

# Geneva's Force

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## **Dedication**

**I wish to dedicate this book to you the reader. It is for you I write. Please enjoy the movies of my mind. I would love to hear from you.**

**Payton Lee**

## *Chapter 1*

“Your friend is going to miss the boat,” Carlton Wessex warned his nephew.

“That wouldn’t surprise me the least bit,” Bennett chuckled adjusting his woolen overcoat in prevention of the chilled seaport winds piercing his body.

“Where did he go when he left our home last night?” Edith queried pulling her collar closed with a gloved hand.

“I don’t think you really want to know,” Bennett quickly responded. He turned to the ship officer approaching. “Have you located my cabin suites?”

“Aye sir,” Ensign McAllister acknowledged. “If you follow me I’ll take you to your cabin.”

“Thank heavens,” Edith commented following the officer. “Another minute and I do believe my hands would have been frozen numb.”

"I'd warm them for you," Carlton volunteered seductively.

"I'll look forward to that," Edith cooed with a wink.

The walk on the luxury liner seemed endless until at last McAllister stopped at a door of the first class cabins on the Promenade level. He took his key and opened the door to reveal a large room showing a luxurious mahogany double bed with matching armoire, chest, chair and desk. The walls were papered with a rich red velvet material. In another corner were ornately carved chairs matching a table. Paper, inkwell, and quill were placed neatly on the table. A porthole was covered with rich red velvet fabric and held back with matching red cord. "I hope this is satisfactory for you sir?"

"Quite," Bennett acknowledged. He had many times made this trip across the ocean. Every spring he would return to Nevada. In late summer he would return to Cambridge University for fall term.

"Oh look!" Edith exclaimed pointing to a large basket on the table. "Someone has sent you a Bon Voyage basket." She walked to the table and pulled a card from between the fruit. "Isn't that sweet? Paige and Ayden sent this for you. How did they know you were leaving today on this ship?"

"They stopped in at Cambridge to visit when Brock and I were planning to leave for London."

"Then your Auntie Paige and Uncle Ayden have met Brock?" Carlton asked while looking behind the basket. "Ah, there it is!" He pulled out a bottle of champagne. "Edith and I ordered this. Let's toast to you a safe and pleasant voyage." Carlton popped the cork and Edith pulled out crystal glasses that were also hidden behind the basket.

"Thank you," Bennett told his uncle taking the glass. "Yes, Aunt Paige and Uncle Ayden have met Brock many times."

"What do they think of him?" Carlton queried sipping the French champagne.

"They seem to like him. Why do you ask?"

"Edith and I first met him last night when you came to spend the night," Carlton responded and sipped some more champagne. "Edith and I were a bit surprised to find out this Brock Hampton is your friend."

“Why do you say that?”

“Bennett, you are, forgive the expression, quite severe or somber in study. Your friend Brock seems flamboyant and rather jovial. You really are opposites,” Carlton commented.

“Maybe that’s why we get along. His cheerful attitudes brighten my somber moods. My somber moods bring him down to study ever so often.”

“Well that makes sense,” Edith agreed. “I hope you understand why your Uncle Carlton asked.”

“Of course,” Bennett chuckled. “Compared to me, Brock is quite flighty.”

“I’m glad he brightens you a bit,” Edith said thoughtfully.

“I really miss Papa and Mamman when I’m away at Cambridge,” Bennett sighed. “I miss Geneva’s Hope, my brothers, and sisters. It’s difficult for me to leave them and come here. When I’m at Cambridge I overcompensate by throwing my every waking moment into my studies. When I met Brock two years ago he brought some life back into my loneliness.”

“He is good for you then,” Edith concurred. “We had no idea you were so homesick. If you had told us, we would have come to visit you more often.”

“Thank you for the thought Auntie Edith, but I was never lonely for company. Between Collier, Carlton, Adam, Abigail, Philip, Auntie Paige, and Uncle Ayden I had visitors nearly every weekend. Somehow it still wasn’t my parents and family.”

“Then this Brock came along?” Carlton asked

“Yes, he made me laugh and pulled me along to parties,” Bennett shared. “I came out of my shell and actually enjoyed talking to different people. Brock introduced me to many people that included professors and intellectuals.”

“Brock with intellectuals?” Edith choked on a sip of champagne.

Bennett laughed heartily. “Yes, he liked to shake them up and rattle them a bit. That’s what he told me.”

“I can see that young man doing such,” Carlton laughed. “Why is he taking this voyage?”

“Brock finished his matriculation as well as I have. He is returning to San Francisco to visit with his Uncle Shelby. Shelby

Hampton was his guardian until he became of age,” Bennett shared. “Brock wanted to travel with me and visit our Geneva’s Hope on his way to California.”

“What does he have his education in?” Auntie Edith questioned after taking an interest in Bennett’s unusual friend.

“He’s a geologist,” Bennett answered. “He also has a fascinating valet called Chin Su. Brock has studied the ancient art of Tai Chi with Chin Su. It is something to watch.”

“What is Tai Chi?” Carlton inquired.

“It is an ancient Chinese martial art. I’ve seen him meditate, exercise the Qui Gong and follow the moves. It’s really incredible to watch. Brock has taught me some basic moves.”

“Enlighten me nephew, what is martial art?” Edith questioned.

“Believe it or not, it is a spiritually based practice for defense.”

“It sounds fascinating,” Edith replied.

The first mate then announced that all visitors aboard were to leave ship.

“Time for us to bid our adieu,” Edith said placing a peck on Bennett’s cheek. “Safe Voyage and I hope your friend makes it in time.”

“One more thing,” Carlton added. “Give this to your Papa for me. It’s a letter for him. It also will tell him that Edith and I plan visiting Geneva’s Hope next spring.”

“Papa and Mamman will be thrilled!” Bennett declared. “Will you bring Carlton?”

“I doubt we could keep him here,” Edith laughed. “He’s wanted to visit your ranch since he learned to talk.”

“It will be wonderful to have you visit,” Bennett responded after taking the letter. He began walking with his Aunt and Uncle to the gangplank deck. “I’ll look forward to next spring.”

On the deck Bennett happened to look down and saw Chin Su grabbing luggage from an open carriage. In the carriage Brock was still cavorting with two women of ill repute. Bennett’s mouth dropped open when he watched his friend Brock stuff several bills between the buxom cleavages of one of the women and let his

hand wander a bit. Bennett hoped his Aunt and Uncle didn't notice. Unfortunately Auntie Edith did notice the display.

"Oh dear!" Edith gasped in shock.

Carlton just chuckled.

Brock openly French kissed one of the prostitutes and shocked nearly every gentle woman within seeing distance. He then jumped from the carriage and handed a slip of paper to a steward with a bill.

Bennett placed his body between Aunt Edith's vision and the boat rail. He gently took her arm turning her around and led her to the gangplank area.

Carlton continued staring at his nephew's friend and held back a boisterous laugh.

At the gangplank they ran into Brock.

"Interesting friends you have," Carlton clucked.

"Indeed," Brock grinned tipping his hat. "Good day, Lady Wessex. How good to see you."

"You seem to have occupied yourself after leaving our house last night," Edith quipped. She attempted to hold a modicum of propriety even though she thought the previous scene at the dock with the prostitutes was quite comical.

With a large mischievous grin Brock replied, "Yes, it seems last night I ran into ah, some distant cousins."

"Indeed! How fortunate for you," Edith responded covering her mouth with a glove so she wouldn't reveal her smile.

"Come dear," Carlton requested taking his wife's arm and tucking in the crook of his. "We need to leave the ship and let the boys get on with their voyage."

"Of course my darling," Edith stood on her tiptoes and gave a sweet kiss to Bennett. "Have a safe voyage. We'll see you next year. Take care, Brock."

"Thank you ma'am."

Brock and his valet, Chin, left immediately for his cabin. Bennett stayed on the Promenade Deck and waved to his family as the ship left port.

Bennett was only in his stateroom a few moments when he answered a knock on the door.

Brock walked in. "Great family you have."

"Thank goodness. Are you out of your mind?" Bennett growled angrily. "Do you realize the scene you made with those women on the docks?"

"Of course I do. I've traveled before you know. That little scene prepares the lovely women on the ship to offer their bodies to me for the nights of this voyage."

"What?" Bennett asked in astonishment.

"The good ladies of this ship see me with prostitutes and start wondering what kind of lover I would be. Of course they offer themselves instead of such disreputable women. It works every time," Brock gloated. "I'm guaranteed a festive night every evening."

"I do believe you are quite mad!"

"Don't be jealous, Ben old boy," Brock chortled. "I'll send you my spares."

"You are mad!"

"Ben, calm down," Brock laughed. "I really wish you weren't so prudish all the time."

"And I wish you weren't so blatant all the time."

"It's what I am," Brock said quietly. His face showed a boyish imp quality that couldn't be hidden if he tried.

"Must you engage in sex constantly?" Bennett queried in calmer tone.

"No," Brock answered. "I do spend a lot of time with Chin Su practicing my Ch'i."

"I was mortified when Auntie Edith saw you and those women," Bennett explained.

"I'm sorry for that. The effect was not for your Auntie."

"Mamman and Papa wired me at Uncle Carlton's home that they will meet us in New York," Bennett told his friend. "Please finish all your monkey business before we dock and my parents meet you."

"You have my word."

Bennett rolled his eyes. He enjoyed Brock's vivacity, but he wanted his friend to make a good impression with his parents since Brock planned on staying at Geneva's Hope for a visit.

"Don't look so worried," Brock chuckled. "I know how to behave when I have to."

“Don’t I know? You fooled every professor at Cambridge with sincerity.”

“There you are.”

“Great, let me start unpacking. I don’t have a valet to do my work for me.”

“As rich as your family is? I don’t understand that at all,” Brock commented.

“My parents believe in taking care of oneself first,” Bennett bragged. “I’ve been trained to take care of myself and frankly I like it.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m off to the smoking parlor.”

“Have fun.”

“I’ll see you for dinner?” Brock asked.

“Yes, I’ll join you for dinner. That is if you don’t have every female on the ship sitting at our table.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Brock clucked. “The women send me messages and we have rendezvous meetings. They want to conquer me. They desire to please me. They don’t want anyone to know their wicked ways. Everything is secret. It’s the secrecy and intrigue they love. Sometimes the intrigue is more fun than sex to them.”

“Go!”

“Alright. I’m going!” Brock raised his hands palms out in false surrender.

That night at dinner Brock received two private notes. Bennett just shook his head when Brock let him read the notes.

“You know Ben, you really are quite handsome. Why don’t you ever play a bit?” Brock questioned his friend over dessert. “I’ve noticed at least three lovelies that keep staring at you here in the dining room.”

“Unlike you, Brock, I don’t jump on a mattress for lust. When I make love to a woman, I intend to make love.”

“My God!” Brock choked. “You’re a virgin?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You are a virgin aren’t you?”

“Keep your voice down,” Bennett demanded. “No, I am not. I’ve visited the red alley district in Ely.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“And you don’t enjoy it as sport?” Brock questioned in astonishment.

“That isn’t sport. It’s a physical release unless you are with someone that means something to you. I see my parents and it is something special between them. That’s what I’m looking for.”

“It’s a great relaxing and fun sport, Bennett.”

“I don’t think so. I think you don’t understand love. When you meet that special someone and share that special magic, well then you will see it’s not sport.”

“Bennett, I don’t believe in love.”

“You haven’t seen the magic of your parents when they are together.”

“My parents were killed when I was young, remember?”

“All too well. Your Uncle really loves you, but you haven’t seen that magic love. Wait until you see my parents before you make your solid judgment.”

“Until then dear Bennett, I will continue with my great sport. Thank goodness you have an alley district nearby. Or I should have to come up with something new in your Ely to get the lovelies to offer themselves.”

“I wouldn’t advise deflowering any of the young women of Ely my friend. Or you are liable to end up with a shotgun wedding.”

Brock shuddered. “I shall tread carefully. In the meantime I have to prepare for my first rendezvous this evening.”

“Is she the married one or the single maid?”

“The fine aged wine is first.”

“Be careful my friend,” Bennett warned seriously.

“And you are too serious by half.” Brock stood and left the dining room. He knew his first tryst was watching.

## *Chapter 2*

It had only been a minute after Bennett returned to his stateroom when he heard knocking. He peered through the peephole and saw Mrs. Withers standing in front of Brock's door. "Ah, your first victim." Bennett went to the armoire and changed into his sleepwear. He was tired from the long day and the sea air with the ship's rolling always made him sleepy.

Bennett woke early and dressed for breakfast. When he opened the door he watched the Peter's maid receiving a kiss from Brock at the door. Brock noticed Bennett and gave him a wink. Bennett hurriedly walked down the hall and down the stairs to the first class dining suite.

Brock came into the dining room shortly after Bennett had been served breakfast. "Good morning!"

"I trust you had an eventful evening," Bennett acknowledged his friend.

“Oh yes. My plan has worked perfectly. I don’t think I shall have a night alone throughout the entire voyage.”

“Aren’t you just a wee bit afraid of disease or leaving a bastard somewhere?” Bennett said bluntly.

“I’ve told you a hundred times I protect myself. Are you just a wee bit jealous?”

Bennett glared at his friend. He certainly wasn’t jealous. He was brought up to respect women and act in a proper manner. He also wouldn’t settle for anything less than the wonderful love his parents obviously shared. His parents created six siblings and they still kissed and held each other’s hands. His parents still looked at each other with deep love. That’s what he wanted in his life. He never even considered these one-night trysts that Brock seemed to enjoy. Bennett didn’t understand that need of his friend at all. “You can believe what you will,” Bennett grumbled and drank a full gulp of fresh milk.

“All right old man,” Brock said quietly. “You’re not jealous. Is it truly concern?”

“That’s all it is.”

“Don’t worry my friend.”

“Brock, have you ever considered those women’s feelings? What if there is a jealous and crazed suitor? An insanely jealous husband?”

“That is where the word discreet comes in. Do I consider the women? Of course I do! These women are out for the intrigue and adventure. I don’t dally ever with a woman that thinks she loves me. Would you feel better if I told you I have yet to taste a virgin?”

“No.”

“Bennett old boy!”

“I like you as my friend. This using of women is the only thing I don’t like. I’m afraid one of these days it will get you in trouble. Especially in Ely!”

Bennett’s worried face concerned Brock. He felt a little guilty. Not much, just a little guilty. “I promise to behave in Ely and your parent’s ranch. Does that suit you?”

Bennett looked up from his scrambled eggs and sausages. “Your absolute solemn oath?”

“My solemn oath.” Brock crossed his heart. He then ordered his breakfast.

Several days later, Bennett was sitting on a deck chair reading essays by Mark Twain and chuckling. He loved that writer’s humor. Bennett was proud that this world-renowned author had actually spent time in Virginia City, Nevada. He felt really fortunate to have attended one of his orations in England and met him personally.

An exquisitely beautiful woman approached Bennett and sat on the end of the deck chair. “Hello.”

Bennett choked and was quite tongue tied when he looked up. His heart started beating faster than Three Finger’s drum during the Shoshone Warm Dance. Never before had such a beautiful and mature woman ever approached him when Brock was anywhere nearby. “Hello.”

“You’re Bennett Wessex?” luscious red and inviting lips inquired.

“Yes,” replied Bennett with the only word that he could choke out of his mouth. Closing his book he found enough air to ask. “How did you know who I am and may I know the pleasure of your countenance?”

The woman politely giggled behind a hand covering those inviting red lips. “I’m Constance Moriarty. I’m traveling with my family to some dreadful place called Eau Claire, Wisconsin.”

“I’ve never been there,” Bennett found himself saying for no reason whatsoever.

“I hope this is our first and last time. I really prefer the English countryside, but I must accompany my family.”

“How do you know who I am?” Bennett repeated in curiosity.

“My Aunt Clarice is traveling with us and she recognized you. She’s kept quite up to date on the important English families. Although your father prefers to live in the colonies, correct?”

“My parents prefer Nevada. My Uncle Ayden takes care of his property and Brenham.”

“The Marquis of Dunham?”

"Yes. Your Aunt Clarice is quite the lineage expert isn't she?"

Constance again held her hand over her lips and giggled. "Indeed!" She placed her hands over her handbag and smiled thoughtfully. "I was wondering if you might do a favor for me?"

Bennett quickly became suspicious. "It depends upon the favor. One doesn't jump into a fire upon the request of a beautiful woman."

"Silly! I was only going to ask you to deliver this to that handsome man you are seen with. What is his name by the way?"

Bennett held back his irritation and responded with a low growl that seemed to pass right over Constance's comprehension, "By the way isn't his name. I'll deliver his note and if he wishes to introduce himself he may."

"Thank you ever so much," Constance cooed smoothly. During dinner last night she kept glancing over at their table. The handsome blonde caught her staring on several occasions and winked flirtatiously. She was certain the rake was interested in her.

Brock had been the gossip of the ladies on board. He was the devil may care rake that most woman wished they could have his attentions. It would be a feather in one's cap so to speak. He was ever so handsome, dashing, rich, and surely a great lover.

Bennett rose from the deck chair and stomped down the stairs from the upper deck. He was furious. 'Now I'm expected to be his messenger boy!' In front of Brock's cabin door he was about to bend and push the note through the bottom when it opened.

"Bennett?"

Gritting his teeth he hissed angrily, "This is for you from one of your many admirers." Bennett handed Brock the note.

"What's up your trousers?" Brock asked taking the small missive.

"You and your women that's what!" Bennett growled.

"Don't ever expect me to be your little messenger boy." Bennett opened his cabin door and stomped into his stateroom. He didn't realize Brock was directly behind him when he spun around to

close the door and lock it. When he turned again he slammed right into Brock. "Get Out!" he shouted.

"Calm down old boy," Brock said quietly. "If you're going to be angry with me I'd like to know why?"

"Sleeping in again? Exhausted from your debauchery last night?" Bennett accused hotly.

"That does it!" Brock shouted in return. "Just what the Bloody Hell happened?"

Bennett ignored him and started walking to table and chair in his stateroom to put down his book.

Brock put his hand on Bennett's shoulder and held him back.

That was the last straw. Bennett was so angry he forgot about Brock's training in the martial arts. He balled his fist and took a swing at his friend.

The next instant he was hurled over Brock's large frame landing with a thud on his back. Bennett's wind had been knocked out of him and Brock was over him holding down his arms with one hand. Brock's other arm was across Bennett's throat. "You're going to tell me what the Bloody Hell has you in a lather right now or stay down on the floor like this until you do tell me. I've got plenty of time."

Unable to breathe properly, Bennett closed his eyelids in acknowledgement.

