.

The dance hall was lit up, despite the fact the sun was still up. John had placed chairs in rows and set up a table with six chairs on the stage. The room seemed surreal, like I'd walked into a movie set. The ranchers filed in and filled the chairs from the back forward, an old habit from their school days. They were as uniform as any businessmen in their clean jeans, shiny boots, snap-up western shirts and tall hats. Even the short ones pretended to be lanky, stretching their legs out noisily and wide apart. Some of the women were there; Marilyn Lass walked in on a cane, very pale, and Sally Ingram had brought all of her brood. John told me to go sit up on the stage, since it had been my

idea. I was too sick to argue. I took the chair at the end of the table, closest to the edge of the stage.

Ned, John and Charlie also sat up at the table, along with John and a chair saved for Roy Smith. I felt silly and miserable up there with these pillars of the spread-out community. John took the chair next to me, out of breath. He flashed me a smile and patted my knee as he sat down.

The hall filled, all but the front row. There were even people standing against the back wall. Finally one older woman in a chartreuse western pantsuit took her place near the middle of the front row. Ned took this as a cue of some sort and banged on the table with a notebook. After several seconds of banging, the hall fell quiet.

"Uh, this here meeting's called to order. We invited Deputy Smith but he's late. He must have caught a poacher and invited himself to dinner." The crowd laughed a little and Ned smiled nervously. "Now. You all know we're here to discuss certain delicate issues and--"

"Tell them the issue here, Ned," said Josh.

"Now, just hold your tongue, Josh," said Ned impatiently. "This here's an issue that must be approached carefully--"

"Like the issue of my cut fenceline," said a man in the crowd.

"Or cattle poisoning," said someone else.

"Don't forget fire," added Fred.

The whole crowd shouted out words--"Vandalism! Stealing my water! Downright unneighborly!"

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" shouted Ned. "Just simmer down here! The issue we need to deal with is how to send Marshall a clear message that we ain't selling out and we ain't putting up with any more of his bullshit!"

The crowd agreed vocally, accenting it with whoops and hollers.

"What about us for whom it's too late?" asked Tucker. He stood up and cleared his throat, a gaunt, tired-looking man, but still clean. "I mean, you all know I'm about flat busted broke. What good is it going to do me now to tell him to go to hell? Selling out is my only hope." Several "yeahs" sounded in the crowd.

"That's part of it," I said timidly. People looked at me strangely.

"Oh! This here's Amanda; you all know her sister, Molly Richards. The meeting's her idea, so we thought we'd set her up here. She's got some real good thoughts. Go on, Mandy."

I blushed a little. "Well, Mr. Tucker, you're one of the reasons we're here. In other times, if someone was hurting, the neighbors would pitch in to help out. But we have all lost that kind of trust. It's time we quit fighting among ourselves and started helping each other; I think you all know that." The ranchers were quiet so I went on.

"But everyone has to do it. There can't be any people holding grudges or it won't work. We all have to simply trust each other."

"How can I be trusting when my own next-door neighbor since I was born is stealing all the water?" said a red-faced man in the back of the room.

Lester Ingram stood up. "I don't use all the water, though I could if I wanted to; I've got squatter's rights on it--"

"You've got no rights! My ancestors were here first!" shouted Robert Lass. He was over by Marilyn, holding a beer.

"Shut up, you ignorants!" shouted Ned. He pounded the table with the notebook again. "This is just the sort of nonsense we're talking about! We'll never get anything done this way. Now, we all know that a certain one of our newer neighbors has been causing trouble on our places, trying to drive us all out of the valley. We ain't been doing it to each other. He has been--"

"Better not make any accusations without Roy here to back you up," said someone.

"Aw, Roy's a goddamn sell-out. He put me in jail over a lousy punch in the nose," Fred said.

"Good job, by the way," said Ingram.

"Weren't nothing," said Fred modestly.

Ned listened helplessly, finally banging his notebook down hard enough to startle the woman in the front row. "If

we do not stop this chitchat, we'll accomplish NOTHING!" The room fell quiet; someone in the back snickered; so did Josh.

