

# The Last Campaign



Tracy Dunham

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Hard Shell Word Factory

For the men of the Tenth Cavalry, who fought the hard  
fight both on and off the battlefields.  
And for my family—Paul, Skyler,  
and Jessie—troopers all.

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PO Box 161  
Amherst Jct. WI 54407  
books@hardshell.com  
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*Except for actual, historical figures, all characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.*

## Chapter 1

The sky was a misty blue, streaked with red that could be either the setting or rising sun. Good time to attack, the light made a man's aim uncertain, especially if he didn't know what he was shooting at. As the rays began to warm the night-cool ground quickly, the man behind the small ridge line squinted at the rancho below. An adobe and stone dwelling, a tiny remuda penning twenty cattle with stone and sticks, rocks stacked at the base of what began to be another outbuilding, all perched in the midst of the West Texas desert.

Soon, the white man would emerge through the low doorway, make water, scratch his armpits, perhaps spit, and present himself a perfect target for the old carbine resting on the rim of the rock. The Apache had watched him for three days now, as he rode out daily to bring in more cattle for the remuda. Three days they'd quietly stalked him, building no fires in the evening chill, speaking in hand gestures.

The Apache made sure the rifle's surface was dusted, unable to reflect the rising sun, blending into the yellows and browns of these Texas rocks as well as he did himself. Dressed in

breech clout, a loose shirt which had once been white, leather cartridge belt slung around his chest where he could easily reload, the curly-toed moccasins of the Apache, the man was as still as a scorpion lying in wait for unsuspecting prey.

The sun barely over the horizon, the burly white man, suspenders dangling, barreled through the doorway as the day began its full-fledged march over the rim of hills. Aiming the carbine, the Apache took his time sighting. The old rifle pulled to the left, and had a tendency to jam. They'd waited days for the white man to round up his rangy cattle, doing the work for them. It had been too long since any of Victorio's men had had full stomachs, either at the hated reservation or now, when they were on the run from the agency. They would drive as many of the animals as could stand the pace with them, butchering as they needed food.

Exhaling as he pulled the trigger, the Apache prayed his shot was good. The sound of the bullet lagged behind its spin as it slammed into the white man, throwing him against the house, his body bouncing against the adobe wall. Legs twitching, the man clawed at the dirt for a few minutes, then finally, was still.

"Yieeee!" shrieked the Apache, bounding over the rim, racing for the corral at a dead run. The five men who rode with him on this raid followed from the ravine where they'd hidden their

horses. Stolen in other raids along the Texas-Mexico border, the steeds still carried some fat on their haunches. When the cattle were gone, if there was nothing else to chew, they'd eat the horses.

But first, they'd drive the cattle across the Rio Grande, into Mexico where the main body of their band of escapees from the white man's prison, the reservation, were waiting. The Mexican soldiers couldn't find them, and the blue-coated soldiers had to stop at the water's edge. Once they were at the river, they'd swim the cattle across. In his mind, the Apache could feel the pull of the current against his moccasins, laced high on his shins. He resented that his people were hunted by the soldiers the color of thunderclouds, with hair like the buffalo. He seethed that the Apache were driven from their lands by white men, that they were cheated by the Indian agents who sold their food to others and parceled out maggoty meat. He railed at being told to be grateful to the White Father in Washington.

Spitting in the dirt, the Apache swung up on his gray, kicking over the fence pole keeping the cattle within their confines. Within a few days, Victorio's people would have food.

Flies found the white man before the dust settled in the remuda. Their hiss, hiss, spun through the air like church bells calling the faithful. Buzzards answered the call. By the time the

small detachment from the Ninth Cavalry arrived, there was nothing much left of the rancher to bury. They piled his bones with rocks, cut a crude cross from the remuda fence.

“Blast it, we can’t fight an enemy we can’t catch,” cursed a shavetail lieutenant, fingering the hole in the adobe made by the spent bullet.

“Darned straight. And we ain’t never gonna catch something we can’t see, much less track.” The grizzled veteran sergeant, his dark face lined with experience, figured the lieutenant was just beginning to understand the facts of the U.S.Army as they stood in the Department of Texas.

“Then why in Sam Hill don’t we get help? Why can’t we get the men and the horses we need?” The lieutenant knew this line of conversation was highly improper between an enlisted man and an officer, but the sight of the rancher’s bloody bones had just sent him to retching against his horse.

“Because we ain’t white, lieutenant, and that’s just the way it is.”

## Chapter 2

I should get out, thought Captain Wyn Trainam, as the train rattled over the miles. His uniform was coated with soot, his eyes ached with sleeplessness, the grime of many days without proper food and a wash gave him a feeling of being gritty and pale. All those nicely elegant dinners in private salons and the best hotels in the nation's capitol had made him soft.

*Too soft*, he mused, as he snapped open, for the hundredth time, the spine of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. *What kind of a career Army officer reads Dickens?* He had to smile at himself. *One who*, he answered mentally, *has just had a long, lazy assignment in the District of Columbia, who has become accustomed to making conversation with ladies in silk afternoon gowns over cups of English tea, one who has forgotten how hard a saddle is on the backside.* Rocking from side to side, he tried to ease the pressure of the hard seat on his tailbone. Dickens, who usually transported him easily, held no attraction at this time. His finger loosely marking the last paragraph read, he flipped open his pocket watch. Ten minutes had passed. Still, he was ten minutes closer. Ten minutes nearer the making or breaking of his Army career.



The medals packed in his portmanteau had happened long ago, too long ago to matter on the border. Apaches and Comanches, he knew from reading the reports of the officers sent to the War Department, didn't give a hoot if you had a chest full of ribbons on your cleanly pressed uniform. Remembering the Civil War and the boy he'd been then, he wondered how much of that bravado and bravery he had left. It was time he found out.

The straw-colored land, awash in hot amber sun, slid past him. Staring at the scrawny trees and small towns as the train lurched through, pausing only for water stops, he prayed for the strength to live with his decision. It was as though insanity had seized him and, holding him captive, forced him to ask for the transfer. Eyes had rolled, officers' ladies had clucked behind fans at soirees, when word got out that he was about to pull duty at a God-forsaken outpost in the middle of Indian Territory. It was generally assumed he'd stepped on some very large and important toes, and a slight aura of disgrace had settled around him as though he wore boots encased in cow pies.

Now, it made him laugh. But not then. Then, he'd been furious with the assumption that a soldier who wanted to fight again was a failure. The fury had fueled his determination and left him with steel saber resolve as he boarded the train that would carry him as far west as he could

go.

Or his backside would let him. Staring unashamedly at his fellow passengers, he gauged their girth and extra padding when he considered how long they'd been together on the train. Some never seemed at all restless, while the thinner lot, of which he numbered himself, found constant need to tread carefully up and down the rocking aisles. *Lord*, he thought as he grabbed a handful of wooden seat in an effort to keep from falling, *I'd give my first born son for a horse. Any kind of horse. A horse with four legs and a nice smooth walk would beat this all to Hades.* He laughed at the wish. He had no children, and never would. No woman in her right man would marry him, and the one he'd loved, he'd lost long ago.

A woman in a black poke bonnet pursed her lips at his quiet chuckle. She saw a tall, slightly stoop-shouldered man in uniform, his brass buttons bright with polish, the cut tailored and precise. She saw also the lines of discontent cutting into a pale face, dark eyes which burned with his inner thoughts, black hair with enough gray to show he'd earned it.

"Sorry, Ma'am." Flicking a finger at his brow, Wyn Trainam wobbled back to his seat. *Sourpuss*, he thought, juggling his feet around the packets of books he'd crammed under his seat. That tore it. If he couldn't even extend his long and very cramped legs, he had to take drastic

action. At the next stop, he'd see what he could do about getting off the train and stretching his legs.

He didn't have long to wait before the train whistled its welcome at the next small town. "God does answer prayers," he muttered, as he stumbled down the steps onto the dusty depot. Like most stops, this one was in a tiny town, raw with unused energy, faded by the sun, hanging onto the edges of civilization with its claws. Glancing around, he wondered why the Army had been charged with hanging onto this desolate land in the first place. From what he'd seen so far, the Indians should be welcome to it. His discontent proportionate to his fatigue, he rubbed his itchy eyes. He'd kill for a drink, a real drink. If this place had anything with an alcohol content, he'd find it. Stepping down from the depot, he fingered the coins in his pocket and tried not to get his hopes up.

First thing he saw was the horse. Once a magnificent thoroughbred, its coat was dusty and matted with dried sweat. From the hip-shot stance, it had been ridden hard, too hard. Tied in front of a general store, its reins were brittle with heat and lack of saddle soap, and the plain saddle thrown carelessly over the hitching post was in just as sad a shape. He hated to see a good horse abused.

Carelessly he sauntered across the lonely street. Not much business, he guessed from the peeling sign across the door of the mercantile. The shopkeeper lazily ambled over to the rail-thin officer in Union blue. "Help ya?"

Fingering the brim of his hat, Wyn gave a slow, disinterested smile. "Maybe. The gelding. He for sale?"

Instantly alert, the storeman knew he had a live one. "Could be. Why? You interested?" Watching the officer's face, he tried to gauge his next victim. The graying sideburns, the campaign ribbons, the authoritative set of the shoulders, showed a man who meant business.

Holding out his hand, Wyn introduced himself. "Name's Trainam. How'd a blooded piece of horseflesh end up out here?"

"Long story, but the short of it is, won him in a card game." The man smiled at the memory, looking like a jack o'lantern.

"So how much?"

There was something too quick in Wyn's response, the shopman was ready to reel him in. "That's a genuine thoroughbred, he is, yessir, finest, fastest animal on four feet you'll ever find, why I done won some handy cash betting on him..."

Staring hard at the sore hooves, Wyn scraped muck from the gelding's frog. No infection, but definitely badly used. "I said, how much? This horse's been ridden into the ground, take quite a while to put enough flesh back on him to carry my weight."

Catching the hardened tone of voice, the shopkeeper switched tacks. "\$100.00, silver, no paper. Nothing wrong with that horse, General, that a good night's sleep won't cure."

"I doubt it. Probably plenty wrong, I just don't want to know about. But nothing riles me more than abused horseflesh, so take \$50.00, and we'll call it a deal." Hating the oily way the man wiped his bald head, Wyn wished he'd stayed on the train. But even from the distance of the depot the quality of the horse had shown through its poor condition.

"And I'm not a general, just a lowly captain, so take it or leave it. It's \$50.00, and that's final."

"Lord almighty, what's the United States Army coming to?" Moaning, the man hung his head and peered out from under bushy black eyebrows.

"You're dealing with me, not the Army. We have a deal or not?" Wyn wondered how he'd get the horse to the Territory.

"Nowhere else you'll find a beauty like that, not out here, no siree, why I could sell him for

\$200.00, easy, but not me, no, I'm trying to do you a favor and..."

The train's whistle cut the air like an icy wind. "Make up your mind, man. Now or never." Wyn wondered if there was a stock car on the train.

"Lord a mercy, you drive a hard bargain. Sold."

Watching Wyn sprint to the train, the shopkeeper muttered obscenities under his breath. He'd had the danged horse for months, been running him against every drunk cowboy who came to town on Saturday night. Finally, the boys had gotten smart, and there'd been no takers for the past few weeks. He'd run the horse into the ground in anger. It'd never win again, anyway.

It was with supreme bad humor he scribbled out a bill of sale and signed it. *Let that stuck-up soldier find out just how lame the horse was, serve him right*, he thought with a nasty chuckle.

Wyn returned with a length of rope and \$50.00 in silver. There was room on the stock car, much to his relief. Flipping the hemp around the horses's jowls, he tied a make-shift halter, dropping the tattered bridle in the dirt. The gelding, sensing the gentleness in the hands that stroked his muzzle, snickered.

"Here, Captain, your bill of sale."

Wyn didn't thank the man. His hard-earned silver thudded in the shopkeep's hands as he

tossed the coins in the air. The metallic chink-chink of the money echoed behind Wyn as he led the gelding to the stock car.

Slamming the door of the mercantile shut behind him, the merchant wished the horse in Hades, and the officer, too.

## Chapter 3

Mara wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of a hot hand. She'd grown up in the South, but nothing had prepared her for the searing temperatures she'd found in the Southwest. Fanning herself with her roughspun apron, she wondered where the boy had gotten off to. Wasn't like him to wander far when she had bread in the oven.

"Matt, where on earth are you?" Slouching against the rough wood frame of the kitchen door, she ached to take off all her clothes and float in the horse trough. Lazily stroking the sky, the arms of the windmill mesmerized her with thoughts of cool, clear water. But in this heat, even the brackish warm stuff pumped up for the stock would have felt better than the rivers of sweat plastering her dress to her backside. She shaded her eyes and squinted against the early afternoon sun. "Boy, answer me!"

"Here, Mama!" His lanky frame hurtled out of the horse shed.

She should have known. With the mare about to foal, he wasn't going to leave her side. "Okay, just checking. Don't make me have to call you twice for supper!"



“No, Ma’am.” Grinning, his lopsided smile so like his father’s, the boy bobbed back into the shed.

Frowning, she wiped her hands on the sides of her thighs, absently leaving flour streaks on the blue gingham. It had been days since Elias had taken their money and gone into Mexico to buy horses for the Army. Usually, he was back as quickly as he could be, bringing a few Mex wranglers with him to help with the herd. She’d been baking bread and putting up quince for days, trying to cook ahead before she was faced with suddenly feeding ten men. Elias hadn’t expected to buy much, the Army wasn’t remounting like it used to, but still....

She hesitated. Worry wasn’t part of her character, and she hated its intrusion. Elias could take care of himself. He’d survived the War, as he told her time and again, and after that, nothing but old age could get him. So she’d stopped reminding him to be careful, that they weren’t back East any more. In many ways, though, Elias was safer out here than he’d ever have been in the Reconstructed South. She knew what happened to men like him who’d fought for the Union, and the image never failed to frighten her silly.

Batting absentmindedly at the red dust clinging to her muslin curtains, she wandered in her mind, back to her home in Virginia. They’d had tobacco and cotton, and enough land to consider

themselves fairly well off. Then, she'd worn silk dresses with French lace fichus, and had ladies from town in for tea and whist games. Laughing, she remembered how her hands had once looked, and how a pin prick would send her into a tizzy.

Dragging at a hangnail, she shook her head as she checked the oven. Once more, she cursed the heavy iron door as she bent to test her loaves. Didn't take her long, after the War and they'd lost everything to carpetbaggers, to learn how to cook and keep house, even help with breaking the horses, once they'd come West.

She'd never regretted the decision, not for a minute. Because her son was ridiculously happy out here in this God-forsaken land, happy with the heat, the torrential downpours that ripped over the mountains with no warning, happy with the horny toads and the scruffy little horses, the sky the color of Indian jewelry, the winds that ripped through their little house on cold winter nights, and the long hard days of backbreaking work. She never considered her own happiness as a factor to be reckoned with. Once, it had been her only concern. Surprising what a child could do your character, she'd noted often.

Checking her flour barrel, she was chagrined to find it so low. She hadn't realized how much she'd used in these past few loaves. Elias had left her money to buy supplies, and some

emergency cash for paying the land note to the government if he didn't get back soon as he expected. Raising the lid of her Dresden biscuit jar, she fished out a few coins. *Poor jar*, she thought as she jingled the silver in her palm. It probably never expected to find itself sitting on a plain, plank shelf in the wilds of America.

"Matt," she sang his name out. "That mare's not gonna foal with you waiting beside her! Come on in the house!"

She tried to think of anything else she needed. "Matt!"

"Yes, Mama." Reluctantly he leaned against the door, anxious to conclude their business so he could get back to his. His hands fidgeted with the latch. He had long fingers like his pa, too, she remembered.

"Need some flour and some baking powder, think you can tear yourself away long enough to go into town? Get back before supper?"

"Aw, Mama, what if Jenny..."

"She won't. And if she does, I'll hold her hoof. Promise I won't let her foal until you get back." The mare would do fine without either of them, but she wouldn't tell Matt that.

"Okay." He stuffed the coins in his pocket, his dark eyes worried beyond his years.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She loved him so much it ached sometimes. He’d been born nine months after they’d thrown what they had left in a wagon and headed West, she and Elias and Madison. She’d never planned on having children in the middle of nowhere, but somehow she got the job done, and Matt had been worth every terrifying moment of his birth. Sometimes she wondered what her life would have been like without his exuberance. Much poorer, she’d decided long ago. She never regretted their decision to leave Virginia, at least not often.

Matt had adored Elias, more than she’d ever hoped and prayed for. She didn’t think he even noticed that Elias was as black as coal. It had made up for much, the bond between the man and the boy. She’d owed Elias her life, and that of her son. He’d stayed with them after Madison died, when Matt was still just a baby and she was floundering like a fish out of water. The ranch belonged to Elias as much as it did to her and Matt, she figured. Even it could never repay all she owed him.

Watching Matt throw his gangly, thirteen year old legs over the bare back of the paint pony Elias had bought for his birthday, she had to laugh. Pretty soon, he’d have outgrown even a fifteen hander. Hard to believe he was getting so tall, but then again, with a pang, she knew he’d

be long-legged and gangly like his father. It would have been easier if he'd looked more like her, with pale skin and light green eyes, small boned and Irish.

Shaking herself mentally, she decided to check on the mare. Elias set great store by this foal, especially if it was a colt. He planned on doing some breeding to increase their own stock so they didn't have to do so much trading with the Mexicans.

Sometimes she wondered what she'd do if Elias never came back from these trips across the border. She supposed she'd pull up their roots once more and head for civilization, somewhere she could use her finishing school education and perhaps teach. But Elias had always come back, and with enough money to keep them going with some left over. He'd always had that way about him, he could survive with the toughest of the lot. If that was all he taught Matt, Matt would be a lucky man. Losing a father was hard on a boy, but Elias had made up for it as best he could, and better than most.

Pulling her loaves from the oven, Mara gave each one a firm shake to throw them loose from their pans. The golden squares rolled onto the old, oak table. Stroking their hard, cooked edges, she knew why Elias had taken them on, dragging her from the ashes of what had been the Talbot family mansion.

Appomattox had been over for months, but the homecoming she'd expected from Madison had taken longer. She'd had no way of knowing he was walking home to her, his horse long since dead of a bullet to the head. The summer kitchen had been home for over a year, ever since Sherman had put the torch to the place, but she wasn't unhappy. She was hungry. Hunger bit into her backbone like an angry dog, but she couldn't ask for charity from their neighbors. Their larders were as bare as hers.

Then Madison was home, and she thought all would be well. But her husband coughed in the night, loud, racking sounds that wrenched her from her bed to run get him some water from the well to drink and to cool his hot brow. She'd believed him tired from the long walk home, from the wasted years he'd worn butternut gray, from the ugliness of a war he'd never wanted. Yet every morning, no matter how long he'd sat up the night before, spitting into the yard as if his lungs were twisting inside out, he'd head to the fields to work them. She knew he'd bartered his sword and his boots for a small bag of seed that wouldn't bring in crops enough to feed them, much less pay the taxes on the land.

That day she'd prayed as she never had before for a sign that life would get better. She was tired of living like an animal, barely clean, scavanging for every bit of food, every wild herb.

Gathering all her small hoard, she'd planned to bake. The wood in the fireplace had cindered down to hot coals, a strong, steady heat she'd use under her legged skillet. She'd grown so thin, she was cold even in the summer's heat, and didn't mind standing close to the open hearth.

Elias had frightened her. Black as the night, his brass buttons shining on the Union blue uniform, he shook his head when he found her in the old summer kitchen, trying to bake bread from the bits of wheat she'd shaken from an old bag. She'd known instantly who he was. All the spit and polish of a Yankee suit couldn't disguise his distinctive face, the thin nose, long chin. He'd been positively patrician, even when he was a slave. His expression had shifted like a summer storm from her to the burned bread, and back to her.

His eyes had said he knew she wasn't going to survive without help. When Madison finally came in from the field he was trying to clear, the two men had given each other a look she'd never been able to interpret, then shook hands. Elias had stayed ever since that day, helping her when he wasn't dragging tree stumps out of the earth with Madison.

Elias had taken them on, providing for them these long, hard years, raising Matt after Madison died not long after they bought the land for the ranch. She never knew, but suspected that much of the original money put down on the land had come from Elias' pay as a Union

soldier. Madison never told her, and she never asked.

Folks out here respected Elias, her, her son. Elias made sure of that. In a strange way, it all made sense, Wyn Trainam's former slave helping raise the son of his best friend.

She sometimes wondered what Wyn would have thought of her and Elias, living out their lives in Texas as a family.

She turned back to her loaves of bread. Such silly thoughts were unlike her. She was a practical woman, long past the days of daydreaming about what might have been. Her son and the good man who'd helped raise him were more than enough to keep her grounded right where she should be, in her kitchen, baking for the horse-breakers Elias was bringing home.

Home was Texas, where it was hot and windy, and she had rocks in her yard instead of boxwoods and azaleas.

She wouldn't have it any other way.



## Chapter 4

Leading the limping thoroughbred, Wyn Trainam wondered where he could stable the horse in town until he could find out if there was a vacant stall on post. The heat of the day beat down on the both of them, man and horse already ringed with sweat. A horse trough across the road from the train station looked appealing to Wyn. He hadn't been able to ride the horse for long, and his wish to stretch his legs had more than come true. His feet ached in boots not made for long distance walking.

"Well, horse, race you to it. First one there, wins." The horse slowly turned his head in the direction of Wyn's voice.

"Right, you've had enough racing for one life. Okay, first one there gets water." Slinging the rope of the roughly made halter over his shoulder, Wyn reflected on the remainder of his journey in the cattle car. He and the horse had lurched about on the rough plank floor, but it had been better than being cooped up in the passenger section. When it had come time to board the stage, he'd done the clearly stupid thing. Deciding to ride the horse into Ft. Concho had not been

one of his more brilliant ideas. The stagemaster informed him he'd be lucky to arrive alive.

Oblivious to the stray pieces of straw clinging to his uniform, Wyn ambled over to the trough with the horse swinging his back hoof wide behind him. They were both alive, albeit worse for the wear. It was going to take some time for Wyn to get his saddle seat back in shape. Rubbing his rump, Wyn didn't care if anyone was looking.

Raising his dripping face from the trough, Wyn hoped he wasn't going to have to salute anyone. Blowing contentedly, the thoroughbred dripped on the sleeve of his uniform.

"What am I gonna call you, big fella? Big Red isn't too original. I forgot to ask that idiot I bought you from if you had a name. Wouldn'a liked it anyway, so what the hay, how about going by Senator? Think you like that one?"

The horse snorted noisily.

"Good. Glad we got that settled."

A gangly boy, a thatch of black hair falling in one eye, stared in amazement from the plank walk beside the trough. Wyn surveyed the small, one street town, its false facades boasting of hopes of prosperity, names of saloons gaily painted in bright reds and greens outnumbering the more common edifices. San Angela catered to soldiers with money to spend on liquor on payday,

that much was clear. Wyn noticed the boy, his eyes intent on Senator. Something about him seemed familiar, but Wyn had never been in West Texas in his life. He was wondering now why he was there at all. Senator shoved a muzzle down his neck and lipped the back of his hair.

Redirecting his gaze at the horse, Wyn ran a firm hand over his neck. “Looks like we got company, Senator. Not much going on around here, want to say hello?” He spoke loudly enough for the boy to overhear.

The boy laughed like a church chime. “Captain, you and that horse old friends, or just making acquaintance?”

“Both, son. Although I fail to see why my conversation with Senator, here, should be so amusing!” He tried to force righteous indignation into his tone of voice with no success.

“Thought I was the only one who talked to horses like that!” The boy still laughed, slapping his thigh. His clothes were worn hard, short in the ankle, his boots too big from the careful way he stepped off the sidewalk.

“Like what, if I can ask?” Infected by the boy’s mirth, Wyn had to chuckle. “Don’t answer that. I have a feeling your observations won’t be too flattering to me. So, son, what’s your name? Think you can give me directions to the livery?”

Bobbing his head, the boy stifled his laughter. “Sure can. Down there, end of the street, on your left, tucked behind the *Fancy Pants*. Mr. Garth’ll take good care of him.”

“Much obliged. But who’m I talking to? You may have guessed, I like to know the names of my companions.”

“Sorry. My ma says I have right awful manners. I’m Matt, of the TwoBars Ranch. Just outside town, here. We break and breed horses.” The boy paused. “We got some empty stalls about now. Expectin’ a herd from down Mexico way, but they ain’t here yet. I feed a horse better ‘n myself.” Eagerness to please spread over his face like sunshine.

Wyn laughed at the boy’s infectious grin. “I can see you have a way with horses, young man.” There was something about the boy’s green eyes that caught at him like a fish hook in the throat. No telling why this ragamuffin boy, on the edge of bursting into manhood, was so compelling. The shock of dark hair was long and scraggly. The boy held a burlap sack at his side as if he’d run an errand, but clearly, he wanted to see Senator more than he wanted to complete his chore. *Just like a boy*. Just like the sort of boy he’d been himself.

But first, Wyn had to report for duty and act like an Army officer. No time for palaver with the boy.

Ramrod straight, he handed Senator's reins to the boy. "Won't bother with Mr. Garth. Think you can put him up for me, Matt? Get him in shape again? Let him take it easy, feed him extra. How about ten dollars a month board?"

The boy's eyes lit up. "Glad to, Captain. But you better talk to my ma about it." Hesitating, the boy slipped the makeshift halter from Wyn's stiff fingers. "She won't mind none, but you know how mothers are." He looked a little less sure of himself.

*Smart boy*, Wyn thought. He'd learned early to fear the power of a woman. Wyn decided to up the ante, just in case Matt's mother objected. "Let's say I pay you an extra two dollars a month for that special care you promised Senator. Think your mama will object to that?"

Matt looked as if he'd fallen into a gold mine. "No, sir, don't see as how she can." He stroked Senator's rough coat. "I'll groom him good, get all this dead hair off him. But you still best speak to my mama, if you don't mind, Captain."

"Later, Matt. After I get settled. Tell me how to get to the TwoBars, and I'll be out as soon as I can, pay your mama in advance."

Matt beamed, giving him quick directions. "My horse is over there, I'll lead Senator home."

Wyn watched the boy mount his rangy pony, his legs too long for the animal. Abstractly, he

thought of his old friend Madison, how he shot up at the same age, leaving him behind until his own growth spurt kicked in a year or two later. He'd always envied Madison that early height, it had slipped his childhood friend into adult territory faster, affording him privileges Wyn desired more than anything. Like a glass of beer on the porch after a day's work with his father. Madison's pa had taken Madison's opinion on more things, once his son topped him by a few inches. Wyn had watched, waiting, praying for manhood.

Manhood hadn't been all it was cracked up to be. Manhood had meant war for both of them, the end of their friendship, the end of the way of life they'd been born to lead. Slapping the hay and dust from his uniform, he pulled himself together to face his duty. Duty. It had brought him out here, and into a pit of loneliness such as he'd avoided in the social swirl of the District. Loneliness that any thought of Mara still brought him, after all these many years. Loneliness that had come with the loss of Madison's friendship.

Patting Senator on the rump, he watched the boy lead the tired gelding down the dirt street. With a final wave, as the boy twisted to give him a grin, he wondered why he felt such an affinity for the youth. The boy walked with a gangly throw of his long legs that seemed familiar, as Wyn's eyes followed him.

“Captain, help you?”

Startled, Matt returned the salute of the sergeant before him. The soldier’s blue uniform was immaculate, the brass polished until the signs dotting the street could be seen in its reflection. No green recruit, the sergeant saluted like a man with years of practice. *Probably fought in the War*, Wyn thought abstractly. One of the few who survived.

“Waited for you, Captain, but didn’t see you get off the stage. Been here long, sir?” The sergeant looked around for luggage, and saw none.

“Rode on in, Sergeant. Picked up a horse a ways back, when the train stopped, we got off. Boy over there going to take him home, fatten him up. Didn’t make the stage, but my luggage should be on it somewhere. Think we can track it down?”

The grizzled veteran stared at Matt. What kind of an officer was this? “Sure thing, Captain.”

Wyn’s eyes never left Matt’s back, as he led Senator down the side of the dusty street. The sun sank into Wyn’s wool uniform, leaving him sodden and uncomfortable. His luggage be darned, he’d carried around too much old baggage for too long. It was time to open the trunk filled with his wounded past, and shake out the moths and silverfish.

“Know that boy, Sergeant?” Wyn gestured in Matt’s direction.

“Sure enough. Him and his ma, and a black fella, one of them as fought in the War, they sell horses to the Army. Most their stock is right small, but now and then they come up with a good one. Decent lad, the boy is, and a true touch with the animals.”

Wyn smiled. Made sense that he and the boy would both have a way with four-legged friends.

“Well, if we can find where the stage depot is, Sergeant, you can show me the way to Ft. Concho, next. Best present my orders.”

Shaking his head, the befuddled sergeant marched down the walk, gesturing for the Captain to lead the way to the Army transport tied to the hitching rail. This one was going to be a real interesting specimen of rank. Yessir, a real winner. Already, he knew the officer was touched in the head, and he hadn't been out West long enough to lose his brains to the hot sun and the crying wind. Riding some broken down horse, when he could have had a seat on the stage. The Sergeant knew what that meant, this one had an iron seat and meant to ride the rest of them into the ground. That was all the men needed, another one like Colonel Grierson.

Meant the Captain showed up ready for Bedlam, it did, and he'd have to warn the troops tonight to be on their guard with this one. Cavalry officers who thought with their seats were



trouble.

Oblivious to the disapproving eyes staring at his back, Wyn could hardly wait to get to Ft. Concho. The single street town of San Angela, with more saloons than anything else, was barely worth a glance. Wyn knew its type well enough, a hard-case set of characters probably set up to milk the Army of its collective paychecks if ever he'd seen one. Knowing Ben Grierson, he kept Ft. Concho dry. That meant soldiers had money to spend in saloons, if not for other pleasures.

The Sergeant found Wyn's small case at the stage depot, and slung it into the wagon he'd brought out to transport the officer. Wyn leaned, leg cocked against the post of a porch in front of the least savory of the drinking establishments, staring through the grimy glass window.

"Bet this gets broken at least once a month, right, Sergeant?"

The Sergeant took a quick look, then shook his head. "Not by me, no sir." He paused. "I prefer my whiskey alone."

Wyn chuckled. "Been in a long time, haven't you Sergeant?"

"Yessir. Since the War. One of the lucky ones, I kept all my limbs."