"Good Lad!" Brock chortled. He stood as quickly as a cougar after downing its prey. Brock stood and offered his hand to help Bennett up.

"Someday I have to get Chin Su to teach me that stuff," Bennett mumbled dusting his clothes.

"Tell you what old man, you get over this mad. Tell me what happened and I'll let Chin Su teach you the Qi Gong," Brock promised.

"I don't like what you do with women," Bennett coughed out.

"I know that. I thought we came to an understanding?"

"We did until one of your admirers struck up a conversation with me so I could get her an introduction to you."

Bennett responded. "She also asked me to give you that note. I don't like what you do and I certainly want no part of it."

"I'm dreadfully sorry old man," Brock said apologetically. "This is my game. I know it's not yours. I am aware of your deep sense of propriety. I also know that lots of women want you, but want you for your title and inheritance. So you see women want us, just for different reasons."

The enormity of Brock's statement struck home with Bennett. One of the reasons he was so conservative was because many women tried to place him in a compromising position. Many women fancied themselves as the next Viscountess of Brenham. Being of noble birth required Bennett to be very careful of any tryst he might consider. He wanted a wife like his mother. He wanted the next Viscountess to be in love with him and he with her. He wanted his love to last forever like his parents. "You're right of course."

"Good Lad," Brock grinned with his wide pearl white smile. "Let's see who this woman is."

"She told me her name is Constance Moriarty."

Brock opened the note. "So it is. She is a lady I wouldn't tangle with. Does that make you feel better?"

"No. Why is she culled from the sheep to slaughter?"

"I really wish you wouldn't put it that way," Brock said seriously. "Constance Moriarty is a married women with two children. She's traveling with her husband, children, Aunt Clarice, and governess. The women is more of a rake than I by reputation and the husband should wonder if those children are even his. He's also dreadfully jealous of his wife. She has the need to remind her husband of how attractive she is by confessing her trysts. Two men have already been wounded by outlawed duels. It seems that is the favored choice of recompense by Mr. Moriarty. He is a world famous duelist. I don't intend to be fish bait on this voyage. I told you I was careful."

Bennett sat back against the overstuffed leather chair. "How did you learn all of this dare I ask?"

"I flirted with the governess and well we sort of talked last night," Brock answered with an impish grin. "Lovely girl that Sally O'Malley."

“Your Miss Sally isn’t a virgin?”

Brock laughed loudly. “Of course not! It seems Mr. Moriarty has a bit of his own impropriety with his attractive governess. I think it is a masculine need of retribution for his wife’s dalliance.”

“My God! Whatever will the future bring for the sanctity of marriage? Will it crumble and die?”

“Of course not old boy!” Brock guffawed loudly. “It’s alive and thriving in a place called Geneva’s Hope with the Wessex family.”

Bennett laughed in unison. Brock did have a bright and cheery attitude that always seemed to charm him out of his sullen moods. He really did like Brock Hampton.

Constance Moriarty did her best for the rest of the voyage to gain Brock’s attention. Unfortunately nothing worked for her. Brock was polite, but never took advantage of her offers.

True to his form, for the rest of the voyage Brock enjoyed a new candy every night.

It was early afternoon when the iron luxury ship entered New York Harbor. Hundreds of people were waiting on the dock to welcome their family and friends. First Class always departed first, followed by Second Class. Steerage was the last to leave and going through immigration and customs was horrendous. They were talking of opening a special place for immigrants. Eventually that place would be Ellis Island.

Bennett had prepared for the arrival and the steward had already taken his baggage when he left his stateroom. He watched Chin Su take care of Brock’s things with another steward and noted Brock had already left the stateroom. As Bennett walked to the Promenade he felt the boat dock.

Brock had left his rooms early. His evening with Mrs. Hazelton had been quite enjoyable. He found he was still full of energy and loved watching a boat pull into port and dock. He was watching from the Promenade deck when he saw a very attractive woman standing on the dock perusing the decks carefully. She was quite attractive showing a slim figure and a well-tailored travel

suit with matching hat. A young girl about three years old whispered to her. She kneeled to talk to her and straightened her pinafore under her unbuttoned jacket. A handsome man with graying temples walked up to the little girl and took her in his arms. He pointed to the boat and walked away to speak to a stevedore.

"You are definitely my cup of tea," Brock lusted. As soon as the gangplank was down, Brock was the first one to disembark. He headed directly for the attractive woman now standing alone. "Good Morning!"

Kerry Wessex returned the greeting to the white toothed grinning handsome young man that she determined was near her son Bennett's age or a little older, "Good Day to you!"

Brock noticed the sparkling gray eyes of the attractive women whom he guessed to be about five years older than he. "Would you need any assistance today?"

Kerry smiled, "No, we have taken care of everything."

"We?" Brock questioned striking his hand to his heart dramatically. "May I hope the we is a matron aunt you wait for and not a suitor or fiancé!"

Kerry shook her head in mirth. This young man was a clown and he was flirting with her. She found that quite amusing. "I dare say tis not a suitor or fiancé, but my son."

"Son? You have a son? He's a young lad with a governess?" Brock responded using his best charm and looking about for a young child.

"Actually he's returning from school. He graduated from a university," Kerry chuckled going along with the flirtatious young man.

"Impossible!" Brock over dramatized. "You would have had to be a child!"

Bennett walked out on the deck and looking in the crowd immediately spotted his mother. He groaned miserably. He watched as Brock walked derisively to his mother. He was engaging in conversation and immediately recognized his friend's dramatics. Bennett started racing toward the gangplank.

Braden had spotted his son. He was carrying Ashley in one arm and pulled Christina with the other. He may be in his forties, but he was still a strong, handsome, and powerful man.

“Ben?” Ashley squealed when her father put her down and hugged his son. She grabbed his trouser leg and hugged it.

Bennett picked her up and swung her around dropping a kiss on her cheek. “Hello Princess.” He remembered Brock and handed her back to his father. “Excuse me, I have something to take care of.”

Six-year-old Christina looked in surprise and felt a little hurt that her brother started to leave them without acknowledging her.

Bennett looked over his shoulder. “I’ll be right back, Puddin.” He nearly ran to his mother and pushed several people out of the way in his hurry. Bennett was oblivious to the reprimanding stares he received. “Brock!” He yelled over the crowd.

Brock turned to his friend’s voice. He grabbed Kerry’s hand and whispered. “That’s my friend coming. I do hope you’ll like him. I hope you’ll like me. Would you join us for supper?”

Kerry looked toward the sound of the familiar voice. She beamed happily and replied, “I think I should love to have dinner with you and your friend.”

Brock was pleased with himself. Once again his charm had worked on a very attractive woman. He put his hand protectively over her shoulder to indicate to Bennett that he once again had scored. He was quite surprised to see Bennett’s scowl when he did.

Kerry pulled away from Brock’s arm and closed the rest of the distance to Bennett’s open arms. She hugged her son and put her cheek to his chest. “Welcome home!”

Brock’s mouth dropped in shock. “Don’t tell me she’s your woman?”

“She’s my mother you imbecile!” Bennett snarled.

Brock turned crimson with embarrassment.

Kerry pulled away from her son and took his hand in hers. She laughed boisterously, “I take it this is your friend, Brock Hampton?”

"Yes Mamman," Bennett answered searing Brock with his angry eyes.

"He's exactly as you described him," Kerry chuckled.

"The handsome rake is quite taken with himself isn't he?"

Brock hung his head, "Ma'am. I'm sorry. Bennett told me his mother was beautiful. I had no idea how beautiful. I just didn't expect..."

"There's no excuse this time," Bennett grumped belligerently.

"Ben, don't be cross with your friend," Kerry chided lovingly. "Actually I'm a bit flattered that your friend considered me beautiful enough to be one of his... victims I think you call them."

"Bennett old boy, what have you told your mother about me?" Brock questioned with his normal dramatics.

"He told me to make certain there wasn't an eligible young woman near Geneva's Hope for at least a hundred miles radius."

Bennett opened his eyes wide with surprise. He never told his mother that. He only said that Brock was a bit of a rake. It was obvious to him Brock made his own impression.

Brock looked at his friend in shock. "You didn't?"

"Of course he didn't," Kerry chuckled. "I made that up. Just like your dramatics, Brock."

"I deserved that," Brock said shyly.

"Yes you did," Kerry reprimanded. "You behave yourself young man. There are lot of men in Nevada like my husband that wouldn't take to kindly to your shenanigans."

"Yes ma'am," Brock responded like a child caught with his hands in a cookie jar.

"Ben! Ben!" A young voice cried out.

"Hello Puddin!" Bennett answered and scooped up a bubbly six year old. "Did you miss me?"

"I missed you terrible," Christina answered hugging her big brother.

"I missed you, Puddin," Bennett answered with a large smile and big kiss to his sister's cheek.

Braden came from behind still carrying Ashley in his arms. "What was that all about?"

“Sorry Papa, I saw Mamman and Brock. I wanted to introduce them.”

Braden smiled to his son and extended his hand to Brock.  
“Welcome. I hope you enjoy your visit.”

## *Chapter 3*

Brock wondered if he was as red with embarrassment as he felt. He took Braden Wessex's hand in greeting. The strong grip told Brock his friend's father was still a powerful man. He couldn't help but notice the strong resemblance Bennett had with his father. Brock had met the English side of the Wessex family. He had even met Bennett's Uncle Ayden McGillinen on one of his visits to his nephew, Bennett. Lost in his faux pas and thoughts Brock became aware of a tugging at his coat. He looked down to see Bennett's baby sister, Ashley Anne Wessex. Brock knelt and thumbed her cheek gently. "Hello there."

"You pwetty," Ashley remarked putting her little hands on Brock's cheeks.



Kerry stifled a laugh. "Ashley is precocious."

Brock looked into Ashley's penetrating blue eyes. The same color eyes as his friend and her brother. "You are not only precocious, but beautiful."

Bennett scooped his little sister into his strong arms. "Princess, boys aren't pretty. Boys are handsome, like your big brother."

Ashley glanced from Brock to Bennett. "You pwetty too!"

Christina piped, "Fritters Ashley, didn't you hear Ben? When you gonna start listening?"

"That is ***going to start listening***, Christina," Braden corrected. "And nice girls don't use the word *Fritters*. Enough of this chatter, let's take these pwetty boys to the hotel."

"Thanks Papa," Bennett moaned playfully. "Where are my brothers?"

"Garrett and Jared stayed home. They wanted to stay at the ranch. Anthony and Braden are with your Aunt Audrey and Uncle Henry," Kerry told her son.

Two voices rang out immediately after Kerry told Bennett about his brothers. "Ben! Ben!"

Bennett handed Ashley to his father so he could accept the hugs of his two younger brothers.

Brock noted the strong family resemblance of the brothers to their older brother and their father. Ashley and Christina looked like their mother with fine delicate features. Both girls had their father's deep blue eyes. It was this scene that struck a pain into Brock's mind. He found he was a little jealous of the large loving family bestowing their affections on his friend. Brock had grown up without siblings. He didn't remember his mother or father. His wealthy uncle had raised him. Brock was raised on the sea and the wealthy aristocracy of San Francisco. His uncle loved him and actually spoiled him, but he never recognized that missing family warmth until now. Up until he met Bennett, Brock's friends had been like him. His friends were all only children in wealthy families. The most his friends had was one or two siblings. Brock had never encountered such a large family until meeting Bennett. Even then, Brock only heard the family stories. When he did meet

any of Bennett's family at Cambridge it was usually on individual visits.

"Wool gathering?" Braden prompted Brock nudging his shoulders. Braden was holding his daughter closely.

"I guess I am," Brock answered. He was still reeling from the embarrassment of realizing he had been trying to flirt with Bennett's mother. Bennett had told him how beautiful she was. He put it as every boy thinking his mother was beautiful. Yet, here Kerry Wessex is. She was as beautiful as Bennett had described her. Another twinge of envy pricked his heart. He'd never known his mother. His uncle told him she was beautiful, but he didn't even have a picture of her. Brock watched enviously as Kerry laid her head on Bennett's shoulder and was chattering away with her son. Kerry's arm was pocketed in her son's arm. His eyes caught the loving picture with Kerry on one arm, Christina on the other and his brothers on each side of the women. The love between them and the entire family was obvious. "I've heard so much from Bennett about his family and it is all real."

"Oh we are real alright," Braden laughed. "I think I'm about the happiest real man in all of Nevada. It started when I met my Kerry."

Brock looked at the middle-aged man. He watched Braden looking at his wife walking ahead of them. Brock saw deep love carved into those eyes. He wondered what that kind of love and devotion felt like.

"Mr. Hampton."

The voice caught Braden and Brock's attention.

"Excuse me Lord Wessex. That's my man Chin Su. I have to see to him and find out about my luggage," Brock explained.

"Of course," Braden acknowledged regarding the muscular small man. Braden guessed Chin Su to be in his forties. He was a bit surprised to notice the Chinese man did not wear the typical long braid like Cho Ling. Instead his head was shaved bald.

"We'll meet over there." Braden pointed to a location filled with carriages and stevedores.

"I'm sure that's where we are headed," Brock replied. "I'll have to hire a carriage. What hotel are we to meet up at?"

“Don’t worry about hiring a taxi. Audrey and Henry have already hired four carriages and two wagons. They always are prepared for arrivals.”

“Thank you,” Brock responded gratefully. This family was full of generosity and surprises. “Will I meet the famed Astors?”

“Of course,” Braden chuckled. “They are over by the carriages waiting for us. Audrey and Henry are always on top of everything.”

Chin Su caught up to his employer. “Everything is in order.”

“I knew I could count on you,” Brock approved. “Bennett’s family has already arranged for transportation and lodging. I guess you simply need to follow with us.”

“Yes sir,” Chin answered following Brock.

An older aristocratic lady approached. “Braden, is this Bennett’s friend?”

“I am madam,” Brock replied bowing courteously. “You must be Auntie Audrey.”

“That I am. Please call me Auntie Audrey. I think it’s dreadful to be called madam,” Audrey motioned to a handsome man talking to Bennett. “Over here Dwayne.”

As Dwayne turned and approached he noticed he was holding hands with another very attractive woman. The woman spoke to twin girls about ten years old and about a seven-year-old boy. The children went to Bennett and his brothers.

“Dwayne and Breena, this is Brock Hampton,” Audrey introduced.

Dwayne offered his hand. “Good to meet you. This is Bennett’s Auntie Breena, my wife.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Mr. & Mrs. McGillinen. Bennett has told me about you and his cousins,” Brock said politely taking Dwayne’s offered hand.

“You mean you actually can keep track of the McGillinen clan?” Dwayne teased.

“Not really,” Brock chuckled. “Bennett has told me at sometime or another about all of his family, but seeing this is rather difficult to believe. Your family really is quite large.”

“That it is. We have even more in Nevada,” Dwayne laughed with Brock. He liked the bright smile Brock presented.

“Not counting the family connections in England,” Brock returned impishly.

Dwayne pulled Breena close to him. “We brought three of our five children. Coming with Bennett is our twins, Megan and Mary. Then there is our son, Brian.”

“Uncle Dwayne,” Bennett addressed surrounded by his siblings and cousins. “Where are Katherine and Dwayne?”

“Katherine is with the Benedictine Sisters convent school. She wanted to go abroad for her education,” Dwayne told his nephew. “We’re in New York because just yesterday we put Little Dwayne on a ship with Father Michael. They’re going to Ireland.”

“Is he vacationing?” Bennett asked his aunt and uncle. “I’m sorry I missed him.”

Breena and Dwayne looked at each other lovingly.

“Actually Father Michael is taking our Dwayne to a seminary that he attended. St. Patrick’s in Dublin,” Breena choked. She was filled with emotions about her oldest son’s decision. She was proud Little Dwayne had accepted the calling to be a priest, but she was going to miss him dearly especially because he and his sister Katherine had both accepted the calling of the church. Katherine would become a novice and study medicine. Breena was sad to lose her children to the church, but happy and proud for their decision.

“Little Dwayne is going to be a priest?” Bennett asked with surprise.

“He’s not so little anymore,” Dwayne replied sadly.

“He told me since he was six years old and Grandfather Grady gave him an old crucifix that Tells the Truth said to give him, he would be a priest,” Bennett said shaking his head. “I guess I never believed his vision.”

“Our son’s vision is very strong,” Dwayne told his nephew. “I’ve always known the visions of Tells the Truth to be accurate. Still I am going to miss my son.”

Breena hugged her husband. Their eyes made contact.

Brock saw the love between the two. This family thing and family love amazed him. Up until now he had only enjoyed

women for the pleasure they brought him. Today he saw a genuine sharing of love that was beyond instant pleasuring. He started to think maybe he was missing something and Bennett's way of life wasn't so bizarre after all.

In the carriage Chin Su watched Brock carefully. He saw something in Brock's eyes he had not seen there before. At the hotel they would take time for their Qi Gong and he would talk to Brock after the Ch'i. Chin Su had come upon Brock when he was three years old. Brock was crying by his mother's body. Mountain bandits had attacked the missionary family. Chin Su was a Shaolin Priest and well educated in several languages. He left the monastery to search for his sister taken and sold by pirates. His family had sent for him and his masters agreed it was his destiny. That was twenty-four years ago. Chin Su believed he would find his sister but Brock had become his charge. Through meditation and enlightenment, Chin Su knew his sister and his destiny were entwined with Brock. Shelby Hampton was a sea captain made wealthy in the spice trade. He was respected by the Chinese and visited his brother every trip. Shelby Hampton found his nephew and Chin Su only a few months later on one of his voyages. He took Brock and Chin Su back to America and invested his monies in numerous successful ventures. Brock grew up in luxury, but kept grounded in discipline and practice of Ch'i under Chin Su's tutelage.

Brock watched his friend interact with his family in the carriage ride to the hotel. Bennett's mother would stroke his cheek lovingly. Bennett held his six-year-old sister. Brock watched as his friend would hug and kiss his sister's cheek. Braden held three year old Ashley and it was obvious he adored his children. The conversation turned serious half way to the hotel.

"Are things that bad?" Bennett asked his father.

"I'm afraid so son," Braden answered. "We are so grateful for your Uncle Dwayne and Aunt Breena. Through intercession and lobbying Geneva's Hope is untouched by greedy land grabbers. The mining companies have nearly destroyed all the natural beauty within a 30 mile radius of Ely."

“It’s horrible what they’ve done,” Kerry sighed. “The working conditions for the miners are disgusting and the riff raff are frightening.”

“No one goes to town anymore unless we send an armed guard,” Braden added kissing the head of Ashley Anne.

“All this in just two years,” Bennett clucked angrily. “How is Uncle Ryan taking it?”