"OK. We have a plan. The first thing is--Roy! Welcome to our meeting!"

Roy Smith walked through the crowd. Lined up on the side of the room. His face was ashen.

"What?" said Ned. "What's wrong?"

"Hold on a minute," Roy said to Ned. "Marilyn, can I speak with you outside?" He held his hand out and she took it. They stepped out into the cloak room by the door.

The crowd murmured quietly. Then Marilyn shrieked. She came back in, carrying her cane, one hand over her mouth. She staggered to Robert.

"He's dead," she said and sobbed into Robert's shoulder.

"Who? Who?" said Robert.

"William," Marilyn whispered. "He's killed himself!"

The whole crowd gasped. I grabbed John's hand for strength. People crowded around Marilyn, mostly women. Some ranchers were cussing loudly and slamming their fists into things; a couple wiped away tears. I felt myself receding from the room, my vision getting narrower.

Marilyn sobbed. "Why? Why?" she kept asking.

I felt a scratching at my throat, some words clawing their way out. "I know why," I whispered. I stood up.

"Mrs. Lass. Marilyn," I said loudly. She looked up at me. "I know why."

The whole room looked at me like I was crazy.

"It's...he...." My breath caught in my throat. John took hold of my shoulders and shook me, demanding I go on, as my head spun faster and faster. and the people crying got louder. I breathed faster; everything went silver and I fainted dead away.

* *

I woke up on the floor by the stage with several faces staring down at me. Roy was the first one I recognized, though John was holding my hand in his and patting it. Ned had stuck his felt hat under my head as a pillow, and Molly had my feet up on her knees to elevate them.

"Roy--we have to talk," I said.

"Yeah, we do," he said kindly. "A couple of bowhunters found him up on a Forest Service road, stuck on his twelve-gauge. He left a note."

"Roy." I sat up. "It was Bud all along."

"Huh?"

"I was fixing fence up by the forest boundary, a couple of days ago. I left Charlie's jacket, and I went back for it." People were crowding around to listen. One of them was Marilyn. Tears slid down my cheeks but my voice was steady.

"Bud was up there, on the other side of the fence. He had a gun and some wire clippers. He told me Marshall had

offered him big money and that he couldn't pay Marilyn's medical bills. He asked me not to turn him in, but I had to!"

The crowd made a surge of noise. Roy hushed them. "Go on, Mandy."

"He said he loved this land and his friends. He was really sorry! I asked him to turn himself in, so I didn't have to." I breathed deeply.

"It's OK, Mandy." Roy patted me on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to Marilyn. She turned away, her face racked with pain.

"Mandy, did he say Marshall paid him to do the deeds?" Roy asked.

"He said Marshall offered him money, and that he never hurt anyone."

"I'll be right back," said Roy. He went after Marilyn, who was outside.

The people milled around. John helped me stand up and got me a glass of water. Nobody wanted to leave. Finally, Roy came in and told us to leave, and we all headed to our rigs.

* *

A week later, after Bud's funeral, we had another meeting. The ranchers organized, calling themselves, the Two Rivers Ranching Association. Among the by-laws drawn up

was one that read, "Trust your neighbor, watch out for your neighbor, help your neighbor. No feuding is allowed."

Lester Ingram signed an agreement stating he would never hoard water, even though legally he had first rights on the North Fork. Robert Lass signed an agreement stating he would never again harass the Ingrams about water rights provided he received his fare share of the river. And everyone signed an agreement stating that all due-paying members of the Two Rivers Ranching Association would be equal users of the river for irrigation. Then they held an election for president.

"Do I hear any nominations?" asked Ned. Nobody stirred. "Feel free to throw my name in the pot."

"I wouldn't do that. I saw the way you botched the last meeting, Ned. I'm not gonna--" said Josh.

"Wait just a minute here!" said Ned. "There was a suicide and a fainting spell! Just how much order did you expect me to keep?"

"Precisely my point, Ned; we can't expect you to keep none."

Ned reached out to punch his brother, and drew back. "Ah, hell, let's get on with it."

"I'll do it," I piped up from my seat at the front table.