His face clouding, Wyn climbed up beside the Sergeant. "Me too, Sergeant, me too."

Hesitating, he was caught in the grip of another old memory, one filled with grapeshot and

minie balls. The veteran sitting beside him probably had many of the same memories, Wyn decided.

“I was at Ft. Gilmer, with the Tenth Colored.”

The sergeant turned to stare at the Captain with new respect. “Pleased to meet you, Captain. Name’s Roper, Wylie Roper. Heard about that one, I have. Rebels shot your men off like cans on a picket fence. Birney’s X Corps, am I right?”

“Yes, Sergeant Roper, you are. Ord’s XVIII.”

Sergeant Roper whistled softly under his breath. “Now you’re back under General Ord again, Captain. Got any chance of chasing the Apache ourselves, instead of having to do it Colonel Hatch’s way? Think Gen. Ord’ll listen to Gen. Grierson?”

Wyn wasn’t accustomed to having enlisted men quiz him on tactics and the position of Generals. But clearly, Sergeant Roper was a soldier to the bone. He noticed that Roper referred to Grierson by his brevet rank from the War, and not his regular Army rank of colonel. All the old soldiers referred to their officers by their brevet rank, and Roper was clearly in that category.

“Ord’s an old war horse, Sergeant. Hasn’t much patience with the Apache. I think we’ll get the fight the Tenth’s been looking for, and the Texans are demanding.”

Satisfied, Sergeant Roper clucked to the team of horses, flicking the reins expertly over their rumps. They clip-clopped their way across the arched bridge connecting Ft. Concho to San Angela, dust devils swirling behind them. Wyn stared at the murky flow of the Concho River, wondering who in tarnation chose such a site for a fort. He wondered if there were other compensations for the heat and dust.

Staring at Ft. Concho ahead of him, he realized there weren't any. The barren parade ground, surrounded by officers' row and barracks, swirled with the same unchecked wind that threatened to coat him entirely with pale yellow dust. Built of stone the color of dust, the small houses blended into the earth. Wyn had never seen anything so desolate in his life.

"Welcome to Ft. Concho, Captain. Headquarters to the Tenth Cavalry!" Sergeant Roper sounded unnaturally cheery.

Wyn was sure now he had lost his everloving mind. Ft. Concho was the saddest-looking spot of earth he'd ever seen.

Sergeant Roper caught his mood. "Sir, if you're ever in need of a touch of the old skullpop, you let me know. Always a spare bit for a man in need." He winked broadly at Wyn's glum face.

In spite of himself, Wyn had to chuckle. "May be calling on you, Sergeant, yessiree. Kind of

you to offer.” Right then, he felt in need of a good, stiff drink. He wondered if the desire would soon pass.

He thought not. Thirst and Ft. Concho were going to go hand in glove, he had a feeling as strong as his desire for a strong glass of skullpop the Sergeant had offered.

He’d been insane to leave Washington. The ladies in the salons had been right.

He’d lost his everlovin’ mind.

## Chapter 5

Hotter than blue blazes, Wyn chaffed under his once-starched shirt and the wool of his tunic. A scorcher of a wind tore around the corner of a scrawny tree as Wyn faced into the force and struggled up the steps to the commanding officer's office.

Presenting his orders, Wyn beat at the dust encrusting him. Never in all his years in the Army had he felt anything like the blast furnace of Ft. Concho. Shoving inside, he leaned against the door as it slammed in a gust that caught him unawares. Quickly, he tossed his orders on the desk in front of him before he came to his senses and resigned his commission.

"Ever let up, the wind, that is?" Wyn addressed the young lieutenant staring at the orders sitting in the middle of his desk. "I'm Captain Trainam, Lieutenant. Present for duty."

"Sir?" The lieutenant shifted his stare to Wyn. "Weren't expecting you quite so soon, Captain Trainam. Haven't got any quarters assignment, and the General's out in the field, sir."

"No matter. I'll poke my nose in and present my compliments to Mrs. Grierson while you come up with a cot for me somewhere."

“Yes sir.” The lieutenant scraped the chair back on the wooden floor, the screech echoing strangely in the headquarters building.

“Where is everyone?” Wyn was surprised at the paucity of warm bodies, bustling around headquarters. The War Department in Washington had been awash in blue uniforms. Too many of them. The Army had become top-heavy with men at ease behind a desk and not in the saddle. He’d been one of them, no denying it.

“Out with the General, sir. He’s been pushing everyone pretty hard the last few months or so.”

Wyn nodded sagely. Sounded like Ben Grierson. Man had an iron rump, could ride anyone in the U.S. Cavalry into the ground, and keep on going as long as the horse could put one foot in front of another. Ben Grierson knew how to march, and he’d proven it around Vicksburg during the War.

The lieutenant led the way back out into the blast furnace.

“By the way, Captain, name’s Harrell, John Harrell.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Wyn mumbled as a mouthful of dust crammed into him at the top step.

Holding his hat, the lieutenant forged ahead onto the parade ground. Wyn hoped Ben Grierson would be happy to see him again. Last time they'd met in Washington, he'd told Ben the hard truth about making brigadier on the permanent roster. Ben had been a General by 1865, and when peace reigned again, most officers had dropped in rank. Only the death or retirement of a higher ranking officer made a space for anyone wanting promotion, and Ben Grierson wanted it badly.

Lieutenant Harrell rapped on the door of the largest of the stone houses farthest from the headquarters building, then stepped back. Letting his mind wander, Wyn studied the barracks, the other structures he could see through the afternoon windstorm, and knew, again, that remaining in Washington had been a big mistake. He'd gotten soft. His first impression of desolation, even poverty, had been made through the eyes of an officer who'd spent too much time in places no career officer belonged. There was a cleanness to the stark lines of Ft. Concho, an economy of spirit that blended into the harsh landscape, and said, "We're here to stay."

Alice Grierson answered the door, dressed in dark blue with a white linen collar. Wyn had never seen her with gray in her hair before, and wondered at the lines etching her face.

"Alice, it's Wyn Trainam," he explained from beside the lieutenant as she fixed him with a

puzzled glance.

“Wyn!” Swinging the door fully open, she grasped his hand in hers. “It’s been so long, I don’t believe you’re finally here!”

“Sorry I’m early. Too eager to get here, I suppose.” Wyn kept her hand in his, aware she’d suffered some great sorrow from the look on her face. The Alice he remembered had been young and vibrant, and had her hands full with Ben and her boys.

“You bring any pretty lady you talked into marrying you, Wyn?” Alice pretended to peek around his shoulder.

“Sorry, I’ll have to keep on disappointing you there, Alice.” Years earlier, Alice Grierson had mentioned several eligible nieces, any one of whom would have made a career Army officer a stellar spouse. Never one to divulge his past, Wyn had parried her suggestion with practiced deftness, leaving her nieces un-introduced. It was easier to leave the impression that he’d married the Army, than to explain. Explanations would require telling her he’d abandoned his family, his best friend, and the one woman he’d ever loved, for a cause. Women didn’t like to hear tales like that, they tended to cling to the belief that love conquered all. Wyn hated to be the one to disillusion a woman as kind as Alice Grierson.



“Come on in, don’t stand out here turning into a piece of broiled meat! Heavens, where are your bags? You can put up with us, until we can get something arranged for permanent quarters. Lieutenant, see to the Captain’s bags, will you?” Alice smiled her wifely smile, and taking Wyn by the elbow, steered him into the narrow entranceway.

Wyn was surprised at the comfort of the simple room she ushered him into. Furnished with battered pieces which had seen too many children playing on their arms and using cushions for fortresses, it had the look of home.

“You’re looking well, Wyn. Don’t know how you did it, keeping those postings going in Washington. Although I can imagine several Generals’ wives I know wanting to keep a handsome, eligible bachelor around!” Alice Grierson gestured at a chair, indicating he should sit.

Wyn laughed. The Army was full of matchmaking wives, and he couldn’t for the life of him figure out why. Most women hated the rough postings out West, and few stayed with their husbands during the tour of duty. Most settled in for the duration in a hometown or at the last civilized place they’d been stationed, waiting for visits from their husbands when duty permitted.

“Now, I know you’ve had a hot time of it, getting here, land’s sakes, but I do have some fresh lemonade all made up, I’ll be glad to bring you a glass.” She smiled her question.

“Thank you.” he sank gratefully into a purple cushion, well worn and immensely comfortable after the train. He knew what Alice Grierson wanted, and he’d tell her what he’d told her husband.

There were too few openings in the upper ranks, and colonels with black commands didn’t rank highly enough politically when it came to the pull needed to make that jump from eagles to stars on the shoulder. It didn’t help any when the colonel wanting to make General was a former music teacher and known to be scornful of West Pointers ahead of him on the promotion list. President Grant had paid back the favor of Grierson’s raid around Vicksburg and its sheer daring, by making sure the colonel got a command after the War, when most men were returning to civilian life and unemployment. Ben had wanted the Army. Wyn wasn’t so sure about Alice, who’d come from a wealthy home in Illinois and a father who disapproved of the music teacher she’d married.

Alice reappeared with a stoneware pitcher and two hobnail glasses.

“Only the best for you, Wyn,” she smiled as she poured the lemonade. Sinking onto a recamier couch, she propped up her feet and sighed. “Feels mighty good, taking a break in the middle of the day like this. Glad you could oblige me by giving me an excuse to shirk my duties.”

“You, Alice, shirking? Never!” Wyn toasted her. “You can and do outwork any ten men I know.”

“You’d be surprised how I’ve slowed down, Wyn. Heat here leeches it out of you, like a tick sucking blood. Take it easy for a few days, until you can get used to it.”

“Alice, anyone who can survive the heat and humidity of Washington, can handle west Texas.”

“You have a point. So tell me, what’s the word on the future of the Tenth? When we heard you were coming, we just about jigged with joy. Must mean the Tenth’s coming up in the world.” The last was more question than statement.

Wyn knew what she was looking for. He’d seen the letters from Ben Grierson, alternately pleading, then demanding, better horses and equipment for his men.

He decided she deserved the truth, and he knew Ben would tell her, anyway. He stared at the white lace curtains billowing in the opened window, and wondered how to tell her his orders had been interpreted as a military punishment for some unknown disgrace.

“I asked for this posting, Alice. Anything to get out of Washington, to be honest with you. I missed the men, I missed soldiering, *real* soldiering. Ben and I have had our rough moments, but

we've always been on the side of the men. Wanted to serve with a commanding officer like that, not someone of Schaffter's ilk.

"It's pretty clear, things are coming to a head with the Apache, and with Hatch and the Ninth about run into the ground, stands to reason the Tenth is next in line to take the field. Truth is, my coming out here was seen as some sort of punishment, for some crime everyone supposes I committed. Can't offer any hope, Alice, not yet, that things will improve any time soon."

Her face frozen, Alice clearly struggled with her inner disappointment.

Wyn spoke softly. "I hope I didn't dash too many hopes."

Tugging at her bodice, Alice smiled wanly. "Guess it's just that the past two years have been so hard, after Edie died. Did you know that, Wyn? She was thirteen. Born the year the War was over. Ben's worked so hard, and generally been ignored by Ord and Sheridan, it just doesn't seem fair. Now, they'll be expecting him to pull the fat from the fire, just like he did at Vicksburg, only he's much older than he was then, Wyn, and with less to do it with. I just don't know..."

Although he wanted to offer her a shoulder for her tears, Wyn held his seat, focusing on the glass of lemonade as though it were the best champagne. Army women, like Alice Grierson,

knew the game better than their husbands, most of the time. He didn't need to tell Alice that Ben shouldn't have referred to General Sheridan as "Sherry Dan."

For a second, he wondered how Mara would have taken to Army life, if she'd have left him to go back East after the first sweep of grasshoppers chewed the linen on the clothesline. He still got pleasure from imagining how life could have been, if he'd chosen the South instead of the North, and Mara had been his wife these many years.

But the longer he dwelled on such fantasies the more morose he grew, until the black moods clung to him for longer lengths of time with each memory. He shook himself free quickly from this one, loath to offend Alice and punish himself even more this very day when he was starting anew.

"Land's sakes, I'm a dreadful hostess. I think, sometimes, that manners are the first to go on the frontier, not one's complexion." Swinging her ankles down from the recamier, Alice heaved herself upright. Mentally, Wyn tallied up the years he'd known Ben Grierson, and was appalled to realize that Alice must be over forty years old.

"Let me show you where I can set you up. Not the best quarters you've had, I'm sure, Wyn, but better than during the War."

Wyn remembered when Alice had had enough of single motherhood, and loaded her two boys up and tracked Ben down in some Union bivouac, setting up housekeeping in a tent for a while. Ben's happiness at his wife's presence had stifled all ribald comments among the other officers.

"It'll be a pleasure just being with you and Ben, Alice. Anything will do, you know that. Tell me, how's Ben?"

Alice sighed again as she trudged up the narrow staircase, gesturing for him to follow. "Fine, so long as he doesn't get heat stroke. Which he does, with regularity, out mapping waterholes. He insists on knowing every pond, puddle, muddy dip, trickle, you name it, in the entire territory. He just keeps on going."

Puzzled, Wyn decided to wait to ask Grierson why he thought water was so important. Clearly, there was a lot he'd have to learn quickly out here.

"I'll get a cot for you from the quartermaster, set you upstairs with the boys. They shouldn't bother you, but I'm afraid the afternoon heat might. Goes straight up, keeps the upstairs right warm at night."

"It'll be just fine, Alice." Slinging his gear he'd brought on the horse on the floor, Wyn

quickly surveyed the whitewashed walls of uneven plaster, the tiny room already suffocating. “Get too hot, I’ll just go jump in the river.”

Alice laughed. “Get the boys to take you, they know the best spots.”

From the small side window, Wyn could see the rest of the officer’s quarters, headquarters, a bit of the hospital. Like all Army posts, it marched in perfectly straight lines, vegetation few and far between. Dust devils continued to swirl randomly across the packed earth, aimless in their mischief.

“I’ll get Harz to bring you something to wash up with. Dinner’s early, I’ll ring the bell.”

Nodding his thanks, Wyn stripped off his jacket as soon as Alice left the tiny room. Sweat ringed his arms, his shoulders, and he could feel trickles down his legs. He’d have to get a washer woman, and soon. He’d done without in the War, and hadn’t given much thought to a clean shirt most of his life; they’d just been there when he wanted one. Wives of the enlisted men did most of the laundry, supplementing their husbands’ meager pay. Pulling out a fresh shirt from his bag, he dropped the sweaty one on the floor. He’d get accustomed to the heat quickly, it was the rest that would take a while. His thin build could handle it much better than the cold. He’d been raised in heat, long sticky summers that burned any winter fat off him and replaced it with

whipcord and wire.

Stretching out on the narrow cot that belonged to one of the Grierson's sons, he crossed his palms under his head and stared at the ceiling. He'd done so many stupid things in the past month, he was beyond recalling most of them. This posting probably was the dumbest move of all, but he had to find out if he could salvage the man he'd been back in '60, when he'd resigned from the Point before graduation to fulfill the oath he'd sworn when he became a plebe. He'd never forgotten the day in Chapel when Washington's Farewell Address had been read to the entire Point, and Washington's words about keeping the country unified no matter what were so clear, they could have been written in blood on a white sheet. What he'd give to have the convictions of his youth again.

But they'd cost him. In the end, he'd lost the only woman he'd ever loved and his passion for the Union. Too much had happened at, and after, the Crater in Petersburg for him to believe in those who commanded the Union, except for General Grant. At least Grant had thrown away white lives with the same abandon as blacks had been tossed into the hole of the Crater, to become living target practice for understandably jubilant Rebels.

Shaking away the memory of the Crater, knowing it would lead to the massacre at Ft.



Gilmer, Wyn used an old technique another veteran had taught him, and summoned up images of his old home in Virginia, the days before the War and his appointment to West Point, when he'd run barefoot along the river and fished away every summer afternoon he could escape his tutor. The trick usually helped him sleep.

He never heard the black trooper set the pitcher of water on the washstand. Wyn Trainam was far away in a time that existed no more, and had, in fact, been obliterated for many years by the cannonballs and fires of war.

## Chapter 6

“Matt, what on earth have you gotten into now?” Mara watched him try to sneak the horse into the barn without her noticing. “And where’re my supplies?”

“Here, Mama.” Shuffling over to her like a kicked pup, Matt handed her the bag with the flour.

“Well, I’m waiting, young man. If you spent a penny of the money I gave you on that sorry piece of horseflesh...”

“No, Ma’am!” His mood rose considerably. “Let me get him put up, and I’ll tell you all about it. I’m getting paid \$12 a month to board him for an officer over at Ft. Concho!”

Mara gave him a hard look that said he’d better be telling her the truth or she’d have his hide, then nodded her permission. The boy ran back, shooing his paint into the faded barn in front of the long-legged, broken-down piece of horse he’d gotten in town. It would be just like him to buy a horse he pitied, believing he could nurse it back to health.

“No sign of the foal yet!” Mara called out between cupped hands, surprised he hadn’t asked

first thing.

Pulling her bread bowl from the shelf, she measured out the flour, and rolled up her sleeves to get to work. She could barely remember taking time to read a book or just prop her feet up on a stool for a quiet bit of quilting. Any sewing she did now was mostly mending britches and trying to keep Matt in shirts, he was growing so fast.

Elias worked even harder, milking every ounce of productivity out of the daylight he could. At night, he mended tack and tried to figure out more ways to build up their own herd before turning in for the night in the barn. He'd always slept near the horses, and as Matt got older, Matt had insisted he was big enough to do the same. She knew Elias feared fire above all else, and wanted to be near their carefully bred herd to get them out if the worst should happen. But she relied upon him to make sure Matt was safe before he did anything else, so she let Matt join Elias in the stables, and she now slept alone in the two room cabin she called her ranch house.

Adding the last bit of salt, she kneaded her dough one last time, tossed a damp linen rag over the top, then set the bowl on the window ledge to rise. Her boots clunked on the wooden porch as she ambled to the wash bucket to scrape the last of the dough from her hands. Matt still hadn't emerged from the barn, and she had to wonder why not.

She'd long ago given up clapping a hat on her head every time she was in the sun, although she knew she should. Didn't matter anymore, her looks, and she really didn't care. All she cared about was Matt, and making sure he survived and had something to give him a start in life when it came his turn to strike out into the world. Sometimes she laughed at the girl she'd once been, so prim and prissy and in a dither over one little freckle. Now, she had more freckles than hairs on her head, and didn't give a fig about either.

The barn reeked of pungent smells, horses, straw, heat, sweat. Breathing it in, she was pleased at the comfort she drew from such mundane odors. Matt had curried the horse, she noted, as she ran a quick hand down his haunch. Contentedly, he munched on a bucket of their best oats, nickering from a full mouth at her touch.

"Matt, come on now, tell me about that flea-bitten piece of Apache dinner you've got there."

His head poked out from the mare's stall. She should have known he'd be in there, holding her hoof.

"Like I said, Mama, met this Captain in town, he offered me \$12 a month to fatten him up, keep him clean. Said you'd want to have a word with him, he'd be out after he got settled in. New out here, still wore one fancy uniform, all nice."

“Won’t take long for that to change.” Mara laughed at her son’s assessment of his employer. “Does this Captain have a name?”

Matt’s face clouded. “Golly, didn’t think to ask. Horse’s named Senator, though.”

Mara shook her head. How like her son to find out the horse’s name first, worry about the human’s identity later. In the stall where Matt had stabled the thoroughbred, she stretched out her flat palm to greet the horse. Wickering softly, he lipped her palm, as though knowing humans often brought gifts like carrots and apples in just such a manner.

Leaning into him, Mara checked out the horse’s chest, his legs, and ran an appraising eye down his haunches. The horse had been mistreated, that much was sure, from his ribs showing through, to the lack of sheen to his coat. But once, this had been one mighty fine piece of horse. If he’d been taken by the Apache, he’d have been dead by now. Which meant that white men had done the damage to the animal.

Mara ran a calming hand down his neck, over his shoulder, then down his leg. Obediently, Senator lifted his right foreleg for her to examine. This horse had too many manners, too much breeding showing through his dire condition, to be a regular cow pony. Her knowledgeable scrutiny of his hoof told her much. This Captain had raced his horse, and hard. Mara felt her ire

rising by the minute.

“Just when did you say your Captain was heading out here to clear this with me, Matt?” She tried to keep a rein on her temper, so as not to upset Matt. She didn’t want her son involved in anything that resulted in the abuse of this horse, and she’d let the Captain know it loud and clear.

“Had to report, Mama. That’s about all he said.” Matt grabbed armfuls of hay, slung it into the trough for the horse. Mara added a bucket of water from the well beside the house, and together they watched the horse eat as though he’d had his last meal a month before, even though he’d just slobbered through a bucket of oats.

Something bothered Mara. Matt, like Elias, couldn’t abide a man who treated an animal like dirt. She would have expected him to come home furious about the horse’s condition.

“Matt, your horse-sense is usually as good as your man-sense. You don’t seem too angry at this Captain and what he’s done to this horse. Why?”

Shaking his black hair into his eyes, Matt frowned. “Ma, *he* didn’t do this! Just got the horse, from the sound of it. Out there in the middle of the street, he’s just talking away to Senator, giving him a name! Knew right then he had nothin’ to do with running this horse into the ground. When he asked if I’d take him on, fatten him up, knew then and there he’s a good

one.”

“Hmmp.” Mara wasn’t so sure. The Captain may not have had responsibility for the horse’s bad shape, but she’d have bet her bottom dollar he intended on running him again. The gelding wasn’t worth much as an officer’s mount, and he certainly wouldn’t make it chasing Apaches, not with those narrow hocks. Then again, maybe this Captain didn’t know that. The man sank even more in Mara’s opinion. Either he was cruel, or stupid, or both. She’d seen the combination in many an officer, and had no intentions of catering to this Captain’s whims, even if he was paying the lordly sum of twelve dollars per month for board and feed for the thoroughbred.

She’d never seen Madison as a soldier, just as her husband. Whenever he’d come home on leave during the War, he’d shed his uniform like a snake dropping an old, worn-out skin. For the first few hours, he’d be tense with wanting to tell her about what was happening to him, to the men they’d known all their lives, and biting his tongue to keep her from knowing how badly it was going. Then, it was as if he’d find the old Madison, the one who’d left happily to fight for Virginia with his hero, Robert E. Lee, and shove all thoughts of soldiering away until he had to button up his tunic once more and report back. She’d wanted to plead to know more, but a wife

didn't do that. A wife was a comfort to her soldier-husband, and didn't worry him with the shortages and the hardships at home. She'd squirreled away coffee, sugar, a ham, for the times he managed to fanagle leave, trying to conceal from him the dearth at home as he tried to keep her innocent of the hell in which he lived.

Neither of them succeeded very well. But words were never spoken about the unspeakable.

She'd been a fool. She wished now she'd forced him to tell her all of it, so she'd know about those years he was away from her, and have them for memories both bad and good.

The one thing she'd be forever grateful for was his reluctance to mention Wyn Trainam. Never a word passed his lips about the man she'd sworn to hate the rest of her life when he left her behind to wear a Union uniform. Madison had gallantly proposed to squelch all the ugly rumors about Wyn's departure, swearing he'd loved her since she'd been a girl in pigtails and short skirts.

She knew he'd lied, but back then, she had too much pride to turn him down. Madison had saved her from disgrace, and she'd returned his kindness with fierce loyalty and a son he would have been proud to acknowledge. She wished he'd lived long enough to see Matt grow up.

So now she and her son and Elias, the Union soldier, sold horses to the same Army that had



defeated her husband and burned their farm to the ground. Yes, she'd seen all kinds of officers, some good, some bad, many just fair-to-middling, and they were all the same to her. Business.

She'd let Matt keep the horse because it made good business sense to have an extra twelve dollars a month go into the jar, but she'd let this Captain with the worn-down thoroughbred know it was just business, and nothing else.

"Remember, you've got other chores to handle, son. Elias expects you to fix the fence in the remuda and add an extra gate to the south end before he gets back."

"Yes, Ma'am, I was fixin' to get on it tomorrow." Matt gave her a look that said she was beating a dead horse and he didn't appreciate it. "It'll take just a few extra minutes to get Senator, here, cleaned up and comfortable."

"All right," Mara grumbled, still feeling in her bones that something was wrong with taking in the horse and that no good would come of it. She hated remembering the War and what it had done to her, to Madison, and for some reason, the horse had conjured up all those suppressed images.

Even images of Wyn Trainam, a man she'd sworn she'd forget the second he turned his back on her and walked through her father's parlor door to join the Yankees.

*Damn.* She hated to blame the horse for her melancholy, but she did.

She had bread to check. Preserves to put up. A life to live as she'd been living it with general contentment up until that horse showed up.

## Chapter 7

“I can’t believe it’s really you.” Ben Grierson pumped the arm of his old comrade up and down like a toy, grinning from ear to ear. “Never thought I’d see the day you got yourself sent to this godforsaken piece of earth called Texas!”

Wyn’s hand ached from the firm grip of the old soldier. Once a music teacher, his hands now were ridged with callouses from reins, his face burned dark by the sun. A long beard, run with gray, hid the scar where a horse had kicked him in the face when he was just a boy.

“Worked hard at it, let me tell you! Alice says you’ve made your saddle your headquarters, these days. Bad as all that?”

Grierson led his friend into the battered parlour that doubled as an office, and fell into what was obviously his favorite chair. With a sigh, he jerked off his long cavalry boots.

“Worse. Washington either ignores us, or thinks we’re making up how bad it is. Have you spoken with anyone, anyone at all, who can get us the men and equipment we need?” They’d been in the field so long, Grierson’s face was sunburned and already peeling.

Slowly, Wyn shook his head. “Hopeless, at least for now. The Tenth isn’t going to get any help, not until the War Department starts seeing the results they want to see. Which is mighty strange, but then again, no one seems to understand anymore that it takes men and rifles and decent horses to fight. Guess they figure we won the War with brains and our good looks.”

Slamming his hand on the armrest, Grierson’s face lined with anger. “Should have known.” He seemed to pull himself together mentally. “So. What’d you do to get yourself so disgraced that the Tenth got you?”

Wyn chuckled. “Same thing Alice asked. Nothing. I requested the transfer. The Tenth’s going to have its moment of glory, and I wanted to be there to see it before they put me out to pasture with the rest of us old war horses.”

Cocking one eyebrow, Grierson ran a long-fingered hand through his shaggy hair. “I’ll be hornswoggled. Well, can’t say as I’m surprised. We’ve been sent out enough to help the Ninth, and they’re just about unhorsed. Did you know, we should have twenty-four hundred men between us, and Hatch has only about 400 men who can ride, and I’m down to around 550?”

Whistling under his breath, Wyn was surprised at the numbers. “How’d it happen?” He’d read Hatch’s reports, but hearing the words spoken aloud by Ben Grierson was an entirely

different matter.

“Victorio’s been holed up in the Candelaria Mountains for I don’t know how long. No way we can ride in there and bring him out, and he knows it. You ever seen what those mountains do to a horse?”

Wyn shook his head. A true cavalryman kept his mount in the best shape possible, knowing his life might depend upon avoiding a sore fetlock. No horseman liked to see horseflesh wasted.

“Don’t know what went wrong. Swear, I don’t. Thought the Quakers had it right, treat the Indians with respect, teach them to farm, give them reading and writing, then Lawrie Tatum resigned back at Ft. Sill Agency, and it’s been downhill ever since. We can’t do anything right, not when it comes to these Apaches. Victorio’s the worst, or best of the lot, depending on whose viewpoint you choose. Got the instincts of Julius Caesar, daring of Jeb Stuart, and what’s worse, he’s fighting to stay on his ancestral lands. Dangerous combination, and it’s all about to explode in the Tenth’s lap.”

Shaken to hear Grierson assess the Apache so admiringly, Wyn remembered the times Grierson had been, himself, under-assessed by the Rebels. They’d usually regretted it.

“That why you’re out riding hard, Ben?”

Grierson stared out the window behind Wyn's shoulder. "Yep. Day's gonna come, and soon, when we'll fight the Apache his way, quit all this hopping around like rabbits with singed toes. We cut off their water, and we have them. Just haven't managed to convince anyone else but my staff that water's the key to the Apache."

Wyn knew what the commanding officer of the Tenth was up against. All the old warhorses from the War left in command thought they could fight the Indians like they did the Army of Virginia. He'd heard enough comments around the War Department, disparaging the Indians' intellect and fighting ability. Even Custer's slaughter had quieted them for only a while.

"So, what're my orders, General?" Wyn figured it was time to quit philosophizing and get down to brass tacks. He knew Grierson, and the man was a fighter.

Grierson cocked an eyebrow, his long face unreadable. "You here to soldier, or spy on me, Wyn?"

Flushing red to the roots of his once-dark hair, Wyn struggled to keep his temper under control.

"How could you think such a thing, Ben? Told you, I'm here to fight. See if I can still do it, be a soldier, that is."

“Had to know, Wyn. Got my enemies, I know that. Haven’t been the most popular man in Washington. Long as Grant was alive and in office, I didn’t worry about it. Times change, though, and I’d like to live long enough to get a star.”

“Know that, Ben. Who told you the lay of the land?”

“You did, Wyn, and I can’t help wondering why you aren’t reaching for the same thing. Medal of Honor, great assignment in Washington, charm, all the right ingredients to send you to the top, again. Still can’t help thinking there’s some other reason you chucked it all to end up on my doorstep in this excuse for hell on earth.”

Tapping his fingers on his thigh, Wyn turned his face from his old friend. Some things weren’t shared easily, and some not at all. How to explain the malaise, the sense that his life had veered off course early and never gotten back where he wanted it to be? He wasn’t a suicide, but he found little worth living for these days. If the mind-blanking pulsation of battle didn’t clear this poison from his system, he was a man with nothing to live for.

“No reason for you to worry about, Ben. I’m here to help. Use me. You know I’ll do my best.” Wyn sensed Grierson’s hesitation.

“All right. We’ve got orders to meet Hatch at the Mescalero Agency. From Sherry Dan,

himself.”

Wyn knew Grierson used his demeaning name for Phil Sheridan in his presence as a test.

“Then I’d best get myself a horse. Any worth riding in the stables?”

Grierson shook his head, a wry smile on his lips. “Not if you want to stay alive. I’ll give you the best I’ve got, but I’d recommend seeing what you can do, yourself. I’ve given orders for Companies D,E, F, K, and L, and a small detachment of the 25th Infantry, to be ready to go.”