“He tries to keep his family away from town completely,” Braden answered.

“What about school for the girls?”

“Cho Ling’s wife has taken over schooling for the girls. She was their nanny and took over the assignment quickly,” Kerry responded. “She’s a treasure.”

“Uncle Ryan is always saying the best thing he ever did was buy Cho Ling’s bond,” Bennett commented. “When Cho Ling found his bonded woman, Uncle Ryan bought her right away. He wanted to keep Cho Ling as happy as possible.”

“He still keeps everyone out of his kitchen,” Braden grumbled remembering his first encounter with Cho Ling.

Chin Su’s eyes rounded with surprise and spoke, “Even his wife?”

“Even his wife,” Braden chuckled. “She’s smarter than him anyway.”

“Just as I am darling,” Kerry teased.

Brock was surprised by his friend Chin Su’s question. Chin Su rarely spoke in company.

“Dwayne and Breena have managed to get legislation passed to protect Geneva lands,” Kerry announced seriously. “Our entire family is safe for now. We’re going to take the legal papers back to Ely and Uncle Brian’s law firm.”

“Eye of Hawk and Bright Moon are safe also?” Bennett inquired.

“It’s difficult, but yes.”

“How’s Marshal Ewal?” Bennett asked. The Marshal was into his sixties and was slowing down even if he was a strong man. Ewal was a fair and just man. He managed to keep Ely free from major problems.

Kerry and Braden looked at each other and Braden answered. "That's part of the problem. Ewal died last winter. He died of heart failure."

"God no," Bennett inhaled sadly. "Who took over?"

"Ruby's Sheriff Amos Cage has taken over until Ely decides what to do," Kerry replied. "We're not certain how honest or fair he is. Eye of Hawk's people and Bright Moon's people remain on our lands. If they need anything we send in one of the ranch hands from Geneva's Hope or Geneva's Branch. It's safer that way. At least for now it is."

"When you go into Ely, be careful!" Braden warned both Brock and Bennett.

"Thanks for the warning," Brock acknowledged. Brock was confident he and Chin Su would be careful. The Ch'i philosophy commanded them to avoid conflict and respond only if threatened.

Arriving at the hotel Brock learned the hotel staff was prepared for the noon meal in the restaurant for the large family. Brock noticed Bennett's family took up one fourth of the restaurant's tables and servers. He thought to himself how happy the hotel staff was to have Bennett's family as guests.

"We'll be leaving on tomorrow's train," Dwayne advised the family at the dinner table. He handed papers to Braden. "Here are the legal documents to take to Uncle Brian's law firm."

"We'll see they are delivered," Braden promised.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Brock," Dwayne said politely. "I hope you enjoy your vacation in Geneva's Hope. If my English brother in law doesn't take care of you, let me know. We'll be on the next train to set things right. We want Bennett's friend to enjoy himself properly."

"Dwayne Sean McGillinen!" Kerry reprimanded. "You know very well that Geneva's Hope is full of hospitality and welcome."

"And a lot of love," Dwayne winked to his sister. "I had to get your craw just once."

"You are still and always will be the bad little boy," Kerry laughed. "I hope you never change."

"I hope not," Breena piped in lovingly. "I'd get bored if I didn't have my husband's impish traits showing once and awhile."

"Mama, what's impish?" Megan asked innocently.

"A word for your father dear."

Megan furrowed her brows. She still didn't understand but replied, "Oh."

"I think we should go to our rooms and take a rest," Braden suggested suppressing a grin for Megan's question. "You boys may want to bathe and dress."

"Thank you Mr. Wessex," Brock replied politely. "Chin Su and I would like to take some time for our Ch'i. We do every day after the noon meal."

"Ch'i?" Kerry questioned Brock while looking at Bennett.

"Ch'i is a form of martial art and spiritual philosophy, Mamman," Bennett explained. "Chin Su is teaching me. I will join them after their session."

"What is martial art?" Anthony asked his big brother Bennett.

"It is a form of defense used to protect yourself," Bennett answered.

"Defense? Do you use a sword, gun, or something else?" Braden II asked.

"We use our body only," Brock explained. "The human body is all the defense you need."

"Huh?" Anthony asked. His face covered with question.

"I've seen Chin Su and Brock practice, Anthony," Bennett said. "You can believe me when I tell you that their bodies are weapons of great force."

"Will you show us?" Christina asked hopefully.

"Maybe later when we're in Geneva's Hope," Brock offered. "Is that okay with you darling?" Brock stared at the lovely little girl. She would be a beauty like her mother when she grew up. His embarrassment about flirting with Bennett's mother came back to haunt him. "I think we'll go to our rooms now."

"I'll see you in two hours," Bennett said moving aside for Brock to get up.

The muscles rippled in taut cords flowing in waves of bronzed flesh. In unity the two men moved. Their feet were bare on Turkish hotel carpeting. Both men wore only black silken pajamas with wide bottoms and a drawstring. Golden Chinese letters done with fine threads accented the pajamas.

"Your spirit is saddened," Chin Su commented during a swift movement. "Your eyes speak louder of loneliness."

"There is no hiding from the eyes of my master," Brock replied. Together they recreated the Qi Gong snake movement.

"Have you recognized your emptiness?"

"No my master," Brock replied honestly. "There is simply an empty pit of blackness somewhere within my being. It is strange and I don't know what it is."

"Look inward," Chin Su commanded. "Man is not a solitary creature. Instinct demands a settling, nurturing, loving, and caring. Never before have you seen these things...until now."

Brock stopped in mid movement. His eyes widened and stared at his master. Chin Su ignored Brock and continued the practice without missing a step.

"If this is so," Brock questioned. "Why is it you are solitary and do not settle?"

"Ah my tiger," Chin Su smiled and curved his body into the movement of a tiger. "I have taken you. I have not been solitary since your spirit has become my responsibility. I nurture, care, and love you as my family. I am complete with my existence in the universe. You my tiger, have yet to find your place. You are but a roaming rogue." Chin Su gave Brock one of his rare smiles.

"Know that you have seen your Eden, you will seek its fruits. The empty pit within you will seek its fill."

Brock shook his sweaty head and returned to the Qi Gong practice. "I hate it when you speak in riddles to me. Can't you ever simply tell me what I need to know?"

"That is not the right way, my tiger," Chin Su reprimanded. "For you to learn, you must seek and find your own answers."

Brock grinned and finished the practice. He actually loved Chin Su as a father. Everyone thought this Chinese man was a servant. Little did they know Chin Su was his master, friend, and companion. Brock's friends were quite bigoted and both he and

Chin Su agreed to give all the belief Chin Su was a servant. Not even Bennett knew that Chin Su was a Shaolin Priest and healer.

After practice Brock and Chin Su sat on cushions for meditation. As always, Chin Su burned fragrant incense during the meditation and relaxation.

A knock on the door interrupted their meditation. Brock rose and opened the door to a curious six year old in front of her big brother Bennett.

“Ben, he’s not dressed!” Christina gasped and turned into her brother. “He’s in his drawers.”

Bennett stroked the sandy brown curls. “It’s okay Puddin, those are special pants the Chinese wear like we wear our duck pants in Nevada.”

Christina moved her head and looked bashfully at Brock. “Really?”

“Really,” Brock smiled broadly and took Christina’s hand. “Come in Bennett.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Bennett explained. “It’s difficult for me to say no to Christina when she really wants to do something. She wanted to watch you and me do Ch’i.”

“No problem. Come in Christina,” Brock invited. A small chuckle followed Christina into the room. There was no doubt in Brock’s mind that it would be difficult indeed to say no to Christina Wessex when she wanted something. She wasn’t a spoiled child that always got her way. He had seen Kerry discipline the child. She was just so adorable you wanted her to be happy.

*Geneva's Force*



## *Chapter 4*

“Thanks for taking me with you into town,” Blue appreciated. She looked to her big cousin, Jared Wessex. He was the image of her father. Jared and Blue were born on the same day. They grew up as close as cousins could be. They were like brother and sister. They stuck together all the way through school. Neither one wanted a higher education like Garrett did or Bennett received. They loved the open land and both loved the lessons they learned from Blue’s Grandfather, Blue Pool, and Shoshone Shaman. Even Tracker and Eye of Hawk taught the two children along with their own. “I sure don’t like going to Ely without Pa anymore, but it’s Pa’s birthday and I want to get him something special.”

"I understand. Ely is filling with scum from the mines that are in Ruby. The work conditions are so bad it seems only the riff raff take jobs. Marshal Ewal would've run em out."

"That no good Sheriff Cage from Ruby is a low down snake belly," Blue remarked. She patted her Appaloosa, Ginger.

"Papa says he thinks Cage is on the Mining Company payroll," Jared shared.

"Ely is going to have to come to grips with this problem and find a new Marshal."

"People are scared, Blue."

"Scared of that low life Cage?"

"And his snake belly deputies."

They rode in silence the rest of the way to Ely. Blue always put on a brave front, but even her Pa tried to stay away from Ely. If her Pa didn't want to go there, she was a bit afraid. Blue was grateful her big cousin Jared would take her into town.

They stopped in front of her Grandfather Crawford's Mercantile. Jared was off his horse, Squash, first. He took Ginger's reins and Blue dismounted.

"Go on in the store. I'll be in later," Jared stated. "I see Matt over there. I want to talk to him."

Blue nodded and walked into the store. She was immediately aware of being watched. She felt a shiver go down her spine. Grandpa Blue told her to trust her instincts and she always did. She looked for Grandpa Crawford but didn't see him. Her instincts kicked in again. She spun around to face one of them low belly snakes, Ron Sikes. He was unshaven and was in need of a haircut. His body odor was overwhelming. Blue believed the man never took a bath. His eyes were close together and were separated only by a hard hawk like nose. Sikes looked evil. "If yor lookin for yor Gramps he had to go to the cellar and find somethin."

Blue backed up and placed her hand on the knife she kept sheathed in her belt.

"Yor sho a purty little gal," Ron snorted eyeing Blue carefully. "Don't like my women in britches."

"Glad to hear that," Blue sneered.

“Where’s yor Pa?” Ron asked looking at her lecherously. He made a forward movement to Blue. “He taint around is he? I think I’ll jest come up to your ranch and put my dibs in fer courtin.”

Blue couldn’t help but laugh contemptuously. “Pa wouldn’t let your kind within a smell of our house. And you smell worse than a putrid skunk.”

“You think yor high fluting don’t ya?” Sikes snorted. “Once I git in yor skirts you’d ‘preciate me. My pecker is large enough to fill you little gal.”

“I wear britches,” Blue snapped. “You’re disgusting.”

“It’s about time someone taught you manners little gal,” Sikes snarled. “Don’t ya knows a woman’s lower than a man. A woman needs to show respect to a man.”

“That leaves you out,” Blue snapped haughtily. “You’re reptilian.”

“What? What’d you say?”

“Reptilian, you know, low bellied snake type. Hardly man like,” Blue quipped and turned her back walking toward the counter.

Sikes grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. A hateful look loomed in his eye.

Blue automatically pulled her knife. “Get your hands off me!” The point cut across the top of his hand.

Sikes pulled back and saw a trickle of blood coming from his hand. “You Shrew!” He put his bloodied hand to his mouth.

Blue looked triumphantly at the deputy. “Don’t ever touch me again.”

“Blue?” Joseph Crawford questioned when he came in the room. Something was going on and he wasn’t sure what it was.

Blue looked back toward her Grandfather. It was enough of a distraction allowing Sikes to grab the knife from her hand. Blue turned back to glare at the deputy.

Sikes grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward his body. His foul breath gagged Blue. “Well little gal. I think I’m going to arrest you for attacking an officer of the law. Maybe you and I can find us some fun in that jail cell. I think I might like to look at

them pert little titties you got. First you gots to learn some manners.” He raised his free hand to slap her face.

Joseph Crawford came immediately out from behind the counter. He wouldn’t let that disgusting man hurt his granddaughter even if Sikes was a Deputy.

“I think not!” a voice came from behind Sikes. A huge hand grabbed Sikes wrist. “Let go of that knife right now or I’m gonna have to break your wrist. That’s your gun hand, right? Won’t be much of a deputy with a gun hand broken. Sheriff Cage might have to fire you.”

Blue grinned at her mountain of a cousin. He had come in just in time. Even Sikes was afraid of Jared Wessex. He was as imposing as Blue’s father.

“You people think yor better’n the rest?” Sikes grumbled rubbing his wrist. “Yor people ain’t above the law!”

Matthew Pierson, the preacher of Ely’s new church came into view. “No one is above the law. Even you Mr. Sikes are not above the law. I saw you about to strike an innocent girl trying to defend herself from your unwanted advances. The language you used was obscene to say the least. I will most definitely report this to Sheriff Cage.”

Sikes growled and stomped out of the mercantile.

“You all right Blue?” Jared asked his cousin worriedly. “That horse dung didn’t hurt you?”

“I’m perfectly all right, but I wish I could have cut out his foul tongue,” Blue replied with exasperation. “What is happening to this town?”

“Ely is certainly missing Marshal Ewal,” Joseph Crawford answered. He placed his arm lovingly over his granddaughter’s shoulder. “How about some chocolate candy?” Joseph knew that just like her mother, Blue loved chocolate. He was right. Blue gave him a big grin and nodded her head like a little child full of glee.

“When are the people of Ely gonna to do something about this Sheriff and his skunks called deputies?” Jared asked Blue’s grandfather.

“We’ve tried but no one is interested in the job. One of the reasons is that Sheriff Cage and his skunks scare any prospect off,”

Joseph answered as he handed Blue a chunk of chocolate bar. "Cage even has a lot of Ely resident's pretty scared, especially the people that stood up to him in the beginning. Watkins is still hobbling from a broken leg."

"You were ready to take on Sikes," Jared noted. He had seen Joseph grabbing a small axe and aiming for the man holding his granddaughter.

"I'd give my life for my family whenever needed," Joseph growled. "I wasn't about that snake belly hurt my granddaughter."

"I think its best that your women folk don't come into Ely until we can get this town cleaned up again," Matthew suggested. "It's a shame. A real shame a young lady is no longer safe here."

"That's gonna wreck attendance for your Sunday services," Jared chuckled.

"That it is," Matthew smiled back. "The Lord will understand. He says a pure and righteous woman is more valuable than rubies and gold. He would want no harm to come to our women."

Blue took another bite from the chocolate chunk and asked her grandfather, "Did Pa's presents come in?"

"They surely did sweetheart. The carving tools and book came three days ago." Joseph went back to the counter and pulled the brown packages out from under the counter where he had put them.

Blue pulled out the money from her beaded leather bag. The bag tied to her gun belt was a gift from her grandfather Blue Pool. The Shoshone beadwork was lovingly done.

"Put your money away sweetheart," Joseph chided. "I told you that I'd get it for you."

"Thanks Grandpa, but this is a present for Pa and I earned the money for it," Blue countered. "I want to buy it for him. It wouldn't be the same if I let you pay for it. Then it wouldn't really be from me."

Joseph took Blue's money reluctantly. "You are a good girl sweetheart. I'm proud of you."

"I take after my Mama," Blue grinned. She knew that remark would make her Grandpa feel good. She watched as Joseph's eyes lit up with pride.

"That you do sweetheart. Chocolate and all," Joseph beamed. "Blue you're a mess." He handed his granddaughter a cloth towel to wipe her lips that were full of chocolate.

"Before I forget," Blue stated wiping her chocolate lips. "Here's a small list from Cho Ling."

"And I have a list from Geneva's Hope," Jared added. "The less I come into town. The better I like it."

Joseph took both lists and handed them to his newly hired assistant, Derrick Maddock. Derrick was a mine orphaned fourteen year old. "Take of this for me would you please?"

Derrick took off for the stock room to get everything on the two lists.

"Where'd he come from?" Jared asked.

"He was in the cellar with me looking for a missing case of lanterns," Joseph answered handing Blue another chunk of chocolate. "We found them and he had brought them up and put them in the stock room."

"I mean when, where, and why did you hire him?" Jared questioned.

"Business is growing and I needed the help. My son is off to school in the East. The boy came in half starved and stole an apple when Samantha was minding the counter for me. She caught the boy stealing but smiled and pulled him upstairs to the kitchen and gave him stew and bread. The waif ate like he had three stomachs. Samantha pulled me aside and told me to hire the boy. It seems he told Samantha everything. His mother died and then his father died in a cave in. He tried to work, but there wasn't anything he could do. Derrick came to Ely looking for work and found nothing either. He told Samantha he was sorry for stealing, but he was hungry. I offered him the job. He's been here ever since. Sleeps in the stock room on a cot and takes meal with us. He's a hard worker and good boy."

"Leave it to Grandma to open her heart and house," Blue admired.

"Your Grandma is one of the best women in Nevada," Joseph bragged. "I'm proud to call her my wife."

"Still needs a little filling out, but he's big for fourteen," Jared noticed. "If you want I can hire him for Geneva's Hope."

Joseph laughed. "No thank you. The boy's turned out to be a real blessing for this old man."

Derrick brought two large homespun sacks to the counter. "I've got everything and gave a tab for each."

"You cipher too?" Jared asked Derrick.

"Yes sir," Derrick replied shyly. "My Mama taught me to read, write, and cipher."

"She did a good job," Jared commented checking the tabs. "You like working here?"

Derrick's eyes grew large and sparkled. "Yes sir I do. Mr. and Mrs. Crawford are good people. I'm proud and happy to work here. My Mama and Papa would be proud to see the job I got here."

Jared put down several gold pieces and gave a twenty dollar gold piece to Derrick. "Your tip."

Derrick's mouth dropped. "Sir, I can't."

Blue came up and placed a soft kiss on Derrick's forehead. "Yes you can."

Jared took both sacks and looked to Blue, "Let's get out of here cousin."

Both Blue and Jared would be surprised if they found out Derrick took that twenty dollar gold piece and put ten in the Ely bank into his savings. Since Joseph Crawford had hired him, Derrick put half of his wages into a bank savings. He took the other half of the twenty to buy pretty combs for Samantha Crawford and new suspenders for Joseph Crawford. He surprised the Crawfords with his gifts that evening for supper.

"We'll drop off the goods at Geneva's Hope and then I'll go to Geneva's Branch with you," Jared said quietly as their horses made soft trotting sounds. He had to break the silence.

"Thanks Jared," Blue appreciated.

"That Sikes didn't hurt you did he?"

"No, but I can be honest with you, Jared. He did shake me up. Lordy this town is getting crazy. I don't want you to say anything to Pa."

"Remember the Romans that brought bad news?" Jared teased to comfort his cousin.