"No siree. We're getting you a one-way ticket back to the civilized world, young lady," said Fred. "I nominate my finest hand, Molly Richards. Molly, do you accept?"

Molly was in the back of the room, giving Jack Ingram some heavy advice on hoof-rot. "Accept what?"

"I'll take that as a `yes'," said Ned. "All in favor shout `aye'!"

"Nay," said Molly loudly.

"It's settled then, thirty-odd to one. Please take the gavel, Madam President." She rolled her eyes and smiled as she walked up front, grumbling something about being railroaded.

By the end of the three-hour meeting, we had projects lined up. Together, we were going to rebuild each other's fences, cut hay and put up a new hayshed for Fred. Tucker's place would be our first project. The proceeds of the annual Two Rivers Rodeo Steak and Eggs Breakfast would go to benefit Marilyn Lass, and Gert would set up a donation can for her beside the beef jerky display.

But our first mission had nothing to do with good will. The Two Rivers Ranching Association had a message to deliver to Jordan Marshall. We had a moment of silence for Bud Lass and adjourned until morning.

Chapter Eight

We met early at Gert's the next day. The Miller boys, Fred, Charlie, Molly and I, Robert Lass, the Ingram boys and their father, Henry Tucker and three truckfuls of men I didn't recognize came to present a unified front to Marshall. It was nearly September and almost cool outside, so we crowded into Gert's store and spilled out onto the porch. John was back to ignoring me; it seemed as if I had to be injured or angry for him to pay any attention to me. He couldn't seem to make up his mind how he felt; that was fine with me because I was heading back to school soon.

Back to school. It seemed like such a strange place now. Nobody there would talk about the weather the way we all did out here--hours of our conversation consumed by the small, detailed changes in temperature and what it did to the stock. And at school, everyone stayed up late; I wouldn't make it much past eight-thirty. I'd have to go back to dating men whose hands were soft, who obeyed the speed limit and couldn't handle a chainsaw. How could I, when my own hands were covered with callouses and I carried tools in my back pocket? Even the patent leather shoes had gone by the wayside, stuffed in a bag under my bed. I breathed in the air that morning, sweet from the third

cutting of hay somewhere nearby, trying to shut out the thought of leaving.

Molly and I stood near the door with Styrofoam cups of coffee. Josh Miller came outside. "I think you girls might want to stay here. We don't know what's gonna happen out there."

"Don't be stupid! I'm your president, Josh," Molly laughed.

"I'm going, too," said Gert, who appeared in the doorway.

"Gert, you don't really want to do that, " said Josh.

"Josh Miller, I've seen more gunfire than you have. I can take care of myself." She stepped behind the counter and held up a .22 rifle with both hands.

Robert frowned and said gruffly, "We ain't taking guns. There will be no more blood shed over this." We were silent for a minute.

Josh spoke up. "You're right. But if it gets ugly, keep your heads low. Mandy, you ain't going."

"Aw, nothing's gonna happen," said Molly, patting Josh on the shoulder. "Just relax and let me do the talking."

Gert locked up the store and we got into our trucks. I rode with Josh and Dan in the lead. As we were pulling out, Roy drove up and flashed his lights at us. We stopped and he pulled up alongside our truck. "What are you up to now?" he asked.

"We're gonna go tell that no-good Marshall where we stand," said Josh.

"Uh, I don't think that'd be too smart. Marshall's boys are armed to the gills."

"We ain't gonna provoke any gunfire, Roy. You know how I feel about that. We're just gonna present him with a very clear message about leaving us the hell alone."

"Hmm," said Roy. He rubbed his mouth with the hand that held his "Roy" coffee mug. "This isn't a lynching mob?" he asked pointedly.

"No!" said Josh, disgusted. "We're peace-loving folks. We're just sick of his crap, is all."

"You should see the resolutions we made last night," I added.

"OK," said Roy. "Tell you what. I'll come with you and make sure that your protest parade is well-behaved." He whipped his rig around and drove off. Josh leaned out the window and waved the caravan forward.

We pulled in to Marshall's slowly, although his entire driveway was paved now. Josh didn't want it to look like an ambush attack, where they'd need to pull out their guns quickly.