“Guess I’d best check out some equipment. Bought a horse, on the way in, but he’s in no shape for riding. Boy who said he’d board him for me said his ma raised horses, place called TwoBars. Know where they might be found? Gave me directions, somewhere east of here, but nothing I could recognize. Should check out the horse, and maybe I can buy another one from them.”

Unwinding from the chair, Grierson hauled himself upright. “Sure do know the TwoBars folks. Good boy, Matt. He and Elias keep that place looking as much as they can like an old plantation in Virginia. Even whitewash the fencing, not that it lasts long. His parents came out after the War, had a hard time of it for a while, I believe.

“Never heard the story about the Negro, Elias. Just figured he’d belonged to them before the



War, and stayed on. Keeps to himself, but folks around here take him seriously. Earned some respect for his horse sense and fair dealing. A good man, from what I hear, and with some Army experience behind him. Never with the Tenth, though. What he says goes, with the boy, too.”

Wyn hadn’t heard the Sergeant who met him mention any names, just that a white woman, the boy who’d walked off with Senator, and a black man ran the TwoBars. He’d risen when Ben had, but the name Elias almost drove him back to the chair.

He hadn’t thought about his Elias in years, except to pray the man had found what he was looking for. He wondered if the man at TwoBars was one and the same with his Elias.

He’d given Elias his freedom as soon as he’d enlisted with the Union, knowing there’d be no decent life for the slave after the master had deserted the South. He’d assumed Elias had taken the gold he’d given him and found his way North. The pell-mell intensity of war had left little time for wondering about the fate of his former slave, but whenever he thought of Mara and all he’d sacrificed to follow the Union flag, he’d remembered Elias, too. Elias would be a man to be reckoned with, if he’d survived the War.

He’d been Wyn’s to free, only because his father had given him the slave as a gift, and he owned the black man in his own right. He’d accepted the gift only because it had given him the

right to sign the papers of emanussion. Even the thought made Wyn wince. Slavery, as much as his loyalty to the Union, had made him a traitor to his native state.

“Feeling poorly, Wyn? Got to be careful out here, heats up fast. It’ll get hotter, as we get into full-bore summer. Take it easy, at least until we ride out.”

Wyn shrugged, accepting the warning. “Guess I’d better get into shape, and fast. Too many years riding a desk for this bony bottom.”

Both men laughed, as Wyn took his hat from the rack in the front hall.

“Think I’ll borrow a horse, ride out to TwoBars tonight, see about Senator, do some bargaining. Tell Alice I’ll try to be back in time for supper, but don’t wait for me.”

Grierson nodded, his beard bouncing against the dusty blue tunic covering his chest. He watched his old comrade in arms amble across the dusty parade ground, dirt devils in his wake, and frowned. There was more to Trainam’s presence at Ft. Concho than the man had let on. But Grierson was a man who knew when to leave well enough alone, and when to press his attack. For now, he’d wait and feel his way with Wyn. Wyn had changed, and it wasn’t just going soft in a cushy job back East that had done it. The pinched look to his face, the lines that etched his forehead, came not with age, alone. Wyn looked, Grierson mused, like the living dead.

He'd have been surprised to find Wyn would have agreed with him. If the eyes reflected the soul, Wyn Trainam had been dead a long time.

## Chapter 8

The horse requisitioned, Wyn spread himself on the cot, hoping for a brief nap before he rode out to TwoBars. The heat was getting to him more than he wanted to admit. The part of him that wasn't permanently wet was cooking in the waves of hot air shooting down from the roof. He'd give a month's pay for a bath. Not that a month's pay amounted to much.

Someone, probably Alice, had spread out his uniforms to let the wrinkles hang out. At least, he hoped they would. He didn't want to meet the other officers of the Tenth looking like a dishrag. As soon as he thought it, he had to laugh at himself. In Washington, a meticulous uniform was *de rigueur*, but he doubted such a thing existed, except for the briefest of time, in Texas. He'd have to stop worrying about how he looked and concentrate on being a soldier once more.

Shoving himself up from the cot, he decided he'd ask for specific directions to the ranch now and take the horse from the stable before they got fed for the night. Throwing his rumpled shirt back on, he decided to forgo his tunic. He'd noticed Ben wearing a canvas hat with a wide brim,

and wondered where he could find the same. Stomping back into his high boots, he gave his face another quick splash of tepid water and sucked in more hot air. *Time to get back on a horse*, he mused, clattering down the narrow stairs.

“Alice?” he called softly, lest she be resting in the heat.

“Yes?” Alice peered around the corner of a door at the end of the hall. “In the kitchen, Wyn.”

“Did Ben tell you I may be late? I need to get out to TwoBars Ranch, see about the horse I brought in with me, buy something I can ride now. Don’t hold dinner on my account.”

“I won’t,” she smiled. “Ben told me about your horse out there. Say hello to Mrs. Talbot for me. Tell her she must come in for a visit soon.”

He froze at the name. For a second, he could see his childhood friend, gangly and dark-haired, racing him to the riverbank to dig for worms. He’d managed, sometimes, to shove all thoughts of Madison Talbot from his memory once he’d joined the South and he, Wyn, had worn Yankee blue.

Memories of Mara were bad enough. He knew he wasn’t the only man to have lost a best friend to the issue of loyalty, but he could never bear to think that a bullet from his rifle might

have killed Madison. It had been easier to not think of Madison Talbot at all. Then he remembered what Ben Grierson had said about the black man, Elias, coming west with the boy's parents.

It was too far-fetched, he told himself as he shook off the reverie. Madison Talbot would never have settled in West Texas, and Elias certainly wouldn't have cast his lot with a survivor of the Rebel cause. Elias had too much ambition to bury himself in this barren land.

"Oh, Ben left these directions for you." Alice appeared, face still flushed and apron rumpled, clawing for a note in the deep pocket. "Just make sure you keep the river on your right, and you'll run into it, if you miss the main road in."

"Thanks." Nodding, Wyn clutched the paper in his fist as he almost ran for the front door. His suspicions were groundless, he was positive, but there was too much coincidence in the names for his peace of mind.

He caught the Sergeant who'd met him in town crossing the parade ground, and persuaded him to lend him a horse from the remounts. As he swung into the saddle, he felt his muscles stretch almost comfortably. Adjusting his stirrups, checking the girth one last time, he realized he was forcing himself to take it slowly. If he was riding to Madison's place, he needed all the time

he could get to think of the right thing to say.

The right thing. It sounded so precise, so easy, as though it should come from a military manual under the heading of, “How to explain to your friend that you didn’t betray him or Virginia, and you didn’t really want to kill him, although you shot to kill.”

Swinging the horse out the front gate of Ft. Concho, Wyn barely felt the late afternoon sun burning his shoulders, his bare hands. Twisting towards the river, he found the road Ben had noted on his hand-drawn map. The pale leaves of the cottonwoods dappled shade over the small dirt lane, but he never felt the respite from the heat. He found himself putting his heels to the flanks of the stocky bay gelding he rode, urging him into a trot, then a slow canter.

His mind hardly worked now, and he had to struggle to notice where he was going. Almost as though part of his brain functioned separately from his real mind, the half that remembered every boyhood prank he and Madison pulled, every time the two of them, with Elias in tow, would play hookey from their tutors, rolled on in an continuous memory in his mind. He had no idea how long he’d been riding when the crossed bars, forged of metal, sprang up before him.

Dismounting, he led the bay to the gate with the symbol, and traced the wrought iron. He knew now he was right. Madison had found a way to keep the stars and bars alive, even if the

South had surrendered. The crossed bars were a remnant of the Rebel battle flag. Wyn was faintly surprised neither of the Griersons had mentioned the symbol. Perhaps they hadn't seen it, or chose to ignore its import.

Madison had planted willows close to the fence, and as their lightweight branches swayed in the early evening breeze coming off the Concho River, Wyn had to smile. Madison used to say willows were only good in graveyards. How like him to plant them over the symbol of his lost battle flag.

Latching the gate behind him, he no longer worried about what to say, or how to say it. The words weren't important, not after this much time. He was elated to know Madison had survived, and if it were Elias, that the two of them were together. Remembering the gangly gait of the boy, Matt, as he strode down the main street of San Angela with Senator, he now understood the feeling of familiarity. Madison had a son with his dark hair and long legs. Wyn felt lighter of heart than he had at Appomattox when he'd known that the War was over, and he'd survived.

Remounting, he pushed the gelding through, heedless of the dust and heat. Seeing Madison again, alive and with a boy so much like him, was more happiness than he'd known in years. The



ride seemed to take forever, as Wyn imagined Madison now, with some gray in his dark hair, the smile still as big as a winter moon. He knew he'd forgiven Madison for the harsh words they'd spoken so long ago, and if he knew Madison, he no longer even remembered them.

Why had it taken him so long to find his life-long friend? When he'd gone home and found Madison's land abandoned, the graves of Madison's parents already overgrown with ivy, he'd given up, not wanting to find a grave at Gettysburg or Antietam, instead. Now, he was sorry he hadn't pressed harder to find his friend. He wondered who Madison had married to mother his son. Madison hadn't been partial to any one girl of their acquaintance in their youth; he must have found a woman to marry during the War. Wyn was eager to meet her, to forge new bonds with this family Madison had built out of the wasteland.

The low, one-story house was flanked by a bigger barn, a paddock. Ben was right, every inch of wood, what there was of it, had been whitewashed until it looked almost ghostly in the last of the afternoon sun. The house, constructed of what looked like river rock, was inelegant except for the broad sweep of porch facing the barn. Wyn wondered if Madison had built the house, himself, or purchased it as it was. Either way, he knew Madison had added that veranda, and he could almost see him rocking there in the moonlight, sipping bourbon like they'd done when

they'd raided their fathers' liquor chests as teenagers.

Seeing no signs of activity, Wyn pushed the gelding closer to the house.

"Hello, it's me, Wyn!" he finally called out, his voice inexplicably choked. He credited it to the dust kicked up by his horse on the ride in.

Receiving no response, he tied the reins on the post in front of the house, and started to climb the three wooden steps that would take him onto the porch. Something held him back. He needed a sign, a gesture from heaven, that all would be right between him and Madison.

The woman who swept through the front door, her apron smudged with hours of cooking, froze at the sight of him.

He had no idea what to do, what to say, paralyzed at the sight of her pale hair tied on her head with a ribbon like a girl's, the green eyes still bright in a freckled face.

"My God," she breathed finally, when he thought she must have been carved of stone. "Wyn Trainam. I always knew you'd find me one day, damn it to hell."

"I never knew..." He could barely breathe. "I thought you were..."

"Dead?" she answered for him. "No, Wyn, I didn't die over you leaving me like you did." Her voice was hard.

He'd never heard hardness or curse words in her voice before, or else time had erased all memories of it.

"Why are you here?" Her presence befuddled him. He had no earthly idea why she would be in West Texas, flour on her elbows.

"I live here. With my son. And Elias." Her eyes were like mica, they sparkled even in the shade of the porch. "Elias runs the ranch for me."

He didn't need to ask who Elias was. Elias had found his way west. Elias was with Madison and Mara. A clog of images jammed behind his eyes, and he couldn't see Mara clearly. But he'd seen enough in those few seconds to know the picture he'd carried around in his mind of her was wrong, dead wrong.

Now he understood the familiar cast to the boy's green eyes, Madison's height and gangly walk.

Knowledge came to him, although he tried to deny it. He didn't want to think about it. Madison, his best friend, and the one woman he'd loved since he'd kissed her one warm Virginia night, had made a son. They were man and wife.

She strode into his silence in an almost manly fashion, surprising him, again.

“Come on up, out of the sun, Wyn. Don’t stand there gawking at me like a hooked fish. Land’s sake, I’ll begin to think I’ve totally lost my looks.” She said it in an unselfconscious manner, as though she knew the years had faded her soft beauty, and didn’t care.

He’d retained enough sense, or instinct, to say the proper thing. “You’re still lovely, Mara. As lovely as the day we parted.”

Turning her back to him, she found a seat on a plank-bottomed chair, gesturing for him to find a place on a stool perched beside her. “Hardly, Wyn, but I’ve changed for the better, I think. I can do my share of the work around this place, Matt’s a wonderful boy, and we’re not in debt. Elias sees to that, he’s the money manager around here. Breaks the horses with Matt, drives a hard bargain for the herd when we’re ready to sell. He’s a good man, Wyn.”

“Where is he?” Looking around the place, he saw no signs of activity. Belatedly, he thought of Madison. “And your,” he almost choked on the word, “husband?”

“Madison’s dead, Wyn. Died just after we came out here. Never got over the wound he received at Malvern Hill. Lasted long enough to set us up, then Elias took over completely. You did the right thing, freeing him back when you did.”

He didn’t want to hear her words. In the space of a few minutes, she’d shattered everything

he'd held sacred all these years since the War. He'd imagined Elias working in a factory in Pennsylvania, proudly arrogant with his work-scarred hands, losing the soft Virginia edge to his words. Madison he'd feared dead, and everyone he'd asked at home had said Mara had disappeared. Not a one had breathed a word that the two had married and produced a son. He wondered if there were other children.

He understood, now, the depth of their hatred for him, the deserter who forsook the South. With Madison dead, he could never make it right between them.

"I'd like to see Elias." He still managed to speak, though the lump in his throat felt like a brick.

"Mexico. Be back soon. I'll tell him you're here. Will he want to see you, Wyn?"

Mara always did have a way of putting her nail right in the sore.

"I hope so. I've thought of him often, Mara. And of you. Madison, too."

She laughed, almost girlishly, and he was taken back to the years before the shots at Sumpter, when she'd been his, and laughed so lightly it sounded like a bird's trill.

"Not like this, I bet. Well, Wyn Trainam, I haven't given you a thought in years. Why'd you come all the way out here, anyway? Still in the Army, I see." She stared at the yellow stripe

down his pants leg. He thought she tried to swallow excess spit.

He wanted to say he'd come out West to find his way again, to regain the youth who'd known what was right, and how he had to find it. He longed to tell her he craved the love she'd filled him with when he'd been too young to appreciate her, too cocky not to believe she'd wait for him until the end of the world. But he couldn't tell this sun-freckled woman with her plain gown, her kindly but passionless eyes, the truth.

"See about my horse. Senator. Your boy said you'd board him, and I heard I could buy one to ride." He didn't mention wanting to see Madison, to set things straight between them. Seeing her now, her face in shadows but her iron will as implacable as the day he'd left her behind, he knew that, while he and Madison might have patched things up, soldier to soldier, man to man, the miracle wouldn't happen with Mara. Women didn't forget like men.

Her eyes clouded with anger. "So, you're the one who rode that poor horse into the ground! Wyn Trainam, I never!"

Just as he began to protest, the boy raced from the barn door, shouting. "Mama, Mama, come now! She's in trouble!"

"Lordy," sighed Mara, "Why now?" With an exasperated glance at Wyn, she ran for the

barn, her heels flying, her skirts hiked up. The Mara he'd known would have never been involved in such an unlady-like display.

Hesitating, Wyn vacillated between the urge to run after her, or remount and ride out. Nothing in his dreams, nothing he'd imagined these many years, had prepared him for this sturdy, sun-worn woman who held such powerful flashes in her green eyes of the girl she'd once been.

How could he leave, he wondered, when he'd found her again? Even if she had married his best friend, she'd once been his.

Squelching his conscience, Wyn strode into the barn, prepared to make his stand with her. Instead, he found her kneeling behind a mare, flanks heaving in labor.

"How long has she been down?"

"She just walked around in a circle three times, then went on her knees, keeled over."

"Not good. She should be up and walking more."

Turning, Mara washed her hand in the bucket beside the stall then quickly knelt, sliding her arm up the horse's tail to her elbow.

"Hold her steady, Matt, I think I've found the hooves." Her voice was low, but urgent.

Quickly, Wyn knew what was happening, and without another thought, stripped off his shirt

and strode over to help.

“Let me, Mara, I’m stronger, and my arms are longer. If it’s a breech...” he let the thought trail off with the words.

“Don’t think so. I can feel the front hooves, maybe. See what you can do.” Without hesitation, she scurried back, wiping her arm on the shirt Wyn handed her.

They both knew Wyn understood more about horses than most men ever learned. For a second, he grinned stupidly at her, grateful she’d remembered and given him his due. Then he went to work.

The birthing was hard on the mare, but he got the foal out before any signs of extreme distress. He let the mare tear off the afterbirth, then checked the foal again, pleased to see the mare on her feet quickly, doing her job. Mara and Matt hugged repeatedly, thrilled the foal was a colt.

Wyn shushed them with a finger to his mouth, as the mare turned to glare at them as the foal sought to nurse. Finding a bucket, Wyn filled it with water from the trough outside, and brought it back for the mare. He was surprised the sky had turned a deep dark already. The time spent helping the mare had seemed minutes, but now he realized he’d been with her for at least a couple



of hours. Wiping his arms on his shirt, he wondered where they could go from here.

He watched Mara rock back on her heels, her skirts filthy, her face shiny with sweat. "Let's leave them alone. They'll do better without us."

Wadding his dirty shirt under his arm, he stopped for a quick inspection of Senator, chewing some leftover oats in a bucket in a most unconcerned manner. He was pleased the horse was brushed until not a trace of sweat was left in his coat, his hooves clean. He'd been right when he'd sensed the boy knew horses and how to care for them. He was Mara's boy, all right. Madison hadn't cared about the work that went into a horse, as long as he could run and jump and look flashy for the ladies. Throwing Senator a quick pat on the rump, he laughed, happy that Mara's boy had inherited her character, if not her looks.

"I'll find you a shirt." Mara paused at the trough to wash off the worst on her arms. Glancing at him appraisingly, she looked even younger in the soft glow of evening.

Stars filled the sky. Glancing up, he was afraid to look more deeply at Mara. Yes, he knew her, but he didn't.

"Mama," Matt began, "can I..."

"Sleep in the stall next to her? Yes, just be sure you don't upset her. She'll be tired." Mara

untied her apron and threw it under her arm, also.

“Thanks, Captain. You sure showed up at a good time.”

“I don’t know what your mother has to say about that,” he began wryly. “But you’re welcome. You’ve done a good job with Senator, by the by.”

Flashing a big grin, Matt spun toward the barn, eager to get back to the new foal.

Watching Matt scurry back inside the barn, Wyn looked over Mara’s shoulder at the doorway that swallowed the boy.

“Your boy, he’s a good one with horses.” Matt had helped when Wyn had given the order, no whining.

“Sure is.” Mara hiked up her skirt to dry her arms, and Wyn was slightly shocked. The Mara of his memory was always beautifully dressed in dimity or silk, every inch a lady. He was startled she wore men’s work boots.

“Land’s sake, Wyn, don’t be such a prude.” She’d caught the startled look in his eyes and laughed. “Life goes on, we all change. Hopefully, we grow up some in the process. Come on Wyn, let’s get some dinner on the table. Best I can do this fast is some fresh bread, jam, maybe a piece of leftover quince pie. Sound okay to you?”

Matt's head poked through the door at the conversation about food. Wyn noted she spoke towards the boy, who'd hung back a respectful distance as they conversed.

"Sure, Ma." Matt nodded at Wyn, still barechested and acutely aware his pale skin shone in the night in a most ungentlemanly manner. "By the way, Ma, he's the Captain, told you when I brought Senator home."

"Yes," she smiled a ghostly smile in the waning light, "now I remember. Well, it can't be helped," she added enigmatically. "See if you can find a clean shirt, Matt, for the Captain, and I'll slice the bread."

The boy disappeared into the barn, again, as Wyn followed Mara into the small house.

He didn't know what to say to this woman. Awkward, too, she stirred the fire, swung a kettle over it.

"I'll make some coffee," she said neutrally.

She could feed him tonight, then tell him to be on his way, him and his horse. She probably would, from the look on her face. He wasn't welcome here, not in her home. He had one chance to ask her the questions he'd always wished he could. One chance. He wasn't sure if he had the nerve.

“Mara, why didn’t you write me?” he asked of her back, as she hesitated before the fireplace in the one-room living area. Stooped, she stirred the coals. He felt the silence between them heavier than all the years since he’d enlisted in the Union Army. Suddenly, he was chilled to the sinew, through the muscle, into the marrow.

Bending to light a straw in the remnants of the fire in the fireplace, she turned and put the flame to a small kerosene lantern set in the middle of a worn plank table. The yellow flicker of the lantern twisted the shadows and freckles of her face into a bizarre pattern as he watched her struggle for the words. He could feel the poverty of the room, its handmade chairs, its bare floor shining with much scrubbing.

“How could I, Wyn? You left me, if I remember correctly, sobbing my eyes out when you said you couldn’t do what I asked. I made my choice Wyn, just as you made yours.”

“But Madison? Why..?” He wanted to know if she’d loved his best friend when they wed, but he wasn’t sure he could stand to hear the truth.

Slamming her palms to the table, she threw her head back with a vehemence that shook her hair, already tenuously held in the slipping ribbon, free. “What did you expect, Wyn? You left us all, not just me, and you made it clear you’d never come back, not alive. I got on with it, Wyn.

Life. Madison loved me, and I came to love him. Even more, I admired him. He didn't turn his back on everyone who loved him. He was a good man. What did you think, I'd pine away for you? Write you pretty little letters begging you to come back to me, saying I'd changed my mind, I couldn't live without you?" She harumphed.

"You didn't know me very well if you thought that. You made your choice, didn't give a hoot in hell what I wanted. Well, I made mine. We both lived with it. We both survived."

Wyn felt as though he'd just been kicked in the gut by a herd of horses. "I never..." He started to say he hadn't renounced her, but she'd spoken the truth. He had left her, and everyone and everything else, when he'd joined the cause of the North. He had thought she'd come around eventually, and join him wherever, whenever. He'd never expected total silence from her.

"I never stopped loving you," he finished truthfully. He watched her face freeze as she stared past his shoulder, her skin suddenly white beneath the burn. Heaven knew, he hadn't planned on such bluntness, such a lack of finesse. In the Capitol, he'd been known for his knack with words in dangerous social situations, but the gift deserted him now. Spreading his hands wide in supplication, he had no other words for her.

"Come on in, Matt, don't eavesdrop," she chided gently. "Captain Trainam and I knew each

other years ago, when we were children. Your daddy and he were friends once, good friends.”

He disliked the dismissive tone to her voice, but he at least understood why she wouldn’t answer him honestly.

“That’s the truth, Matt, your mother and I go way back.” He hoped his voice didn’t sound as shaky to the boy as it did in his own ears. “Your father was my best friend, many, many years ago.”

He couldn’t read the boy’s face. Shrugging, Matt handed Wyn a worn, blue shirt, patches neatly mending many tears.

“Figured this might fit.” Matt’s voice, just beginning to squeak into manhood, cut through the silence.

“Thanks,” Wyn nodded gruffly, slipping it on quickly. More than his skin was bared in the small room, filled with the love of a family which should have been, by all rights, his.

Mara bent her head to slice bread with a vengeance. “Get the butter from the crock, Matt.” Her voice barely quivered. “Wyn, wash bucket’s outside on the porch. Need fresh water from the well, bring it in, if you would, and I’ll get some coffee ground.”

Both Wyn and the boy jumped at the command in her voice. “Yes, Ma’am,” they both

responded, scurrying to do her bidding.

By the time she had the small meal ready, Wyn's heart had stopped driving nails into his chest, and he was able to hold her chair for her without shaking hands. She passed the slices of bread and pie, filling all their cups to the brim with the hot coffee. Every time he opened his mouth to say something, all he could think of was how much he'd loved her, wanted her, needed her, and how he'd lost it all for a cause which left him nothing, not even the surety that he was a good soldier.

He was grateful to Matt, as he chattered on about the foal, and its wonderful birth. Wyn felt as though he had died that night in the small house, and there could be no resurrection.

Mara had been plain enough.

He wasn't wanted, needed, or even remembered fondly.

The food he chewed stuck in his throat more than once. Fighting the Apache would be easier than sitting across the table from the woman he'd once loved and the son she'd borne his best friend.

## Chapter 9

The white man still believed the Apache could be locked up on the hated San Carlos Reservation. Victorio and his people, the Warm Springs Apache, along with a few Mescalero, ran through small rancheros and sheep farms like the ghost of death on the Texas border. Screams from Mexicans and Tejanos brought more soldiers from the border posts, all of them searching for a chimera who vanished in the harsh mountains when the timing was right.

The morning was bright in Ojo Caliente, as Captain Hooker and Company E of the Ninth Cavalry began the day. Hooker's orders were specific—bring in Victorio. He'd been given a herd of horses sufficient to do the job. At least, that's what Colonel Hatch, his commanding officer, hoped. Soldiers curried horses quickly, slugging down hardtack, left over all these years after the War, with lukewarm coffee.

Eight men guarded the herd not yet saddled, sleepy from a long night duty on guard, aware they had to ride the day long, anyway.

“Hey, got a chew?” Ambling on his horse to his pal, the trooper was looking for more than



tobacco. Maybe a chance to stretch his vocal chords would wake him up.

“Naw, sold the last to Harris. Paid me a buck, he did.” Harris grinned at his friend. “Next time out, I’ll pack more.”

The horses sniffed the morning air. “We’ll be relieved afore long,” Harris noted, squinting at the rising sun. The herd that wasn’t under saddle would bring up the rear as remounts.

“Think we got a chance in hell of makin’ it back alive?”

Both men studied the barren horizon. “Leastwise, we made it this far.” The trooper looking for a chew of tobacco, called Rounder, scratched between his shoulder blades. “Never did figure not findin’ him by now. Me, I’m itchy to get this over with and get on back.” He scratched again for good measure, chuckling at his own small joke.

The arrow found him squarely between his shoulder blades, nicking a lung. Sucking in a gulp of surprise, Rounder’s lips bubbled pink.

“Rounder?” Unable to comprehend the strange expression on his friend’s face, the blood seeping from his lips, Harris heeled his horse closer to grab Rounder before he toppled from the saddle.

The next arrow flew into Harris’s throat, slicing his larynx and an artery. Blood gushed onto

his horse's neck as he swayed forward, grabbing his reins in a cavalryman's reflex which demanded a soldier hold onto his horse at all times. Clawing the mane as he slid to the ground, Harris was almost dead before his mouth filled with dirt.

Crawling between the herd's legs, smelling of horse and familiar scents that wouldn't spook the herd, Victorio and his men worked their way closer to the remaining six herders.

The next one tried to shout as he was dragged to the ground by a leaping coyote. The coyote slashed his throat before he could realize an animal hadn't attacked him.

Startled to see three comrades disappear without much more than a whimper, the other three spurred to their sides. Darting upwards, the Apache jerked on one man's legs, hauled on his horse's tail to stop him in his tracks, and used a knife on the soft part of the throat.

Smelling man-blood, the herd began to spook. Noses in the air, tails high, they skittered in aimless circles, calling to one another as all eight guards gurgled their last at their feet. Anxious as Apache threw rope halters over their noses and leapt on like mountain lions, the herd whinnied helplessly. Lions they could fight, they could outrun, but the enemy man was on their backs like ticks, stinging them to run away from safety, away from the men who protected them.

The herd, all forty-six mounts, had no choice but to obey the Apache who quirted them with

knotted leathers. Racing for the mountains, they would supply Victorio and his men with the means to raid and kill some more. When they'd been run into the ground, when their legs could no longer stumble over the packed earth, they'd end up as haunches in a fire, feeding the warriors.

CAPTAIN Hooker was unable to pursue the enemy, he wrote in his official report, as his mounts had been taken in the early morning raid. General Pope quickly charged the experienced officer with carelessness.

Pope had never fought the Apache one on one, and had no way of knowing Victorio wouldn't be stopped. The Ninth's horses were just the beginning.

If the United States Government was determined to kill Victorio and his people by slow death on the hated San Carlos Reservation, he'd take as many of the white eyes with him as he could before his time came to sing the death song.

Victorio was getting bolder by the day. No one knew what to do, no one high in the chain of command, that is. The Ninth Cavalry was bearing the brunt, and just about on its knees.

## Chapter 10

“No horse, Wyn?” Ben Grierson peered under the brim of his hat at his newest officer.

“Not yet.” Wyn noticed he didn’t want to tell his commanding officer about seeing Mara, after all these years. Ben had no way of knowing about her, and he’d just as soon keep his past dead and buried, where it belonged.

“Sergeant Roper said he’d talk with Elias for you when he gets back from Mexico, see if there’s anything worth riding in whatever he brings back.” Ben sounded cheerful, which surprised Wyn.

“That’d be fine,” Wyn responded dully. He should see Elias, himself, but he’d had about all he could stand at the TwoBars. He’d slept badly, trying to blame it on the small cot and the heat trapped in the attic room, but he’d known better. His dreams, when they came, were filled with a reproachful, aloof Mara and her son, who so resembled his dead friend.

“Spit it out. Why the long face? Burr under your saddle?” The General leaned back, cocking a leg over a knee as Wyn relaxed and sank into a chair across the desk. Alice had

commented on Wyn's haggard appearance at the breakfast table, after Wyn had left before Ben appeared. She'd gotten enough out of him to sense that something had gone dreadfully wrong at TwoBars Ranch last night.

"You don't want to know. Need to get busy, Ben, so give me my orders." Wyn passed a hand over his face, hoping to hide the fatigue lines. "Just a bad night, I'll get used to the heat soon, I'm sure."

"All right. You're going to take five men, and stay out there until you can tell me for sure we've got all the watering holes covered. Leave a man at each one you don't see one, here," Grierson passed over a piece of paper criss-crossed with lines, "with orders to ride like the devil for the Fort if he sees any hostiles."

Wyn whistled softly. "I get to pick my men?"

Grierson shrugged. "Don't know them ,yet, Wyn, and they don't know you. How about Sergeant Roper, he's experienced at tracking through this area, and you let him pick the four others?"

"That'd be fine." Snapping to his feet, Wyn threw Grierson a salute. "Yes, sir. We'll ride before noon," he amended his casual response.

He was grateful to Ben Grierson for getting him back into the saddle, where he'd feel like a soldier, again. For a second, he'd been afraid Ben would put him behind a desk, writing reports for the War Department. The mirror that morning had told him he didn't look very fit.

"My orders from Gen. Ord came on the twentieth. I'll probably be meeting Hatch and the 9th at the Mescalero Agency when you get back. If that's the case, and you and your men return before us, keep on riding for the Agency. It'll be an eye-opener for you, Wyn."

"Yes, sir. I'll find Sergeant Roper, give him our orders." Wyn was eager to be out of headquarters. He wondered briefly what sort of eye-opener Grierson meant.