"Yeah, they were killed."

"I don't feel like getting chewed up by Uncle Ryan. Besides, he'd want to know why you went to town without him."

Blue still held a sullen pout.

"Hey what's really up your craw, cousin?" Jared leaned over his saddle and gently squeezed Blue's arm.

"That snake belly caught me with my drawers down," Blue gritted. "That ain't ever happened before. Blue Pool would be furious with me. So would Pa!"

"Nah. They wouldn't be upset," Jared reassured. "Besides, who said you wouldn't have whipped his butt if I hadn't stepped in and taken over?"

"Well I was planning to give the snake belly a good kick in his privates," Blue laughed.

Jared grimaced at the thought.

Blue sent her cousin a big smile. Her cousin was so dear to her. He always made her feel better. Blue remembered she had never seen her cousin angry. He was so much like her father.

The rest of the way to Geneva's Hope they chatted about Ely and what the town had turned into. They were grateful they lived away from Ely.

Garrett greeted them when they arrived at Geneva's Hope. "Got a wire from Mama. They're coming home a week from today. We're to meet them at the whistle stop."

"Bennett okay?" Blue queried her other cousin.

"Mama says everyone is good. Bennett is for sure bringing his friend, Brock Hampton."

"He should make life interesting around here," Jared guffawed.

"For sure," Garrett agreed.

"What's wrong with this Brock friend?" Blue frowned. Her sandy brown curls responding to the wind and flying about.

"Nothing," Jared replied sheepishly.

"You ain't a good liar, Jared," Blue accused. "Tell me about this friend."

"Jared, don't!" Garrett ordered. "It's man talk. It isn't for any girl to hear!"

"I ain't a girl!"

Jared and Garrett raised their brows. They tried to hold back their laughs. It was a favorite pastime of the brothers to get Blue's gander up.

"Could fool me," Garrett quipped. "Your Pa sure thinks you're his girl."

"You know what I mean," Blue growled. "I'm your cousin. I'm family. If there's something fishy about cousin Bennett's friend, I should know about it."

Jared caved in to Blue's logic. "He's sort of a randy."

"Randy?" Blue had never heard that word before.

"It means a ladies man," Garrett explained. He was flush pink down to his toes. He prayed Blue didn't ask any more questions. This was embarrassing.

Blue was really confused. "He's one of them funny men preachers say is going to eternal damnation?"

Garrett groaned.

"Damn Blue, it's hard for a guy to explain," Jared choked. He was as crimson red as his brother. "It means he likes to you know, use women in that way. Then he walks away."

"Oh," Blue's mouth formed a big O when she responded. Now it was her turn to blush with embarrassment.

"Here's the grub and things Mrs. Barber ordered," Jared told his brother to quickly change the subject. "I'm going to take Blue back to Geneva's Branch. I'll probably spend the night."

"Everything all right in Ely?" Garrett asked. He was close enough to his brother to read his moods. He could tell Jared was worried over something and it wasn't their recent topic of Brock Hampton.

"We had a little set to with Sikes," Jared shared. "He was crude to our Blue."

"You okay honey?" Garrett questioned worriedly.

"Jared took care of things before I had to," Blue said with bravado she didn't feel. Just remembering the touch of that vile man sent shivers up her neck.

Garrett immediately saw the distress in his cousin. "Go on now. It'll be dark before long. Jared and I will stop for a visit before we pick up Mama."

"I hope you stop by with Auntie Kerry and Uncle Braden," Blue hoped verbally. "I know Mama, Papa, my sisters, my brother, and I would enjoy the visit." Blue reined in Ginger and left the ranch heading for home.

Jared was right next to her.

Garrett frowned. He had a sudden thought. Blue was a beautiful woman. He and Jared never really thought about it, but the thought of Brock Hampton made him scowl. *'That randy friend of yours brother better stay away from our Blue.'*

It was nearly dusk when Jared and Blue road into Geneva's Branch. Little Ryan pulling away from Lei Ling greeted them.

"Hey Jared," Ryan squealed in delight. The little boy loved Jared as much as his father and maybe that's why he felt comfortable with his cousin. Jared looked so much like his father.

"Where's Pa?" Blue asked Lei sliding off Ginger and grabbing her sack.

"He's out on the back forty with Sam and Lucy," Lei answered reaching for Ryan. "They're practicing their riding with Blue Pool." She pulled Ryan back by his shirt. "Where do you think you're going? You get back in that house and finish your alphabet."

Jared still marveled at the perfect American Lei Ling spoke. Her husband Cho Ling still had a terrible accent. Still Lei Ling spoke fluent Chinese with Cho Ling. He dismounted Squash. "Evening Lei Ling."

Lei Ling, slight of stature but strong of will and character returned Jared's greeting. "Good Evening Mr. Jared." Her brown eyes sparkled with intelligence and her black hair streaked with only a few strands of gray glistened in the sunset.

Twiggy appeared at the doorway. "Hello Jared." She looked at her daughter and immediately noticed her wrist was bruised. "What happened Blue?"

"I ran into the deputy Sikes," Blue answered. She knew she couldn't keep anything from her mother.

"Come inside and tell me what happened," Twiggy ordered. "I mean everything. You too, Jared."

## *Chapter 5*

“Let me wrap your wrist,” Twiggy told her daughter after she heard the story. “We’ll tell your Pa you burnt it on the cake pan when Cho Ling put the cake out to cool. I don’t want your Pa running into town and getting in trouble. It’s best he doesn’t hear about this.”

“Yes Mama.”

“That goes for you too, Jared.”

“No argument Auntie Twiggy.”

Twiggy took a clean cotton bandage and wrapped it carefully around Aurora’s wrist. Just as she finished Little Ryan ran in the kitchen. “Papa is coming home. Lucy and Sam are riding ahead.”

“Thank goodness everything is ready,” Twiggy fussed. She spread her hands across her clean apron and then palmed the loose

curls back from her face. She pinched her cheeks and bit her lips to make them rosy and wet.

Aurora Blue put her presents on the table. They were wrapped in pretty calico cloth with a blue silk ribbon. That was special to the Ryan McGillinen family. Only Aurora Blue wore or received blue silk ribbons. It was her sacred and special color.

Cho Ling carried the large chocolate birthday cake into the dining room and Lei followed him with the freshly made chocolate ice cream. "This be Lyan's birthday, but cake and ice cream arways prease women."

"We just love chocolate," Blue smiled sweetly. "It's the way of the McGillinen women."

"I like chocolate," Little Ryan butted in pushing his way through his mother and sister. "I ain't no girl." He folded his arms over his chest and pouted.

"Your Pa likes chocolate, too!" Twiggy laughed and scooped Little Ryan up in her arms. "It's a McGillinen way. We women are just a bit more fond of it."

"Okay!" Little Ryan nuzzled his nose into his mother's hair.

Big Ryan was greeted outside of the ranch. "Hallo Jared. What brings you to Geneva's Branch?"

"Blue reminded me it was a special day," Jared replied cheerfully.

"Special day?" Ryan looked puzzled.

"You've forgotten?" Twiggy asked forlornly. She loved teasing her big bear of a husband. "How could you forget our special day?"

"You ain't teasing me, honey." Ryan dismounted and handed the reins to Bill Greens, one of the ranch hands. He strolled over to Twiggy and lifted Little Ryan. After placing a soft kiss on his son's cheek he pulled Twiggy into his embrace. "I never forget our anniversary and it is **not** today."

Twiggy melted into Ryan's big strong arms and looked up into her husband's comforting gray eyes. "I didn't say it was our anniversary. It is our special day." Stretching to her limit and with a bit of help from Ryan's arms, Twiggy was lifted up to give her husband a peck on the lips.

"I give up. I'm a bad husband. I can't for the life of me remember what this special day is."

"Well, as long as you admit you're getting old and forgetful," Blue said quite seriously grabbing her father's arm. "We'll take you into the house to help you remember."

Ryan resisted slightly and laughed, "Just what is that supposed to mean? You lose respect for your elders' girl? You ain't too old to get a whupping!"

Twiggy tugged on her husband's other sleeve to pull him in the house. "You've never raised a hand to these girls. It's too late to start."

"Ain't never too late." Ryan pulled back on both women and with one arm grabbed Blue. With the other he grabbed Twiggy. Both women rode on Ryan's hips into the house.

Twiggy and Blue were squealing with delight and protesting in humor.

"Put me down you big bear!"

"No Pa! Oh no Pa! Don't whup me."

Ryan stopped in the hall and saw the dining room decorated with ribbons and candles. In the middle of the dining room table and surrounded by fine bone china plates and silverware was a huge decorated chocolate cake. Carrying his two ladies he walked into the room and looked at the cake. "Well I'll be. I totally forget today is my birthday."

"We didn't!" his family chimed together.

"You think my birthday is our special day?" Ryan asked Twiggy after putting Blue down and setting Twiggy on her feet.

"Very special. If you weren't born today I wouldn't be the happiest and most blessed woman in this country."

Ryan's face beamed with a loving glow. He turned and growled at Blue, "You remember girl, you ain't too old for a whupping. Call me old and forgetful?"

"Aw Pa!" Blue realized her father's threat was harmless and loving. Many times she and her sisters would talk about how lucky they were to have such a wonderful father and mother.

"Happy Birthday, Pa!" Sam and Lucy squealed and hugged their father.



“Happy Birthday, Papa!” Little Ryan added. “Can we have the cake and ice cream now?”

“Sure can, son.” Ryan picked up his son and put him on the chair next to his. He took the cake knife and carved into the birthday treat. He gave big pieces to every one.

After everyone had their fill of ice cream and cake Ryan opened his presents. All of his gifts were thoughtful. Twiggy had made him a new pair of soft moccasins. Lucy was the artist of the family and she did the beadwork. Samantha knit her father a new pair of warm socks. Little Ryan offered his small carving that Bill Green had helped him make. It was a barn swallow carving. Little Ryan wanted to carve pretty wood like his father.

There were a few moments that Ryan had to hold back the tears from his eyes. One of those times was when Blue presented her gift. Twiggy announced that Blue had earned her own money to buy it for him. The carving tools were something Ryan had seen in a catalog and decided he would buy them some day. The gift was a very special loving gift from his eldest daughter. He choked out a thank you and was as proud as he could be of his children. “How can a man be so lucky to have you for a family?”

“Maybe because you are the best Pa in the whole world,” Blue answered proudly.

“Wait a minute,” Jared disagreed. “My Pa is pretty great!”

“Uncle Braden is the best father in all of England,”

Samantha remarked wisely and with political brilliance.

“I like Uncle Ayden,” Lucy rebuffed.

Samantha groaned, “Truth be known, my favorite is Uncle Dwayne of all the uncles.”

“That’s because everyone says you are an Irish politician like he is,” Blue chided.

“Maybe we are all so lucky because we are the McGillinen family,” Twiggy suggested ending the discussion amicably. They were a happy family and it seemed as if nothing would ever come into Geneva’s Branch to destroy this happiness. For twenty years they lived happily on this ranch and watched their family grow. Ryan’s daughters, that is what everyone in Ely called the girls. No one dared to offend or anger, Ryan’s daughters. They knew they

would have to face the wrath of Ryan Patrick McGillinen. It was also well known throughout the county that Ryan's daughters could shoot; throw a knife, hunt, track, and fish better than most of the men in the county. One didn't mess with Ryan's daughters.

That is until today in Ely by the not so popular Deputy Sikes. The dolt believed his badge would protect him.

Jared was invited to spend the evening at Geneva's Branch. He knew Geneva's Hope was safe under Garrett's hand and accepted. He enjoyed spending time with his favorite cousin, Blue. She was closer to him than his own sisters. They grew up like twins would have since they were born on the same day and looked very much like each other.

Blue sat on the floor by her father's chair. Jared sat in the chair opposite his uncle. Twiggy was putting Little Ryan and Lucy to bed. Samantha was reading another one of her history books by a kerosene lamp.

Ryan lifted Blue's hand to his lap. "What happened to your wrist baby?"

"Oh nothing."

Ryan bent down and placed his lips on the bandage. "If nothing happened why is your wrist bandaged?"

"Oh it's just a little burn," Blue lied and tried to tug her wrist away from her father's grip.

"Burn?"

"I got to close to Cho Ling's cake pan when he put your cake out to cool," Blue replied remembering her mother's made up story.

"Really?" Ryan pursued. "Let me take a look at it."

"It's fine really."

"I don't smell any pine tar salve on it. I should put some on."

"Really Pa, I'm fine. It doesn't hurt at all."

"Now you see baby girl, that does worry me," Ryan continued and started to unwrap the bandage. "A burn does hurt." When he pulled the bandage off he saw the bruise. "What the Sam Hill is this? Who hurt you baby girl?"

Twiggy came into the room and rushed to Blue's side. "Leave it be, Ryan."

"No I won't leave it be. First I find out my baby girl lied to me and now her Ma tells me to leave it be. It doesn't take a smart man to figure out something happened to my baby girl. Is that why you're here, Jared? I want the truth!"

"I'm here for your birthday Uncle Ryan," Jared answered quickly. "That is the truth."

"What happened?" Ryan demanded. He looked at Blue directly into her eyes. "You've never lied to me."

"No Pa, I haven't."

Twiggy interceded once again. "Don't get upset. Jared was there. Nothing happened."

"Dammit! What happened?" Ryan roared.

"Deputy Sikes caught me off guard," Blue shuddered. "I'm so ashamed, Pa. You taught me better than that."

Ryan took Blue's hands in his and spoke softly, "He hurt you?"

"Only my pride," Blue confessed. "And my wrist, but Jared gave him the what for."

"Jared, I want you to tell me exactly what happened," Ryan said softly. His jaw was set and his eyes narrowed.

Twiggy recognized her husband's anger. She was most frightened for her husband when he was quiet and angry. If the bear growled everything would be fine.

Jared related briefly the encounter with Deputy Sikes.

Twiggy waited for her husband's response. There was silence and his fists closed.

"I see," Ryan whispered.

Twiggy was really frightened now. "Nothing happened Ryan."

"Not this time," Ryan returned quietly. "The low life touched my baby. We can't let him get away with that. No one touches my baby girls that way."

"Ryan, let it be," Twiggy pleaded. She moved between his legs and sat on Ryan's lap. Gently Twiggy extended her arm to her husband's shoulder, raised her legs to rest on his thighs and snuggled her head into Ryan's neck. "This is our haven, our heaven, don't let anything interfere with our peace."

Ryan bent slightly over Twiggy's head and pulled her into his frame. His hand stroked her red velvet wrapper from the top of shoulder down to her perfectly formed bottom. Ryan noticed the white silken nightgown she wore. She smelled of lilac powder. He loved that smell. Twiggy was up to something and he was glad. He always enjoyed his wife when she wanted to persuade him into something she wanted. "Twiggy darling, our haven is threatened if we let them think they can paw our baby girls."

"No my love!" Twiggy whimpered quietly. "If we let them upset us and you confront them, it will give them an opportunity to take you and all of this. They'll call it legal. We can't risk all our life, love, and work for a slight. I can't imagine life without you. Please don't risk this. Don't risk our life."

Samantha looked at her parents. She sighed and announced, "They're nuzzling again. I guess its time for bed."

"I think so," Blue agreed. "Come on Jared. Let's hit the hay. Are you going to sleep with Little Ryan tonight?"

Jared rose from the chair and followed the sisters. "Yeah, I promised the little fella. Would it do any good to say goodnight to Uncle Ryan and Aunt Twiggy?"

"Nah, when they get like this they get really involved," Blue laughed tugging at her sister's arm and leading her to the stairs.

Ryan and Twiggy did share their own world when together in a nuzzle. Ryan nuzzled Twiggy's neck and soon the two were self absorbed with each other. The world and Deputy Sikes was forgotten.

"Let's go to bed," Ryan croaked huskily. He rose from the chair cradling Twiggy in his arms. Soon they were in their bed behind a closed and locked door. Once again Twiggy had calmed her savage beast with their special love.

Twiggy stretched her arm across the big oak bed. Where Ryan was supposed to be was an empty mattress. She jumped up from the bed with a start. Fear and panic gripped Twiggy. Did Ryan leave this morning and go off to Ely to deal with the deputy? Once again tying her red velvet wrapper around the soft white

silken gown, Twiggy ran into the great room. Then in the dim light of the arriving morning sun she walked into the dining room.

Lei Ling was gathering the dirty breakfast dishes.

Twiggy did not try to hide the panic she felt. "Has Mr. Ryan eaten and left?"

Lei Ling continued her duty but answered softly, "Mr. Ryan told me to tell you not to fret. He is going to Bright Moon's camp. After his visit with Chief Bright Moon, he and Master Jared are going to check the south forty before Jared returns home." Lei Ling looked over her back as she walked into the kitchen. "No need to fear. Mr. Ryan is not going to Ely."

"Thank you," Twiggy whispered and sat down in her chair at the dining table.

Cho Ling emerged from the kitchen with a breakfast plate. "You eat, feer good. Don't be aflaid. Okay? Lyan say he be home at noon."

Twiggy took the coffee urn and poured herself a cup. "Okay." Relief knowing that Ryan would not go to Ely flowed out in a happy smile to Cho Ling. "There were three plates. Did Blue go with them?"

"Yes Missy Twiggy."

Twiggy was certain now that Ryan would not be going to Ely. He kept his daughters away from the town for the past two years. After Deputy Sikes offense, he would not take Blue to town.

"Morning Mama," Samantha greeted. Lucy tagged behind her holding Little Ryan's hand.

"Come sit for breakfast," Twiggy invited. Her children scurried around the table anxious for the wonderful breakfast Cho Ling made every morning.

"Where are Pa, Jared, and Blue?" Samantha inquired grabbing a piece of fresh buttered bread and putting jam preserves on it.

"They went out to visit Chief Bright Moon and your Grandpa Blue Pool," Twiggy answered spreading preserves on a piece of bread for Little Ryan.

"Can I ride over after breakfast?" Samantha asked her mother hopefully.

“Absolutely not,” Lei Ling resounded entering the dining room with fresh hotcakes. “You are behind in your geography studies. It’s the school room for you, your sister, and your brother.”

Twiggy arched her brows and raised her shoulders in defeat. “Lei Ling has spoken.”

The children groaned. Their disappointment didn’t spoil their appetites as they enjoyed the hotcakes.