Nevertheless, four men came out of the bunkhouse carrying guns when we stopped. Everyone got out of the rigs and stood in front of the trucks.

"Morning," said Molly. Nobody answered. "Is your boss anywhere around?"

"He's taking his morning swim," growled one of the hired help.

"Will you please tell him he's got company?" asked Molly politely. One of the men moved back and turned around. Marshall appeared then, in a white robe and sandals, his head dripping with water.

"Morning!" he yelled, and waved. "I'd get you all some coffee but the pot's not big enough." He stood beside his henchmen, grinning as wide as ever, his eyes flickering from person to person.

"Morning, Jordan," said Molly. "We just dropped by to let you know I've been elected president of the Two Rivers Ranching Association."

"That so? Have you come to ask me to join, or are you gonna shoot first and ask later?" said Marshall.

Molly turned to the crowd. "Guys, will you show your hands?" We stretched out our arms or held our hands in the air. "You too, Gert," said Molly. Gert rolled her eyes and held out her palms.

Molly turned back to Jordan Marshall. "We have come peacefully to let you know that up to now, we have been very patient with you as a newcomer, but we won't tolerate your actions any longer."

"I see," mused Jordan, scratching his chin. "And is this an official decree or did you just decide this over a game of poker?"

"Look, Marshall, we ain't gonna sell out to you, so you can just knock off the bullshit," burst out Ned.

"What bullshit?" said Marshall with wide-open eyes.

That set us off. Nearly everyone shouted accusations at once. Roy just stood off to the side, wincing.

Then Robert brushed by me, smelling strongly of whiskey, and walked right up to Marshall's face. "You killed my brother!" he shouted over and over. Marshall stood still, his eyes hooded. Robert was so close to Marshall that he spit on his robe when he cursed him. I turned to see what Roy would do, but he just stood there. So did the others, while Robert shouted himself empty.

Abruptly, Robert stopped and went back to his truck, shielding his eyes with his hand. "Nonsense," snapped Marshall. "Get off my property. Deputy, please tell these folks to get off my land."

"There's an old Indian legend," Molly began. "Seems that old Chief Paulina took a band of young warriors on a hunt one day in the canyon between Double Cross Ridge and Sawyer Hill. That's up behind your place, you know. Anyway, the chief was a pretty good shot that day, hitting jackrabbits left and right. But each time he shot one, he sent a warrior back with it to the village, until it was late in the day and there was only one warrior left." Molly paused to take a breath, and Marshall opened his mouth to talk.

"Now, just hold on and let me finish. The last warrior was getting very hungry, and he asked Chief Paulina why he didn't stop and eat one of the rabbits. The chief said, `Our people are starving. If they do not eat, I do not eat. The man who thinks of his hunger before that of the people is cursed, and the Earth will not feed him.'" Molly looked backward at his pasture and turned to Marshall, wide-eyed. "Why, Jordan, looks as if the curse is upon you already!"

The ranchers laughed loudly. Marshall's face turned red. "You don't scare me," he said.

"I'm not trying to," said Molly. "In fact, we're doing you a favor, letting you know not to count on any new grazing land from us. However, some of us are in the market to buy your stock to replace the ones you poisoned."

Someone said, "You got him, Molly," while the crowd chuckled.

"You damn inbreds don't like outsiders," Marshall said.

"It could be that we just don't like you," said Molly.

"I know I don't," said Gert. "Don't you bring your business to me, 'cause I won't have it. I just don't like you."

"Fact is, we'd prefer it if you'd head on back to California. But if you insist on staying, we feel obligated to let you know, none of us are gonna sell out, no matter what you do. Plain and simple," said Ned, shrugging.

"You're shit out of luck, Marshall," said Henry Tucker. The other ranchers supported him with nods. "I would appreciate it if you stayed away from my fenceline."

"Mine, too," said Ned.

Panic was beginning to show in Marshall's eyes. They still darted from face to face, while his hands worked inside the pockets of his robe. Now all the ranchers were adding one-liners to his discomfort.

Roy finally cut us all off. "I think that's enough now."