Folding the sketch Grierson had handed him, Wyn was already planning what provisions they'd need, how fast they'd have to ride, all the details of a quick survey.

"Wyn, be careful. I expect you back at Concho within the week. If you're not..." He left the statement unfinished, and Wyn wondered if the General was going to add that he'd assume Wyn and his command were dead.

"We'll be back," Wyn interjected. Twirling on his heels, he marched out of headquarters, his boots ringing on the hardwood floor. Saluting a passing soldier as he paused on the front steps, he shoved all thoughts of Mara, Matt, and Elias from his mind. He had to concentrate, or they'd

all end up dead. He'd understood Ben's implications clearly. This foray into the charted, and uncharted, watering holes of the Apache was not just a futile exercise.

Wyn halted the next soldier passing by, and inquired as to Sergeant Roper's location. The man had the lean look of a horseman of many years, and briefly, Wyn wondered if he was one of the few who'd stayed in after the War.

"Yes, sir, I'll see if I can find him, tell him you're looking out for him." Saluting, the soldier took off. Wyn wondered what the men had been saying about him in the barracks last night.

Heading for the stables, Wyn puzzled how he'd make out once he hit the saddle. Part of him couldn't wait to see if the soldier within would find his way out, the other part wanted to see Mara again and start over. Last night had been a fiasco. He would have given the world for their first meeting to be different, but in the light of this morning, he knew it had been an unmitigated disaster. The woman he'd cherished in his memories was gone, and the person who'd taken her place no longer loved him. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and it hadn't gone down, yet.

Stroking the neck of the horse he'd ridden to TwoBars, he felt his equanimity returning slowly. He was a horse soldier. He'd been right when he'd enlisted with the North, and there'd been nothing he could do about Mara's loyalties. He knew he should be grateful she seemed so

content, happy, even. Finding a saddle, he threw the tack on the horse, reaching for happiness in such a simple task.

“You wanted me, sir?” Sergeant Roper saluted from the door of the stable.

“Yes, Sergeant. Gen. Grierson has ordered me to pinpoint the last waterholes not already mapped. He suggested you help choose the other four men to ride with us. Men who won’t panic if they’re left alone, see some Apaches.”

“Yes, sir.” Sergeant Roper was clearly thinking as he answered, his dark face even darker in the musty light of the stable. “Think I have just the men for you, Captain. When we pulling out?”

“Now, Sergeant. Need provisions for a week.”

Roper saluted again, every inch of him military. For a second, Wyn felt a surge of pride. This was what he’d fought for, all those years during the War.

Leading the horse to the front of the Grierson quarters, Wyn tied him to the rail. It wouldn’t take long to pack his gear, and he was anxious to ride. Throwing together a bedroll, Wyn avoided Alice until he no longer could. Bedroll tied, he rocked back in one of the porch chairs, and studied the map Grierson had shoved at him. He knew as soon as he settled, Alice would find him.



“So, he’s got you running too, Wyn?” Alice dried her hands on a dishcloth, leaning on the front door frame.

“Sure enough.” Wyn rose to greet her, tipping his hat.

“Told me this morning, he’d meet you at the Mescalero Agency after you finished the waterholes. Tell you the truth, didn’t think he’d trust anyone else with his map.”

Wyn knew what she was doing, telling him her husband had confidence in him. He hadn’t been aware his lack of that important ingredient was so obvious.

“We’ll be gone before lunch, Alice. Should have told you sooner.”

“Knew that. By the way, the boy rode in from TwoBars, about half an hour ago, left a note for you.”

Barely breathing, Wyn watched as Alice’s hand slowly drew a small envelope from her apron pocket. He couldn’t believe she’d waited this long to tell him. With all the self-restraint he possessed, he refrained from snatching the paper from her thin hands.

Although he wanted desperately to read what Mara had written him, he stayed his trembling fingers from ripping into the seal. Mara had dripped wax across the point of the envelope, he assumed to keep the boy, curious like all boys that age, from peeking. Alice stared nonchalantly

at the parade ground, as though something terribly interesting was occurring with the dust devils dancing across the arid earth. Finally, he could wait no longer. His fingernail itched as it picked at the wax.

“*Dear Wyn,*” she’d written. He stopped for a second, his heart caught at the sight of her handwriting, at once so familiar, yet so strange. He hadn’t seen her written hand in years, but unlike her, it had changed little.

*“I didn’t want you to think Matt wouldn’t care for your horse. Of course, he will. When you left last evening, I was not too pleased at your presence in our sedate lives. I realize, after a hard night of thinking, why I am discomfited by seeing you again. I do not want you to disrupt Matt’s life. Elias and I are older, and have been through much together, and our lives have taken paths which you can do little to alter. But I do not want you to encourage a friendship with Matthew. I do not want him to hear stories of his father’s childhood from you, and how the two of you were so close. I do not want Matt to grow to admire you, and perchance, see you as the father he lost in his infancy. Elias and I can raise him alone, and so far, have succeeded in seeing him successful in his young life.”*

*Most of all, I do not want Matt wanting to follow your path. Should he don a Yankee uniform, it would dishonor his father, and me. I will not take the chance that you will become an important part of my son's life. Therefore, I must ask that you stay away from Matt. Elias or I will discuss any business arrangements you may wish to make concerning stock, or the care of your current horse.*

*I hope I have made myself clear without insult to you. I mean none. But you are part of a life I have chosen to forget, and have no desire to return to. My son has no need of the burden of the past, anymore than do I.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Mrs. Mara Talbot"*

AS HIS stomach bucked within him, Wyn fought down the urge to vomit. If she'd kicked him in the guts, she couldn't have hurt him as much. He hadn't known until that moment, reading the letter, that secretly he was looking forward to seeing Mara and her son again, telling the boy about their youth together in Virginia. Keeping the past alive, with Mara and Matt, would have given him a modicum of pleasure. But she must have sensed what was coming, and known just

how to nip it more effectively than killing him.

Crumpling the letter, he stuffed it into his shirt pocket, buttoning his tunic over it. He'd burn the words as soon as he could. Anger nipped at his hurt, choler worked its way into his blood, and he was barely civil to Alice as he tipped his hat once more.

"My regards, Ma'am, but my men must be ready by now. Until later." He couldn't believe the words were clearly formed, his tongue felt swollen with bitterness.

His body functioned, even though he'd felt his common sense fly off as he'd read Mara's letter. He sat the horse erectly, heels down, back straight, knees in. As though from a distance, he watched himself give the five black troopers mounted before him their orders, return their salutes, then wheel to lead them through the gates of Ft. Concho. Yet inside, he foamed, he frothed, he spewed fury more violent than Vesuvius. How dare she write him thus!

*How dare she?*

## Chapter 11

Grierson left for the Mescalero Agency with Companies D,E, F, K, and L, and a small detachment of the 25th Infantry. They rode and marched hard, the early April weather not yet unbearable. Their orders were to assist Colonel Hatch and the 9th Cavalry in rounding up the renegade Mescalero Apache. Hatch and the 9th had been trying to do that for years.

That night, as the small detachment under Wyn's command clustered around a small fire to brew a quick pot of coffee, Wyn eavesdropped, pretending to study his map by the flickering light. They all knew what was going on, more clearly than Wyn thought even Ben Grierson understood. Not a man envied their comrades riding for the Agency. The five who rode with Wyn all felt safer in a small patrol, able to move quickly and stick together when they had to.

Quickly, Wyn had broken through their reserve, treating them like men and not slaves. He'd always had the knack of making men feel at ease, but he'd forgotten it in the spit and polish of the political military world of the Capitol. It felt good, commanding real soldiers, again. Wyn watched his men divide up the watch for the night.

*Those in Washington who still think the black soldiers are nothing more than monkeys in uniform have no idea what a real soldier is.* Two of the five men weren't veterans of the War, but the other three had seen their share of fire.

"How long you in, Captain?" Roper pulled Wyn into the conversation among the men.

"Since Sumpter," Wyn confessed.

Another trooper, feeling emboldened by Roper's opening, jumped in. "You ride a desk?"

Wyn didn't take as an insult the suggestion he'd ridden out the War in a cozy job at headquarters on the Potomac.

"No, trooper, I saw it through. Fought with Hooker, Grant, McClellan, when he'd stand and fight." Wyn kept his tone light, as if those years were nothing but a bedtime story.

His men knew better.

"How about you, Sergeant Roper?" Wyn already knew about Ft. Gilmore.

"I don't think back on those days, Captain. Plenty of worrying to do here and now, if you know what I mean." Roper cleared his throat, as if anxious not to give Wyn offense. "Them Apache, they don't fight like none we stood against in the War, Captain. That's God's truth. Don't go thinking you can throw up an abati or dig a ditch to hunker down."

Wyn cradled his tin cup, warming his hands in the cool desert night. “Did some studying, afore I got here, Sergeant. I suspect you’ll have a lot more to teach me before we’re through. Speak up, you see me making a mistake that’ll get us all killed.”

This enemy was different. Running, hiding, darting like lightning bugs eluding greedy children on a summer’s eve, the Apache were beyond his practical experience. So far. But he was a fast learner.

“Sir.” Roper threw him a salute. Their pact had been forged.

Wyn leaned back against his saddle, listening to the hobbled horses snuff the barren ground for a little dry grass, and felt a bittersweet contentment worm its way inside him. Slowly, he allowed it to seep warmth around his heart, where Mara’s letter froze him still. He thrust all thoughts of her away, eager for a reprieve from his grief and his fury.

Wyn scanned the darkening landscape, his inner sense always ready for trouble, even as they talked softly. Sergeant Roper had warned him, and now continued, suddenly garrulous, his voice a low rumble.

“Lots to learn about the Apache, sir. Never hear them, they don’t want you to. Don’t light fires, don’t eat much, run longer and faster than any man alive, only thing they need is water. The

General figured that out. Can't see it, myself, why no one's listened to him."

"That's the way it is with General Sheridan, Sergeant. 'Less you've got a ring from the Point on your finger, you're lower than dirt."

Roper grunted. "Meaning no disrespect to the General, sir, but he's got a lot to learn about fightin' Indians. Ain't the same as the War, no one stands still to shoot it out face to face, not out here."

Stifling a guffaw, Wyn eased his head back onto the saddle. "So tell me, Sergeant, how they fight out here. My guess is, you know more than any ten officers with pens in their hands back East."

He could feel Roper almost preening in the dark. The grizzled veteran stuck a twist of tobacco in his cheek, chewing contentedly before beginning.

"Well, sir, it's like this. Make sure you got a good chunk of chaw, and pardon my being blunt, a canteen of skullpop. Medicinal purposes only, of course." He appeared to think a bit more on his advice, scratching his lightly grayed hair.

"There's so durned much to learn you don't know where to start. Guess I start with the first rule of fightin' Indians. Don't let them take you alive. And shoot their horses, first, if they're



riding any. Keep one in the breech at all times, make sure you can get to water, and pray. They run and hide all over every mountain range from here to California, down to Mexico, and they can live off cactus and seeds like wild animals. Their women'll fight just as fierce as their men, when they need to, so don't go playing the gentleman when one of them aims a gun at you. Shoot to kill."

"Succinctly put, Sergeant." Wyn was no stranger to guerilla warfare. He'd conducted some of his own, in the War, riding behind enemy lines, picking off stragglers and raiding supply trains. If you knew your terrain and could live off the land, keep your eyes and ears open even when you slept, you could survive.

Roper chewed. "And do your dreamin' when you're on post. Out here, most of all, sleep with your eyes half open and your ears wide awake."

Chuckling, Wyn tipped the last of his coffee on the ground. "That shouldn't be hard, Sergeant. These rocks aren't going to let me get much sleep any way you cut it."

Wyn, rolled in his blanket, slept dreamlessly, no visions of Mara, none of her son, or even Elias to worry him. Awakening before dawn, he checked the horses, shook the fire enough to throw bacon in a pan. Even the grit in his eyes, the thick fuzz in his unwashed mouth, couldn't

dampen his spirits. His men gathered, while one saddled up and another kept guard, eating quickly like men with somewhere to go.

Wyn spread Grierson's map in front of Sergeant Roper, and checked the terrain.

"Don't know this land, yet, Sergeant, but I'd guess if there'd be any spring runoff, it might come down this range, what do you think?" Stabbing the map, Wyn waited. The Sergeant would let him know if he was thinking like a Westerner, or not.

"Might as well try it, sir, the General didn't get that far. If we don't find water, we can scratch it off."

As the pale violet dawn streaked the sky, Wyn sucked in the cool, dry air. The old wounds in his soul still stung, but a new layer of skin was building, tougher and sun-clean. Riding hard with his men for a few days had been the tonic Wyn had been seeking. Gratefully, he knew he was looking forward to the new day for the first time in many, many years.

Camp cleared, he gave the order to mount up. As his men swung into the saddle, Wyn was vindicated in his heart. He'd made his choice, and it had been the right one, both in '61, and now.

They rode hard the week they were allotted, finding nothing Grierson hadn't already mapped. Wyn grew accustomed to the bright sun, the brilliant blue of the spring sky. Sergeant Roper

warned him everything would burn brown before summer was over, but right now, he reveled in the clean, jagged lines of the mountains, the heat that built like an oven. Grierson had given him a week to feel like a soldier again, and he was pleased it wasn't taking that long. Even more, he was proud of the men who rode with him. All doubts, bred in the stewpot of the Capitol, had been baked out of him by the sun and the professionalism of the men of the Tenth.

"Sir, if we go southwest 'bout now, we can probably catch up with the rest of the command on the Penasco." Roper's tone was casual, but Wyn could tell the man thought it was high time they quit having fun, and got back to work.

"All right, Sergeant. Lead the way." He was feeling cocky, almost too sure of himself. Even his backside had ceased aching, and he could feel his inner thigh muscles growing at ease with long hours in an old McClellan saddle once more.

He sent two of the men out to scout the location of the Tenth, and settled down for a hard ride once they returned. He could hear the talk now, in the social soirees of the Washington military and political elite, where, if his name was mentioned at all, it was probably with relief that he hadn't married any of the women thrown at him. Not a woman in the lot of them could have taken West Texas. He almost laughed aloud at the image of one young lady, her broad expanse of

white chest exposed at a ball, one evening, leaning over demurely to give him a glimpse of her charms. What would a girl like that have done with his orders to Ft. Concho?

Unbidden, he saw, in the place of the delicate rosebud of a girl, Mara's freckled face, her green eyes squinting in the sun, hands roughened from hard work.

Once, Mara had been a girl like the one in Washington, a lady to her core, bred for beauty and charm. For a second, his hurt and rancor slipped away and he saw clearly that he'd misjudged her horribly. She hadn't faded away, given up her heritage, her looks. She'd grown into a woman and left the girl behind. She'd followed Madison where he'd led her, and stuck it out with more grit than he'd ever given her credit for. He'd underestimated the girl he'd loved so long ago, and found the woman who'd emerged a total bafflement. No wonder she wanted him to stay out of her and her son's life. She'd seen the look in his eyes when he'd recognized her, and known what he thought.

He had the good grace to feel ashamed of his anger over her letter. Its crumpled pages matted to his pocket, he'd resisted the temptation to use them to start a fire. But his courage hadn't been enough to read the words again. It still wasn't.

Sergeant Roper pulled a spyglass from his saddle bags, and surveyed the horizon. Pulling

himself away from his thoughts, Wyn held out a hand for a look.

“Thought I saw dust, sir,” Sergeant Roper explained.

Wyn followed where his hand pointed, and agreed. “Our men?”

“Let’s hope so,” Roper glanced around nervously. “Nowhere to hole up, not out here.” They’d left the foothills early that morning, and now the land flattened as far as they could see.

“Just in case, Sergeant, get the men ready.” Although Wyn’s words were softly spoken, Roper interpreted him correctly.

The past few days had taught Wyn more than a month of sitting in garrison could have. Wyn realized that Ben had wanted him to have a quick course in western survival, and that Sergeant Roper was a master instructor. Now it looked as though he’d have to earn his keep and prove himself worthy of his command, as well as be a quick student.

The old carbines slid slick and quietly from scabbards and reins were tightened as every man stared at the horizon. Wyn felt his hands go cold and clammy, and was startled at his body’s reaction. It had been a long time since he’d fired at a man hoping to kill him, and he still didn’t feel too enthusiastic about the idea.

“Sir, I’d say they haven’t spotted us, yet. My guess is, we stay still, see if they go outta their

way to check us out.”

Secretly, Wyn chuckled at Roper’s assessment of the situation. Don’t reveal your position, a good guerilla tactic, he noted, and again applauded Ben for giving him Sergeant Roper.

“Sounds good, Sergeant. Let’s see if we can keep this sorry mess of horseflesh from sending out our position.”

Quickly, Roper signalled the men, all of whom dismounted, moving to the head of each horse with one hand on a velvet muzzle, the other on his rifle. Wyn could feel the uncertainty like a rolling rock, picking up steam as it crashed down a hillside. Whipping out his looking glass, he carefully shielded the lens from the sun with his hand as he tried to focus with the other hand.

At first he thought the horses were disfigured, the human figures still a blur of blue. But gradually, he realized the blue shirts on the riders weren’t regulation Army attire, the splotches on the horses, painted figures. Quickly, he thrust the glass to Sergeant Roper and gestured for his men to stay still. He had counted five, and Roper confirmed it by raising his left hand, all fingers splayed.

“Apache, Sergeant?”

Roper nodded silently, his eyes on the figures in the distance.

Unsure of the politics of the situation, Wyn whispered to Roper. “Where are we in relation to the reservation?”

Roper shook his head slightly. “Nowhere near, sir. They’re on the run. See the war paint?”

His question answered, Wyn swung into the saddle. Quickly, Roper gave the signal to follow, as each man gave his hat an extra shove to make sure it stayed on during whatever came next. Wyn felt their nervousness, the shuffle of horses as they shimmied under their riders’ edginess. They didn’t know him in battle, nor he, them.

“Sergeant, I think some inquiries are in order. I will see how they react to me. Keep the men at the ready.”

He didn’t wait for an explanation of Roper’s curse. The Sergeant probably thought he was the ultimate greenhorn. But Wyn had learned in the War that doing the unexpected was often the best thing a soldier could do to stay alive. Roper was a soldier, he’d make sure the men kept up. Spurring his horse, he was surprised how he saw clearly what would occur in the next few minutes. Either they’d fire at him and miss, or hit him. He’d prefer a miss, but he wasn’t about to pull back now.

The small band had finally spotted them, and he was surprised they pulled up. Maybe they’d

mistaken the blue tunics of his men for other Indians, dressed as they were. Wyn pressed his advantage, and got an extra burst from the animal, laboring by now with the pace Wyn had forced from him. Absently, he promised himself a decent horse if he lived through this.

Pulling his pistol, Wyn let it ride his right thigh, his reins loose now in his left hand. Thank God, the horse ran a straight line, he noted abstractly. Vaguely, he was aware that Roper and the others had drawn abreast of him, their dark figures pale brown with the dust he'd been kicking up. They were at the point of do or die, he noted, as he began to distinguish the markings clearly on the horses, the startled gestures of the men who rode them.

He couldn't distinguish their faces, but their rifles were crystal clear, and as though in slow motion, he saw an Indian raise one to his shoulder, saw the small puff of smoke.

*Enfields*, he thought calmly, *they've got some old Enfields*. And they wanted a fight. He would have preferred to talk, but he'd learned long ago to read the signs of men who shot before they wagged their tongues. He was aware of the bright vermillion stripes on the shoulder of a large gray, bigger than the other horses, with the legs of a thoroughbred. His rider twisted in the saddle, waving his arm as though calling in a pack of dogs, dark hair flying into his face as the gray twirled in anticipation. Still, Wyn held his fire, forcing himself to wait until the last second so



each bullet counted for something, if it had to.

Sergeant Roper edged closer to Wyn, the toe of his boot knocking Wyn's stirrup as their horses matched strides.

"Sir, permission to fire at will?" Roper's shout edged through the roar in Wyn's ears.

"Granted!" Wyn's eyes never left his target, the man on the gray. Intuitively, he knew him to be the leader.

Ribbons of dust fluttered gently from the Apache as they grouped and finally turned to run for it. "Blast it!" Wyn cursed, knowing it would be a hard fight if they had to chase them down. Another *zing* hummed past his ear, and he knew he'd finally come into range.

He aimed for the horses, first, hoping to cripple them enough to stop any flight. The swirl of dust clouded his assessment of his aim, but he was aware of steady firing beside him. It had been a long time since he'd shot to kill, and he'd have preferred to not start doing it again, but as the Apache made it clear they weren't going to stop and say howdy, he raised his sights.

*Stupid thing to do*, he noted calmly as the man on the gray took aim. He intended to kill, and Wyn ducked to the side of his horse's neck, making himself as small a target as possible.

Without thinking, Wyn returned the fire, aware he'd have to reload soon. The labored

breathing of his mount, the men and horses beside him, roared in his ears as the man on the gray toppled like a rag doll. The gray hip-hopped to avoid stepping on the body, a delicate prance that fascinated Wyn as he returned more fire, tasting sweat and latent fear in his mouth as the Apache turned for one, final, fury of fire.

Each second had seemed like an hour, but Wyn estimated they hadn't been at it ten minutes when the survivors among the Apache decided to cut their losses. Tossing up his arm, Wyn shouted for his men to stay where they were.

"Horses are spent, Sergeant, let's see what we can find out about this bunch from the one we got."

Sergeant Roper looked up from tying a bandanna around his upper arm.

"Yes, sir," he muttered not quite enthusiastically.

"Heavens man, you're shot!" Wyn hadn't noticed anything, except that his men were all still mounted.

Quickly, he detailed two of the other troopers to bury the dead Apache and to round up his horse. The gray had galloped half-heartedly after its companions before trotting to a halt to stare back at its dead master. Checking Roper's wound, Wyn sighed with relief.

“Went through the flesh, Sergeant, you’ll live. Got anything medicinal we can clean it with?”

Sergeant Roper cocked an eyebrow. “Now, sir, you know I always leave a spit of the skullpop for just such an occasion. My canteen, if you will, Captain.”

Wyn grinned, fetching the canteen from Roper’s gear. Yes, he and Sergeant Roper would do fine. He wondered if Ben Grierson knew about the homebrewed spirits, and decided that if he did, he’d turned a blind eye to the veteran buffalo soldier’s proclivity for liquor. He poured a generous dollop onto the wound, smiling wryly as Sergeant Roper bemoaned the waste of good whiskey.

“You’ll be fine, Sergeant,” Wyn noted as he tied the wound with a clean strip of one of his handkerchiefs.

More than anything, he wanted to get a good look at the Apache they’d killed. Death, itself, wasn’t what attracted him, it was the manner of man who’d tried to round up his comrades and get them out of harm’s way.

Squatting beside the body as the troopers dug a shallow grave, Wyn pulled a shank of hair from the man’s face. Sharp-featured, he was built leanly, every bone in his face standing clear in the flesh. The blue shirt, soaked with blood, had once been Army issue, but beneath, the Indian

wore only a breechcloth and leather moccasins, wound high on the leg with laces. The leather cartridge belt slung over his torso was well-oiled, and half-full. Wyn wondered why he'd ordered a retreat, when clearly, he'd had ammunition for the Enfield. His men had been ready for a fight, that much had been clear.

Rocking back on his heels, he concluded that these people were a mystery to him. Without Sergeant Roper's tutelage, he'd have been as naive as a schoolboy trying to soldier.

"Sir, grave's ready." One of the troopers gestured to the shallow hole dug in the hard dirt.

"Carry on, soldier." Standing, Wyn backed out of their way, as two men reached for the Apache.

He felt as though he should say something religious over the grave, but he had no idea what would be appropriate for an Apache. Ashamed of his lack of knowledge, he left the men piling earth on the corpse to stroke the muzzle of the gray. The horse nickered softly at his caress, as though he sensed what was happening to his dead master.

"Whoa, boy," Wyn comforted, running his hand down the gray's neck, across his back. The Apache had ridden with no saddle, a hackamore-type bridle his only control of the animal. Feeling a fetlock, Wyn nudged the horse to shift its weight and lift its hoof. The horse was thin,

but in good shape, Wyn concluded. Clearly, it had been bred somewhere where this foal had been intended for purposes other than running from the cavalry. Chatting constantly, Wyn completed his inspection of the horse's legs, his rump, even his teeth. About six years old, Wyn guessed, and range-tough.

Without another thought, Wyn uncinched his McClellan saddle, and slid it gently onto the gray's back. Although it twitched at the touch of the saddle blanket, the horse stood quietly as Wyn worked the cinch straps. Next, he looped his reins over the horse's neck, and sliding the hackamore free, tickled the corners of the gray's mouth to open and accept the curb bit.

"Trooper, I'll need a lead rope for this mount." Wyn gestured at his Army-issue steed, calmly lipping the dirt for any nibbles, the leather loops of the Indian's hackamore around its neck.

The soldiers had been staring at Wyn's progress from the corners of their eyes as they completed the burial.

"Sir, if you don't mind my saying so, these Apache horses usually aren't good for nothing, you know what I mean. Don't know anything about bits, and sure don't ride like they should."

"You may be right, Trooper. But I'd bet my bottom dollar this gray didn't come from some Indian herd. My bet is, he was stolen in some raid."

Sergeant Roper opened a beady eye to survey the situation. “May be right, Captain, but I’d keep my heels down, if I was slinging *my* tailfeathers onto his back.”

Wyn grinned, anticipating his ride. None of them knew his long history with horses. Sliding his toe gently into the stirrup, he carefully swung his weight into the saddle. The gray trembled a second, twitched his ears as though reaching for a sound command, then threw himself into a tizzy. Wyn barely had time to adjust the reins before the horse was twirling like a top, spinning on its back legs so fast Wyn’s hat flew through the air on the first twirl.

Whipping on the gray’s back, Wyn barely hung onto the saddle. As soon as the gray’s head began to bob down, he knew he was in trouble, and yanked back to keep the horse from bucking. The gray didn’t care. Practically pulling Wyn’s arms from their sockets, the gray put on a bucking show worthy of a champion. Wyn fought for balance, much less control, and finally, to keep clear when he got thrown. The gray didn’t take long to toss him onto his backside, flat in the dirt.

“Mind my saying...” Sergeant Roper managed to choke out the words between guffaws, “that was some riding, Captain.” A stream of tobacco juice accompanied the sparkle in his eye. “Don’t think I’ve seen anyone take such a short time to get bucked off, no, not in a while, at any

rate.”

Sitting up, Wyn dusted off his tunic, shifted each leg carefully to check for broken bones, and hoped he didn't look as ridiculous as he felt.

“Mind if I have a swig from that canteen of yours, Sergeant Roper?” Hauling himself upright, Wyn aimed for the hard stuff.

The gray had settled down peacefully as soon as he realized he'd dumped Wyn. They eyed each other warily, man and horse, as Wyn swigged the dirt out of his mouth. The gray snorted, letting Wyn know it would add insult to injury if he was foolish enough to try to ride, again.

Wyn had to concede defeat. Today was not the day to break the horse to a new master, not with the old one barely buried. Clearly, this was a one-man horse, and he'd have to win him over gradually.

“Trooper, mind helping me get my tack off him?” Edging to the gray, Wyn let the horse see he was moving slowly, and not about to jump into the saddle, again.

Together, he and the soldier convinced the gray they weren't going to trick him, and managed to get the tack switched back to the Army steed. With Sergeant Roper, by now mightily fortified from his canteen, helped into his saddle, the small command moved out. The gray,

hackamore once more back on his head and its leathers in Wyn's fist, followed like a pet as they moved out.

Musing as they rode, Wyn kicked himself mentally. He should have known better with the gray. A horse like that, one who knew but one master, wouldn't switch allegiance like a hooker changing men on a busy night.

Hitting him like a cannister of grapeshot, he saw that he'd been expecting the same of Mara. Her allegiance, too, couldn't shift overnight, not when she clearly was her own woman, now. He wasn't sure he liked the revelation, and in fact, he'd have preferred to remain both angry and crushed at what he felt had been her betrayal. But, if truth be told, he had to admit he hadn't given her a chance, after all these years, to learn to know him, again. And sure as shootin', he hadn't tried to understand her.

He hoped he lived long enough to give it another try, both with Mara and the gray horse. Seemed like the second chance he'd looked for in heading West was going to take more effort than just soldiering.



## Chapter 12

Sergeant Jordan was getting his twenty-five man patrol bedded down for the night at Sanders Stage Station, when the lone rider raced for the depot.

“Apaches!” he screamed, and threw himself from his heaving horse. “Victorio, aiming for Old Fort Tularosa!”

Sergeant Jordan, Ninth Cavalry, ordered boots and saddles. It didn’t take much calculating to figure that if Victorio hadn’t hit the settlement yet, he’d be there by dawn. The twenty-five Buffalo soldiers of K Company didn’t waste a motion in getting their horses saddled, and their backsides on them. If it was a matter of death, not life, Sergeant Jordan intended to ride to the ends of Hades if he had to, to determine which way Victorio had gone. This time, he’d find the Apache.

A full moon helped guide the troopers over harsh land, each soldier wide awake in the saddle. As dawn cracked the horizon, Jordan ordered a faster pace. So far, they hadn’t seen or smelled burning in the breeze. That fact gave him hope; they’d be in time.

By early morning, they arrived at Old Ft. Tularosa. Nothing about the abandoned post bespoke a tragedy about to happen. Old tatters of shutters hung on windows, wide open to attack.

“You, Hiram, and you, Pearson, get a scouting party together, and circle this area for five miles. I want every person warned and brought in, if you can get them. Taylor, get the rest busy building a stockade!”

The men of K Company knew it was a matter of life or death. They fell to it with a vengeance, throwing up barriers that would have to do, as terrified settlers from the area began a steady stream into the Fort.

“How many can hit what you’re aiming at?” Jordan quizzed.

A few men raised their rifles, others, their pistols.

Sergeant Jordan gestured for the men to gather around him. The men obeyed, some terrified, some pretending a bravado everyone knew was false, others grimly determined.

“They’ll hit when the light’s not quite day, not quite night. If they haven’t come by now, it’ll be dusk.” Jordan was explaining what every man here already knew, but he wanted them to be alert, without having to give a direct order.

“I want every able-bodied man at the barricade. We’ll watch in shifts.”

The day would have seemed endless, except terror and their desire to strengthen the fortifications made daylight seem all too short. Sergeant Jordan surveyed his men, the few able-bodied settlers, a handful of women and children, and knew in his bones it would be the toughest fight of his life. Victorio would take no prisoners.