Blue and Jared visited Blue Pool while Ryan talked to Bright Moon and his council. Ryan shared his fear for his family and the camp. The current sheriff and deputies posed more of a threat to the tranquility of Geneva’s Hope and Geneva’s Branch than ever before. Bright Moon agreed and sent two warriors to council with Eye of Hawk. Bright Moon agreed to keep watch warriors at all boundaries of Geneva’s Branch during all hours of the day. Bright Moon told Ryan that their shaman Skywriter had a vision. Skywriter then spoke and told Ryan a strange giant will come to the land and defeat the evil taking over this country. He will carry no gun or knife, but will be of Tam Apo. This giant would arrive soon. Skywriter also warned that Ryan, his family, and the McGillinen’s would soon face great peril from the current sheriff. Skywriter told Ryan that a time of great danger, the giant would save him and his family. He told Ryan not to worry or do anything foolish when it appeared there was no hope.

Ryan promised to remember Skywriter’s words and thanked Bright Moon for his help. Ryan decided to send James Brewer into Ely and send a wire to Carson City. He would ask his good friend, Judge James to give the Ely Town Council the right to name a new Federal Marshal. He would also send a letter to Joseph Crawford telling him of his request to the judge. Joseph was a prominent member of the Ely council and would secretly let the members know. At least the members Joseph could trust. Ryan walked out of Bright Moon’s lodge to see Jared and Blue walking toward him with Blue Pool. Aurora Blue was holding her grandfather’s hand. He was so proud of his family. Even Jared was more like a son than a nephew.

“Ready to ride Uncle Ryan?”

“Yep, let’s go Jared.”

The three rode out to the southern boundaries. Ryan spoke to three of his ranch hands. He asked them to ride this range daily, but always together. Ryan also told them Bright Moon’s warriors would be helping keep watch over Geneva’s Branch lands. Ryan did not share Skywriter’s vision with his ranch hands. He believed the Shoshone warriors already knew and that would be enough.

Jared turned on his horse and gave a salute to his uncle and cousin. Then he rode toward Geneva’s Hope. Once more he promised he and Garrett would stop in on their way to pick up their parents and siblings who would be returning from New York.

“Time for some riding practice, Pa?”

Ryan smiled broadly. “Yep, I think we can. Think Ginger is aiming to practice?”

Blue stroked her Appaloosa mare’s mane. “Are you Ginger girl?”

The Appaloosa nickered happily.

Blue gave the mare her head and even with saddle she practiced her balance riding. Blue removed her boots from the stirrups and stood on the saddle. She carefully balanced on Ginger’s back.

Ginger threw her head back and whinnied happily.

“Sure is easier bareback,” Blue chuckled to her father.

Ryan laughed, “I’m certain of that. Ginger would like it better also.” He kept Cheater close but slightly behind Ginger. They returned to Geneva’s Branch close to noon as promised.

## *Chapter 6*

Brock felt the train stop. He was told the next stop would be the whistle stop where the spur rail would hold the McGillinen's private cars. He grinned. For as simple and down to earth this family was, they traveled in style. He was nearly run over by Bennett's brothers when he entered the parlor car. They had been looking out the window. He heard them screaming Garrett and Jared's names and the names of their horses. When he did get a chance to peek outside he stroked his chin with his forefinger and thumb. Brock mumbled, "Look's like a small army." There were three wagons, a stylish carriage, ten men dressed in western clothes and carrying handguns and rifles. There had to be about twenty horses and some ponies. Brock admitted it was magnificent horseflesh. One in particular was quite striking. It looked like a thoroughbred Morgan with white stockings.

Bennett placed his hand on Brock's shoulder. "There's the rest of the Wessex family."

"All of them?" Brock teased.

Bennett slapped Brock on the back. "No, the two big ugly ones are Garrett and Jared."

"I recognize one that looks like you. Who is he?" Brock queried pointing to Garrett sitting on a magnificent palomino.

"That's Garrett," Bennett replied and pointed to Jared. "The one in the dark blue shirt on that buckskin is Jared."

"He doesn't like the rest of you."

"Jared takes after Uncle Ryan and my cousin Aurora. She and Jared were born on the same day. They look like twins."

"That is going to be one ugly girl," Brock quipped.

"That's what I want you to think," Bennett joked in return. "You play my cousin like any of your women folk and my Uncle Ryan would strip your skin inch by inch."

"Nothing to fear if she looks like Jared," Brock laughed.

"Jared is a handsome man, but it wouldn't do for feminine charms."

"Come on friend," Bennett laughed. "We've got to change and saddle our horses. I know my siblings are real anxious to get back home."

Brock nodded and quickly changed. He walked from the train car toward the baggage car and was surprised to see Bennett's mother in a split skirt, simple cotton blouse, black leather boots, riding gloves, and a black Stetson. She was beautiful. Brock sighed. He sure wished Kerry Wessex wasn't Bennett's mother. He still couldn't get over how attractive she was. The Wessex nanny was being helped into the carriage. She would be caring for Christina. Braden Wessex was already mounted on that Morgan with stockings. Braden was holding little Ashley. Brock was amazed with Braden's change of attire. In New York he wore the finest cut suits with expensive wool and silken shirts. Today he wore black duck pants, leather cowboy boots, a green flannel shirt, and Black Stetson. Bennett was near his father riding a red chestnut mustang. Bennett was dressed in similar clothing as his father. Brock felt a big awkward since he chose his tight white riding breeches, black leather boots, silk shirt, ascot, and red woolen riding jacket.

Jared saw Brock walking toward them and hooted, "We got us a bona fide dude, Garrett."

All heads turned toward Brock and muffled laughter could be heard.

"Sure glad the Shoshone are our friends and live here," Garrett guffawed. "That red coat would attract several arrows. That man is some pumpkins!"

"That's why they call Brits, red coats," Anthony chided.

“Bennett, you didn’t tell us your friend was a dude!” Jared added.

“Enough!” Braden issued a stern command. He was not pleased with his sons’ teasing of Bennett’s friend.

Kerry mounted her buckskin and rode next to Braden. “I hope Brock can forgive our rude children. As for our boys, well, a quick trip to the woodshed would seem in order. They seem to forget they are not too old for a whipping reminder of proper manners.”

Garrett, Jared, and Anthony quickly apologized to Brock.

“We didn’t mean any harm,” Jared assured. Although none of the Wessex children had ever suffered a spanking, they never liked getting their mother or father angry. Like the Shoshone, when a child was naughty, the entire family reprimanded and chided the offender. None of the Wessex children misbehaved very often. “We were just having a little fun and teasing to welcome you into the family.”

“I think I shall need to visit your Ely and acquire different attire,” Brock whispered to Bennett.

“I think that’s a good idea my friend,” Bennett agreed. “I’ll go into to Ely and together we’ll buy some clothes from Crawford’s Mercantile.”

“Uh, big brother,” Jared interrupted. “I think you should know that there are problems in Ely. The law doesn’t exactly ride the rail.”

“What’s going on?” Bennett asked. “Uncle Dwayne only told us there were some problems since Marshal Ewal died and he and Auntie Breena pushed through markers in the congress to protect our Genevas.”

“Jared and Aurora went into town last week. They went to pick up the present Aurora bought for Uncle Ryan,” Garrett told Bennett. Everyone in the family referred to Aurora as Blue except his parents. When the boys were in earshot of their parents, they always called Blue by her proper name, Aurora. “Deputy Sikes manhandled Aurora and said some pretty bad things to her.”

Kerry and Braden were listening intently.

“Oh no, Ryan didn’t...” Kerry gasped.

"No Mama," Jared reassured. "Auntie Twiggy ordered Uncle Ryan to stay away from Ely. She knew it would put all of us in trouble if Uncle Ryan taught that lily livered polecat a well earned lesson."

"Thank God for Twiggy's cool head," Kerry breathed in relief. She leaned back in her saddle. Kerry would never stop worrying over her big brother. "Is Aurora all right?"

"Just bruised," Jared told his mother.

"I can't believe that Ryan didn't kill Sikes," Braden marveled. "Ryan's daughters are as precious to him as mine are to me."

"You wouldn't go off and kill someone for touching them?" Kerry queried almost certain of her calm husband's response.

"Well my love, if someone touched my Christina or Ashley in an improper way," Braden hesitated. "Yes I would."

Kerry's mouth dropped. "Let's get home."

"Is that deputy almost blind?" Brock whispered to Bennett. "Why would he manhandle a twin of Jared?"

Bennett kept his smile from erupting and shrugged his shoulders. Bennett was certain that if Brock even looked at Blue twice, Uncle Ryan would lay him flat. Bennett hoped to protect his friend from that situation. The best way to keep Brock from Uncle Ryan's daughters would be to let him think they were all homely. In reality, Bennett knew his cousins were the prettiest girls in the county.

The first night the group broke for camp. All comforts were available. Everyone had hot food and strong shelters. In the morning the group broke into two parts. Braden and Kerry took their younger children with them to visit Geneva's Branch. Braden and Kerry discussed not waiting to show Ryan the legislation Dwayne had managed to get for protection of the ranches. Bennett and the older sons of Kerry and Braden went with the other half of the ranch hands directly to Geneva's Hope. Braden left strict instructions that everyone waits until his return before anyone ventured into Ely.

Brock woke early in the morning. After yesterday's ride, hot bath, and filling meal, he had gone to bed early. This morning feeling fresh he dressed in a simple Aran knit sweater, his white riding breeches, and black leather riding boots. Brock had decided he would go into Ely and purchase more appropriate clothing. This land was different even from San Francisco where he was raised. The warning not to go into Ely from Braden Wessex he was certain meant for his young sons and not meant for him. Brock had to admit to himself as he walked down the stairs toward the kitchen, this Geneva's Hope was quite impressive. His guest room was Mother Earth room. The subtle earth tones of the room relaxed him and gave him a warm home feeling inside.

He stepped into the kitchen and found Mrs. Barber pulling fresh bread from the oven. The aroma was heavenly.

"You're an early riser," Mrs. Barber commented wiping her hands on her white apron. She still had a small English accent to her voice. When Marseille Aumond retired as chef at Geneva's Hope, Braden brought Mrs. Barber, a widow from his English estate, to be the new cook at the ranch. She wasn't a French Chef, but everyone loved her down home cooking.

"Must be the aroma of your baking," Brock suggested. He knew it was always a smart idea to compliment the cooking of a woman.

"I take it you're hungry?"

"Like a penal escapee."

Mrs. Barber raised her brow and after a cold silence for several minutes broke out laughing. "That's a new one on me. I like that. For that you'll get some extra jam on your bread."

"Thank you ma'am," Brock grinned. He sat down at the worktable and let Mrs. Barber fix him a plate of eggs, steak, milk, and biscuits. On a separate plate she presented Brock with two thick slices of fresh warm buttered bread with jam preserves.

"You're not from around here are you?" Mrs. Barber queried and then before he could answer announced quickly. "Those are English riding clothes. You're that student friend of Bennett Wessex."

"Right on all counts," Brock smiled warmly. He liked the motherly type woman Mrs. Barber was. He wondered if his mother would have been like her.

"So, where are you off to this morning?"

"I sort of stick out in these clothes, so I thought I'd ride into Ely and buy some more appropriate clothing," Brock answered still chewing and enjoying the savory fresh baked bread.

"Lord Wessex ordered everyone to stay away from Ely," Mrs. Barber warned. "You're a guest, but you should listen to your host."

"Why Mrs. Barber, what could happen to a stranger in Ely purchasing new clothing?"

Mrs. Barber crossed her arms over her large chest. "A lot could happen and most of it trouble. Ely has become a bad town."

"I bet you don't even go to town very often," Brock suggested wryly.

"I don't! I don't with good reason," Mrs. Barber argued. "My employer is a good and wise man."

"I'm certain he is," Brock agreed. "But I do need new clothes and I doubt I'll get into trouble as a stranger who is simply visiting." He finished his breakfast and walked to the stables. He found his saddle and the horse he rode to Geneva's Hope. This horse was a bit skittish under the English saddle, but tolerated it.

The stable boy helped Brock saddle the horse and then asked him where he was heading. When Brock told him, the boy protested but it was too late. Brock reined the horse and headed it toward the road the led to Ely.

Soon after Brock had left, Jared, Garrett, Bennett, and Chin Su came to breakfast.

"Good morning, boys," Mrs. Barber greeted. She had already placed the eggs, steak, bread, hotcakes, bacon and fresh milk on the sideboard. As the young men sat down she poured them hot coffee.

"Good morning Mrs. Barber," Garrett returned stacking his plate with hotcakes. "If I were an older man I would make you my wife. You are the best cook this side of the Mississippi."

"If you were older I'd hope you'd have better manners," Mrs. Barber reprimanded. "Lord Wessex will certainly have a say

to you boys about your manners when he returns. Of course that will come after a good strong tongue lashing from Lady Wessex."

Garrett furrowed his brow, "I washed my hands."

"I'm talking about harassment of your guest," Mrs. Barber clucked angrily. "That poor young man could get into a lot of trouble because of your teasing. What with such a fine lad and all and him dressing quite proper, well you boys made him feel quite badly about himself."

"Mrs. Barber, what are you talking about?" Bennett queried after swallowing a mouthful of fried eggs. He reached for a piece of fresh buttered bread.

"Your guest, Brock Hampton, feels it is necessary to go to Ely, against your father's wishes I might add, and purchase new clothing. Thanks to your unmannerly teasing, the lad feels awkward and ill at ease in his clothes."

Bennett took a sip of cold milk and replied, "Garrett and Jared were just teasing. I had no idea Brock took it so seriously. I'll have them apologize to Brock when he gets up."

"Apologize?" Garrett choked. "What in the Sam Hill for? He looks like a sissy dude."

Mrs. Barber glared at Garrett.

The glare seared right through to Garrett and Jared. "Yes ma'am, we'll apologize to him when he gets up."

"He's already up and on his way into Ely," Mrs. Barber growled.

"Into Ely?" Jared gasped. "Pa told us to stay away from town until he returns to Geneva's Hope."

"A fact which Brock felt he was exempt from," Mrs. Barber snapped. "Because of your merciless teasing he felt bad enough to take himself into Ely and buy new clothes."

Garrett and Jared moaned, "Oh shit!"

"Papa will be furious with me if anything happens to Brock," Bennett groaned.

"Pa and Mama will split my hide," Jared whimpered.

"That's after they're done with me," Garrett sighed.

The three boys looked at each other sheepishly.

"What are we going to do?" Garrett questioned.

"I have to go into Ely and make sure he's alright," Bennett said rising from the table.

"It's our fault too," Jared said rising. "We're coming with you. Perhaps it will be better if we ride into Ely as a family."

Garrett grabbed a piece of buttered bread and rose from the table. "Just be sure you stay away from Deputy Sikes little brother. He's already got a fly up his craw for you. I'm sure that little bully didn't cotton to you putting him in his place when you were protecting Blue."

"That reject from a cow dung pasture isn't good enough to live in Ely, much less carry a badge," Jared snarled back to his brother. Jared was as big as his Uncle Ryan and when he walked in determination his strides always put him ahead of his brothers.

"Unfortunately we can do nothing legally to take away that badge he uses to bully people," Bennett said quietly. "We will have to wait and let Papa, Uncle Ryan, Uncle Duffey, and Uncle Dwayne handle these things. They know what they are doing."

"I think you're right big brother, but there are times when a boy has to grow up to be a man and do a man's job," Jared countered.

In moments the Wessex boys were saddled and riding toward Ely.

After a leisurely ride, Brock tied his horse's reins to the post outside Crawford's Mercantile.

Sheriff Amos Cage had watched the blond giant ride in. He recognized the horse brand belonging to Geneva's Hope. The rider looked strange to him. He was wearing strange riding clothes and a saddle without a horn.

Deputy Sikes also watched Brock ride in. The rider was a giant, but his clothes were of a sissy dude. The horse belonged to Geneva's Hope. He grinned wickedly. Perhaps he could get even with that high flouting Wessex clan. How he hated and envied that family. They had everything, money, power, land, good looks, and a strong family. His family had been an abused mother and drunkard father. Sikes shivered remembering the beatings he received from his drunken father. Sikes father had been a drunken miner from Ruby that took his frustration out on his wife and son.

Sikes hated the Wessex family the most for the love they shared. He was a man possessed with enmity. If he could make that McGillinen woman his, Sikes believed he would have the same power, money, and family. He couldn't see how much of a bully, like his father, he had become. Sikes came back from his thoughts when he heard Sheriff Cage speak to him.

"What do you think of that?" Cage asked moving his finger in a circle and pointing at Brock Hampton. "I haven't seen such a peacock since I was a kid and visited a zoo in New York."

"The dude is riding a Geneva's Hope brand," Sikes returned.

"What prissy would be visiting the Geneva's Hope lot?" Cage questioned thoughtfully stroking his unshaven chin.

"One of them there fancy pants British Lords?" Sikes asked in answer to the Sheriff's question. "Them Wessex set high and mighty with that royalty and all."

"I think we should pay a visit to Crawford. Don't you?" Sheriff Cage stated and began walking down the plank boardwalk. Cage never looked back at Sikes. He knew the pathetic little man would follow. He always picked his deputies well. They were all malleable.

Joseph Crawford greeted Brock in the mercantile. Derrick was busy serving Julia Whitman, the daughter of Jason Whitman who owned and operated The Ely Times newspaper. Joseph was impressed by the size of the blond giant. It was difficult to believe that someone could be larger than Jared Wessex or Ryan McGillinen, yet there he was. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, Bennett Wessex recommended this mercantile to purchase more appropriate clothing," Brock replied walking toward a stack of Levi jeans on the shelving. "Those look like just the thing. Do you think you have something that might fit? Usually I have a tailor make my clothes. I don't fit the normal cut."

Joseph bent his neck to look the giant blond in the eyes. "Normal you are not, but Levi's are cut at different waist sizes and the pants lengths are long. Most roll up to fit, but I think the length will fit you perfectly." Joseph looked down at the tree trunks that

were legs. He slipped a grin. The length would fit, but those legs would fit making the Levi a second skin and not have the bagginess the other cowboys had on their legs. "Let me get a tape to measure your waist and go from there."

Brock nodded and walked to a back shelf holding linen shirts for men. He hoped he could find something there his size.

Sikes walked in behind Cage and spotted Derrick Maddock helping Julia Whitman. This was an opportunity to exert his authority and show off for the newspaperman's daughter.

Cage stepped behind some shelving and watched the blond giant. He was curious as to what the man was at the mercantile for. Cage having a guilty conscience was always suspicious of everyone. Cage watched Brock pick up several shirts. Cage was so intent on watching the stranger he didn't even notice Sikes and what he was doing.

"Kid, get me some of that chewing tobacco," Sikes ordered looking directly at Derrick.

Derrick looked up from the counter where he was weighing Julia's sugar purchase. "I'll be right with you Deputy Sikes," Derrick replied politely.