"But--" began Josh.

"Now, I think Mr. Marshall has a clear idea of the position of the folks in this valley. Let's let the rest be said when I conclude the investigation."

We turned back to our trucks with angry parting looks at Marshall. "See you in court," I called to him. The ranchers laughed.

Josh told me I was a smart-ass and punched me in the shoulder when we got in the truck. I was proud of myself, and of everyone there.

My grin stopped when I looked at Dan. "What's wrong? You look miserable, Dan."

He looked out the window. "Oh, you know. Chrissy," he said.

"Daniel, old boy, you gotta just up and pop the question," said Josh. He reached behind me and smacked Dan

on the back. Dan didn't respond like usual. He stared morosely ahead.

"Well?" I finally asked Dan. "Why don't you?"

"Oh, hell, I ain't got a thing to offer her. She's beautiful and smart. She has money. She's got everything she needs. The only thing she could need me for is love!"

"Isn't that enough?" I asked. Dan didn't answer.

"The dance is coming up," Josh suggested. Dan stayed quiet, so we bad-mouthed Jordan Marshall all the way to the store.

The moon was over half-full that night, and after we'd sat at the kitchen table all day and not done a thing except laundry, Molly and I took a moonlit ride. We saddled up Joey and another horse named Smokey.

Splashing through the shallow river and riding up the road into the rimrock, we were silent. The hills were black and shades of silver, quiet and unassuming bulges in the earth. I'd been sad and guilty about Bud, but the moonlight calmed me. So had the visit to Marshall's place.

We rode up and around to the fenceline without saying much. Charlie's jacket was still there, matted down against a dead sage bush. "Some critter slept on it," said Molly.

"I'll wash it," I said. "This is where I last saw Bud, Mol."

"Huh."

I fetched the jacket. We rode the fenceline to the end, where the land suddenly broke off and plunged to the

river. We stopped there and looked over the highway. A few rigs picked their way slowly through the curves; their lights seemed too small to guide them through the immense darkness.

"Think I'll run Joey a bit," said Molly. She turned the horse to run parallel to the cliff. "I'll race you!" Smokey wasn't behaving and I held her back at a canter.

Joey was a light grey horse, and Molly's hair was loose. They galloped away like a scene from a corny movie. I watched them race away, too close to the edge, and thought of Bud's story about the Indian maiden. My stomach tightened as I thought of Molly and the river; then she pulled on the reins and Joey skidded to a halt. She turned her head and hollered through the breezeless night. "Come on, Bones! You're no fun!" I kicked Bear in the sides to catch up to the maiden.

* *

Two Rivers Rodeo was always held on Labor Day weekend. This gave the participants an extra day to heal up before heading back to their day jobs, and the rest of us a chance to shake our hangovers. I was a bit too excited and sentimental about the rodeo, because I would be leaving for the University the following Tuesday. I ate even less than I had been and planned what to wear several times a day. Molly did her planning, too; she delivered Kevin's jeep back

to him and she paid a down payment on a red and white used Bronco. Then she dropped by the lawyers to file for divorce and bought a new bottle of Jim Beam whiskey. Several hopeful cowboys had come to the house to ask her to the dance, but she'd said no to all of them. I didn't hear from John.

The rodeo on Saturday was dirty and exciting. Marshall didn't appear to have caught the hint; he sat proudly in a dusty box seat up front, where the bulls kick dirt into the beer-cups, right under the fuzzy PA speakers. Chrissy didn't look too happy. The flowers stuck in her newly-permed hair wilted, and her rouge was streaked with sweat. I swear that several skilled cowboys attempted to guide their bucking bulls toward Marshall's seat so they could spit on him, but Molly said my imagination was acting up. "You just wish it was true. You should cut him some slack, kiddo."

"What, are you brainless?" I said.

"No, I'm just nicer than you. He'll get his. You just wait."

"He's just despicable, Mol. And I did see Jack Ingram spit at him!" I glared at her turned head.

"Ah, the heat's got to you. Go get yourself a beer. Get me one, too." She gave me two bucks.