Just as the sky streaked a spectacular range of violets and grays, Sergeant Jordan wished he had one last drink of some good stuff. His aching eyes searched the surrounding terrain one more time, and then he saw what he’d been hunting for.

“Apache!” he hollered. “Man your positions!”

Victorio’s Apache swept down upon them like locusts over Egypt.

“Hold your fire, ‘til they’re close enough you won’t miss!” shouted Sergeant Jordan. His men were seasoned Indian fighters, but the civilians were an unknown quantity.

Firing steadily as the Apaches swarmed the small stockade, the men of K company cursed under their collective breaths. It was quite a sight, one of them mumbled, one he’d just as soon have missed. They hit their mark, wounding enough that the Apache ran for cover. The settlers cheered, tossing hats in the air, but the Buffalo soldiers knew better. Victorio’s men would hit

again in a few minutes, just as the shadows of night were settling down, and the defenders' visibility would be practically nonexistent.

The second onslaught was more fierce than the first, the Mescalero alongside the Warm Springs band shrieking down on them like furies. Settlers and soldiers fired steadily, furiously, knowing it was their last chance for survival.

Victorio was known for his intelligence. A winning battle wasn't necessary to inflate his pride. Losing more men than he could afford wasn't worth the horses he'd get from K Company. As darkness descended with finality, the Apache slipped away, southwest into Mexico. Victorio knew when it was time to bind wounds and regroup.

GENERAL Hatch got the message from Sanders Stage Station and rode out immediately for Old Ft. Tularosa. When he and the Ninth arrived the following morning, K Company was in full control, Victorio was halfway to Mexico, and Sergeant Jordan found himself written up for a Medal of Honor.

Hatch chased Victorio into Ojo Caliente, where the Mogollon tore up his horses and starved

them into barrel-staves. The Ninth had just about had its belly fill of Victorio. Hatch wired General Ord for reinforcements. The Tenth would get its turn next.

## Chapter 13

“Any trouble, Wyn?” Grierson rocked back on his camp stool and lit a cigar. “Alice disapproves of these things, so I figured I’d indulge where she can’t smell ‘em.”

They’d found the rest of the 10th on the Penasco, just as Sergeant Roper had predicted. Sunset streaked the sky, and Wyn gratefully sank onto the stool Grierson offered, batting at the dust on his trousers. It was April 10.

“Might say. Caught a small band of Apache, don’t know what kind, have to admit. Anyway, after a few rounds, they hightailed it, and we just couldn’t keep up. Killed one.”

“Good thing you didn’t try to stay with them!” Grierson exploded the stool back on all four feet, his face flushed. “One of the oldest tricks in their book, pretend they’re running for it, and lead you into the middle of an ambush!”

“Don’t think that was the plan here, Ben. They were as surprised to see us as we were to see them. By the way, Sergeant Roper’s recovering nicely from a flesh wound.”

“Keep him out of the devil’s brew, Wyn?” Ben settled back to puff on the cigar, his beard

wagging as he drew on it, hard.

“No, sir. But he did require its medicinal properties, you understand. A wound like that can fester, place like this.”

Grierson chuckled. “Never lets it get out of hand, and he’s one of the best men I’ve got. Hope you and he hit it off, he’ll teach you things about the Indians it’d take you years to learn on your own.”

“Figured that was why you assigned him to me. Thanks. Well, what’s next?”

Grierson was suddenly the commanding officer, again. “Didn’t expect you to run into any Apache off the reservation, not where you were. Means they’re running into the mountains where we don’t want ‘em. Don’t know what Hatch expects he can do, but we’ve got to get to the Mescalero Agency. See what Russell has to say about his wards.”

“Didn’t get the feeling out there,” Wyn gestured out the tent door, indicating the wide plains of Texas, “that talk was held in high esteem.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. We can talk until our noses turn blue, but when we don’t follow through, keep our word, we’re wasting our time. Lot of that’s been going on for too long. The Indians don’t trust us, and with good reason. For Pete’s sake, *we* don’t trust *them*.”

“That’s the way of it, is it? Got the picture, back in Washington, that the Army’d have the Indians pacified in no time, if the politicians and Quakers stay out of our business.”

Grierson laughed. “Lawrie Tatum, back at Ft. Sill, was one of the best Quaker agents I ever knew. Good man, good ideas. No way to make them stick.” He grew serious, running his long fingers through his beard. “Finally quit, frustration almost killed him. Heaven knows, I’ve felt the same.”

“What’s the answer, Ben, kill them all?” Wyn had heard such talk long enough in Washington to know that Sherman and Sheridan believed it to be the only solution, if the Indians wouldn’t start doing as they were told.

“The good Lord willing, it won’t come to that, Wyn. Because I won’t be the man to do it. If I have to go back to teaching music, I won’t be part of wholesale slaughter. An honest fight’s something else, though.”

Wyn wondered about the difference. If the old Enfield they’d found on the Apache they’d killed was any indication, the enemy wasn’t well armed. How fair a fight could it be?

Grierson must have been reading his face. Grinning wryly, he added, “They know every trick in the book, don’t feel sorry for them. Most vicious fighters I’ve ever seen. Know when to cut



their losses and run, and when to fight. Apache seem to grow up knowing the difference, while four years at the Point don't teach that simple fact to some of our best and brightest."

Wyn laughed at the truth. How good it felt, to be talking about tactics, the enemy, survival.

"Well, we're out of here early tomorrow. Good night, Wyn." Wyn wondered at the lithe feel to his body as he rose from the camp stool, saluting Grierson before he returned to his men. By all rights, he should have been aching with days in the saddle and sleeping on hard ground. These past few days, Mara's letter aside, had given him hope.

They rode the next morning, pushing for the Mescalero Agency after finding some Indian signs of trails leading out from the reservation. Grierson rode the way he always had, hard and fast, and daring his men to keep up. Wishing he had time to gentle the gray, Wyn put up with the bone-jarring trot of his Army-issue horse. If his rump could stand the torture, he'd end up with callouses.

A small, sad array of dismal buildings, the Mescalero Agency wasn't what Wyn had expected. In his mind, he'd pictured something like an Army post, bustling with activity and white-washed walls. The graying wood structures of the agency seemed to reflect the mood of its agent. Russell greeted them in his office, its walls decorated with Navajo blankets.

Rising, the agent extended a firm hand to Grierson. “Good to see you, Colonel. Where did you leave your command?”

“We camped outside your boundaries, sir. Didn’t want to precipitate anything.”

“Good thinking, Colonel. Colonel Hatch spoken to you yet?”

“No, sir.” Grierson took the Army-issue wooden chair across from Russell, while his officers waited, standing. “I thought I would inform you that the Tenth is here, first. Where can I find Colonel Hatch?”

“I believe he has taken the western quarter of the outskirts. I will, sir, inform you of my recommendation. I do have some friendlies, whom I am expecting to return to the Agency. I sent the message two days ago, and a few have already arrived. I would expect you to wait before taking any military action, until I can conduct a head count within a reasonable time.” The agent’s face was worn with sun and a tough job.

Wyn watched Grierson’s toe tap up and down, up and down, as his fingers wound around each other. Like an old war horse, Grierson wasn’t anxious to respond to a firm hand on the reins. But Russell had asked for the Army’s help, and Wyn knew Grierson could be politic when he chose.

“I’ll speak with Colonel Hatch, Mr. Russell, and I’m sure we can accommodate you. However, my men found trails leading out of your reservation, fresh ones, not a day ago, and I fear you may be hoping in vain for a roll call of your charges which will satisfy you as to their peaceful intent.”

Standing abruptly, Russell began to pace from one end of his office to the other. “That is my fear, Colonel.

I have been more than patient, but Victorio and his men have done nothing but breed discontent and violence. If only the Agency had been placed in their ancestral grounds, we wouldn’t be having these problems.”

“A little late for that,” Grierson harrumphed, rising to his feet. “I will take my leave of you, Mr. Russell, for now.”

The agent’s reddened face showed his frustration. “Three days, Colonel, is what I asked of Colonel Hatch. Give my Apaches three days.”

“If Colonel Hatch agrees, so will I. Good day, sir.” Turning on his heel, Grierson abruptly departed.

“Men like that drive me to drink, Wyn,” Grierson muttered under his breath, as they stood in

front of the agent's office, waiting for the horses to be brought up. "Asks for Army help, then doesn't want it. By jimminy, he's like a girl who wants a kiss, then doesn't. This will be messy, Wyn, mark my words."

The men of the Ninth and Tenth were already on edge, so close to the enemy, but under orders to keep their eyes open and their guns in their holsters. Grierson sought out Hatch, both of them veterans of the War, both seasoned by too many years out west. Hatch's gray hair matched that in Grierson's beard and he, too, wore the sun-hard look of an outdoor soldier.

Hatch made it clear the Tenth was to assist the Ninth. "I'll set my men up west of here, Colonel Grierson, where the most direct path seems to lead to the departing hostiles. Please keep your men and Captain Steelhammer, with Company G of the 15th, in camp, ready to move in the event any attack threatens the agency."

Grierson appeared to mull this order. "You expect a direct assault?"

"The situation is more than volatile, Ben, and to be honest, I don't know where it'll come from, but something's about to blow. My scouts reported talk that Victorio is taking all able-bodied men, and there won't be much left of Texas, New Mexico, or Arizona, when he's finished."

“Whew.” Wyn whistled under his breath.

The Colonels retired with their respective staffs, eager for the waiting to be over. Uneasy with remaining in his camp tent, Wyn wandered over to talk to the men of the Tenth, especially Sergeant Roper. He found the veteran recuperating in the hospital tent, his arm in a sling, his temper foul.

Pulling up a stool, Wyn gestured for Roper to forget the salute due him.

“How’re you feeling, Sergeant?” Wyn watched as Roper grimaced at the effort to lie back down on the cot.

“Poorly, truth be told, sir. Darned thing’s pulling fit to beat the band.” Roper held his arm stiffly at his side, rubbing the hand protruding from the sling with his good one.

“That’s a good sign, I thought. Means it’s mending fast.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, sir. Won’t give me any medicine in here, and that’s a fact. My canteen’s with my gear, so I haven’t been able to doctor myself, you take my meaning.” Roper blinked, owl-like, at Wyn, until Wyn got the message loud and clear.

“Ah, I think I understand, Sergeant. Headache about to do you in, is it? Well, I’ll see what I can do about that. Perhaps some powders?”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but I don’t need a powder, need my canteen. Feel right as rain, and be back in the saddle quick as a wink, if this headache will just ease up a mite.”

Wyn winced in sympathy as Roper tried to rub the ache from his forehead. He’d had days like that, when there was no thinking straight, much less doing his job, as a headache threatened to shove his eyeballs down his nose.

“See what I can do, Sergeant.”

“Captain, about that horse. The gray. Apache make them part of the family, tie them to a stake outside the wickiup. Try letting that horse get to know you, ‘fore you go sticking a saddle on him.”

For a second, Wyn was tempted to take offense. After all, he’d been breaking and training horses since he was old enough to jump up from the top rail of the fence onto a horse’s back. But then he remembered, he was the newcomer out here, the greenhorn wet behind the ears.

“Thanks for your advice, Sergeant. You get rid of your sling, how about you help me?”

Roper grimaced. “Tell the truth, Captain, horses and me, well, we just tolerate each other. Part of the job, you know what I mean? Less I have to do with them, happier I get.”

“Hard being in the cavalry, Sergeant?”

“No harder than what the General does, what with his getting kicked in the face by a horse when he was a little nipper.”

Wyn nodded his agreement. Grierson showed no aversion to horses, but it was known he viewed them as an evil necessity.

“Well, Sergeant, I’ll see what I can do about your canteen. You keep it down, though, only use what’s needed to get you back on your feet.”

“Yes, sir!” Sergeant Roper seemed to perk up at the thought.

Wyn ambled into camp, concerned as he watched the men breaking down weapons and cleaning each piece with an industry that meant they realized serious business was at hand. Swinging Sergeant Roper’s canteen gently from hand to hand, he found he wanted nothing more than to read Mara’s letter, again. Maybe, if he could find paper and a pen, he’d answer her. She deserved that much from him, at the very least.

Sergeant Roper rescued, Wyn settled down to wait with the rest of the camp. Captain Woodward had scrounged up writing utensils and loaned him a camp desk. Settling onto the edge of his cot, Wyn spread his hands over the crumpled sheet of paper.

First, he studied the determined angle of Mara’s penmanship, her firm strokes hinting at the

forcefulness of her words. He wasn't sure his anger had dissipated sufficiently to allow him to read her letter with dispassion, but watching the men of the Tenth prepare for battle had brought back memories. Memories of nights before the wholesale slaughter of the War, when men had scrawled their names and addresses, and pinned them to their shirts so their families could be informed of their deaths. He wondered if the death angel would come for him now, in this new war when he was older and knew enough to be afraid.

If death had marked him, he had to take care of this one thing. Dipping the steel tip into the inkwell, Wyn began his heading. "Dear Mara," then he stopped. He was unable to answer without reading her words, once more.

This time, he read between the lines, and not just the words. She'd meant to be harsh, but not unfair. She had been right, he had no place in her life, disrupting her and her son. He could find no fault with her words, or her state of mind, but what still rankled was her clearly held belief that he'd prejudged her and found her wanting.

He hadn't. Startled, shocked, dismayed at the hard life she'd led, jealous she'd found happiness with Madison and not him. But never, now that he thought about it, had he found her to be less than the girl he'd known. If anything, she was stronger, and more of a woman today



than when he'd left her with his kiss on her lips and a plea that she wait for him, to join the Union Army.

How could he argue with her choice? After all, he'd made his position clear to her, and expecting her to accept it, just because she loved him, was nothing more than gross injustice. Who was he to judge her, when she'd found a path in life without him? It wasn't as though he'd given her a real choice, a chance to be with him. And after the War, he hadn't tried hard enough to find her.

Strange, he mused, that Elias had tracked her and Madison down. He wondered if Elias had been looking for him at the old home place when he stumbled across Mara and Madison. With a painful digging into his deepest thoughts, he had to admit he could have done more to find her, once the last surrender paper had been signed at Appomattox. Why hadn't he?

He knew the answer. He'd been afraid of her, afraid she'd send him packing just as she'd done when he'd informed her of the decision he'd made without consulting her, the one that made him an enemy of both their people, forever. He was terrified, plainly and simply, deeply and thoroughly, of losing her for all time. As long as he'd thought she was still out there, somewhere, waiting for him, pining for him though her pride wouldn't let her admit it, he didn't have to face

his arrogance nor his betrayal of her.

He *had* betrayed her, and what he'd led her to believe was hers: his trust and complete honesty. She'd deserved to be made a party to his choice, and he hadn't allowed her to participate.

What a callow youth he'd been. Disgusted with himself, he saw clearly that he'd presumed much, expecting her to be as she had been nineteen years ago. Dipping the pen once more in the ink, he let the nub hover over the foolscap. If he waited too long, if he thought too much, he'd never say what had to be said.

The rifle crack, shouts, bugle trilling shrilly in the afternoon, caught him unawares. No, he thought, I have to finish this, then he realized what was happening.

As Sergeant Roper would have said, all Hades had broken loose, and he didn't have the vaguest idea which end was up. Grabbing his revolver, Wyn ran from his tent to find other officers already mounted.

"Get going, Wyn!" Grierson shouted, one foot in the stirrup. "They've attacked from the mountains!"

Wyn ran for the remuda, wondering if he'd die before telling Mara that he'd always loved her

and always would. Troopers swirled around him, intent on saddling up and getting into position. Forgetting Mara, Wyn quickly assessed the horses left, and grabbed for the gray.

“Time to get acquainted,” he muttered softly, as he gave the horse a quick pat. Their last attempt with the saddle having been a disaster, Wyn forgot about the McClellan and, instead, settled on the closest bridle.

The gray took the bit easily, standing quietly as others around him pranced in the excitement. Grabbing a fistful of mane, Wyn swung up bareback, hoping he remembered how to keep his seat. Twitching an ear, the gray turned its head to give Wyn a one-eyed stare. Wyn nudged with his legs, careful to keep his boots out of the gray’s ribs. The gray responded easily as Wyn tensed for a fight. They reached Grierson quickly, the gray at an easy lope.

“What’s happening, General?” Wyn ignored the sharp stares of the other officers congregating around Grierson.

Captain Woodward cupped a hand to be heard above the tumult “Our sentries shot two men, stealing cattle. Looked like a raid to feed Victorio and his men, now the devils have broken loose. They’re firing at us from the mountains!”

*Of course, what better position for an attack? Didn’t take a degree in tactics to figure that*

out. Impatient, Wyn watched Grierson poking at a map on his pommel as the junior officers lined up the men of the Tenth.

“We’ll divide in two, with my half taking to the hills, the remainder staying in the foothills to stop them from raiding the Agency. Send word to Hatch.”

Wyn didn’t ask where to go, he aligned himself beside Grierson. He’d wanted to see action again, and within a week, he’d have taken part in two engagements of the enemy. *Engagements, what a polite word for killing.* But it was his choice, and he knew it. Bareback on a stubborn Apache horse, he felt more like a soldier than he had in fifteen years.

## Chapter 14

Mara threw the last of the rinse water on the floor and watched it sluice towards the opened door. The floor always had leaned a bit, but she didn't mind, it made cleaning up easier. In the past week, she'd scrubbed the inside of the ranch house until she had splinters in every finger. Even the stove had received a blacking, and the chimney had been poked with rags on sticks to shake the soot out. Matt thought she'd lost her mind, but as long as he could stay with the new foal, he didn't care what she did.

She was angry with herself for being so shaken by Wyn's sudden reappearance in her life. She'd counted him among the dead in her book, even if he still breathed earthly air. Madison had never mentioned his name, not after Wyn had turned traitor and joined the Union Army. So she'd stopped thinking about him, gradually, except in the occasional daydream. Even then, she thought of him as the dead, part of a past which had died with Appomattox.

Writing him the letter had spilled out of her like air. She knew as soon as he left the night the foal was born that seeing him again, or letting him into her and Matt's lives, was impossible.

Elias, for one, would never feel like the free man he was, not with his old master haunting the ranch. She valued Elias and trusted him too much to want to see him hurt in any way, and she wasn't sure Wyn wouldn't hurt him, albeit inadvertently.

She didn't know the man who'd appeared on her doorstep like some resurrected ghost. If he'd been startled, even horrified by her appearance, her sunfreckles and her work-scarred hands, she'd been equally startled by Wyn. He'd lost the brash, bright light of a youth untouched by life, and wore his years on his thin bones like a heavy hair shirt. Even his height, once breathtaking to her, had seemed diminished, and she wasn't sure if it was his graying hair or the tired-looking eyes that shrank him. Only when he moved, the same fluid twist of bone under skin that she remembered, had she been positive it had been Wyn.

She didn't want to know how the years had bowed him. She wanted to remember him as he'd been, his lips hot on hers, begging with his eyes, with words, for her to wait for him.

She hadn't. He'd been a fool to leave her and the South. But he'd made his choice, as she'd made hers, and there was no crossing that old bridge, again. Mara picked up her broom and swept the last of the rinse water across the floor and out the front door. Staring at the dribbles trailing across the veranda, she waited for them to disappear in the warm sun at the edge of the

steps, seeing Wyn in each stream of water.

“Mighty serious job, washing floors.”

Startled, Mara clutched the broom to her, fighting to hold on to the present. “Sake’s alive, Elias, don’t go sneaking up on a body like that!”

She was so relieved to see him back once again. Yet, his presence had brought her dilemma to the sticking point. She didn’t know how to tell him what he needed to hear.

Shaking his head, Elias beat at the dust on his chaps with his hat. “Truth is, Mara, made enough noise to wake the dead. Roused Matt to get out to the herd, called for you couple of times. Fine lookin’ colt, by the by.” He squinted up at her from the yard. “So what’s got you sleeping standing up?”

She knew she had to tell him, plain and simple. But the words stuck in her throat like rocks.

“Mara?” Elias’ dark face frowned at her, his eyes showing, for the first time, worry. “What’s happened while I was gone?”

Finally, she choked out the name. “Wyn.”

Elias’ face didn’t shift, nothing fled across his eyes that she could see, but she felt him tense like a colt about to be saddled for the first time.

“Say that again,” Elias demanded softly. “Don’t think I heard you quite right.”

“Wyn Trainam, Elias. Rode out here bold as brass the other night, said he wanted to buy a horse, board another with us. Not sure he knew me, at first. Didn’t know who Matt was, didn’t see Madison in him, when they met in town. Matt brought Wyn here.”

Turning his back to her, Elias headed for the barn. “Got to check out that new colt some more, Matt says he’s going to be a winner.”

She ran after him, her feet clumsy, feeling like she moved through mud up to her chin. “Elias, wait. He’s changed. Like he’s tired of it all. Told him ‘bout you, and Madison. Then I wrote him a letter,” she paused for effect, knowing Elias would be impressed that she’d put something to paper.

“Forbade him to have anything to do with Matt. Only deal with you, or me, on horse business. Still in the Army, he is. Elias, I don’t think he understands, yet, why you had to go and leave him. Or why I didn’t wait for him. Oh, Lord have mercy, it’s such a mess!” Her last words rang with unsuppressed anger.

Elias held the barn door for her, his face still turned. They’d never spoken of Elias’ insistence on leaving Wyn, once the papers freeing him had been recorded. Instinctively, Mara knew that



Wyn had expected Elias to stick with him when he went North. Elias had left the day of his emanumission, without a word to anyone, least of all Wyn.

“Nothing for us to bother with. He’s got no call coming out here, bothering you and the boy.” Mara recognized Elias’ protective tone of voice. They operated under the credo that everyone pulled his or her own weight around the ranch, and they pulled together when it was needed.

“Won’t be coming around, I imagine. Told him, in no uncertain terms, to keep his distance. Just wanted you to be ready, you see him at Ft. Concho.” Mara waited for him in the relative darkness of the barn, Elias silhouetted in the doorlight.

“Good. Now, let’s see that foal. Got a great deal on some mares in Mexico, bet some have Arab blood. May have the start of a bloodline, yet.”

Examining the colt, running their hands over his flanks and chest as the mare snickered anxiously, they talked of their plans for the new herd, prices in Mexico, how many men it would take to break the mustangs Elias had brought home. Mara realized that each carefully never brought up the one subject bothering them both, Wyn Trainam. Finally, Elias stopped at Senator’s stall.

“This sorry piece of horse belong to Wyn?”

She could hear the disbelief in his voice. “Yep. Said he bought him off someone at a train stop on the way out here. Matt was taken with him, so I agreed to let him take care of the horse. Taken with the *horse*, I mean,” she added lamely.

“Hmmm.” Elias almost snorted. “Can’t see Wyn having a blamed thing to do with anything as sorry as this. Run into the ground, downright broken.”

Mara thought of her impressions of the Wyn who’d appeared and helped foal the coLieutenant “Maybe he saw something of himself in that horse, Elias. Something needing help.”

“Wyn Trainam never needed help.” Elias almost snorted.

“Not the Wyn we knew, but times change. So do people. Look at us,” she added pointedly.

“I’ll be...” Elias stared at her, as if unable to believe she was willing to give Wyn Trainam the benefit of any doubt at all, even the most miniscule.

Mara had a way of understanding people that was almost uncanny. She seemed to sense who they could trust with a handshake, and from whom they needed to get cash up front.

“He can do without ours, our help I mean.” Elias’ voice was as hard as the baked earth in the remuda.

“We’ll see,” Mara mused softly, as the motes of sun hazed before her eyes as she stared at the foal. As an afterthought, she added, “I owe him for helping with the mare. He had to pull the colt out, my arms weren’t strong enough.”

Elias had no answer. She knew he didn’t want to owe Wyn Trainam a blasted thing.

“But he won’t come collecting, made sure of that.” Mara tried to reassure Elias. “No one will take over this place from us, Elias, you and me, we’ve poured our blood into these fences, that barn. Don’t worry, I won’t go batting my eyes at Wyn Trainam.”

Elias gave her a hard look. “Don’t go making promises you may not keep, Mara. You and Wyn, you were closer than twins. Got my own feelings to sort out about him, know you do, too. Keeping him away may not be the best way to set ourselves straight.”

Chewing on her bottom lip, she considered Elias’ words. “But I don’t want to think about him. Makes me so mad, I could scream, him showing up like a bad penny, upsetting me — us,” she amended.

“Not upset, not angry. Just think it best I have a few words with Wyn, set the record straight, that’ll be the end of it, of him, at TwoBars.”

Mara wished it could be that easy. “You’re a good man, Elias, and I know God sent you out

here to keep Matt and me in one piece, body and soul. Don't let what was between Wyn and me so long ago come between you and Wyn. You think Wyn and I were close? Lord have mercy, take a look inside yourself, my friend, and you'll find pieces of Wyn in every organ. You two were brothers in everything except blood. I don't want to stand in the way of you making it up with Wyn."

She wondered if Elias knew the trembling in her knees as she spoke the words. But she'd always been a generous woman, and even in the midst of her inner turmoil, she couldn't let her anger stop Elias from working out a solution to his own relationship with Wyn Trainam.

"Except I was his slave." Elias' voice screeched with sorrow, bitterness, shame.

"He took care of that, soon as he legally could. Be fair, Elias." She could hardly believe she was defending Wyn to Elias. But her partner's happiness mattered more to her than her own.

Just as she tried to read Elias' eyes, Matt came whooping and hollering into the yard, swinging his lariat like a vacquero.

"Whooee, Mama, Elias got some good ones this time!"

She was glad she'd cooked ahead. They had plenty of work to do in the next few weeks, and she wouldn't have time to worry about Wyn and Elias, anyway.

“Think I’ll head on into the post, see who’s lolling about I can hire up to help us break ‘em.” Elias squinted at Matt. “Come on, ride with me, boy.”

“No Mexes with you?”

Elias snorted. “Only two men, came with the herd. The rest are afraid of Victorio. Won’t leave their families alone, not that close to the border.”

“Well, Matt’s old enough to take on some of the hard part of the breaking.”

Matt grinned. “I am that, Elias.”

Mara saw echoes of Madison in his smile and wished Wyn could have seen it too. *Stop this*, she ordered herself, heading for the house. *You’ve more than enough on your plate, Mara Talbot.*

“We’ll see, boy. See what I can round up at the sutler’s.”

“Make sure you see Captain Trainam while you’re there,” Mara advised coolly, lest Matt catch the tumultuous undertones.

Elias was just as calm. “Think I’ll do just that.”

## Chapter 15

“Hatch’ll head for Old Ft. Tularosa, see what he can find.” Grierson spoke to his officers, his back turned to them as he pointed to one of his ever-present maps. “We’ll take the Sacramento and Guadalupe Mountains.”

They’d killed fourteen Mescaleros, running for Victorio and the mountains, but at least thirty more had escaped. Agent Russell complained bitterly that the Tenth had precipitated the fight, killing men who’d been sent on his orders to bring in stray steers.

“I asked you to wait, sir!” Face flushed, Russell fumed at the Army officers.

“Impossible.” Grierson was curt. “The situation demanded action.”

Grierson had lost all patience. Russell was lying about the Mescaleros. Grierson just rolled his eyes and Wyn understood. Didn’t look good for an Indian agent to end up with dead Indians on the reservation, particularly ones shot stealing food. Looked much better if the Army did the killing out where the reservation boundaries stopped, and the agent could claim no control over the situation. Grierson gave orders to his officers. Wyn sensed Grierson’s determination to stop

the Mescaleros once and for all and give the Tenth some peace.

Sergeant Roper seemed to have recovered his amiable frame of mind and some bodily strength, because Wyn ran into him throwing a saddle on a horse, one-arming it with surprising strength.

“Sorry I haven’t been to visit in a while, Sergeant.” Wyn watched the saddle get settled, Roper deftly holding the cinch straps in his teeth as he adjusted the buckles with his one hand. “Think I might help?” He didn’t dare ask what the veteran was doing up and trying to get ready to ride.

“No, sir, think I got it. Thanks, anyway. Soon as you got me my medicine, did just fine. Healing like cured leather, I am.”

“Sure the surgeon’s released you to ride, Sergeant?” Wyn looked askance at the crooked sling, obviously much the worse for wear.

“Aw, don’t matter what that old sawbones says, General’ll let me ride. Knows I don’t want to miss a good one.”

“Thought you’d just as soon ride a chair as a horse, Sergeant. Don’t you think this might be your chance to do just that for a while, let your wound heal properly?”

“No, sir, if you don’t mind my saying so. I go where my men go.”

“Ah,” Wyn sighed with understanding. “Well, then, carry on.”

They rode hard, Wyn wishing he’d brought a padded saddle with him. The gray took some adjusting to the McClellan, but he nipped and bucked less each morning as Wyn saddled him up. The ragged mountains they attacked didn’t seem to faze the gray, as it unerringly found its footing while others were scrambling to stay on their feet. The vermillion paint was slowly curried out of its hair, but its hide had been dyed with the coloring. The men of the Tenth kept their distance from the Apache horse, but they were still chasing the Apache.

Pushing as hard as they could, they covered 1500 miles, killing five Indians, capturing five women and one captive Mexican boy. By the time they headed back to the Agency, Grierson made it clear that the higher-ups had to listen one of these fine days, and it had darned well better be soon. The men of the Tenth might survive such a march, but their horses couldn’t do many more of them.

After a month in the field, the Tenth returned to Ft. Concho, not exactly triumphant, but having tasted what was to come with skill and courage.

In the Ft. Concho stables, Wyn unsaddled the gray himself, rubbing down its sweat-soaked



back with a stiff brush, wishing he could have the same done for himself. Old sweat stiffened every shirt he'd brought with him, and not a one smelled any too sweet. Sniffing himself, he decided the horse was less odiferous. Still, rolling his stiff shoulders even as he massaged the tired gray, he noted he was less tired than he'd first thought. A month in the saddle had done him good, as much good as he liked for the moment, but definitely good.

Dropping the curry brush in the tack box, Wyn tackled the gray's hooves next. Right rear leg braced on Wyn's thigh, the gray put up with just about as much poking at its frog with a pick as it could stand. Stamping the hoof down, he landed square on Wyn's boot toe.

"Blast it, you stubborn piece of..." Laughing, Wyn hopped around on one foot for a second, as the gray turned its large black eyes to stare at him.