In a flash Sikes was at the counter pushing Julia aside and pulling Derrick's ear. "You got trouble hearing kid? See this badge? You respect this. If I tell you to do something, you'd better hop to it. I'm the law in this town and don't you forget it!"

The cry of pain from Derrick when Sikes pulled his ear caught Joseph Crawford's and Brock's attention immediately. They both heard Sikes demand. Cage was too focused on Brock to notice or care about Sikes.

Joseph put down the tape measure and started walking toward Derrick. He was about to reach for the chewing tobacco just to get rid of Sikes when he saw Brock standing in front of Sikes and removing Sike's hand from the boy's ear. Joseph didn't even see Brock move over there. He was as quick and quiet as a pouncing cougar.

Brock's voice was quiet and calm. "Please release the boy."

*Payton Lee*

✍

## *Chapter 7*

Sikes released Derrick's ear and smiled looking into the giant's eyes. "You did say please didn't you?"

Brock nodded his head.

"One thing I like about you big dumb ones," Sikes cackled toward Julia. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall and they knows it. These lumps are big dumb and stupid. Yessiree!"

Brock tapped the crowing little man on his shoulder. "Sometimes it's not too smart to put everyone in a category. You could make wrong assumptions."

Sikes spun around to the giant talking to him. "Ass oh what? You calling me an ass?"

Brock didn't answer. Instead he allowed a tiny grin to ease across his lips. He repeated, "wrong assumptions."

"Name calling ain't to bright. This here is a badge. You ought to respect me," Sikes growled menacingly. He slowly placed his hand over the holster of his gun strapped to his thigh. To Sikes displeasure he saw no fear or any emotion in the serene face of the blond giant. He boldly stepped forward. "You jest may get shot if you ain't careful."

Brock watched the fidgeting deputy and knew the instant he would pull the gun from its holster.

Joseph watched in disbelief and amazement at the following scene.

A flash of a large body moved a waist and then shoulders moved in a fluid motion bringing a painful hand chop across the wrist pulling a gun. The giant blond body spun in a circle faster than the eye could follow and in a twirl, large legs flew in the air with one boot landing directly into the Adam's apple of Sikes. Instantly the deputy was on the floor.

Sheriff Cage responded after he saw Sikes on the floor. Everything had happened so fast even he wasn't sure what occurred. Cage moved his hand to his holster only to have what felt like a club smash against his wrist. The gun flew from his hand and was caught in another flash by the hand of Bennett Wessex.

"You dropped this Sheriff Cage," Bennett said attempting to hand the gun the Sheriff holding his wrist and grimacing in pain.

"You son of a bitch!" Cage snarled. "You broke my wrist!"

"Sheriff, you hit the counter when you drew your gun," Bennett lied calmly. "I merely picked it up for you before it accidentally fired."

Brock stepped on Sikes gun hand and stood there ignoring the man screaming hoarsely in pain beneath his foot. "Pretty good Cricket," Brock praised his friend Bennett. "Pretty good indeed."

Julia came from behind the mountain and stepped daintily over the writhing deputy. "I saw it too, Sheriff Cage. You pulled out your gun and your hand hit the counter."

Cage was smart enough to know this was not the time to pursue the matter with Julia Whitman in the store. He had loftier goals than be a Sheriff all his life. "Would you mind getting off my deputy's hand?" he directed to the tall blond.

"Oh dear," Brock said softly. "Am I standing on your hand? I'm so sorry deputy." He removed his foot after grinding it into the fingers and then offered his hand to the deputy in assistance.

Sikes refused the help and stood up slowly with wobbling knees. His gun hand fingers were terribly misshapen. "You broke my fingers," he whined painfully. "I'll get you for that."

"I'm so sorry," Brock apologized lamely. "It's just that you pulled a gun on me. I thought you were going to shoot me. I must have over reacted in fear and trembling."

Julia covered her mouth with her glove to prevent her giggles from spilling out into full fledged laughter at the deputy. Her eyes remained fixed on Bennett Wessex. He was more handsome than she remembered. He was all of a real man now.

Bennett returned Julia's staring. She was a beautiful woman. She was more beautiful than he remembered. Her figure was perfect in the simple pleated white blouse, small waisted belt sash of black silk, and black simple linen skirt decorated with black silk bands along the hemline. Unlike other women of fashion, she didn't wear a bonnet but let her blonde curls fall loosely down her back and tied back with a white silk ribbon. Bennett felt his heart beat a little faster and walked in two quick strides to her side. "Are you alright Julia?"

Julia beamed a smile to Bennett. When he took her arm, her heart raced faster and barely whispered, "Yes, I'm fine."

Cage spoiled the quiet with a grumble, "Sikes, come on. We have to go see Doc Adams about our accidents."

Sikes whined as they walked past Garrett and Jared, who had remained standing at the doorway. "Did you see that? He broke my fingers. I won't be able to shoot for months!"

"If ever again," Brock whispered quietly to himself.

Garrett finally asked Brock, "What the Sam Hill did you do? I've never seen anything like that in my life. Is that some sort of wrestling? If it is I'd like to learn it so I could whip Sharp Arrow and Little Weasel's butt."

Jared had been just as astounded as his older brother, but he saw Bennett do a similar move to Sheriff Cage. "Did you teach that wrestling to Ben?"

"It isn't wrestling," Brock explained. "You don't use the Ch'i for offense. You must only use our Ch'i as defense."

"That was some defense," Julia commented still allowing Bennett to hold her hand. "I've heard of Ch'i. Isn't it almost a religion in China practiced by Shaolin priests?"

"Something like that," Brock replied. He turned to Joseph Crawford. "Can we get my pants and shirts now? I think I'd like

to leave Ely and get back before I miss Mrs. Barber's supper. She is some cook."

Joseph closed his open mouth. He had been amazed that an unarmed man had defeated a gun pointing shiftless no account deputy without as much as breaking a small sweat. Joseph had been told last week to start looking for a new Federal Marshal and he was certain he found one. The town didn't need a gunfighter. A gunman with a badge was more trouble than robbers and riff raff. This man was perfect. He was hoping this Brock Hampton might be interested in the job. First he had to get the full support of more than half of the town council. "Yes sir."

Derrick shut his open mouth and quickly volunteered, "I'll finish your order Miss Whitman."

Bennett looked at Julia. "Miss Whitman? As beautiful as you are, someone hasn't married you?"

Julia withdrew her hand from Bennett and nearly whispered her reply, "Maybe I've been waiting for the right man." She turned her back on Bennett and walked briskly to the counter where Derrick was putting the weighed sugar in a bag. A broad smile was on Julia's face and only Derrick saw it. Julia had been in love with Bennett Wessex for sometime but she was too shy to admit it. Now he had told she was beautiful. Julia almost floated to the counter.

Bennett had been thunderstruck. His father had told him that is what happened to him when he saw Kerry McGillinen the very first time. She was playing with Bennett on the floor and looking at those shapely legs, figure, and then her eyes. Braden had told his son he was lost to the insanity of love that instant and he never regretted one moment of his headlong plunge into the abyss of love. Yes, now he knew exactly what his father meant. He felt it himself.

Jared came up behind Bennett. "You okay brother? Where did you learn that move? Had Brock been teaching you that Ch'i thing?"

Bennett pulled his thoughts together. "Yeah Jared. Brock and Chin Su have been teaching me some simple moves."

"Wow!" Garrett said in awe. "You think they'd teach me?"

"You have to ask," Bennett answered. "But remember Ch'i is meant only as a defense. It does not seek trouble. It is a way to avoid trouble with as little violence as possible. It is a way of life, not a weapon."

"Training is determined by Chin Su," Brock added. "If he feels the lessons will be lost in anger and violence, he will not teach it."

Jared understood and said quietly, "It is a better way than guns and knives. Especially for someone like Garrett, he only wants to be left alone to tinker with mechanical things."

"If you understand this," Garrett replied. "Chin Su will instruct you in the lessons of Ch'i." He held up a black silk double breasted shirt with black piping against his chest. "What do you think Bennett?"

Bennett took his eyes away from Julia. "Looks good, Brock."

Julia took her three packages and started to walk toward the door.

"I'll walk you home," Bennett offered quickly taking her elbow in his hand.

"Why thank you," Julia accepted. "I'd be honored to have you walk me."

When they stepped out the door Jared chuckled, "Did you see that? He's got the look."

Garrett agreed. "He surely does. He's a goner."

Brock heard the discussion and place four shirts he had selected on the counter. "What look?"

"It's the look we kids have described for love. It's the way Pa looks at Mama, Grandpa looks at Grandma, Uncle Ryan looks at Auntie Twiggy, Uncle Ayden looks at Auntie Paige, and Uncle Dwayne looks at Auntie Breena," Jared answered.

"Even Uncle Brian looks at Auntie Alyson that way," Garrett added. "It's the love look. We know when that look will hit us, it will be forever."

Brock laughed. He couldn't believe those boys believed in such nonsense. Love indeed! Yet he had to admit to himself that Braden Wessex did look at Kerry Wessex with puppy dog sick look. He shook his head. This was nonsense. Brock selected

three pairs of boots, four belts with shiny buckles, two Stetson hats, five shirts, and six pants. "I can't believe you have clothes in my size."

"I try to keep a line big enough and small enough," Joseph Crawford said. "Remember, I have Jared and Ryan to clothe. They are almost as big as you are."

Brock chuckled and looked at Jared, "Almost." He handed money to Joseph Crawford.

"It's on the house," Joseph stated firmly. "I can't thank you enough for protecting Derrick from that big bully of a deputy."

"The man was wrong. You can't think everyone is a certain way. I may be big, but I've been trained to be agile and I can't stand anyone being hurt human or animal. Chin Su raised me to respect and care about all life," Brock replied.

"Is that why you didn't kill him?" Garrett asked. "For some reason I think you could have."

"Yes, I could have easily killed him. What purpose would that serve? We all play a part in this world. It is what the Chinese call Yin and Yang. It is good and evil. I will not kill unless there is danger of death to myself or a loved one," Brock told Garrett sincerely. He returned to Joseph Crawford. "I will pay for my purchases. No arguments!"

Joseph smiled. Here was an honest man and the perfect one for the open job as Federal Marshal. "Alright, but please accept one shirt as a gift."

Brock nodded. "Very well. This one." He held up the first shirt he had picked up. "I like this one."

"It suits you," Jared said honestly. "It really does."

"You're going to need a slicker and jacket," Garrett added. "I'll pick it out for you."

"Thanks," Brock acknowledged.

Garrett talked to Joseph and they selected the slicker and jacket. Garrett paid for them with his own money and didn't let Brock know.

"I wonder how long Ben will be?" Jared questioned after the purchases were secured.

"From the love sick look in his eyes, it could be a real long time!" Garrett answered. "Let's go to Hannah's for lunch."

"When Bennett does return, I'll let him know where you are," Joseph volunteered.

Derrick slipped quietly to Brock's side. He looked up at the giant and said, "Thanks mister."

"You're welcome Derrick. Call me Brock."

"Thanks Brock, sir."

Brock laughed and went with Jared and Garrett for lunch at Hannah's. A middle-aged woman served them. Hannah had skills in the culinary arts equal to Mrs. Barber. Or maybe it's because Brock was hungry. This fresh air was getting to him.

Hannah's restaurant was on the first level of a three level building. Hannah lived behind the restaurant. She had a fine parlor, two bedrooms, privy, and a large kitchen. She and her husband had started this restaurant and boarding house. Hannah was grateful they had, because this was her livelihood. It kept her comfortable and allowed her son to attend college in the East. Hannah had hired another woman who lived with her and slept in the spare bedroom. They became friends as well as employer and employee. Together they ran the restaurant and boarding house efficiently and profitably.

Brock was impressed with the restaurant. The tablecloths were fine Irish linen. Each table had a vase with fresh cut flower and large candle in the center. The windows were covered with café curtains of white Irish lace. He was served on fine porcelain china. The meal was excellent and quiet. Apparently Hannah allowed no riff raff in her establishment. The rule was, if your hands and face aren't clean and an attempt at keeping boots polished, you weren't served. Brock also noticed only well-dressed and well-mannered people and couples sat at the table. They paid attention to their own quiet conversations and only stopped once to stare at the blond handsome giant. Brock felt comfortable and homey. It was a term he never thought he'd understand.

Bennett showed himself in the restaurant right after Hannah had served their meal. It was shepherd's pie. Jared, Garrett, and Brock were thoroughly enjoying the meal. "Hello Hannah!"

The woman looked up, wiped her hands on her white starched apron, and gave Bennett a hug. "Tis good to see ya lad. We've missed ya."

"I've missed you to Hannah," Bennett greeted. "Are things alright here with you?" Julia had told him many things on their walk back to her father's newspaper office and home. Ely was not a good place to live in these past few years.

"Tis wonderful," Hannah boasted. "I'm turning a handsome profit. I have good friends. The town people help me to keep my customers of the proper stature."

"You're a good woman, Hannah Miles."

"And you're a good young man. You and your family are always welcome in my establishment. Now I'll fetch you some Shepherd's Pie," Hannah bubbled. "Go sit by your brothers and that handsome giant they brought along. They'll be plenty of young girl's hearts going a pitter-patter when they see that one. If I were younger I'd set my sights on him me self."

"No you wouldn't," Bennett chuckled. "You're smarter than falling for a pretty face."

"Why would ya be saying that?" Hannah teased. "I fell for your pretty face. Didn't I?"

Bennett joined the group at the table and soon they were all enjoying Hannah's Shepherd's Pie.

Brock noticed that the brothers did not ask about or tease Bennett about Julia. Instead they concentrated on discussing the work that needed to be done on the ranch fences before their parents arrived.

The next day Brock woke early once more and donned his new working outfit. The clothes fit well and he waited for the brothers to arrive for breakfast. Brock and the Wessex boys spent the day on the ranch repairing broken fences. Some of the mending required looked like the wooden fence had been purposely damaged as if with a sledgehammer of sorts.

Jared was furious. "We've got to set up more guards."

"I think that's happened already," Garrett said pointing to some hills ahead of them. "Look, it's several of Eye of Hawk's warriors coming this way."

Brock wiped the sweat from his brow on his open forearm. He had long ago rolled up his sleeves. He couldn't believe how good he felt doing hard physical labor. "Indians?"

"Eye of Hawk's warriors," Bennett returned quickly.

"How the Sam Hill can you tell the difference?" Brock retorted.

"The clothes and decorations. Colors tell it all. The sacred color of Eye of Hawk's people is a dark red, almost brown. The Shoshone of Blue Pool that live on Uncle Ryan's land have blue as their sacred color. It is a deep blue like the night sky," Jared explained.

"I think I have a lot to learn," Brock stated. "A lot to learn."

"Then that's a fair trade!" Jared declared. "You and Chin Su teach us this Ch'i thing and we'll help you learn the ways of the people."

Brock thought a minute and agreed. He was enjoying this vacation and for some reason was feeling more and more comfortable here. It was like home. It was like a home he had only dreamed of but thought was too elusive.

Just before dusk, the group returned to Geneva's Hope. It was obvious the family had returned. Anthony and Braden were in the front yard rolling hoops like Eye of Hawk taught them. The groomsman Braden had brought back from the Brenham stables was currying Braden's horse Stockings. They could smell supper through the soft breezes floating past their noses.

After their horses were tethered and placed in the capable hands of the groomsman they went to the ranch house. Edward who nearly growled at the boys greeted them sourly.

"Your parents are waiting in the study for you."

Jared moaned and Garrett rolled his eyes. "We're in for it."

Brock looked confused. "Why do you think you're in trouble?"

"When Mama and Papa are waiting for us in the study," Bennett explained choking. "It means we are in big trouble. It's the room where private discussions, lectures, and punishments are doled out if we are called to it."

"I bet Mrs. Barber told them everything," Garrett groaned.

"She didn't know everything," Brock insisted.

"Mrs. Barber has a way of knowing and finding out everything," Jared choked. "We still haven't figured out how she does it. Anthony and Braden are convinced she's a witch or fairy."

The boys followed Edward to the study. He opened the double doors and then closed them silently as the boys entered into the room.

Brock watched Bennett, Garrett, and Jared fidget nervously. Braden Wessex was sitting behind a large mahogany desk in a huge leather stuffed chair. Behind him was Kerry Wessex. Both parents were wearing a deep reproving frown.

"Sit down boys," Kerry ordered. She walked from behind her husband to the front of the large desk.

Each boy took a seat.

Brock nearly choked when he saw Kerry come from behind the chair. She was wearing a white shirtwaist blouse and snug fitting black jeans that outlined her form perfectly. *How could a friend's mother look that good?*

"We believe you have some things to tell us?" Braden said sternly. "Which of you would like to begin?"

## *Chapter 8*

Kerry placed herself in front of Braden's desk. Slowly she crossed her legs while leaning on the edge and crossed her arms.

Bennett, Garrett, and Jared felt as if their mother's eyes were burning into their souls. They froze and held their breath. They had never been physically punished, but Kerry's lectures were far worse than ever receiving belting.

Kerry waited. Her brows were furrowed and a frown rested upon her lips. Still there was silence. Kerry began to tap her fingers against her arm.

Brock watched as Kerry glanced to each son and they shrank at least an inch or two further into the chair. He began to feel a little terrified. Kerry Wessex was a formidable mother.

"We're waiting," Kerry stated sourly uncrossing her arms and placing them firmly on the desk behind her. The boys shrunk another inch. "If one of you doesn't answer your father and I in a minute you will regret it. I promise you." Kerry focused on Jared. He was the most sensitive of her older sons.

Brock watched as Jared turned quite pale and mouthed words that wouldn't come out.

Bennett straightened his back and faced his parents. "Mamman, Papa, what would you like us to tell you?"

Braden leaned forward. "Perhaps about a little trip to Ely? Maybe you did some shopping at Crawford's Mercantile? And then there might be a confrontation with Sheriff Cage and Deputy Sikes?"

Jared and Garrett moaned.

Bennett's mouth dropped. He had suspected his parents would find out about going to Ely against their requests, but he was shocked that they knew everything.

The study doors opened and Grady McGillinen walked in. He was still a powerful man, but age had required the aide of cane to assist his walking. Grady's hair was snow white and more lines added to his facial dignity. He was still the patriarch. Morning Song followed behind.

Bennett stood immediately to give his seat to his grandfather. Brock rose at Morning Song's entrance and offered his chair.

Grady's lips curved and the wrinkles by his eyes creased deeply. "Surprised to learn your parents heard of your adventure?"

"No sir," Bennett replied. "I am a bit mystified that my parents know *everything* so quickly." He had enunciated the word everything.