I grumbled my way to the concession stand, where I knew John was working. I decided halfway there to be nice to him, to spite him. He hadn't mentioned the dance, and I

wasn't about to go and see him with some other date, so this was my last chance to talk to him. "Howdy!" I beamed at him.

"Hi." He glanced up and continued to wipe the counters down.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"You could've at least told me no, instead of acting like a snob."

"Tell you no to what?"

"The question on your damn front porch! It's sitting right there!" he said

"John, we never use the front door." I felt bad; I stopped his frantically cleaning hand with mine.

"Well, it's right there." He looked at me, wounded.

"Here," I said, and handed him the money. "Get a beer over to my sister. I'll be right back."

I had the keys to the truck, so I drove home, breathless. I knew what the question was. I drove right over the lawn to the front door. There was a cardboard box with a message written on it: "Mandy, couldn't find patent leather. Will you do me the honor of attending the dance with me?" Inside were the shiniest black cowboy boots I'd ever seen.

* *

I found out why Molly had turned down all the other hopefuls when Roy Smith showed up at the ranch house that evening.

His hair was slicked back and his face was shiny with excitement. Molly came out in a great fringed blouse and a matching suede skirt. "My," said Roy. "You look lovely."

Molly laughed at him. "Roy, you have never been this nice--why start now?" But I could tell she was pleased.

"You get to drive Old Doorless tonight, Bones," she said.

"Thanks ever so much. Have fun! Don't ruin a perfectly good friendship!" Roy blushed and cleared his throat, then he ducked out behind Molly, who was driving her new rig.

I had also opted for a skirt to show the boots. It blew back above my knees as I drove; the air was sharply cool. I was chattering from nerves and cold when I arrived.

John was looking around for me when I pulled up. He also had his hair slicked back, and he wore a white shirt with pearl snaps tucked into brand-new black jeans. I was windblown as usual, but he didn't seem to notice. "You look gorgeous," he said. He took my hand. "Do they fit?"

"They're perfect. Thank you, John." I smiled at him.

He waved it away. "Oh, wasn't anything at all. Thought you deserved them after what I put you through with the shoe business."

"That's no big deal," I said.

"Well, I was hoping you could tell it was all flirting," he laughed nervously. "Anyway, umm. The boots fit, huh? They were to thank you, too, for your help at the

store. We sure enjoyed having you around," he finished softly. He looked at me the way I had always wanted.

"You're welcome," I said, smiling.

"Well, Mandy," he said, breaking his gaze away, "let's go in and test those things out, what do you say?"

The rodeo dance is basically a free-for-all. Inside the dance hall are whole families, children who learned to do the Western Swing at age five, old folks who can't move their hips but who still shuffle nicely to the country songs. Outside, the street is alive with people who were giddy or simply drunk; drinking age is about fifteen on rodeo night. Old men pitch horseshoes by the light of the streetlamp beside the store; perfect strangers plant kisses on you in exchange for a drink of the bottle of Yukon Jack in your hand. Marriage proposals are made in and out of the dance hall, shouted across the street, whispered at the far end of the porch. Fistfights are common; they are mostly between women, and nobody lets them go on for long. Late at night, many a person gets religion in the bushes or the outhouse as they cut deals with God and vow never to drink that much again. The very old and the very young serve as designated drivers at three in the morning, when the band is out of replacement guitar strings and Gert finally shuts off the neon in the tavern.

In a rough way, the dance works its magic on everyone there. I could see it in Molly, whose eyes sparkled as she stomped and swirled with Roy and anyone who cut in. People

bought her beers outside (there were none allowed inside the hall) and shook her hand and said, "Heard you went calling on Marshall. Keep up the good work." After a summer full of misery, she was the sweetheart of the rodeo, and she deserved it.

Marilyn Lass was there, to my surprise. She had on a bright red wig, which made her look very tired. She stopped me and handed me a note. "I wrote this to you last week but I've been too busy to get it to you. God bless you, honey." She cupped my cheek in her hand and made a small smile.

John walked up and said, "My gosh, Marilyn, aren't you looking wonderful! Will you dance with me?" He led her out to the floor and held her up while they waltzed.