"Guess I can't curse you too soundly, without some sort of name." Realizing he'd held off naming the gray, Wyn finally faced the fact he hadn't wanted to do so until he knew the both of them could survive what the Tenth would put them through. The first test passed with flying colors, Wyn took a step back and really looked at the gray.

"Ghost." The name came to him on a sudden, cool breeze through the corridor of the stables. No other name would fit, now that the word had come to him. Wyn wondered if the

specter of the dead Indian who'd once ridden Ghost was whispering a warning.

"Don't be daft, man," Wyn warned himself, speaking loudly. He'd never been one for ghouls and spirits, and he wasn't about to begin now. Still, a chill wind ran through his soul, and for a moment, he felt the old fear grip him, the one that seized his innards like an icy hand and squeezed hard.

"Don't remember you talking to yourself like a crazy old fool."

The warning wind that had ridden in with Ghost's new name swirled in Wyn's mind even stronger. The softly Southern voice that carried from the stable door was hard to identify clearly, but Wyn *knew* it was meant for him. Slowly, he returned the hoof pick to the tack box, and ducked his head to catch his breath in privacy. Swirls of dust, old straw, horse dirt, twirled in the small rectangle of sun streaming above the stall. Swinging through the block of liquid light, Wyn faced a real ghost.

"Come in where I can see you, man." His voice was firm, Wyn noted with satisfaction.

"Don't know me, do you?" Bright light surrounded the silhouette of a man wearing civilian garb, loose chaps, broad Texas-brimmed hat, and the shadow of a low-slung holster.

Wyn edged out of the stall, sensing a stronger hand than Fate's in today's work. The last

statement, the voice clearer now, had sent his memories swirling in eddies of ancient dust, Mara, Elias, Madison, all flying before him until they were a blur.

“Elias.” Softly spoken, the single name held a childhood of derring-do, an adolescence of bravado, a youth left on the fields of war.

“How do, Wyn. Mara said you’d shown up, like the bad penny you always were.” Elias slipped farther into the barn, out of the glare of daylight. In the shadows, Wyn could see more of him, but still, he was a blur of darkness. Wiping his eyes, Wyn realized he’d begun to weep.

“Didn’t know you’d made it out alive. Heard casualties in the black regiments were close to ninety per cent. Didn’t have to do it, Eli. Could have gone up North and lived in some town, stayed safe. Hell, you could have come with me. I’d have protected you.” The words spilled out of him like a cut artery. Words he’d always thought, words he’d wished he could have said long ago. There was no stopping him now, except he couldn’t seem to catch his breath after the last syllable faded away.

A long silence stretched between them like years embedded in floes of ice. Finally, Wyn crossed the space between them, stretching out his hand for that of his former slave. Elias’ dark, plaid-covered arms remained at his side, his wide chest barely rising and falling beneath the

stained leather vest he wore, as he breathed softly, staring at Wyn.

“Have I changed so much?” Wyn tried to joke away the awkward situation.

“Plenty. Who hasn’t, all this time? More changes than looks, but I guess you found that out from Mara.”

Wyn started at Elias’ use of Mara’s first name, without the respectful addition of “Miss.” But then, he’d never spoken to a free Elias, before. As soon as the papers had been recorded, Elias had disappeared. Squinting with his nearsighted vision, Wyn studied Elias. The boy he’d been was long gone, that much was for sure. Life in West Texas had etched lines, albeit less noticeable ones than those stamped on Mara’s face, and life had added an element Wyn was at first reluctant to name. Unhappy with the long quiet which extended between their brief words, Wyn forced himself to draw closer to the flame of understanding.

Grit. Raw grit. Steel courage. Tempered like a saber. Yes, Elias was a man who’d gone through hell and emerged purified, stronger, sharper than a bayonet. Wyn recognized the feeling within himself, the man he’d been at the end of the War, weary with the killing, but a survivor. That man had melted away like strawberry ice cream at a social affair in the years after 1865, but Elias had continued to pass through the fiery furnace, burning off all excess softness until his dark

face was carved in some wind-blasted stone.

“Mara hasn’t changed so much.” He wasn’t lying. He’d realized, during the long hours he’d had to think late at night, the stars above him like brilliants on a velvet ballgown, that she’d carried the seeds within her of the woman she’d become. Mara, too, had gone through her trial by fire and emerged, if not unscathed, at least a stronger woman.

Elias slipped the hat from his head, not with respect, but to beat at the horseflies nipping at him, which gave him an excuse to look down. “I have, though. Used to wonder why it took you so long to set me free. Never thought of myself beholding to you for anything, Wyn, but when you had the lawyer write up those papers, I knew I’d never be free of you. Always owe you for that.”

“Lincoln did it for everyone, Elias. Don’t owe me one blamed thing. Should have done it long before, but my father made me wait until I was of legal age. He wanted it to be my decision.”

Again, a stretch of silence. Wyn realized Elias was digesting his words.

“I owed you, anyway. Didn’t see how I could pay off such a debt, so I took off. Didn’t need me, not anymore, you didn’t, not when you joined the Union. Figured it was time we made our

own ways, separate-like.” The hat returned to his head, Elias peered once more at Wyn, his eyes buried in a squint the sun had forced upon him for too long. Elias waited.

Wyn wondered how long Elias had known he’d sought answers, how long he’d wished for this conversation with him. “Guessed that was the way of it. Didn’t hold it against you, but blast it all, Elias, I sure as shootin’ *missed* you.”

Elias edged closer, finally, slowly, extending his hand. Wyn grasped the calloused palm in his, tightening his grip until it hurt. “God knows, I’m glad you’re alive.” Wyn sighed, as they both reluctantly dropped their hands to their sides.

Something rumbled in Elias’ throat, a hard sound that sounded like a choked sob. Finally, turning his back, Elias’ shoulders hunched downward for a second, then drew back tighter than before.

“I could say the same, Wyn.” The words rumbled thickly over Elias’ shoulder. “But Mara’s not so sure. Rode out to the post, heard the troopers were back. Came out, soon’s I got back from Mexico. Wanted a word with you. Been a long time, didn’t think waiting a few more weeks would matter much. Did, though. Said all I have to say, except this.”

Perhaps it was the tension tightening a notch in Elias’ voice. Wyn leaned back against the

stall door and braced himself against the wooden planks.

“Mara’s right upset, you showing up.” Elias twisted to throw the words over his shoulder, rumbling a slightly embarrassed laugh. “Doesn’t want to see you, she says. Told me she wrote you to stay away from Matt.”

Wyn nodded, the letter still against his chest, an ever-present reminder of how much he’d messed up his life. He’d yet to finish the letter in response. The words wouldn’t come, not the true ones that would give her the comfort of knowing he understood her reasons and forgave her. However he phrased it, he sounded like a pompous ass.

“I’ll respect her wishes, Elias, don’t worry. But I won’t go out of my way to avoid her and the boy. I like him, Elias, he has a way with horses Madison never had. But I won’t be run off, either.”

Turning this time, Elias lifted his chin as a small smile shone through his dark face. “Hoped you’d say that. Been like a grizzly bear, Mara has, ever since she saw you. Matt’s a fine boy, done my best to raise him right. But he’ll be gone one day, and not too far down the road. Mara’s going to feel like the dead, day that happens. Unless she’s got someone else in her life.”

Wyn was speechless. Elias matchmaking? Impossible, the thought sent him reeling. He’d

expected terseness, angry words, warnings to stay away. “Anyone on your list, Eli?” He didn’t trust himself to say more.

“Nope. Won’t have anything to do with Yankees. Too particular, tell the truth. Always was stubborn as her father, who, you may well remember,” Elias winked slowly, “ was too stubborn for his own good.”

“You forgetting I’m wearing Union blue, Eli? How’d you get by, if you don’t mind my asking, her hatred of Yankees?”

Roaring with laughter, Eli sent the horses in the stalls skittering. “Heck, Wyn, I’m not a Yankee, not a Union soldier, far as Mara’s concerned, I’m one of the family. Always have been.”

“Then why’d she let me know in no uncertain terms that I’m a traitor to the Cause?” Some of his indignation seeped into his voice, and Wyn realized he was still angry at Mara.

“Simple. You betrayed her. Don’t be such an idiot, Wyn. Thought you would’ve learned *something* about women, all these years gone by. By golly, if you don’t know how to go about it by now, I sure as heck can’t teach you!”

The absurdity of it rolled over Wyn like a summer rain. Two middle-aged men, strangers for too long, talking about a woman one of them had always loved as though she were the spring



belle of the ball, a young maiden to be won by an awkward knight. Laughter spurted out like a bubbling spring. Laughter turned into guffaws, guffaws rolled into side-splitting belly laughs, and Wyn knew all would be well.

“Anything I can do for you, Captain?” Sergeant Roper poked his head through the door, clearly reluctant to intrude, yet curious at the same time.

Slapping his thigh, Elias stumbled into Wyn, as they collapsed together in a heap on the packed dirt floor. Gulping for air, Wyn attempted to pull his officership around him, and failed.

“Plenty, Sergeant, but I don’t think I should drag you into this mess!”

Elias whooped it up even louder, drumming his heels into the floor.

Sergeant Roper had given up on Wyn, and turned to the other man for an explanation. “Heard a good joke, Elias?”

“Nope, leastways, not one you’d understand.” Elias swiped at the tears on his cheeks with the back of one hand. “Captain Trainam, here, he’s an old friend.”

Wyn thought that just about said it all. “Better friend than I ever knew,” he whispered.

## Chapter 16

“Ord says he’ll try,” grumbled Grierson. “He’d better do more than that, or Sheridan will end up killing us all. Don’t know New Mexico, not like I do this part of Texas. Only way we can win is to fight it out where we know the terrain.”

Wyn leaned the wooden chair back, propped his feet on the rungs, and pulled on the cigar the General had offered. Grierson’s feet were already ensconced on the edge of the desk, and he was on his second cigar. In response to Wyn’s raised eyebrows, he’d grinned.

“Alice went to San Angela today, to shop. Got a few hours to clear the smoke out before she gets back.”

In the aftermath of the hard ride through the mountains after the Mescaleros, there’d been a marked letdown in what Wyn considered “make work” duty. He figured it was Grierson’s way of rewarding his men for a hard job well done. He’d returned, after saying good-bye to Elias, to find Alice calmly happy at the return of her husband. Making himself scarce seemed the most diplomatic action to take, so he had. A quick game of poker had won him a handful of cigars, and

he'd chosen this moment to share his loot with the General.

"What'd you think of my men, Wyn? Tell me honestly." Grierson wasn't fishing for compliments, of that much Wyn was sure.

"Don't need me to tell you they're good soldiers. You know that, Ben. Rode hard, fought hard, did everything you could have asked of them."

Grierson slammed his feet on the floor. "Then tell me why in tarnation I can't get Sheridan to listen to me? Does he hate me that much?" The old soldier's beard shook with frustration.

Wyn knew it would come down to this one day or another. After a month of hard campaigning, he owed Grierson the truth.

"Don't think it's hate, so much as you're just not one of his boys, Ben. Long as you're around, he can't ignore you, and he'd just as soon you didn't get a star so he'd have to do something else with you. Sherman's the man you need, now. He would give you your head, and let you run."

Talented at analyzing the politics of personality, Wyn realized he'd learned much during his Washington years. Finally, it might bear fruit.

"Let Ord run this one through. Something's bound to break where you can take action

quickly, and prove you're right."

"Carpenter still had to chase down the ones who hit the civilians in Bass Canon, just west of Ft. Davis. Didn't do us any good, knowing the watering holes."

Wyn realized Grierson was analyzing out loud, thinking through where his theory fell short. He was there as a sounding board. Wyn, who'd been with Grierson when the report had come in, had read Carpenter's narrative just behind the General.

"Had Winchesters, that crowd did. Late models, according to Carpenter. Out to hit and run. Only reason Carpenter didn't take them was he had to stop at the Rio Grande. Mackenzie may not feel compelled to respect the border, but personally, I think Carpenter did the right thing."

"Darn straight he did." Grierson took a heavy suck on his cigar. "I'd have busted him to private, if he'd ridden into Mexico without my orders."

Tapping his ash into the pottery bowl Grierson had set out for that purpose, Wyn studied the dark gray designs on the red clay.

"Indian, Ben?" Wyn tapped the bowl with his index finger. While he might understand the politics of the military in Washington, he had no concept at all of how this enemy thought, what he believed. A culture which could produce this oddly crude, yet charming piece of pottery must

have some elements he could understand.

Grierson nodded. "I collect, Alice does, too. Whenever I can pick up a nice specimen, I like to do so. Makes moving difficult when we get transferred, but the boys appreciate these odd bits of the West. A buffalo skull, some arrowheads, a beaded shirt. That came from some cliffs not far from the fort. Interesting paintings, high up. No one knows what they mean, who did the art work. Clearly aboriginal. Get some spare time," Grierson grinned, "you may want to take a look."

"Most interesting." Leaning his head back, Wyn puffed hugely, pale clouds billowing about. "But something tells me I won't have any free time, not for a while."

"Smart man." Grierson jabbed his cigar into the bowl, staring at the stub as though it held the answers to all his problems. "You have a way about you, Wyn."

Wyn detected uneasiness in the General's voice, a timbre of doubt. "What you got in mind, Ben?"

"Well, being a Medal of Honor winner, and all, and let's face it, one of those who can swim with the big dogs down the river..." Grierson shifted his thin shanks uncomfortably, twirling the cigar band between his index fingers.

“I hope you’re not planning to send me back to Washington,” Wyn joked uneasily. Just as he was starting to feel alive again, with a chance to make up for lost time in his life, he wasn’t about to take orders back to the capitol.

“Nope, nothing so drastic. How about doing some politicking for me with the Texans, though? Ord’s a hero to them, he’s fought the Indians so long they’ll be building him a statue any day. What I need is for them to go easy on my men. I’m not Ord, I can’t command them to respect the black soldiers. Wyn, you have no idea what my men have to put up with.” Grierson shuddered.

Wyn realized his conversations with Sergeant Roper, with the other men, centered on their mounts, equipment, Indians. Not a one had complained of mistreatment by the Texans. Even during the War, when the black recruits had been paid less than the white soldiers, he’d heard grumbling, and one regiment had refused to accept any pay until there was parity, but being the best soldier possible had superceded all bigotry. When bullets flew, color didn’t matter.

“Give me an idea,” Wyn urged grimly. Suddenly, the cigar-thick smoke was too much, and he wrestled with a window. He had an idea he was going to need an iron stomach for what Grierson had to say.

“One of my men did some singing and dancing at one of the saloons in San Angela. Saturday nights, made a little extra money. Sure had a voice on him,” Grierson, the former music teacher, looked dreamy. “Well, some drunken cowboy decided it’d be fun to shoot the monkey, kills my man.” Grierson’s voice was rock hard now.

“Townpeople hid him, the man who did the shooting. Had to send a sternly worded message to the sheriff, reminding him of his duty.” Grierson now was the General, demanding justice. “Lo and behold, the threat of a boycott by the Fort of all civilian emporiums of every sort worked wonders. Man was brought to trial.”

Wyn could guess the end of the story. “And walked a free man, with twelve men tried and true congratulating him on his good shooting.”

“That about says it, yessiree.” Grierson waved at the smoke balls still crowding his home office. “Things like that go on all the time. Won’t help my men, whether they’re tracking game or Indians. Blame us every time they get hit, lose stock. If I were General Ord, I could bully them into treating my men like human beings. But I’m not Ord, I’m their enemy. But you’re not.”

Throwing up another window sash, Grierson sucked the tepid afternoon air. Tapping his toe

against the desk, Wyn wondered who'd cooked up this idea, Ben or Alice. Something was going on, sure as shootin'.

"So, spit it out, Ben. What've you got in mind?"

"Tact and polish, Wyn. Pin that medal on your chest, and make some calls. I understand," Grierson coughed into his hand, hiding his face, "you're friends with Mrs. Talbot. Greatly respected in these parts, Mrs. Talbot. Elias, too, mainly because he runs the ranch for her. No one in town, not in these parts, would give Elias any guff."

Freezing, Wyn wondered crazily if Mara or Elias had talked with the General, trying to get him out of their way. How much did Ben know about their history, his and Mara's? Suddenly, he remembered Sergeant Roper at the stable, the day he'd seen Elias.

"Boarded a horse out there, broken down old thoroughbred I found hip-shot in front of a saloon at one of the train's watering stops. Matt Talbot took him off my hands when I got here." Not about to give anything away, Wyn was going to make Grierson work for whatever it was he had in mind.

"Yes, hmm, well, I see." Even Grierson, not known for his charm and polish, was wary when treading in these waters.



“So what is it you want me to do, General?” Slightly ashamed of himself for jumping so hard on his old friend, Wyn decided to give him some maneuvering room.

“Build us some bridges around here, Wyn.” Grierson spat the words out quickly, as though if he hesitated, he’d never complete his request. “We’ve got a few weeks, maybe, before it starts all over again, and truth is, this may be the last chance the Tenth has in Texas. If I can get some of the influential ranchers, the folks in town with money, to give us a hand, talk us up with Ord and Sheridan, maybe Sheridan will cut some orders the Tenth can live with. Maybe, just maybe, he’ll let us do our job the way I know we can.”

Wyn whistled. “Big order, Ben. You think because I’ve got a horse at TwoBars, I can polish the image of the Tenth enough to get you whatever it is you want? Respect, what?”

“More than that, Wyn.” Grierson was the General, again. “Texans get their congressmen to talk, to make demands that get listened to by the money men, the ones who buy the horses in St. Louis, the ones who send us the rifles. We get the right people behind us, Washington will send us what we need to fight, and fight well.”

Wyn noticed Grierson had left Mara’s name out of it. But he wasn’t about to let it drop. He had to know what Grierson knew. “How does Mrs. Talbot fit into the picture, Ben?”

Twisting, Grierson stared out the window. “Alice should be home soon, better get the rest of these blasted things propped open.” He reached for another sash.

“Sergeant Roper have any hand in this, Ben?” His voice soft, Wyn struggled to keep bitterness out.

Grierson continued to face away, the graying back of his head in need of a haircut, Wyn noticed.

“Funny, how sometimes God just sends a gift, and says ‘open it, son, and see what you can do.’ Guess that’s what you are to me, Wyn, a gift horse I don’t intend on looking in the mouth. Whatever’s between you and those folks at TwoBars is none of my business, nor anyone else’s. But it sure wouldn’t hurt if you could find it inside your gentlemanly soul,” Grierson turned now, and stared at Wyn, man to man, “to take those Southern manners of yours to town, and drum up a little support for the Tenth. Having a lady like Mrs. Talbot at your side won’t hurt, not one little bit.”

“I’ll be goll-durned.” Tripping on the edge of the Turkey carpet, Wyn braced himself on the General’s desk as he wondered at his lack of surprise. Going West had been his idea of a new start, and here Grierson wanted him to play the political military game he’d been playing in

Washington, albeit on a smaller, more provincial scale. “I’m a soldier, Ben. Like you. I want to soldier, not glad-hand some old geezer with too much cattle and not enough sense to know what’s good for him.”

“I hate to ask you to do this, but you’ve seen for yourself how it is with the Tenth. My pleas to Washington fall on ears not just deaf, they’re gone. No one’s listening to me, and I’m about ready to try anything. Even this.”

For a second, Wyn wondered why he was putting up this fuss. Ben was correct, he was getting nowhere fast, through regular channels. In the month he’d spent in the field with the Tenth, he’d realized that the Buffalo soldiers were the best he’d seen since the War. If he could help, why not? What really galled him, though, was Ben’s implication that he use Mara to gain an entree into Texan society.

And why not? Suddenly, he’d have a legitimate reason to see Mara more often, to plead his cause in a more indirect fashion. While he made his case for Texan support for the Tenth, he’d be able to see if his powers of persuasion would work with Mara. For a second, he saw himself once more in her good graces, a father to Matt, the past long forgotten and their love renewed.

*What a fool you are, Wyn Trainam.* Perhaps a younger Mara would have fallen for subtlety,

but the woman he'd met over a month ago was no longer that girl. Her letter to him had proven her forthrightness, if nothing else. Mara Talbot would never allow herself to be used, unless she felt the cause to be just and deserving.

Elias, though, had given him hope. His cause *was* just, he reminded himself. The Ninth was at the end of its time chasing Apaches, and the Tenth was about to take the brunt of their blows. If he could help the Tenth, and at the same time give Mara a chance to see how he, too, had changed, why not give it a try?

"All right," Wyn blurted suddenly. "I'll do it. On one condition: You ask no questions, and you stay out of this, entirely."

Grierson nodded solemnly, his beard bobbing against his chest. "Alice said you'd say that."

*Ahh, the omniscient Alice Grierson.* So, he'd guessed correctly about her, and Sergeant Roper, too. *So be it*, he concluded, heading for the kitchen to dump the cigar ashes behind the house. Fate had sent him to the Tenth, for reasons other than those he'd first discerned. It was up to him to control the flailing hand of chance and make sure it brought no misfortune to those he cherished.

## Chapter 17

Crooking his head, Matt took a hard look at the thoroughbred's coat. Swiping an imagined speck of dust, he ended up giving Senator a firm pat on the rump.

"Looking good, old boy. Say so, myself, you'll do." Dropping the curry comb and brush in the box, Matt slipped a dried apple from his pocket. The horse lipped it from his palm contentedly.

"You'll be put to work soon, once the Captain gets a good look at you." Regret as well as pride tinged the boy's voice, just beginning to crack. Out here, he spoke freely, but around his ma and Elias, he kept his answers to syllables. Elias had told him the crazy voice would pass soon, but he didn't like to sound like a cricket with the hiccups in the middle of a sentence more than he had to.

Slipping a bridle over the gelding's head, Matt led him into the sunshine. Using the lower rail of the paddock fence, he slipped onto the horse's back, ready to exercise him. The Captain hadn't given any orders beyond feed and cleanliness, but Matt knew a horse like Senator would go

downhill fast if he couldn't move freely. Boy and horse had built up stamina along the river's edge, moving fluidly as the bay gained strength. Accustomed to rugged Mexican ponies and rangy cow horses, Matt thrilled at the thoroughbred's long, quicksilver gait.

Since it was Sunday afternoon, the one time his ma allowed the ranch to rest, he put his heels to Senator, intent on stealing a few golden moments alone with the bay before his ma called him to wash up for supper. Barely nudging Senator's flanks with his heels, the boy and horse rocked in a gentle canter down the long road leading away from the ranch house to the river's edge. For a second, Matt imagined himself a general leading his troops into battle, his saber glinting in the early light of dawn, his hat plumed like Jeb Stuart's. Even though Elias had fought for the North, and Matt thought the world of Elias, it was his daddy, the man who'd died when he was a baby, he emulated in his imagination.

Unheeding of anything except his mental image of his father, the Confederate war hero, Matt almost landed on his face in the dust as Senator shied.

"Whoa, boy!" Grabbing at the loosely held reins, Matt was startled back to reality.

"See you got my horse in shape, young Matt Talbot." Captain Trainam leaned on the pommel of his saddle, grinning at Matt with more than just amusement. Matt stared, amazed at

the transformation of the Army officer.

“Thought that was what you wanted, sir,” Matt gulped, hoping his voice wouldn’t betray him. The Captain sat high atop a long-legged gray, all muscle and sinew, his hide short-haired and tough-skinned. A real tough piece of horseflesh, was Matt’s first impression. The Captain had found himself a horse, all right. Senator sensed his rival, flattening his ears.

“Sure enough, and you’ve done a good job. Think you deserve a bonus, young man.” Fishing in his pocket, the Captain emerged with a glitter of gold in his palm. “Call it a reward for a job well done.”

Gratefully, Matt accepted the coin. Barely resisting the urge to test it between his teeth, he allowed his fingers to trace the designs on the metal. A ten dollar gold piece, by jimminy! He’d never had so much money, not in his entire life.

“Thank you, sir,” he managed to mumble in his excitement. Then he realized why the Captain was at TwoBars. He meant to take Senator back to Ft. Concho. Matt’s elation sank into the murky depths of self-pity. He didn’t want Senator to leave him, he’d feel as though his best friend had been stolen.

“I’ll get him ready for you to lead back, Captain,” Matt squeaked out in his disappointment.

Turning Senator's head, he didn't see the amusement in Wyn's face.

"No need, Matt. He could use a bit more of your tender care, I'm sure. Ghost, here, is doing just fine, once we reached an understanding."

Relief shed through Matt like a spring rain, and he unwilted. Squaring his shoulders, he remembered his manners.

"Come on up and say hello to ma. She's fixing supper at the house."

"It's your mother I came to see, Matt. How do you think she'd like a meal in town with me one night?"

Unaccustomed to thinking of his mother in any other light than as simply his mother, Matt was taken aback by the image of the Captain calling for her in a buggy to go into San Angela.

"Well, uh, I don't know," was about all he could manage. His mother was *old*, for heaven's sake. She seemed quite happy with their life on the ranch, and even though he knew other women on the ranches remarried after their husbands died or got killed, his mother wasn't one of *them*. She was simply his mother.

"Well, I'll be asking her, if you don't mind." Captain Trainam seemed unable to completely squelch his grin at Matt's befuddlement. "The Tenth's back for a while, and your mother and I



being, old acquaintances, thought I'd like to have a talk about the old days."

"Ma said you and she and Pa had been friends." Matt had thought sometimes that his mother had squelched any questions he'd had about her comment the night the Captain helped deliver the foal. As far as he was concerned, his ma hadn't answered a single question about the "old days" satisfactorily. Finally, he'd given up trying with her. Elias, on the other hand, had been even worse, pretending he didn't hear the questions put to him. His curiosity sharpened, Matt had bided his time. He'd always known the Captain would show up again, if only to pick up Senator.

"Good friend, your father. Best one I ever had."

A million questions burst into Matt's head like shooting stars, but Captain Trainam had given the gray the signal to walk on. Although he wanted to fire questions to the soldier's back like a Gatling gun, Matt remembered enough of his manners to swing Senator around and try and catch up. He also remembered how Elias and his mother had cut him off when he brought up the Captain's name, and he had no intentions of using the same direct tactics with the officer. He'd learned his lesson, and he'd be more circumspect this time around.

"Say, Captain, we hear there's going to be a real hullabaloo starting soon. Think you'll be

needing Senator for a campaign?” He didn’t want to think about Captain Trainam courting his mother, for Pete’s sake. Maybe if the Captain got busy in the field, he wouldn’t have time for such nonsense.

“I’d say you heard right. No, son, don’t think I’ll take Senator along for this ride. He deserves more rest, all he’s been through before you got to work on him.”

Preening under the compliment, Matt almost forgot to ask about his father. But a topic so important couldn’t be forgotten for long.

“My pa was a real good soldier. You as good?”

Wyn knew what the real question was. Had Wyn once worn Confederate butternut brown, then become a galvanized Yankee? Matt was carefully feeling out the relationship between the adults in his life, and the man his mother clearly did *not* want to discuss. Wyn thought his answer through carefully. After all, Matt was innocent of what had happened years before his birth.

“Grew up together. Went our separate ways, once the War broke out. Your father and I never spoke again after Ft. Sumpter. Wish we had. Elias, your pa, and I, we were just about inseparable when we were your age.” The warmth of happier times shaded Wyn’s voice, but he was careful to keep it short.

“Ask your mother about us, she’ll tell you what she wants you to know. But there’s nothing to worry about.” Wyn chuckled. “No deep secrets, nothing to be ashamed of. Just too many years since friends parted. Understand? It’s like seeing a bridge in front of you, way far away in the distance, and you keep thinking you ought to change directions and head over that way, but you just never do.

“Well, guess I was like that. Should have found your pa, Elias, your mother, after the War was over. Never did, and I don’t think your mama cares much now to renew an old friendship. Don’t say as I blame her, either. That’s why I need your help.”

Wyn’s eyes sparkled. “Talked with Elias, the other day. He’s on my side. What about you, Matt? Think you can help me with your Ma? Get her to put on her town dress and ride into San Angela with me?”

Although young, Matt had grown up fast, helping Elias around the ranch. His mother had taught him his letters and sums, but there were some things he just *knew* couldn’t be learned by reading or doing. He was feeling that way now. The Captain was, for whatever reason, asking his blessing. Matt squirmed uncomfortably.

“No one tells Ma what to do, Captain. You should know that, you being such an old friend,

and all.” Once firmly in the Captain’s corner, if only because he’d trusted Matt to look after his horse, Matt was now feeling the reins of caution. After all, his mother hadn’t evidenced any bounding enthusiasm for Captain Trainam’s presence, much less any mention of his name.

Wyn hooted aloud at Matt’s response. “Spoken like a Talbot, son. Men in your family always did know when to step aside, and let the ladies run the show. Wish I’d learned that lesson.”

Suddenly reassured by Wyn’s humorous response, Matt relaxed. “Elias sure did. People think he runs the ranch and Ma tells folks that, so they’ll deal with him when it comes to the horses. But she’s the one who keeps track of every penny, knows when the Army needs remounts, all that business stuff.”

“Learn from her, young Matthew. A woman like that is rare, indeed. Actually, my intentions in calling on your mother are more than social. Her business acumen is apparently acknowledged over at Ft. Concho. I was led to believe she could introduce me to other influential ranchers, the sort who might be able to speak to political powers about certain topics.”

Matt felt like an adult, being included in the Captain’s discussion of his reasons for his visit to TwoBars. His mother an influential rancher? He’d never thought of her in that way. But now

that he thought about it, she knew everyone in these parts, and whenever there was a threat of some disease to the livestock, a dispute over a boundary, and the ranchers got together to settle the matter without guns, his mother saddled up the mare and rode to the palavering. He always assumed she'd had her say, because if she hadn't, he and Elias would have heard about it, right fast.

The Captain had dropped right much in his lap, and he needed some time alone, tucked away in the loft of the barn, to sort it all out. Chewing on his bottom lip, he hadn't even thought about being careful about how much he spoke, and being embarrassed because his voice cracked in mid-sentence. Senator had no trouble keeping up with the long stride of the big gray the Captain rode. Matt barely noticed the ranch house was in front of them.

"Matt, get that horse put away, right now." Hands on her hips, his mother loomed before them in the middle of the front of the barn. Matt had never seen her so angry, not even when he'd brought home the beehive filled with upset bees.

Speechless, Matt stared at his mother's fury-filled eyes. When he tried to answer her, his throat seized up like a rusty nail in an old horse shoe, and all he could do was croak.

"Do as your mother says, Matt." Captain Trainam dismounted, casually handing the gray's

reins to Matt. Matt was amazed at the Captain's easy manner in the face of such anger. He felt himself withered by it.