Grady chuckled, "Right now they know more than you do."

Bennett's brows merged with question.

"It seems Whitetail was at Doctor Adams bringing his mother's salve to the doc when Cage and Sikes came in," Braden Wessex informed his son. "Whitetail heard Cage and Sike's story."

"Whitetail told me last night at the camp," Grady grinned. "I came here earlier today and talked with your parents right after they arrived. It seems your friend Brock broke all of Sike's fingers on his gun hand and Sheriff Cage has a badly bruised and sprained wrist from Bennett's attack."

"Well?" Braden questioned. "What is your story and why did you go to Ely when I told you boys to stay away until our return?"

Brock spoke up, "I couldn't let Sikes pick on the boy."

"You mean Derrick Maddock?" Kerry questioned already knowing the answer. Not only had they been given the story from

Whitetail, but Mrs. Barber, and Gar Knowles, the ranch hand she sent to follow Brock.

"The deputy is a nothing but a bully. A little bully with a tin badge and using the law as a cover to bully," Brock stated quietly. "He was hurting the boy and I wanted the bully to face someone his own age."

"It certainly wasn't to have Sikes face someone his own size," Grady laughed. "You're at least a foot taller than the deputy."

"Sikes pulled a gun on Brock," Garrett blurted out in defense of Brock Hampton.

"A gun was pulled on our guest because he was in town against our wishes and your thoughtless teasing," Kerry reprimanded testily. "If our guest wasn't in town looking for new clothes, Sikes wouldn't have had a gun pulled on Brock would he?"

Garrett shrank back into his chair.

"Sikes is a bully, Mama," Jared defended. "He picks on little Derrick all the time. He calls the boy, white trash, filthy Mick, and reminds him all the time he's an orphan that supposedly no one wants."

"We are discussing the facts that I raised you boys properly. I raised you to learn to understand all people of the world, their lives, customs, clothes?" Kerry said in exasperation. Her hands were clenched into small-balled fists. "We also raised you to understand and obey our orders. You know very well we make rules for reasons!"

"Sikes and Cage are dangerous men," Braden spoke quietly. "They are more dangerous than most because they use the badge as cover for their own purpose, brutality, and control."

"It is precisely because of this danger we asked you not to go into Ely," Kerry reminded. "Do you have any explanation for disregarding our orders?"

"It's my fault ma'am," Brock admitted shyly. Lord, he felt like a schoolboy caught dipping a girl's braid in the inkwell. "Mrs. Barber reminded me of your request and I left any way."

"We were worried for him," Bennett added. "Garrett, Jared, and I decided it would be safer in numbers if we all went together and stayed with Brock."

"You weren't feeling a little guilty for goading Brock in the first place?" Braden questioned angrily lifting an eyebrow.

"That too," Jared admitted hanging his head.

"Anything else you want to add?" Kerry asked the boys angrily.

"No Mama," Jared answered for all three brothers. "We knew it was our fault Brock felt uncomfortable with his clothing. We knew he might get in trouble in Ely and we thought it was better to disobey your orders Papa, than to let something happen to Brock."

Braden sat back in his chair placing his hands in a steeple shape under his chin. He glanced to his father in law and saw a twinkle in his eye. It was pride for his grandsons admitting their errors and their reason for doing so. Braden returned his father in law's look. He couldn't help but be a bit proud of his sons.

Kerry caught Braden's glance and gave her husband a reproving look. The boys still needed to learn obedience. *Rules are made for reasons* she always said.

Braden turned on his stern face. "What ever reasons you boys may have had, and the fact no one was hurt except the Sheriff and Deputy.." Braden muffled a chuckle with a small clearing of his throat. "The fact remains your manners were inappropriate and you disobeyed us."

"Yes sir." The boys said in unison.

Brock was amazed at the family he was viewing. Never had he known such honor and respect in family or friends other than his Chin Su.

Grady sat silently. He watched his grandsons carefully.

"Jared, your punishment will be to help Mrs. Barber in the kitchen for all meals. You will do everything she tells you to do no matter how important or menial. Is that understood?" Braden queried after delivering the first punishment to the first son.

Jared's face turned pale. He choked. Jared hated being indoors. He knew that's why it was his punishment. It was terrible for him. "How long?"

"Two weeks," Braden replied firmly. He addressed the next son. "Garrett, you will work with Gil Marks on repairing fences along the southern borders. You will not work on your horseless carriage for two weeks."

"Pa?" Garrett questioned almost in tears. He loved his little shop in the barn and he loved tinkering. He especially loved the new toy, a horseless carriage run by a gasoline engine.

Braden held up his hand to stop any complaint or plea.

"You have a horseless carriage?" Brock asked in wonderment. He had seen a few in Europe and in New York. Brock had been fascinated.

Garrett's eyes lit up in joy. "Yeah, it's a beauty. I'll show you later."

Kerry cleared her throat. "You may show Brock in two weeks. Until then you are to stay away from your toy. Maybe that will help you remember to obey your parents."

Garrett sank into his chair once more. "Yes Mama."

"Bennett, I am most disappointed in you," Braden lectured. "You are the oldest and should set the best example for your younger brothers."

"That is why your punishment should be the most firm," Kerry agreed. "I am really disappointed in you."

"That is my punishment isn't it?" Bennett suggested. "It's the worst punishment of all to know I disappointed you."

"Is it?" Braden asked leaning forward on his desk.

"Yes Papa."

Brock felt as if a heavy weight had been placed on his own chest. The guilt was horrendous. He felt as if he also had disappointed his hosts. He deliberately ignored their request for him to stay away from Ely until they returned to Geneva's Hope. "And my punishment?"

"You are our guest. We apologize our sons made you feel uncomfortable for any reason," Kerry stated. She was still maintaining her position on the edge of the desk. "We do admit we are somewhat disappointed you did not heed our warning."

"I really do apologize," Brock blurted out. "Sometimes I just don't think. I react. It is wrong and I know it. Chin Su reminded me of my weakness several times last night."

A knock at the study door drew attention.

"Come in Mrs. Barber and Gil," Braden invited.

Mrs. Barber and Gil walked in to the study. Each carried a large sheet of paper in their hands.

Garrett whispered to Jared, "How did Pa know it was them?"

"Our parents know everything. Why else are we sitting here? Maybe when we're parents we'll know what it's like to know all things at all times."

Braden heard his sons talking and put on a stern scowl. He had to do it so he could prevent a laugh from spoiling the seriousness of this reprimand. "Are you ready to take Jared and Garrett in hand?"

Mrs. Barber had a delightful and wicked grin. "We are ready and have their list of duties written out as you requested."

Jared looked at the large piece of paper in Mrs. Barber's hand. "For the week?"

Mrs. Barber snorted devilishly, "no my boy. This is for the day."

Jared's eyes widened with apprehension. "For the day?" he croaked.

"For the day," Mrs. Barber repeated. "Up with you. There is a table to prepare for supper. Then there are dishes after the meal and bread to prepare for baking, butter to churn, and milk to strain."

Jared's face paled. He rose to his full height and followed Mrs. Barber out of the study.

Gil came forward and barked, "You too, Garrett. We've got the cows to milk, the chickens to feed and the stalls to muck before supper. That's about an hour of work. After that, well, you know."

Garrett mumbled and followed Gil out of the study.

Brock started to walk toward the doors when Grady called him, "Don't leave yet son. Have a seat. We need to share some things with you and Ben."

Brock was as obedient as a puppy dog with a new master. He sat down in the chair between Grady and Bennett.

"I wanted to let you know what Whitetail told me about the injuries you two boys inflicted on the Sheriff and Sikes," Grady stated placidly. "Whitetail told me that Sikes and Cage told the Doctor you used some sort of *wicked injun wrassling*."

"Gar Knowles told us you were *the dandiest thing he ever did see*. You were a flash of movement like a bolt of lightening and then Sikes was down," Braden added. "He told us that in another flash of lightening Cage was holding his wrist cursing and Bennett was holding Cage's gun."

"There's more to the story than Sike's broken fingers," Grady announced. "Whitetail overheard the Doctor tell Cage and Sikes after he set the fingers the best he could that he doubted Sike's would ever be able to use his fingers properly again. Or at least he wouldn't be able to hold and fire a gun."

A smirk traveled across Brock's face.

Grady caught it and guffawed, "You knew that would be the result didn't you boy?"

Brock nodded his head.

"Well it worked," Grady chuckled. "Cage took off the deputy badge and sent Sikes to see the Foreman at Ruby Hill Mine."

"You've made a dangerous enemy Brock," Braden warned. "Yet this turn of events may assist us in ridding Nevada of a crooked sheriff and staff."

"Sir?" Brock questioned.

"We've long suspected Cage guilty of extortion," Braden answered. "Sikes is a weak link and it will give the Pinkerton operative a chance to get more information."

"You've got a Pinkerton agent working in the mines undercover?" Bennett asked with surprise.

"Not working in the mines. He's working for Cage as one of his deputies but Cage doesn't trust him yet. Andrews just started working a month ago," Grady replied. "This gives him a chance to get cozy with Cage and get information from Sikes."

"What kind of extortion?" Brock asked with curiosity.

"He uses his badge as protection from calamity as Joseph put it," Braden replied. "Ryan's father in law pays Cage ten dollars a month so nothing happens to his store. At first he refused

and then a strange fire started in the back of the store. Derrick put it out in time, but it was definitely a warning. We have to get proof. It seems other proprietors in Ely have shared this same protection donation with Joseph. It comes to about a hundred dollars a month."

"A badge is a symbol of law enforcement," Brock said in disgust. "It shouldn't be used as a hammer of fear and profit. I hope your Pinkerton can bring Cage down."

"That's what we are hoping," Braden sighed. "It is more important than ever to stay away, not create any stir, and let Pinkerton do their work."

"I promise to stay away from Ely," Brock said quietly.

"You need too, boy," Grady warned. "You've made an enemy in Cage and Sikes. I'd sure hate to see you bushwhacked."

"So would I," Brock chuckled and then more seriously he noted. "I will practice my thinking and restraint as Chin Su suggested."

"Good," Braden stated.

"Mama. Papa. There is something I would like to talk to you about," Bennett brought up quietly. "I'd like to be able to go to Ely if I could."

"Absolutely not!" Kerry nearly shrieked. "Don't you realize you've made an enemy as well? I'll not have my son get a bullet in the back by a no account polecat."

"Mama," Bennett pleaded. "I want to court Julia Whitman."

Braden's eye's widened and Kerry's mouth dropped.

"Seems to me the boy should be allowed to court a lady if he's a wanting too," Grady injected. "The boys old enough and so is Julia Whitman. She's a fine lady and would make a good wife, Ben."

"Pa," Kerry croaked. "You're talking about my baby boy courting.. ..marriage.. wedding.. wife.. children!"

"Ben's hardly a baby boy," Morning Song said. It was her first participation in the entire conversation. "It's time to let the eaglet leave the nest and find his own aerie, daughter."

"Morning Song is right," Grady agreed. "I'm plumb tickled our grandson found a gal right here to court. It means he'll drop

roots and be near us. I was always afraid he'd go away like Dwayne."

"I want to stay, Grandpa," Bennett smiled. "I've loved my home here in Nevada the first time Mama and Papa brought me here. I've even given thought to what I can do here."

"What is that son?" Braden asked. He choked back a large lump in his throat. His eldest son was considering marriage. How fast they grew.

"I thought I'd stay and help Mr. Whitman run the Ely Times," Bennett replied. "When I walked Julia home after the fracas she told me she was helping her father because the paper was getting bigger and it still was growing. Ely is becoming a larger town."

"He is getting on in years," Grady agreed. "I think it is wonderful and I wish you well, but I think you should come in from the west side of town. Then go through the alleys until you reach the newspaper. In other words, go in the back door. I'm sure Julia will understand."

"Papa?"

"Yes Bennett. I understand and I wish you the best, but listen to your Grandfather and try not to be seen," Braden directed. He reached over the desk and squeezed Kerry's hand. "Our boy is growing up."

Tears spilled over Kerry's eyelids. "I know and I don't like it."

The next morning Brock found breakfast to be fascinating. This time when he woke and went down towards the kitchen Braden sitting at the head of the table called him. Brock took the seat Braden Wessex had given him instructions to take. The entire family was sitting at the large dining room table with the exceptions of Jared and Garrett. He had a strong suspicion where they were. Grady and Morning Song had spent the night and were also seated at the table. Grady was cutting up bacon slices and eggs for little Ashley. Morning Song was in deep conversation with Christina. Anthony and Braden were involved in their own discussion. Bennett, Braden, and Kerry were engaged in another. Brock took a deep breath. In the high society in which he was

raised the unspoken rule at any table was absolute austere silence. There was never any conversation. Everyone ate silently. The only exception would be a dinner party. A family meal was silent. Lord, he loved this family. Brock loved the subdued noise of conversation and activity. Brock loved the warm love he felt whenever he was near his friend's family. His thoughts were broken by Braden's address.

"Is there anything special you're planning for today, Brock?"

"No sir," Brock answered quickly. "Chin Su suggested I feel the energy and spirit of the land. He tells me I can draw strength and resolve. So, I am going to ride about today on your land if that's alright with you."

"Would you like company?" Braden asked. "I have work to catch up on, but it can wait. Bennett is going into town today. Grady is going to go with our hands in a wagon and that should give cover as Bennett goes through the back alleys."

"Thank you very much for your offer, but I would prefer to meditate today. Chin Su has reminded me to practice restraint. If you don't mind I'd like to borrow that mare again. She's gentle and seems to like me. I would like to try the western saddle."

"Duster is a perfect match for you," Kerry agreed. "We'll have Garrett saddle her for you."

"Thank you very much," Brock offered happily. He was looking forward to the ride on their land today.

After breakfast he hurried to the stables. Garrett had Duster saddled and ready.

"No one is watching," Garrett whispered. "Do you want to see my horseless carriage?"

"Are you sure you won't get into any trouble?" Brock questioned cautiously.

"Maybe, but only if we're caught or you tell."

Brock smiled broadly. "Show me quick."

## *Chapter 9*

Brock rode to the north and west. He immediately understood what Chin Su meant by absorbing the power of this land. The land emanated strength and beauty. It was natural almost virginal. Brock smiled at the thought of the comparison. Would this land be the only virgin he would ever know? He laughed aloud, “How is it Chin Su you are right about everything. Even things I don’t really understand or admit to myself?”

About noon Brock’s stomach began to grumble. He was on a hill overlooking a lush green valley. There was a creek running through the valley making it deep green and splashed with colors from wildflowers of white, yellow, red, blue, and purple. Staring at the beauty of Mother Nature’s canvas, Brock recalled viewing oil paintings of the West by various artists in museums across Europe. He had thought then the paintings were enhanced to look more beautiful. Today he realized the artists had tried but fell short of capturing the real beauty of this land.

Brock retrieved the lunch from his saddlebags. Mrs. Barber had prepared it for him after breakfast when he told her he would be just riding about today. A chuckle escaped from his lips when he remembered Jared’s forlorn face. When Brock entered the kitchen, Jared was scrubbing the pots and pans from the morning meal. Jared had already washed the china and one of the kitchen helpers was drying and putting the bone china away. A little pang of guilt had crept into his thinking when he saw Jared working in the kitchen. The guilt didn’t last too long. At least

Jared and Garrett had loving parents that cared enough to discipline their children. Brock's uncle and wealthy friends seemed never to mind what he and his friends were up to. They never seemed to have time for their children. Brock's friends were raised either by oppressive governesses or free thinkers that allowed his friends to run as wild as their parents allowed.

Brock sighed. At least he had Chin Su. Chin kept him in line and centered on the important values in life. Chin Su disciplined him with a firm hand. It was not a hand of punishment, but rather a discipline of thought and responsibility for actions.

Brock removed the blanket roll and spread it on a clearing overlooking the valley. The hill itself was covered heavily with brush and thick pines. Unpacking his lunch, he enjoyed the beef dodgers, stew, buttered bread, and fresh milk. He was surprised to find a berry cobbler for desert. It was one of his favorite desserts and remembered telling Mrs. Barber. What a sweet wonderful woman she was. He sat cross-legged enjoying his meal. When he was finished with his food he folded the napkins and returned the tins neatly into the saddlebags. Brock began his Ch'i when he heard his horse nicker softly as if in greeting. The mare's ears twitched nervously and Brock noticed her head swing from side to side as if trying to see something. His mare began to calm and nicker softly. Brock's eyes returned to the valley and saw what he believed to be a vision. An Appaloosa came galloping into the valley. On this mare's back was an angel. The angel wasn't seated. Her arms were spread open. Sandy Brown hair reflecting the rays of golden noon sun flowed in the wind freely. The angel's hair was at least the length past her waist.

Brock swallowed hard. *Why would he be sent such a vision?* Chin Su had told him that on occasion in one's life they might have a day vision to tell them something. He stared at the rider. Brock was mesmerized and transfixed in time. At least he felt like he was.

The angel didn't merely stand on the Appaloosa's back. She did a back flip and reversed her position. In the blink of an eye the angel was standing on her hands. Her legs were perfectly straight pointing to the sky. In another blink of an eye she was sitting on the Appaloosa's back straddle riding without benefit of

reins, bridle, or saddle. It was as if this mare and angel was one lovely creature.

In truth, Blue and her mare Ginger were one in spirit. Ginger was a gift from her grandfather, Blue Pool when she was fourteen. Blue had followed the traditional Shoshone method of horse training. She and Ginger lived together for a week. Ginger became dependent upon Blue for care and feeding. Blue had long ago been taught horse language by her grandfather. All animals have a language he used to tell her. You must learn it and learn from them, because this is their world also. Blue and Ginger bonded over four years ago.

Ginger knew exactly what Blue was thinking and needed her to do by the way Blue touched her or moved on her back. Blue also knew Ginger's needs or way. Blue felt Ginger slow her pace, nicker softly, and raise her head as if looking for something on the hill before them.

With Ginger's actions, Blue knew immediately that there was another presence on that hill. Blue let Ginger stop and looked ahead where Ginger seemed to concentrate. It was Duster, a gentle mare from Geneva's Hope Blue saw. Then she saw the man sitting on the hill. He seemed big. Maybe he was bigger than her Pa or Jared. His black Stetson looked new. It was still deep black and not yet sun faded.

"You're the randy Jared was talking about," Blue spoke into the wind. "You're Bennett's school friend."

Brock watched as the angel stopped. She cocked her head one direction and then another. This vision of his began to look directly at him. Did she know he was there? Could she see him? That was nonsense. This is a day vision. This is a hallucination.