I went back in the corner and read the note. "Amanda, what you did took incredible courage. What William did was the easy way out. If he had confessed, I know people would have forgiven him. Thank you for letting him have the chance. I wish he would have taken it. Don't blame yourself, ever! I wish you luck. Marilyn."

The memory of Bud's tormented eyes had an edge to it that made me cry. But there was John, wanting to dance the Cotton-Eyed Joe, his hand on my shoulder, smiling for real. "Marilyn's a real nice woman," he said. "You OK?"

"Oh, yeah! Let's dance!" But before we could get in step with the rest of the dancers, the music stopped abruptly and the lead singer of the band said into the microphone, "Ladies and gents! May I have your attention,

please. We have a feller here who wants to say something." He nodded to Dan Miller, who was fidgeting with a paper sack beside the stage.

Dan hopped up on the stage casually and took the microphone. "Christina Mae Marshall, will you step up here, please?" Chrissy sashayed up onto the stage, exchanging questioning looks with another woman whom I didn't know.

"Well, it's no secret how I feel about you, Chrissy." Dan blew a breath out and said, "Here goes," off the microphone. He put the microphone on the stand, opened the crumpled bag, took out a fuzzy grey box, opened it and showed the ring inside to the crowd. Dan leaned over to the microphone. "Chrissy Marshall, will you be my wife?" he nearly shouted. She whispered yes, and the crowd erupted into hoots of laughter and clapping. The band struck up another slow song and everybody danced.

It was almost three in the morning before I got a chance to be alone. I borrowed a flannel shirt from Gert and walked the fence down to the river. It was cold for the first time since I had come to the valley; frost had settled on grass by the bank. I sat on a clump of dead grass at the edge, careful not to get my boots dirty. The river was swifter here, right below the fork. It flowed deep and loudly, the surface almost smooth, but it didn't cover my thoughts. I readied myself to cry very hard, and it didn't come. The moon was long gone, and I sat in darkness, wondering if my heart was getting hard.

"You about done freezing?" Molly came up behind me.

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

"Sixth sense." She squatted beside me, a coffee cup in her hand. "Why aren't you out behind the dance hall making eyes at John-boy?"

"I needed to think. Marilyn gave me a note."

"Oh yeah?" she grunted as she sat down beside me.

"Yeah. It was really nice. You know, Mol, I've been thinking. This has been a really weird summer. Maybe if I'd never come, things wouldn't have turned out so horrible. You think?"

"I think you think too much. Besides, it isn't so horrible. Look, you got your date with John, we've stopped feuding, thanks to your idea, I've got a new rig. Things are looking up."

"But Bud's dead, the hay's gone.... And what about Kevin? To be honest, you don't seem too sad."

Molly grunted as she tried to sit down without spilling her coffee. "Well, I am sad about Bud, and as far as Kevin goes, we've been working up to that one for a long time, kid. But you being here did not make anything worse. The way I see it, things were just gonna go the way they turned out. Like Charlie says, the world don't stop for nothing."

"Molly, I feel like Bud's dead because of me."

"Amanda! Stop it right now!" Molly looked at me sharply, then she softened and hugged me around the neck.

"You couldn't have stopped him. Some rivers you can't dam up; they'll just flow over the top and keep on going."

"You and your river talk!" I laughed a little.

"Well...it teaches me things. I'm never going to leave this place." She sighed and looked up at the hills.

"So Fred wants you to stay on?"

"Yep. He couldn't keep the place if I wasn't there."

"It'll be a long winter," I said.

She chuckled a little. "Winter's always long. Roy will probably be around. And Charlie and the dogs. Hey, listen!" Molly sat up straight. Coyotes were singing to the east. The river churned by in smooth strokes.

"You gonna come back?"

"I thought you'd never ask! I'll go crazy waiting for June."

"Yeah, maybe the house will burn down next year; wouldn't want to miss that," she said and we laughed. "Come on, Bones. Let's go dance the last song." She got up and started toward the cluster of lights and noise.

"I'll be there in a minute," I said. For a long, quiet moment, I listened to the river.

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