"Yes, sir," he finally squeaked out, riding Senator into the barn with the gray following like a lamb, as though he, too, was grateful to escape the barrage coming from the woman Matt had always thought of as gentle but firm.

"Mara, let's talk," Captain Trainam answered softly, so quietly Matt had to turn his head to hear. He caught a glimpse of his mother's freckled face, flushed as though she'd been breaking a bronco.

Not daring to look back again, Matt gratefully disappeared into the soothing darkness of the barn. His ears rang still with the wrath buzzing around his mother like a bad rain. Sorry for Captain Trainam, Matt almost forgot to think about what the Captain had said about wanting to take his mother to dinner.

Worried about a man taking an interest in his mother, he calmed himself with the certainty that the woman he'd seen a few seconds ago wouldn't have a thing to do with the Captain.

Because no matter what the Captain said about his mother and his influence, he'd seen a look in the Captain's eye that said more was intended.

## Chapter 18

Elias rested against the fence pole, anxious to get it in place to fix the hole where its predecessor had rotted. But the scenario about to play out before him was too good to miss. Matt had flown into the barn like a mouse about to be eaten by a tabby, his adolescent face filled with fear and awe at the same time.

“She’s in for it, for sure!” Matt managed to gulp out after Elias whacked him on the back so he could catch his wind.

Without waiting to find out what Mara might be in for, Elias ran for the barn door, his gun in his hand. If Mara had trouble, Matt might think her capable of handling it without interference, but he, Elias, knew better. Some things a woman shouldn’t have to face alone. He didn’t intend on shooting any visitors, but he’d make his point forcefully if Mara told whoever’d upset Matt to vamoose, and the stranger didn’t vamoose.

No sooner had his foot slid into the dirt of the yard, when Elias recognized Wyn Trainam’s back, sweating in the sun as Mara glared down at him from the front porch. *Common sense, that*

*man does not have*, Elias noted, as Wyn kept his feet firmly planted on the ground.

“I told you to stay away, and I meant it. What is it about you Yankees, you hard of hearing?” Mara’s voice was clear as a desert night. “Or is that you never had another woman turn you down, Wyn Trainam, and you can’t stand it? Well, I won’t be the one who gave in to you, not then, not now, not ever.”

Edging back into the barn, Matt and Elias tried without success to hear what was being said.

“I’ll do some chores,” Elias whispered, grasping the first idea that came to hand. He might have to rescue Wyn if Mara continued along the verbal path she was on right now. Nothing in their past would have prepared Wyn for the wrath of a woman disobeyed.

“And another thing...” Mara’s voice rose like an eagle about to fly higher into a storm.

Her complexion burned a deeper shade of red than Elias had ever seen. He didn’t envy Wyn, his back ram-rod straight as he weathered the barrage. Maybe there was something he could do to help.

“Matt,” he hissed over his shoulder, pretending to work the wooden post into its hole, “come on out here, boy.”

“Not me!” Matt’s strangled whisper barely reached Elias. “I know better than to step in a



rattler's nest, and you should, too!"

"Been knowing your mama a long time, boy, come on out here, *NOW!*" Elias knew Matt wouldn't disobey him when he used that tone of voice.

Creeping from the barn, Matt kept his back turned to his mama, pretending not to notice the tirade from the porch. Grasping a sledge hammer in one hand, steadying the post with the other, Elias winked slyly at Matt.

"Hold on, boy, and when I say so, start screaming and hopping around like I clobbered you good with this hammer."

Matt wasn't too sure about the hammer not actually falling somewhere on his head if he didn't obey, so as Elias cracked the wood solidly, he began yelling for all he was worth.

"Quick, fall down, Matt, pretend you gotta get carried to the house!" Elias hissed in Matt's ear, as he flung the hammer down and simultaneously began yelling for help.

Mara flew from the porch like a barrel of shot, rocking Wyn back on his heels.

"Matt, Matt!" she screamed, her skirts flying as she skidded into the dirt beside her son. "What happened, Elias, where's he hurt?"

"Get him in the house, quick now, Mara, no time for squawking." Elias pretended to try to

lift the boy, and stumbled back with him. “Get Wyn, he’ll help.”

Elias saw the anger at Wyn flee Mara’s eyes, as she turned imploringly to the house, expecting to find Wyn waiting where she’d left him. But Wyn was already beside her, pulling Matt’s head into his arms as Elias lifted his feet.

Matt groaned convincingly. Elias pretended to struggle with Matt’s feet, so Wyn took more of the boy’s weight in his arms, until he was carrying him alone.

“Should you go for the doctor, Elias?” Mara held her son’s hand in hers as Wyn easily toted Matt into the cool darkness of the house.

Matt’s eyes flew open, as he gulped quickly. “No, mama, it’s not so bad as all that, I’ll live.”

“Where’re you hurting?” Mara’s hands swept over Matt with the experienced touch of a woman who could set a broken bone so it healed straight and true.

“Uh, well,” Matt hesitated. He’d never knowingly lied to his mother before, and Elias hadn’t whispered any hints as to how to handle this.

“Mara, need to speak with you, alone, if you would.” Elias grasped Mara’s shoulders, bent over her son, and firmly righted her. “Outside, please.”

Frowning over her shoulder at him, Mara’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You’re not

planning on telling me it's a man thing, are you, because I'll remind you I changed this boy's diapers for two long years."

"No, Mara," sighed Elias, "it's not that. I just need for you to speak with me in private, if you please."

"What's all this polite talk, you aiming to tell me Matt's on death's door?" Giving Matt another hard glance, Mara rose to her feet, ignoring Wyn holding her son's head in his lap. "'Cause I'm beginning to have a suspicion there's nothing wrong with this boy a good strong hiding won't cure, one which he has coming, I may add, for scaring his mama to death."

His face white at her threat, Matt started to rise.

"Now, don't go getting up," Elias soothed, "it'll make your foot start throbbing. Got him on the right one, thing like that'd make a grown man cry. Leave the boy alone, Mara, and come with me."

Wyn had remained silent through the scenario before him. He'd realized quickly the boy wasn't hurt too badly, if he'd been hurt at all, by his lack of flinching as he mother prodded his every muscle with her thin fingers. Still numbed by Mara's tirade, he hadn't yet figured out what was going on, but clearly Elias wanted Mara away from him. He decided to keep his mouth shut,

and see how it played out.

The concerned mother disappeared and the Southern lady Wyn remembered from his youth took her place. Sweeping through the opened door of the house, Mara's skirts trailed her as though they were of silk and not gingham. A grin on his face, Wyn had a warming sense of nostalgia and well-being. Elias clearly had the situation under control.

Mara planted her heels firmly on the porch, arms akimbo.

"Well?" was her opening sally.

"Think we can walk and talk, Mara?" Elias nodded towards the barn, grasping her reluctant hand and threading it through his arm.

"You'd better have a very good explanation for this, Elias." Her feet clicked and clacked on the steps as if she were squelching rattlers, male rattlers, under her heels.

Elias marched her into the shadow of the barn, aware her eyes were building with anger, again.

"Now, before you fly off the handle at me too, just settle down a minute. You and I go way back, Mara, and I have never in my life seen you act like this. There's no reason for you to treat Wyn like some Yankee marauder, out to rape you and steal the silverware."

Mara's mouth spun into a straight line, and Elias bet she was biting her tongue. Never before had Elias called her to task, and the fact he was now doing so shocked her into silence.

"I know you didn't want Wyn around Matt, and I know why, but darn it, Mara, men change. That boy likes him, and he was your husband's best friend. Yours too, if you'll just remember. Let him speak his piece, and try to keep a civil tongue in your mouth."

"Oh," gasped Mara. She'd known she'd been a shrew with Wyn, but Elias' words stung deeply. Elias hadn't once criticized her, and she was a fair-minded enough of a woman to realized he wouldn't be doing so now, if he hadn't just cause.

"That bad, am I?" Her face blushed with shame now, not anger.

"Well, let's just say you weren't giving the man a chance. Everyone deserves at least that, don't you think?"

"Guess so." She hung her head briefly, but her chin was up again in its stubborn angle before she could admit to more shame.

"Man came out here to make peace, is my way of thinking. You could do worse than to settle it between you, Mara. He's not the man you once knew. Get to know him better, see if you won't say I'm right."

“How do you know all this after one short meeting at Ft. Concho?” She wasn’t ready, yet, to concede defeat.

“Tell a lot about a man, when I need to. How’s about getting off that high horse of yours and come on back down to Earth?”

“All right. But I can’t say as I’m happy about him being with my son, when I asked him to stay away. Doesn’t show much character, you ask me.”

“Wyn’s got character, just not the one you want him to have. He’d stayed home, joined up with all the other boys in gray, you’d have praised his name ‘til we’d have had to shoot you. No, Mara, time’s come to give up old grudges. Get on with it, woman.”

She hesitated, and Elias could tell she was weighing the stakes in continuing the argument. He hoped common sense would win. Whether or not Wyn and Mara became as close as they’d been in the past, she needed to be free from her fear of him. Finally, with a shuddering breath, she gave ground to him.

“Land’s sake, I never could fight with you.”

“Don’t like it much, myself. Now don’t go blaming Matt, but nothing’s wrong with him, just did what I told him to do. Now how about you head on back in that house, and send Matt back

out here to me. You can handle this better alone, is my bet.”

She cast him a scornful smile. “What you really mean is, I’d better eat crow, but you won’t make me have an audience. Lord have mercy, Elias, you’re a hard man.”

“And you’re one tough woman, Mara Talbot, and I know you’ll do the right thing by Wyn. Bury the past, once and for all, and let’s get on with it.”

She knew what he meant. Life would be changing for the three of them, with Wyn making a new fourth. She had no doubts that was what Elias meant to happen. She still wasn’t so sure herself, but if it meant Elias and Matt would be happier, she’d try to rinse some of the starch out of her corset and learn to bend to their will, for once.

She nodded her assent.

“Matt, come out here, son, your ma’s got something she wants to say to the Captain, alone.”

Matt’s head popped out the open door, where he’d been trying to eavesdrop. “Can I walk now, Elias?”

“Yessiree, you’ve just made a miraculous recovery. Tell the Captain to wait where he is.”

Elias watched Mara cross Matt’s path on her way back to the house, and relaxed only when she reached up to ruffle the boy’s hair affectionately. She’d just taken the steps she needed out of

her anger, and into living again.



## Chapter 19

“I don’t know what to say, Mara.” He figured he’d better try honesty, right off the bat. Color still stung her cheeks, but her eyes had softened some since she’d left Matt and Elias at the barn.

“Guess so, Wyn. Hard to answer for all those years, in one afternoon.”

“Don’t think I can. Just hear me out, give it a fresh try. All I’m asking, Mara.” He felt gangly and uncertain, disadvantages that had weakened his knees as a youth. But he’d never once been on shaky ground with Mara, not until he’d come West and found her, again. Only she wasn’t the Mara he’d remembered, but this strong, independent woman with a temper.

Her eyes searched the horizon as though she waited for an answer from the sky. He watched her memories fly across her pupils like old thunderheads, felt her tighten with old hurts, ache with old scars. Her hands, loose at her side, knotted in the gingham of her apron once, and he feared she’d rend the cloth with one strong jerk. Gradually, her sun-browned face softened, and he caught a glimpse of the love he remembered seeing in her so long ago.

He wondered if the feelings she remembered now were those she had of her dead husband, his best friend, or of him. He kept his stance on the porch a respectful distance from her, face hidden in the shadows as she soaked in the reddening rays of the setting sun. Finally, she shifted slightly, staring him down.

“Say your piece, Wyn Trainam. I won’t bite your head off.”

He still wasn’t sure, but it didn’t much matter if she took him off at the knees or not. Time to change tactics. She wasn’t going to listen to him try to explain himself, not right off the bat. He’d have to work her into it gradually. Clearing his throat, he tried again.

“Ben Grierson sent me out here to get your help politicking the ranchers hereabouts. Get their influence going to see if the Tenth can’t get better horses and weapons. But it’s just an excuse for me to be here.”

Laughter ripped from her like a sudden storm, rolled out of her like thunder. He stood his ground, aware the import of what he’d said was close to causing her tears, not humor. Finally, as the peals settled into hiccups, she wiped a corner of each eye with her apron, and sucked in a deep breath.

“You’ve still got more nerve than any ten men, Wyn, I’ll give you that.”

“That I do, that I do.” Fiddling with his pockets, he studied her. She still was uncertain, wanting to do what was right, but angry enough to fight it.

“Let me at least tell you what’s going on. It’ll make a difference to you, your ranch, if we can catch Victorio. Help all the ranchers in Texas.”

“Think I’m a fool, I don’t know that?” She was still quick to take affront.

“Not saying that.” He felt as if he were quieting a skittish horse. “Just my way of working around to what Ben—I mean, Colonel Grierson—wants me to ask you.”

“Oh, all right.” She was slightly mollified, but still none too happy to be alone with him at the moment. “So, speak your piece.”

His eyes travelled from the scuffed toes of her work boots to her hair, falling from its pins at the base of her neck. “Well, how about I do that over a steak in town?”

For the first time, panic crossed her face. “Don’t need to eat to hear you talk.”

“That you don’t, but I’d surely like a full stomach about now.” He had a thought. “Elias and Matt, they’re welcome, too. Elias said he’d help any way he could.” He hadn’t said that directly, but Wyn was an old campaigner. He took whole cloth out of an unstrung loom when he needed it.

One scuffed toe tapped the porch. Wyn waited.

“I suppose that’d be all right.”

*Less than gracious, but better than a flat-out no.* “I’ll help Elias hitch up your wagon.” Tipping his hat, Wyn tried to keep the triumph out of his eyes.

One month he’d been campaigning, and he was back in the saddle for good. Nothing could stop him, now. Mara might not know it, yet, but she was as good as his.

Dinner went better than Wyn had expected. The restaurant, tucked off the main street of San Angleo, often served Buffalo soldiers, so no comment was made about Elias accompanying the them. Plain wooden tables, lit by kerosene lanterns with glass shades, showed the signs of heavy scrubbing and many hot plates.

Wyn let Mara and Matt do the ordering, not a complicated matter in a simple place such as this, and knew in his heart it would be a better meal than any he’d had at the Willard Hotel back in the nation’s capitol. A large man, a Mexican, Wyn surmised, hauled platters of food from behind the swinging doors to the kitchen, almost as soon as they’d finished ordering,

Chicken, tamales better than those in San Antonio according to Elias, fried potatoes, biscuits as big as Wyn’s fist, along with a crock of fresh butter, and a platter of fresh tomatoes floating in

vinegar covered the table. A pitcher of homemade beer and another of lemonade appeared behind the food. Mara collected their plates and served the pewter platters as though she were the matron of a grand establishment. Matt and Elias kept up a steady ramble of talk that washed over him and Mara. Wyn concentrated on not staring at her too much, but now and then, he felt himself studying her face in the light of the kerosene lantern in the middle of the table. He wanted to remember this face, this sun-freckled, unladylike face so filled with courage and strength, he was almost glad the Mara of his youth was gone. He liked this woman immensely, and out of liking, there could be a better love, a more lasting treasure than anything promised in the passion of youth.

They all chatted amiably about the new foal, the horses, sales to the Army, the weather. Watching Matt, Wyn could see his father in him, the likeness growing stronger as Matt was pushing into manhood. Mara treated him with the tender toughness of a mother for her young son, but Wyn could see the ties were stretching to the limit. Soon, Matt would have to make his own mark in the world, and he wondered if Mara would cut the cord, or Matt. He had the feeling it would be Matt, and it would be soon.

“Captain, you taking that gray with you when you go after Victorio this time?” Matt flashed

eager eyes at Wyn, the crumbs of the last three biscuits clinging to his chin.

“Wipe your mouth, Matt,” Mara interrupted.

Ignoring her, Wyn nodded at Matt. “One tough horse. I like him almost as much as Senator. Don’t think Senator should have to go through what we’re going to run into, though. Deserves his rest, Senator does. How about you keep him exercised while I’m gone, start working his stamina back up?”

“Sure!” Matt sparkled. “But he’s in good shape now, Captain. Better than you’d think, given how hard he’d been used before you bought him.”

“What you driving at?” Elias leaned across the table, his gingham shirt stretched across his stomach like a man who’s eaten a good meal and knows it.

“Well, I think Senator deserves a chance to go with the Captain, whenever he rides out again, is all...” Matt buried his mouth in a forkful of mock apple pie, blushing behind his darkly tanned face.

“*Senator* deserves to go? What are you driving at, Matt?” Mara abruptly dropped her fork on the table, oblivious to the clatter she’d caused.

“Just that the Captain paid us, I mean me, good money to get Senator in working shape, and

now he is, and I just think he deserves a chance to get in on the excitement, is all...”

Wyn had the itchy feeling between his shoulder blades that meant trouble, but he had no idea what kind and where it was coming from.

“Fighting’s not exciting, Matt. It’s boring as all get-out ninety percent of the time, and the rest is sheer terror. You get your tail feathers burned off rubbing leather, your feet frozen to the stirrup irons in winter, frostbite and sunburn at the same time, some altitudes, and there’s no way on Earth you can call all that exciting.” Elias spoke from his experience, and Wyn nodded in agreement.

“All boys think Army life is exciting, don’t they, Wyn?” Mara’s unhappiness was written on her face, and Wyn didn’t know if she meant him, or her son.

“Well, not all. I suppose it depends on the time you’re living in, and what’s going on with the world.” Wyn hoped he’d answered diplomatically, but he wasn’t about to squelch Matt.

“Guess that’s true, “ she whispered, as though speaking to herself. Then, more robustly, “What are you thinking of, Matt? Spit it out.”

Almost tied into knots by his foray into the battlefield of adult personal politics, Matt clutched the edge of the table until his fingers blanched, then mottled.

“Nothing, Ma. Nothing at all.” Clearly, Matt had a change of heart, and was no longer willing to risk his mother’s ire in the midst of such a public setting.

Mara appeared happy, indeed, grateful, to let the subject drop. Wondering if she had any idea what was going on in Matt’s head, Wyn promised he’d get to the bottom of it. For his own sake, if not Matt’s. He didn’t want to walk, unprotected by foreknowledge, into any field of fire between Mara and Matt.

“Well, finish up that last bite, Matt, and let’s be on our way.” Shoving away from the table, Elias patted his stomach. “Thank you, Wyn. I’ll ride home with Matt, you and Mara take the wagon. You can get your horse back at the ranch when you get there.”

“Oh,” softly escaped Mara. As he paid for the fare, Wyn noticed Mara standing stiffly on the front steps, waving good-bye to Elias and Matt as though she’d never see them again.

“Not going to kill you on the road back, Mara. You can relax,” Wyn offered, as he took a place beside her, close, but not too. Yellow light poured through the opened doorway, casting their shadows into the deepening dark of the street.

*We’re so close, yet so far, mused Wyn. Will she be able to see what we have that can bridge the distance between us, or will she stay forever outlined in my life, but never really there, not in*



*person.* He longed for her touch.

She bristled. “Didn’t think any such thing, Wyn Trainam. Just that it’s clear, Elias wants us alone together, and I wasn’t sure if you did, too.”

Slipping her arm in his, Wyn led her to the sidewalk, over by the wagon tied to the hitching post. He felt better touching her, knowing he had her to himself for the half hour the ride would take. *God bless you, Elias.*

“You know I do, Mara. Got a lot of catching up to do, been a long time coming.”

“It’s not that long a ride back to my place,” she offered.

“I’ll make it last long enough.” Confidently, Wyn flicked the reins over the rumps of the horses, backing them into the street.

As the last of the town lights flickered away into the night behind them, Wyn at last felt able to speak to her plainly. In his youth, he’d assumed Mara had known what he was thinking, believing in his naivete that all women in love understood their men. Now, at last, he’d learned better.

He waited for her to speak first, hoping to take his cue from her. She, however, wasn’t in any hurry. *Once more into the breach.* . . He took a deep breath and began.

“Mara, I plan to be around a long time. I want to be part of your life, and I’m willing to make changes to fit into the life you’ve built up here. All I ask is that you drop this wall you’ve set up around yourself, and step on out, and talk to me.”

“Nothing much to say, Wyn. You’re asking a lot of me. Not sure I can give it.”

“At least we’re talking. More than I expected, Mara. More than I hoped for, to be honest. We’ll give it time, let it grow up right.” He clicked his tongue at the horses. “By the way, you’ve done a good job with the boy. He’s like his father, be a fine man some day soon.”

“Elias had more to do with Matt’s turning out the way he has, than me. Always had the feeling he was doing for Matt what he’d seen your father do for you.” Mara’s throat constricted, so that the words seemed thick as she spoke them. Wyn wondered if she hid tears behind her equanimity.

As the lump grew in his own throat, Wyn hoped it was true.

“If so,” he managed to get the words out finally, “then he’s done one fine job, and you’ll never need worry about Matt.”

“Only thing I worry about is Matt and the Army. What if he wants to be a soldier, Wyn? Don’t think I could stand it.”

He'd been right about the strings between child and mother stretching. Already aware that Matt teetered on the dangerous border between adolescent and child, Mara had correctly sensed the coming battle between her and her son.

"It's not a dishonorable profession, Mara. Remember that for us, in our time, the Army meant something different than it does today. There's no war between North and South now, Matt won't be called to divide his loyalties, not like I was. Like you, and all the others who fought and wept for those who did."

"But..." she began, then stopped. "No sense fighting and worrying over what may never be. Think I've got a full plate with you, right now. At least, you'll keep my mind occupied, and that's the truth."

"And glad I am of it," Wyn chortled, surprised she'd admitted so much. "Plan on doing it for a good long while."

"And Matt's still just a boy," she added hopefully.

"Not for long, Mara, not for long," Wyn warned. "He'll be taking off on his own one day real soon."

As though the knowledge had been there all along, but she'd ignored it like a wart on a

finger, Mara caught her breath.

“But I’ll still be here,” he added. “For a long time to come.”

“That may be more a curse than a blessing,” she muttered, sounding not so much angry as exasperated.

At least the talk between them was that of two people who once cared for each other, and whose lives had been intertwined. For this night, at least, Wyn felt like a father to Matt, explaining in the way of time immemorial to a mother, that her son would one day go off on his own. Relishing the feeling, Wyn settled back into a companionable silence between them. There were many fences to jump for the two of them, he was sure of that. But for tonight, they’d take them together.

## Chapter 20

Ft. Concho baked in the sun, its stone buildings soaking in the heat until it radiated from rooftops like a Dutch oven over the fire. Sweat darkened uniform shirts until the fabric became a second skin, and even with regular dunkings in the horse trough, men couldn't get cool.

"Hard riding, weather like this, hot for June," muttered Grierson, playing with the cigar he'd hidden in his pocket.

"They'll be fine," reassured Wyn.

"Hope so." Grierson twirled on his heel, and headed for his office. For the hundredth time, he ran his finger along the line of watering holes, mentally assigning and reassigning men to each one. The plans had been laid long ago. When the Mescaleros hit some citizens in Bass Canon west of Ft. Davis in mid-May, it had come as a shock that they'd fired late-model Winchesters. The ante had gone up considerably, and it wasn't only the weather that was chewing at Grierson. Then, in the middle of June, some Pueblo Army scouts were slaughtered on their way to Ft. Davis through the Chinati Mountains. Prevalent theory held they'd run into some of Victorio's scouts.

The campaign was planned with Grierson's usual care and attention to detail. The men were to be ready to ride with Grierson on July 10, the other details already having been dispatched where Grierson wanted them. The cat and mouse game was about to begin.

Wyn took his leave of Alice Grierson, aproned and keeping busy as she usually did before the men moved out. Wyn figured it kept her mind off what was to come. Already packed and ready, Wyn figured he'd ask Alice to keep an eye on Mara, although he knew she didn't need it.

Alice saw through his ploy immediately. Snapping a dust cloth on the front porch, she beckoned him to sit in the shade.

"So what's going on, Wyn Trainam? My matchmaking do any good?"

"Yours? Lands sake, Alice, you never know when to quit." Wyn settled on the rocker, cocking an ankle over a knee as he prepared to spar with the General's wife.

"Been right scarce, the past few weeks. My beloved husband finally spilled the beans—you and the widow spending right much time together. So, Wyn, is it finally the altar for you? Confirmed bachelor that you are?"

"Sure do get to the point, don't you, Alice?" Wyn flicked an invisible speck of dirt from his uniform.

“Of course. Robert says Matt speaks of you all the time.”

“So, now your son’s spying for you, too? Your young, tender son. If I’d known, Alice Grierson, you were going to get me married off, I’d have stayed in Washington.” Although his tone was severe, Wyn’s eyes sparkled as Alice hadn’t seen them shine, ever.

“Well, Robert won’t be able to spy for me for long. Ben’s taking him with him on the 10th. Robert’s been dying to see some action, and he is old enough, I guess. Ben says he’ll be perfectly safe, that Victorio’s running south as fast as a March hare. Hard for boys out here, growing up in the Army, never really getting to play a part in what it does.”

“So, that’s where Matt gets it. From Robert.” Wyn thought back to his conversations with Mara about Matt’s growing restlessness.

“You think Robert would like some company?” His mind was moving faster than his mouth, and quickly Wyn knew this was what Matt needed to start him on his road to independence — time away from Mara and Elias, time to feel like he was part of the action. The question was, would Mara agree? Wyn hoped she would. He’d enjoy getting to know the boy alone, away from the watchful eye he always kept on Mara when Wyn was around.

“What are you planning, Wyn? Don’t tell me, I don’t think I want to know. I’ll never be

able to look Mara in the eye again without dying, if something should happen to that boy of hers!” Alice was sincere in her worry, and dropped into a rocker beside Wyn, leaning her hands on her knees as she stared at his face.

Wyn saw then the worry lines cutting into her forehead. Alice Grierson might play the perfect commanding officer’s wife, but she went through the same turmoil and trials as all the other women in West Texas.

“Then I’ll speak to Ben. But if Robert’s coming, why not Matt? Do the boy some good. Needs to get out of here for a while, get away from Mara’s fussing and worrying about him.” In the few weeks he’d taken to visiting TwoBars regularly, using Senator as an excuse, Wyn could tell Matt was champing at the bit for more freedom than Mara allowed. “Boys should be allowed to make their own mistakes,” Wyn had told Mara, but she wouldn’t hear of any changes for Matt. He doubted she’d take kindly to his suggestion that Matt accompany Robert Grierson in this ride after Victorio, but he’d try, for Matt’s sake.

Alice watched Wyn head for the stables to saddle up the gray. Ever since he’d taken to visiting the widow Talbot, he walked taller and less stooped, as though fifteen years had washed away over night. As soon as the men rode out, she’d take a trip to Mara’s ranch, and settle down



for an afternoon of tea and talk. She'd love nothing better than to arrange a wedding when the men returned. Her fruitcake recipe was famous at receptions.

Mentally, Alice ticked off the ingredients she'd need to start the cake, planning to order those she was lacking, as she went back to cleaning her quarters from top to bottom. In the way of all women risking their men in battle, she would keep busy for the next weeks, and keep telling herself they would all come home safely. It was the only way she could survive.

## Chapter 21

Wyn wasn't having an easy time of it with Mara. He'd planned to use the few days left before he had to leave, to ask her to marry him. If he didn't make it back from the chase for Victorio, he'd die knowing he'd tried his best to set things right with Mara. But first, he had to speak up for Matt.

Matt's frustration at being stuck in his boyhood was gnawing at the youth, and Wyn felt for him. He remembered all too well having to push for his own independence, but he at least had a father who'd understood. Like a chick pecking out of its shell, Matt would have to make his own way into adulthood, but Wyn meant to help him all he could. It was the least he could do for Madison Talbot's boy.

He found Mara in the barn, watering the mares in the heat of the day. Skirts dripping from the buckets she'd hauled, she paused, arms akimbo, when he appeared.

"Pour the next one for me, will you, Wyn? I declare, my shoulders feel like they're about to break off at my neck. Mares are thirsty, and it's the second time I've filled their buckets today."

He took the water bucket from her and replaced the empty one in the stall in front of her. The mare wickered softly in gratitude.

“We’re leaving on the 10th, Mara. Don’t know how long we’ll be gone for sure, but I wanted to talk to you about Matt, before I leave.”

“That boy!” Mara sounded disgusted, as she shoved a stray hair from her cheek. “Off with Elias, and I need him here! Don’t know what’s gotten into him, Wyn. Never acted like this before.”

He’d tried, subtly, to explain what Matt was going through. Elias had done the same. Neither of them had had any effect.

“Robert Grierson’s going this time, Mara.” He figured he’d spit it out, see what happened. Matt and the Grierson boy were the same age.

When she remained silent, he plunged on. “He and Matt are friends, I understand. Alice thinks Robert needs this, give him a chance to be with the men, feel like he’s part of everything happening out here. Can’t keep Matt in cotton-wool for the rest of his life, Mara, let him go to. I’ll watch out for him.”

Without a word, Mara marched to the back of the barn, and plopped on the stacked bales of

hay. Tucking her legs under her, she slumped as though defeated.

“All right,” she whispered.

Wyn could barely hear her. Still wary, he perched beside her, the hay sticking him through his uniform trousers. “What did you say?” he finally asked when she maintained her silence.

“I said, you can take him. But he’d better come home, Wyn Trainam. You, too.” Her eyes were determined.

Her admission stunned him. But he’d take it slowly, still afraid of spooking her.

Carefully, he patted her hand. “What changed your mind? This was way too easy.”

She almost laughed. “Guess I finally see what you and Elias have been telling me about Matt. I know you won’t let him get in harm’s way, and he deserves to get away from me and the ranch for a bit. Change of scenery would do anyone good.”

“You too?” he asked hopefully.

“Sure enough. Must admit, I’d welcome a change, right now.” Wiping the beads of sweat from her forehead, she leaned against him. For the first time, Wyn felt he was on an even keel with her.

“Think San Antonio would be a nice place to honeymoon?” He said it before he lost his

courage. Maybe today would be a day for firsts, all around.

She started to jerk aside. He refused to let her go. “Just think about it, is all I ask. When I get back, we can talk more.” He waited, afraid to breathe, too afraid to let her go. He was asking too much of her, he feared, too much for one day. The last time he’d been on the campaign trail, he’d carried her letter with him, the one which told him to stay away. Briefly, he wondered if he’d carry those same words with him this time.

They’d come far in the short time since their first dinner in San Angela in the company of Elias and Matt. Every spare minute, he’d worked to build a new relationship with her, painstakingly proving to her he was a changed man, albeit one who’d never stopped loving her. As he’d grown accustomed to her independence, she’d made adjustments of her own to him, and he sensed they now fit together in a new pattern, forged by new challenges into a new life.

She didn’t answer him, but she didn’t smack him silly, either. Triumph welled within him.

He didn’t feel the need to say anything else. Enclosing her hand in his, he watched her fingers tighten, then relax.

## Chapter 22

Ft. Davis, surrounded by a ridge of mountains, was greener this time of year than Ft. Concho ever was. It had taken eight days of hard riding, without any sighting of the Mescaleros, to get there. The men were grateful for the brief respite. General Grierson, known for his hard riding and lack of discomfort, allowed as how they could give the horses a break. The men wished he'd give them the same consideration.

Setting up headquarters in his tent, Grierson refused a polite offer of a set of quarters. Some family, he knew, would be dispossessed by his presence, and it was contrary to his principles to do that.

Wyn pitched his tent in a row with the General, Matt happily making himself useful. Senator had proven Matt's boast, that his stamina was what it should be, and even race-tender hooves had proven equal to the ride. Astride the Apache's gray, Wyn felt a swell of pride as Matt crossed the hard miles with ease. Madison, his old friend, would have been proud of his boy, too, Wyn knew it.

“Message from Colonel Valle, gentleman,” Grierson addressed his assembled officers. “It’s not encouraging. Seems our Mexican counterpart believes Victorio’s heading for Eagle Springs. Another five day ride from Ft. Davis. I suggest we get back in the saddle.”

“Any word from the scouts, sir?” Wyn knew their sightings would be more important than anything Colonel Valle had to say.

“Nothing. Our Pueblo Indians are still out there on the border.”

Lieutenant Nolan spoke up. “Then, we’ve no choice, sir. It’s Eagle Springs.”

There were no dissenting voices, although Grierson let it be known he encouraged every officer to give his opinion before the final decision was made. Every officer in the tent knew only too well that Hatch and the Ninth had run themselves ragged all over New Mexico. They didn’t want that to happen to the Tenth. Grierson’s stake-out at all the watering holes they’d found would either work, or be a dismal failure. Now was the time to find out.

“Gentleman, we ride at 3 a.m. Five days cooked rations. We’re camping cold.”

They wouldn’t eat off the land, either. There’d be no time to hunt, little game to feed the Tenth as they got closer to the Apaches. Each bullet had to count from now on. They’d have to beat the Apaches to the water, or Grierson’s plan wouldn’t work.

The heat of the day began to crescendo from five in the morning, on. As they rocked in the saddle, each man kept his eyes open, knowing the Mescalero and Warm Springs Apache could hide like lizards on a rock.

Tension built as they neared Eagle Springs. Wyn moved Matt and Robert closer, and found himself worrying about Matt more than he should. He was a soldier, he should have left the boy with his mother. The Army was no place for a family, Mara had been right. But Matt and Robert thrived on the conflict, pretending grim determination, their eyes gleaming. Matt, especially, had bloomed in the freedom he'd found, losing the sullen look that had worried Wyn.

They were triumphant when they made Eagle Springs before the Apache. The watering hole was untrampled by anything but the prints of local fauna. Quickly, Grierson gave the orders to set up a defense line.

Finding Sergeant Roper, Wyn pulled him aside. His wounds healed, the Sergeant winked at Wyn. "Got ourselves one heck of a fight coming, Captain. Feel it in my bones."

"Glad you're here, got a favor to ask." Wyn nodded at Matt, excitedly whispering to Robert Grierson.

"Keep an eye on him, if something happens to me. Know the General will do his best, but he



may be kinda busy, you know what I mean.”

Sergeant Roper patted his carbine. “Yes, sir, be glad to. You notice anything new about me, sir?

Impatient to be off, Wyn frowned. Surveying the Sergeant’s trail-dirty uniform and shiny rifle, he knew he’d fall into the Sergeant’s game without any effort. “No, Sergeant Roper, tell me what’s new.”

“Don’t have my canteen, sir! Surprised you missed such an important part of my appendage!”

Frowning, Wyn was about to scold the soldier that now was not the time to tipple.

“Cut it out, sir, just wanted you to know. So you wouldn’t worry about the boy, and me being bleary-eyed with the skullpop.” He winked reassuringly. Inwardly, Wyn scolded himself for his impatience.

“Thank you for telling me, Sergeant. You’re still the man I’d pick to keep the boy safe, no matter what. Just wanted you to know, in case there’s no time later for saying thanks.”

Wyn just had time to grab Matt’s shoulder, and pull him aside.

“You stay low, behind those rocks over there,” Wyn pointed. “You should be safe, you stay

put. You hear me, Matt? I don't want to have to explain to your mother how you ended up with a bullet in your brains."

"Yes, sir." Matt glanced at the Sergeant, then snapped a salute. "Nothing's going to happen to me, Captain Trainam. Don't you worry about me, I'll be fine. Help you with the horses, sir?"

"No, blast it," Wyn cuffed the boy affectionately. "Be busier than a quilting bee in a spell. You get yourself set up where I told you. And Matt," he paused, "you're a fine young man, and your father would have been proud of you."

"Thank you, sir!" With a grin as big as Texas, Matt scampered away. Wyn was grateful he'd spoken to the boy as a scout raced for their small camp.

"Apache!" signed the Pueblo scout to the General with hand gestures, his horse heaving. "Coming down the ridge line," he added softly.

"I want five men out there, now, back here in an hour, full report on their position and number," Grierson cracked.

By the time the scouting party returned, they were all about to snap with tension. But there was nothing out there, the men reported. No sign of any armed group at all.

"Probably one of Victorio's scouts," mused Wyn to Grierson. "Now he knows we're here."

Grierson chewed on an unlit cigar. “So we keep riding. Won’t show up, that’s for sure. Ft. Quitman’s a day’s ride from here, we’ll see what they’ve heard there.”

During their next bivouac, Mexican soldiers waded the Rio Grande with a message from Colonel Valle to General Grierson. The men he commanded were running out of supplies, chasing Victorio on the Mexican side of the river.

“Doesn’t look good, gentleman,” was Grierson’s first assessment of the situation. “He’ll do the same to us, right fast.”

Wyn spoke up. “Sir, I recommend we leave a force here at Quitman, some men to hold Eagle Springs, and the rest go north.”

“Good idea. Captain Nolan, you will stay at Quitman. Captain Gilmore will man Eagle Springs. Let’s set the noose, and start tightening it.” Grierson’s blood was up.

As soon as the other officers left Grierson’s tent, Wyn asked about the boys. “I don’t think either one of us wants to face an irate mother, Ben. Shouldn’t we leave them here?”

“They’ll be fine, Wyn. I’d rather Robert were with me, where I could keep an eye out, than anywhere else.”

“Guess I feel the same. Is this what being a father feels like?”

Grierson laughed. "Suppose it does. We're going to have a real ride out there, Wyn, and I don't want Robert to miss it. Might just be the last great Indian campaign in the annals of the history of the United States Army. Always did like being a part of history."

Wyn chuckled at Grierson's sly jab at his reputation. His ride around Vicksburg had saved Grant's Army during the War, and the press had taken due note. More than that, it had secured Grierson's reputation as a guerrilla fighter, a man who rode hard and fast and could live off a hostile land.

"We'll take the boys and five men with us. Pick out who you want, Wyn."

Wyn trusted Grierson's sixth sense, his ability to smell the enemy and beat him to the high ground. Matt practically sparkled with excitement as Wyn explained the plan to him.

Crossing back to Eagle Springs from Quitman, Wyn began to worry as bruised fetlocks began to show up. If their horses couldn't withstand this campaign, mild in comparison to the punishment the horses of the Ninth had taken, they would be in dire trouble.

Halfway between Quitman and Eagle Springs, they spotted riders on the horizon, pushing horses so hard they could see foam on the steeds' chests. Wyn flipped his glass to his eye, and focused it. One of the men in uniform was Henry Flipper.

“Must be from Captain Nolan, sir!” Wyn pulled the glass from his eye, staring at Grierson. Nolan wouldn’t have sent two men at such a killer pace unless there was good reason. Sensing this was what they’d been expecting, Wyn and Grierson cantered out to meet the two riders.

Lieutenant Flipper swung a salute, his heaving horse lathered to white. “Dispatch from Captains Gilmore and Nolan, sir!” He tendered the leather pouch.

“Summarize, if you can, Lieutenant,” Grierson rumbled. Flipping through the pages, he handed them to Wyn for a closer look. Flipper caught a ragged breath.

“Victorio’s heading north for sure, sir,” he responded through cracked lips. “Captain Nolan says to move fast.”

Grierson nodded. Admiringly, Wyn noted that once again, Grierson had guessed correctly about the enemy’s position, just as he’d done in avoiding the Confederate line at Vicksburg.

Grierson skimmed the pages Wyn handed back to him. “Lieutenant, how far did you ride, how long?”

“Ninety-eight miles sir, in,” Flipper pulled a timepiece from his jacket and squinted, “I believe twenty-two hours, sir.”

“Good riding, Lieutenant,” Grierson sighed softly, “very good riding, indeed. Get yourself

and your horses tended to, we're moving on."

As Flipper poured water from a canteen down his throat, Grierson pulled a folded map from inside his uniform jacket. Studying it, he seemed lost in thought. Realizing this decision was crucial, everyone around the General kept silent.

Grierson's face was sternly determined. "Gentlemen, we're riding for Tinaja de los Palmos. Only waterhole west of Eagle Springs, and it's far enough north for Victorio to need it. No where else he can get water, with us at Quitman and Eagle Springs, and he knows it by now."

"Lieutenant Flipper, I need you to return to Captain Gilmore, tell him to meet me there with reinforcements."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Flipper saluted. "Need a horse, sir. Mine's played out."

"Here, take mine," Wyn offered the gray. "He's made for this country. Take care, Henry."

"I will, sir." Swinging back into the saddle, Lieutenant Flipper was galloping away before Wyn realized he was hoping for more than reinforcements. They'd need more luck than the entire United States Army had had so far in catching Victorio.

Swinging back to where Matt and Robert Grierson had their heads together in excited whispers, Wyn had another pang of worry. But now, he didn't have time to indulge in "what ifs."

“Gentlemen, we’re riding hard for Tinaja de los Palmos. We are sure to engage the enemy. Are you prepared?”

For a second, both boys looked dismayed, then their enthusiasm reasserted itself.

“Yes, sir,” they chorused.

“Good, because I want you to stay beside me. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they chirped again. Wyn almost laughed at their joy, but the job facing them was too grim for happiness. They’d learn that soon enough. Maybe, he mused quickly, it was the lesson Matt had to learn, and would make Mara happy. Even though the boy she’d nurtured had spread his wings into manhood in these few days with the Tenth Cavalry, Wyn doubted he’d want to make a career of the Army after all was said and done.

The handful of men raced the old stage road for the ridge line, where the watering hole was tucked away in the barren rocks. No one slept as the moon rose and soaked them in yellow light. Even Matt stared into the darkness, his eyes unblinking.

The Apaches could creep over crumbled stone and not slide pebbles to give away their position. When they heard a clatter of hooves, they knew it had to be a cavalryman, not a Mescalero. The men who dropped from the horses had been sent from Eagle Springs, with word

that the Apache weren't ten miles away.

Grierson pulled two men. "Mount up," he ordered, "report to Captain Nolan, tell him to bring A Company immediately. Now, repeat it!"

Just before dawn, as tension cracked at Wyn's shoulders, they spied a column of men winding along the stage road.

"They're ours!" chortled Wyn, happy that Lieutenant Flipper had made it through to deliver his message.

But the flurry of men was smaller than expected. Captain Gilmore had sent ten troopers of G Company with Lieutenant Finley, with orders to escort the General back to Eagle Springs.

Grierson was having none of it. "Lieutenant Finley, station your men. We don't have much time, dawn's almost here."

They all knew the Apaches would make for the water hole before the heat of the day became unbearable. Thinking of Mara, Wyn checked Matt for the hundredth time, and ordered him to stay down and hidden behind the outcropping he'd chosen.

About three hours after dawn, Lieutenant Finley jerked and pointed. They'd kept silent since the sun crept over the ridge line, trying to avoid tipping off the enemy.



“Blast it, they’re turning,” Lieutenant Finley hissed in Wyn’s ear. Something had given away their position, and the Apaches shifted east to avoid the soldiers. Quickly, Grierson ordered pursuit.

“Hold them until Gilmore or Nolan gets here!” he commanded.

They charged into the Apaches, Wyn forgetting the boys left behind at the water hole. Rifles blazed, horses stumbled on the rocky terrain, Victorio’s men scattered, finding unfindable hiding places. Wyn made sure every round counted. No telling how long they’d be locked in this death grip with Victorio.

They didn’t have long to wait. As Captain Viele of the Tenth raced for Tinaja de los Palmos, they fired into the smokey field of battle. As Grierson pulled his men out of the friendly fire, the Apaches flanked them, skipping around the ridge line to the south to avoid Grierson. Viele sent his men to pursue the Apache as Wyn mounted the horse he’d commandeered.

Horses screamed as the bullets flew. Reloading, Wyn wiped the sweat from his eyes, prayed for a fresh horse and enough men to pursue without mercy. He didn’t want to have to do this ever again.

Victorio and his men turned and raced for the Rio Grande. After a four-hour fight, the Tenth

gave up as it became clear the Apaches were well into Mexican territory.

In the aftermath, Wyn hurried back to the water hole to check on the boys. He found Grierson there ahead of him, resting with his back to a boulder, his sweat-soaked jacket on the ground.

“Have a seat, Wyn,” Grierson offered wearily. Matt and Robert, their faces somber, filled canteens from the water and offered them to the officers.

They counted their dead and wounded. Private Martin wouldn’t make it home, and they’d had ten horses killed. In return, they were sure seven Mescalero and Warm Springs Apache were no longer among the living. Wyn shut his eyes, seeing the fight again in his mind, wondering why he’d wanted this assignment in the first place. He’d had a bellyful of war twenty years earlier, and it hadn’t gotten any prettier or better than he’d remembered it.

“I’m too old for this, Ben,” sighed Wyn. Fatigue chewed at him, and he didn’t like the green look around Matt’s gills. The boy had never seen a man dying painfully, before.

“Matt, come here,” he ordered. He knew he had to say something to Matt, but he was, for once, at a loss for words with the boy.

“We all are,” agreed Grierson, fanning himself with his hat. “But we need to keep after them.

Even if it means crossing the border.”

“We can’t do that,” Wyn argued tiredly. “Men and horses have had it, after *that*.”

“Got to, Matt. We’ve got to stop them here, or we don’t stand a chance.”

Wyn knew the General was right. Grierson ordered the least weary men out to scout, while the rest tried to make the wounded comfortable. By the following morning, Grierson had his answer. Victorio was camped sixty miles from Ft. Quitman, on the Mexican side of the border. Even worse, Colonel Valle of the Mexican Army, declined to attack.

“Blast the man!” cursed Gen. Grierson. “Victorio’s *got* to cross the Rio Grande again, his supplies are all over here! Means we’ll have to finish the job. Victorio’s bound to cross the border, and I’ll be darned if I know where, this time.”

Wyn was always to remember the ride that blazingly hot early August. August the third, and Corporal Asa Weaver headed up a patrol near Alamo that ran and fought the Apaches for fifteen miles. Knowing that the Apache were already across the river, Grierson guessed Victorio would aim for Van Horn’s Wells this time. The Tenth missed the Mescaleros by hours.

The next place the enemy would light had to be a bit of water with the ominous name of Rattlesnake Springs. Once more, the men of the Tenth hit the saddle at three in the morning and

marched as only Colonel Grierson could march. Covering sixty-five miles in twenty-one hours, they arrived at Rattlesnake Springs. Blazingly hot weather sapped their strength, and Matt drooped in his saddle. But they got there, once more, before the enemy. By keeping the range of mountains between his command and the Apaches, Colonel Grierson had maintained the element of surprise, not an easy thing to do to the Apaches.

Wyn left Matt with Grierson's train, guarded by Company H of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, while C and G companies under Captain Viele rode hell-bent-for-leather for Rattlesnake Canyon. The sun beat a tattoo on their heads as the men tried to stay immobile behind rocky perches. Ambush was their main weapon, and they didn't plan on losing it through carelessness. Legs cramping, aching for food, they waited.

Creeping into Rattlesnake Canyon as though they suspected something ahead, the Indians came to a complete stop before they reached point blank range for the Tenth. Sweating, Wyn prayed the Apache wouldn't run again, aware the Tenth's horses were reaching the end of their endurance. Captain Viele had had enough of waiting, too, ordering the men to open fire.

As weapons cracked and bullets slammed into rocks, Victorio ordered a retreat. Holding his breath, Wyn and the rest of the men waited to see what decision would be reached. Almost

gleefully, Wyn realized that Victorio had underestimated the Tenth's presence, as the Apaches advanced, firing, once more.

Aware of the fight, Grierson ordered H and B Companies to support Captain Viele. Heading for the spring itself, Grierson planned to keep the Apaches from the water if it was the last thing he did. Realizing the threat, Victorio threw his men at Grierson's train, but they were forced to retreat. Firmly ensconced at the watering hole, Grierson beat back the Indians when they tried one final time at dusk to force him out.

There was to be no water for Victorio's men that night, and Grierson pressed his advantage. Pursuing closely, Captains Gilmore, Nolan, and Carpenter kept Victorio on the move as long as their horses held out, while the Tenth carefully, steadily, and with precision closed the mountain passes to the north.

Frustrated and thirsty, Victorio led his men one last time across the Rio Grande. He would never again ride the river to the north.

## Chapter 23

“You should have seen it, Ma!” Bubbling with his tale, Matt blurted out his greeting to his mother.

“What ever happened to hello, I missed you?” Pretending anger, Mara frowned from the porch, where she squinted into the late afternoon sun to see him.

“Missed you!” Throwing himself from Senator, Matt ran to squeeze her in a hug.

Thinking he wouldn’t be doing that much more in the future, Mara savored the touch of his young body. Her son had grown so much in the few months he’d been with the Tenth, she could hardly believe it. Letting him go, she twisted to see Wyn, almost hiding at the side of the house.

“Two of you’ve shed a few pounds out there. Army not feed you?” Mara ruffled Matt’s hair from his forehead. “And that horse looks tuckered out. Get him in the barn, I’ll fix him a bucket of corn and molasses.”

“But, Ma, you should have seen us at Rattlesnake Springs, and then they high tailed it for

Mexico again, and just like General Grierson figured, they finally ran out of everything, 'cause we got his supplies three days earlier at Sierra Diablo, Captain Lebo said, and only thing they could do was fight, and..."

"Later, Matt, your Ma may not want to hear the gory details just yet." Smiling wryly, Wyn raised his palms to the sky in the eternal gesture of a man who's listened to the gushing of a boy for too long, and hopes to spare everyone else the torture.

"Go on, get." Mara affectionately tossed Matt his reins, and slapped the thoroughbred on its rump. "I'll be in, just give me a second with the Captain, here."

They watched Matt lead Senator toward the barn, not speaking. Finally, Mara took the bull by the horns.

"Get it done? Victorio staying out of Texas long enough for Matt to grow up?"

Wyn slid to the ground, loosening the cinch on the gray's saddle. Lieutenant Flipper had ridden the horse hard, but returned him in good shape. Running his fingers through the horse's mane, Wyn shrugged.

"Guess so. Mexicans finally killed him, their side of the Rio Grande. Fight was just about starved out of him and his band. Kept him away from his supplies, over this side, long enough."

“Oh, I see,” Mara sighed. “You were gone so long, I was beginning to get concerned.”

He could see the cuts in her forehead left by her worrying, and much more. Tracing them with a fingertip, he had to smile.

“Hope some of that worry was about me, too. Matt did just fine, Mara. Learned a lot, grew up some. He was at Rattlesnake Springs with the General, Robert Grierson, me, and about ten other troopers when the Apache hit. Pretty tough fight, but Matt never panicked. Stayed put, and did what I told him to do. You would have been proud, Mara.”

Eyes brimming with the start of tears, Mara grabbed Wyn by the waist, her fingers digging into the cloth of his uniform jacket.

“You mean my son was in danger? Real danger? I thought you said he wouldn’t be anywhere near any fighting!”

Covering her hands with his, Wyn sought to reassure her with his touch.

“Didn’t figure he would be. But there was a hot fight, and Matt was there, and he’s safe, and that’s all that matters.”

“Oh, Wyn, what can I do, what can I do?” Mara wailed. “I don’t want my son to end up dead in some blue uniform, and after this, he’ll probably run out and lie about his age, and enlist!”



Remembering how Matt vomited after the excitement of battle gave way to its grim truth, Wyn stroked her shoulders comfortingly. She didn't withdraw from his touch.

"Don't give it another thought. He may want you to believe he had the time of his life, and in some ways, he did. But he'll never take to the guidon, Mara. Don't worry. Saw enough fighting to last him a lifetime, is my bet."

"You think so?" She hiccuped softly.

"Bet on it." Pulling her to him, Wyn stroked her hair, hanging loosely about her shoulders as though she were a girl, again. There was more gray in it now than he'd remembered before the Victorio Campaign began. She stiffened, then relaxed.

"And what about you, Wyn Trainam? You planning on staying married to the Army? Or you had a bellyful yet, because if truth be told, I don't think I could stand to have another husband shot up in some stupid war."

Her directness didn't surprise him, now. Throwing the gray's reins over the porch railing, he settled on the top step, and patted beside him for her to take a seat. Flinging herself down, she toyed with the hem of her apron. Watching her, he realized how much he'd grown to love her sunburned beauty, the weathered look of a woman who'd seen the storm coming, and ridden it

out with her face to the wind.

“I love you, Mara Talbot. Always have, always will. Let me prove it.” He hadn’t planned anything so direct, but all his plotting earlier to be around her seemed childish in the face of such emotions struggling within the two of them.

“Got some gumption, Wyn, say that for you. Guess it took the same fortitude to spit in our eyes, and join the Yankee cavalry.”

“Yes, I’d say so. Wasn’t easy, Mara, not knowing if you’d love me when I came home.” All the anxiety spilled from him without his having to wonder for the words.

“I didn’t plan on it, loving you ever again, not for a second. That’s not to say I don’t remember how we felt, once. But that was long ago, Wyn. We were kids. Life saddled us up with different broncs, and they’ve bucked apart for a long time.” She sighed.

“We can pick up this new hand, see what we’ve been dealt.” He didn’t give her a chance to say another word. Slipping her hand into his palm, he pressed it to his chest, so she could feel the pounding within him. Fingers fluttering in his, she tried to slip free, but only barely. Pulling her to him, he circled her waist with his other arm, and tucked her head into his shoulder. For a long time it seemed to him, they joined together as they’d never been before, not asking, not

demanding, not wanting, just together in a silence that spoke more than words.

As daylight began to settle down around them, he found her lips, and kissed her gently.

Wyn held Mara close as she started apart from him.

“I do believe a new day has dawned,” muttered Elias to Matt from the barn door. “About time.”

“Figured this day would come. Don’t know if I’m much of a rancher, Mara. Know some about horses,” he smiled wryly, “and that I love you. Think it’ll be enough?”

“If it is for you, then it’s fine by me,” Mara countered, still unsure of him.

“Guess I’ll resign my commission, then. Take a while to process the paperwork, but I think Ben Grierson will speed things up for me some. Ridden on my last campaign, Mara. From now on, I’ll ride herd with you and Elias.”

“I’ll be danged,” Mara sighed, a dazed look to her eyes. “Alice Grierson said you’d give it all up for me, but I swear, I didn’t dare believe it. Look what a fool you’ve made of me, Wyn Trainam.” Laughing and crying, she buried her face in his chest.

He felt as though the weight of his captain’s bars were lifted at last, although they still rode his shoulders. Now he knew what he’d been seeking when he came west. His ego didn’t need

promotion, his soul didn't want another battle. He'd been looking for love, and he'd found it, finally, with the woman he'd always known was his.

He didn't hear Elias come from behind the ranch house, until his spurs clicked on the bottom step of the porch.

"Looks like things got settled at last." Grinning like he'd just made a million dollars selling the herd, Elias leaned on his knee with his forearms. "Knew this day was coming, just wasn't sure when."

Mara wiped her tears with the back of a worn hand. "Wish us luck, Elias. Wyn's resigning his commission, going to learn to ranch with us."

Elias' face changed subtly. "Hadn't figured on that, Mara. Thought for sure you'd end up an Army wife after all."

"No, these old bones want to settle down." Thrusting out his hand, Wyn gripped Elias' in his tightly. "Got you to thank, old friend. Weren't for you, I'd have given up on this woman months ago."

Planting both feet firmly in the dust at the bottom of the steps, Elias flashed them a rueful smile. "Glad I could be of some help, Wyn. Both of you deserve to be happy." He paused, and

Wyn could see him swallow hard. “Where’s Matt? Need to say good-bye, before I head on out.”

“What?” Mara was on her feet, her freckles pale, voice strangled. “You just got back from selling the last herd. Where you off to, now, Elias?”

“Don’t rightly know. Guess I’ll pick up work somewhere. Mind if I take my share from the cookie jar, now, Mara, before you bank it?”

“Now just a minute.” Wyn stepped forward. “If this is what I think it is, you’re making a mighty big mistake.”

Mara found her voice, and her anger. “Mistake? You pig-headed fool! You think just because Wyn and I are getting married, you’ve got no place here! For goodness sake, Elias, you’re family! Family doesn’t up and leave when there’s a wedding to plan.”

Rolling his eyes at Elias, Wyn shook his head. “Just like a woman, eh, Elias? I do believe, she expects you to help with the menu.”

“Blamed straight, I do. Alice Grierson will make her fruitcake recipe for the wedding cake, and I can do right much of the cooking, but...”

“Mara, just a minute,” Elias cut in. “I’ll stay for the wedding, if it’s that important to you. But I can’t stay and work for you and Wyn. This has been my place to run for too long. It’s only

right, Wyn takes over, him marrying you and all.”

Wyn felt like he was repeating himself. “Don’t be a fool, man. You’re staying, nothing’s going to change.”

By now, Mara was really rolling. “And what about Matt? You’re the only father he’s known. Just going to up and leave him?”

“Not a boy anymore, Mara, Wyn and I been telling you that. He’s set on his path, and I wish him well. No, too many bosses make a ranch fall apart. Best if I be moving along.”

“If anyone’s leaving, it’s me.” Wyn slipped off the porch, and clutched the gray’s reins in his hands until his nails cut into his palms. “Can’t do this, Mara, can’t drive Elias away from you and the boy. His place is here, I’m the interloper.”

“Men!” Mara snorted, storming into the house. The echo of her bootheels carried across the paddock, and Matt stuck his head out the barn door.

“Where’s Ma? Said she’d come help me.” Clearly, Matt hadn’t heard any of the argument. “Captain? Elias! Boy-howdy, do I have some stories to tell you!” Running from the barn, Matt resembled a puppy hurrying forward for a hug and a pat. “You’ll never guess what happened!”

Elias replaced his forlorn face with the calm assurance Wyn had known was his real self.

Wrapping an arm casually around Matt's shoulder, he steered him away from the house. He threw Wyn a look which said they'd take up where they left off, later. Wyn wasn't having any of it.

"Matt, Elias says he's leaving, 'cause your mother and I plan on getting hitched. Thinks we won't need him anymore. So I figure, you all need him more than you need me. Much as I love your mother, I won't upset the apple cart around here."

"What?" Matt's voice slid on a scale Wyn hadn't heard since his own voice started breaking at puberty. "*Married?* Elias, that true?"

"Sounds sure enough to me. Think I should get out of the way. They'll get hitched, no matter what the Captain says, once I'm on the road."

"Then I'm going with you." Matt had swallowed the marriage news more quickly than Wyn had expected. "Get my gear, haven't unpacked yet, anyway."

"Now wait just a minute here, son." Elias clamped two big, black hands on the boy's gingham shirt. "Your place is with your mother, and your new father. Got to go on alone, you understand?"

"No, and I don't think the Captain does, either, by the looks of him." Matt threw Wyn a

glance that bespoke more maturity and comprehension than Wyn had yet credited him with possessing. “That why Mama’s not out here? She ready to hide you, too?”

“I think her opinion of men is none too complimentary at the moment,” Wyn noted drolly. “Elias and I have contrived to upset her once again. Only last time, I was the one doing the leaving first. Joined the Union Army, Elias took off for God knows where, and your father ended up in Confederate butternut brown. Yes, I think we could agree that your mother doesn’t give us any commendations at the moment.”

“Sounds to me, she’s got good reason.” Matt looked more like Mara at that moment than Wyn had ever seen before. “I’ll say my good-byes to her, wait up for me Elias.”

Mara appeared in the doorway, her face shadowed. “That’s about enough of this from all of you, you hear me?” Her voice hard as steel, all three men silently winced. “I’ve had enough foolishness for one day. I run this ranch, not you numbskulls. You, Matt, you bring your gear in here, and unpack right this minute. Elias, you’re staying put, or I’ll put buckshot in your tail if you try to leave. Wyn, you go get the chaplain, we’re getting hitched today, with or without Alice Grierson’s wedding cake. That’s the way it’s going to be, you three understand?”

Numbly, they nodded. Matt had flushed as red as Wyn, and Elias stared at his feet like a



two-year old in trouble.

“And I never want to hear another word of this argument, not as long I draw breath. Is *that* understood?”

Again, they bobbed their heads.

“Then move it. I want to get supper, and I can’t take care of it, if I have to ride shotgun on you three lamebrains. Wyn, tell the chaplain he can stay and eat with us, after he does his job.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Wyn mumbled, feeling like he should salute her.

“Elias, you change your shirt, you’re giving the bride away. Matt, I want clean hands and face for my wedding, start priming the pump.”

Wyn marvelled all the way back to Ft. Concho at how Mara had whipped them into line with a few sentences. The woman should have been a Major General, he mused. He’d have to remember that when they crossed swords in the future. At least he had Elias and Matt to back him up. Maybe. If she didn’t take all three of them off at the knees.

Shrugging out of his uniform jacket, Wyn tossed it in the dust behind him, putting spurs to the gray so suddenly he almost bucked. Pulling at the bit, the horse took off at a dead run. Reminded him of Mara, as the gray defied any attempt to rein him in. Laughing, he let him have

his head.

The End

Watch for Tracy Dunham's ***Morgan's Land*** coming Summer 2000!