Blue clucked and then addressed Ginger. "Home girl!"

The Appaloosa nickered softly and turned.

Duster returned the nicker. Brock turned to look at his mount. When he returned to look at the valley he watched his angel disappearing into the horizon. He rose to his full height and watched Blue disappear into the hills of the valley. Brock walked to Duster and stroked her nose. "You know that Appaloosa, Duster?" She nickered in response.

Under the tutelage of Chin Su, Brock had also developed an affinity with animals. He understood the natural order of things and a communication with all living creatures.

"I thought so," Brock murmured. He continued to stroke the mare's nose.

Brock rode to the same spot everyday at the exact same time for the next three days. His angel and vision appeared on the Appaloosa. She did her special dancing and then would look directly at him. She would then turn and ride away.

Chin Su was waiting in the barn next to Duster on the morning of the fourth day. "You leave everyday at the same time. You are gone the same length of time," Chin Su noted. "This is not like you to set any pattern in your life. Is something troubling you?"

"Chin Su my Master," Brock replied taking a pause of reverence. "I see a vision everyday at the same time and place. I wait and hope this vision will reveal purpose to me. It is the same each day and I still do not understand the meaning. After the vision I meditate and practice my Ch'i.

"I sense you seem to be in great peace here," Chin Su noted.

"I feel it also Master," Brock admitted.

"Then go little tiger," Chin Su smiled warmly. "Follow this vision to the end of it. I sense you will find your life and happiness there."

Brock nodded respectfully and mounted Duster. Gil had Garrett ready Duster every morning like clockwork. Every morning Garrett and Brock would exchange a few quiet words about Garrett's horseless carriage. Brock never mentioned his vision to anyone. This is the first he spoke of it, but it was to his master, companion, and friend. Today he felt wonderful. Each day the angel visit made him feel happier and content in this place and time. "This land is enchanted," he mused.

After his angel vision faded into the horizon, he removed his clothes. It was time for Ch'i. Brock found these new clothes to be restrictive. Why not be as natural as his surroundings? No one was near with exception of Birds, small mammals, insects, his horse, and maybe a reptilian or two. He was certain the animals

didn't mind his being natural. It was a wonderful feeling to be so free and uninhibited. The feeling of true freedom and natural energy gave him a sense of happiness he had never felt before. Brock neatly folded his clothing and began to concentrate on his Ch'i.

Blue didn't return home immediately that day. "If you're going to watch me, I'll return the favor Mr. Randy," Blue chuckled as she urged Ginger on to the hilltop. Blue had been trained in the ways of the Shoshone and didn't make a noise or sound as she approached the clearing.

Ginger and Duster nickered softly to each other, but Blue gave it no mind. This randy wouldn't know his horse was communicating with another. He wouldn't realize he had company. Blue crawled on her belly the last few feet. When she peered through a large bush she choked. The randy was as buck naked as the day he was born. She couldn't look away. Blue had never seen a grown man naked and this one was a looker. She knew what men would look like because she helped her mother take care of her baby brother, but she had no idea they could look this good all grown up. She watched his back as he moved. This randy was moving strangely and every muscle moved a fluid pattern as he did. Each muscle looked as if an artist had sculpted it. He moved gracefully in a slow motion. His muscles rippled ever so slightly with every movement. His legs looked like carved tree trunks. His buns, oh those buns looked rock hard. She wished she had brought her slingshot with her to see if a pebble would bounce off those twins. Blue continued to stare.

The only other time she had seen such graceful movement was when her Auntie Kerry had taken her to visit with Auntie Breena and Uncle Dwayne. They had gone to what Auntie Kerry called the Ballet. Blue's memory kicked in as she continued to watch this man and his dance. When she had returned home from that visit with Auntie Kerry in New York she announced to her mother and father that she was going to grow up and be a ballerina. She remembered her mother furrowing her brows in question not knowing exactly what a ballerina was. Her Pa started stroking his chin and told her his baby girl could be anything she wanted to be, but she would have to live in New York or London. Those were

the only cities he knew of that taught schooling of Ballet. Blue laughed softly to herself. She remembered crinkling her nose at the prospect of living in one of those big, ugly, dirty, and noisy cities. She declared right then and there she would be a horse ballerina. Her and horse would dance every day and be just as graceful as the dancers she had seen on stage. She had kept that promise to herself and her father encouraged her. He had on many occasions watched her dance and praised her. Her father always encouraged his girls to be the best they could be. He consistently ordered and bought books for Samantha. He encouraged Lucy in her charcoal drawings.

Blue realized she wasn't breathing when Brock turned in a move and faced her. A gasp drew in breath as she gazed upon his manhood. It was larger than she believed would fit into a man's trousers. She giggled silently as she thought it looked like it belonged to the stallion White Face. White Face was the wild mustang stallion that had taken over from the Phantom. Blue took in a deep breath. "Great Spirit," she whispered into the wind. "He is one beautiful man."

He turned once more and Blue continued to stare. She felt strange. Her heart was racing. Her hands were sweaty. Her stomach fluttered. Blue wasn't ashamed of watching this naked man. It seemed right to watch him. He was beautiful and he danced so gracefully. It was such a strange feeling that overtook her. It was time to get out of here. So she did.

That night she couldn't sleep a wink. Blue kept thinking about that beautiful man and his graceful dance.

The next morning Blue rode Ginger and she gave Brock a return performance of her dancing. She secretly hoped he admired her talents. She hoped it was the reason he returned everyday to watch her from the hill. Blue giggled a bit. It wasn't quite fair, because she knew he was there and he didn't know she had been watching him. When Blue had finished her performance she turned Ginger and headed for home.

Brock had no idea she would backtrack to where he was lying trying to take a nap and catch up on his missed sleep. Brock had suffered almost a week of restless sleep. He couldn't keep that

angelic vision from his mind. Was she real? Was she a vision? What did this mean? He was drawn back and watched mesmerized every day. This angel was like an addiction. He needed to talk to Chin Su. He would when he returned to Geneva's Hope this afternoon, but right now he needed a nap. The open air and serenity of his surroundings lulled Brock quickly to sleep. This had to be close to heaven.

Blue inhaled quickly with fear when she saw Brock lying on his back fully clothed. His eyes were closed. Panic flooded her when she thought a rattler might have bitten the randy. Silently Blue rose to her feet. Without so much as a twig snapping, her bare feet moved into the soft grass. The randy still hadn't moved. Bravely Blue walked forward. "Could he be hurt? Snake bit?" Blue had to find out. She didn't want this beautiful dancer to die. Blue stood beside him. The randy still hadn't moved. Blue knelt next to him and stared at his handsome perfectly chiseled face. He had the longest eyelashes she had ever noticed on a man. Those lashes were golden like his hair. Blue watched as his chest rose and fell in subdued rhythm. Blue realized immediately this randy was fine. He was taking a nap. Blue started to rise when a long arm and huge hand moved at the speed of light and brought her suddenly down upon the pine needle covered grass. In a flash she had been put on her back and the beautiful dancing giant was straddling her. His thighs were pressing tightly against her hips.

For some unknown reason Blue wasn't frightened. She smiled at the randy.

"You!" Brock exclaimed. He was in shock. He had just fallen into slumber when he felt a presence near him. His response had been automatic. Beneath him was his vision. Was he still asleep and this a dreaming dream? The angel felt real enough.

Blue smiled broadly revealing perfectly formed pearl white teeth pursing her rose-colored soft lips. She greeted him, "Howdy!"

Brock was dumbfounded. He finally found his voice. The angel vision had spoken. She greeted him? "Are you real or are you my dream?"

Blue couldn't imagine why he had asked such a question. She thought a moment and replied, "As my Pa would say, that son

is a pretty deep philosophical question and I ain't quite sure how to answer it."

Her voice was soft, feminine, and musical to Brock's ear. This time he spoke loudly and bravely, "Bloody Hell, this is one wonderful dream if you aren't real. And if you are my dream, I think I'll kiss you because you can do anything you want in your dreams."

Blue furrowed her brows in question. "What's a kiss?"

"This!" Brock placed his lips over Blue's rosy red lips. His tongue laved her outer lips and then his teeth nibbled those lips gently. Encouraged by the pleasantness of his dream he covered her mouth with his. His tongue searched for hers. Her lips were sweet and the kiss delightful.

Blue tasted cobbler and enjoyed the sweet flavor of his kiss.

Brock found himself removing his lips from hers and gently trailing soft little nibbles down Blue's neck. "Lilac. You smell like fresh spring bloom lilac."

Blue remained silent beneath this giant of a man. Her mind was useless. She couldn't think, move, or respond. Whatever this kissing was, it made her feel different. It was a pleasant feeling.

Brock straightened his arms and braced them to hold his shaking torso steady. He looked at the angelic face. He studied it to memorize it. This was a dream he wanted to have often. His angel's hair spread out upon the ground forming a sparkling sandy brown halo. Her soft gray eyes were unafraid and looked so innocent. Her skin was flawless and tanned. Brock allowed his eyes to wander further down and focused on her white cotton shirt. It was so sheer it was nearly see through. He stared at her rounded perfectly formed breast hidden by a dainty silken chemise tied with pink ribbons. Brock noted her waist was so tiny he could span it with both hands. Brock grinned wickedly, there would be no corset contraption for this enchantress. Brock began to wonder if this was a dream. It seemed to be a real woman beneath him. "Did you like the kiss angel?"

Blue laughed heartily. "My name is Blue not angel. What's yours Mr. Randy?"

"There you are," Brock chuckled. "Angel suits you and randy suits me, but I'm Brock. Brock Hampton."

"Howdy Brock!"

"Howdy Blue!" Brock snorted. "Did you like my kiss?"

"If what you just did is kissing, it sure reminded me of a small puppy a nibbling and licking. Course you kind of tasted like berry cobbler," Blue chuckled playfully. "Have you decided to get off me yet?"

Brock rolled over onto his back, but he did not release Blue. He held on to her as she rolled and she ended up lying flat on his muscled abdomen.

A rumble or two indicated to Blue he was laughing.

"Maybe puppies are how we learned to do this. What do you think?"

"You may have a notion there," Blue agreed. "Seems to me that most animals are smarter than humans and we could learn a lot from them. This world might be a better place if maybe humans learned some animal ways."

"Couldn't agree with you more," Brock said without hesitation. This angelic woman child was a wonder. She was perfect in body and perfect in mind. "Tell me Miss Blue, was that your first kiss?"

Blue shyly nodded her head. "Unless you count Bubbles a licking and nibbling me when he was a pup."

Brock burst out laughing. "Maybe we could count that." Never in his life could he remember having a more wonderful conversation. "Haven't you ever seen your Ma and Pa kiss? Sisters? Brothers?"

"No, can't say I have. I'm the oldest and Ma and Pa don't do that puppy licking. They like to snuggle."

Lord he loved the innocence of this woman child angel vision. "What's a snuggle?"

"Since you showed me the puppy licking kiss, I'll show you snuggle," Blue offered. "You'll have to let me go."

"No."

"No?"

"I'm afraid," Brock answered huskily.

“Afraid? Of me?” Blue roared in mirth at the absurdity. “I doubt if I could hurt you too much.”

“Actually you have the power to break my heart,” Brock offered stupidly. “I ‘m really afraid if I let you go you’ll disappear. I’ll wake up.”

“I ain’t going to disappear,” Blue replied seriously. “It’s only fair if I show you snuggling.”

Reluctantly Brock released Blue. He held his breath hoping she wouldn’t vanish before his eyes. She remained a solid form before him.

Blue stood straight and put her one finger to the corner of her mouth and one hand on her hip. “Something’s not quite right.”

*Here it comes*, Brock thought. She’s going to disappear and he would wake up. Brock stared at her to burn this image into his memory. She was perfectly formed. She was not too tall and not too short. She was very feminine even though she wore britches. Dear Lord, she wore britches just like .. like.. like.. like Kerry Wessex. This is a vision. This is Kerry Wessex as a woman child. This is Kerry Wessex maybe twenty years earlier. Was he so entranced by Kerry Wessex, his friend’s mother he was hallucinating about her? This was something he would definitely talk to Chin Su about.

“This is wrong somehow,” Blue murmured quietly.

“Yes it is,” Brock agreed choking on his own thoughts. Could he lust and covet an older woman that much?

“I know what it is,” Blue tsked shaking her head. “Sit up and squat your legs as you sit.”

Brock obeyed quickly. He needed something to take his mind off his current thoughts. “Like this?”

“That’s it!” Blue declared. “I’ll sit in your lap.” Blue knelt down and wiggled to sit in the cradle of his lap between his legs.

Brock began to think this might not be a very good idea as soon as she sat in his lap. He felt her soft but firm bottom move seductively over his male organ. Without control his manhood stood to attention.

Finally comfortable on Brock’s lap she placed her head on his shoulder and commanded, “You start rubbing my back and arms with your hands.”

Brock's eyes grew two sizes. *Feel her? Was she kidding?*

## *Chapter 10*

Blue began demonstrating. Her hand caressed his chest. Brock's nipples burned in pleasure and hardened into little nubs.

Blue place her head into the curve of his neck and ran her delicate fingers up and down his neck, arms, and chest in a circular motion. "Like this," she encouraged. "Put your arms around me and pet me."

Brock nearly strangled with a choke. His organ hardened more. Her simple gentle touches were like branding irons. It was heaven. It was hell. He never had need for restraint in sexual matters before. Brock was convinced this would kill him. He was even more confused as to why he wouldn't take her. Was it because she was so innocent of the ways of a man and woman? Did he refrain because she was a woman child? Was this real or hallucination? If it was a dream this was the most sensual wet dream he ever had in his life. Brock did as Blue had ordered but knew it was a bad move. His heart was racing and his body sweating. The bodily need for release into her warm wet haven became too painful for any man to bear. His hand began on her back following a path down to her bottom and across the top of her thigh. Brock's thumb brushed her breast as his hand followed up her arm to her neck and back down to her back in the same rhythmic motion she was using.

"Doesn't that feel good?" Blue questioned as her hand roamed over Brock's chest with her hand.

"Wonderful," Brock managed to croak. "I think I get the idea. Maybe you'd better get up."

"You sure feel good and smell nice," Blue ignored as she continued her sensual touching. She liked being on his lap. She felt as warm, safe, and comfortable as if she was in her Pa's lap. Blue felt Brock shaking. The shaking turned into real spasmodic tremors. "You okay?"

"No," Brock moaned. "I think you really need to get up." After all he needed her beyond reason and you couldn't really make love to a fantasy. Could you?

"You need a doc?" Blue asked jumping from his lap.

"No.....," Brock quivered rising to full height on shaking legs. "I.. I.. need.. need to go." Brock limped to Duster and mounted.

Although a bit confused Blue asked as he started to ride off, "Are you coming tomorrow?"

Brock turned to nod his head. "Yes, I'll be here tomorrow." Urgency required him to have Duster go into a full gallop. He found the nearest fishpond and jumped into it fully clothed. The chilly waters were therapeutic. Quickly he returned to a near normal state of body and mind. Brock lingered a while in the fishpond and swam its length several times.

Wet and a little chilled, he remounted Duster. Who would believe that an un-sexual act such as sitting on a man's lap and touching him would create such erotic sensations? Or was it because it was a dream and it was a young Kerry Wessex he was fantasizing about. Why didn't he wake up when he jumped into that cold water? These wet clothes felt cold and real. Why did he tell his dream he return tomorrow? Wasn't this torture enough? Riding back to Geneva's Hope, the afternoon sun warmed him and dried his clothes.

Garrett greeted Brock when he entered the stable. He wrinkled his nose at Brock when handed the reins to Duster.

"Phew! You smell like fishpond! You fall into one?"

"No, I dove into one!" Brock grumbled. "Do you know if Chin Su is around?"

“Why in the Sam Hill did you dive into one with your clothes?” Garrett pursued. He noticed the fresh clothes he left with this morning were now wrinkled and disheveled.

Brock rolled his eyes. “Never mind that. Do you know if Chin Su is around?”

“I saw him in Grandma’s rose garden with Ma,” Garrett answered taking Duster’s reins and walking her into the stables. “They should still be there. It was only a few minutes ago.”

“Thanks,” Brock appreciated on the outside. Inside he groaned. If this is a dream it is starting to get complicated. Now I’ll see my master with my illusions. I have to talk to Chin Su about this, dream or no dream.

Brock found them as Garrett had said. Kerry, Chin Su, Ashley, and Christina were in Kerry’s mother’s rose garden. This time his fantasy Kerry Wessex was in a teal silk dress. It was the current high fashion from Paris. Kerry’s daughters were dressed in white pinafores, white stockings, and white leather ankle length button boots. It was then Brock realized that with the exception of Jared, all the Wessex boys looked like their father and the girls were a miniature of Kerry. Maybe this was real and Kerry had a baby sister somewhere or older daughter? Brock’s head was spinning.

Chin Su was the first to notice Brock. Chin Su knew immediately Brock needed him. Chin Su had told Brock many times you can read people not only by what they say, but how they act and what they do not say. Clearly Brock’s body language was screaming at Chin Su for attention. “You need me little tiger?”

“Desperately,” Brock breathed deeply. He stopped at the edge of the garden. “Do you have time for me?”

“Of course little tiger,” Chin Su replied. He bowed slightly to Kerry and her daughters. “Thank you for showing me this living memorial to your mother. I hope we can continue our talks later. I fear my little tiger is in need at this moment.”

“Of course Chin Su,” Kerry acknowledged. “I would love to continue our talks later. It is so wonderful to discuss our different yet similar philosophies.”

"It is a pleasure I too shall look forward too," Chin Su bowed once more. "It is most refreshing to share thoughts with such an intelligent beautiful woman."

"Thank you very much," Kerry accepted graciously. "A wife and mother of seven children need to hear she can still be intelligent and beautiful."

Chin Su grinned. "I'm certain your husband tells you these things every evening and morning."

Kerry winked playfully. "Indeed he does. He knows what is good for him." She took Christina's hand and then Ashley's. Together the three women walked to the stone memorial of Ashley McGillinen where they would lay white roses on their grandmother's headstone. It had become a ritual when the rose bushes gave their first blooms in spring.

Brock was pacing nervously. His patience was at a hair's breadth. He needed Chin Su. He needed his master. He needed the calm and soothing his master always brought to him when he was uncertain, fearful, and confused.

Chin Su felt his ward's uneasiness. Something was troubling Brock. Chin Su knew this trouble came from deep within Brock's being. Something had happened to shake him considerably. Chin Su saw it in his eyes. "Come walk with me to the fields before us and tell me what is troubling you."

Brock bent his head reverently. His eyes watched Kerry and daughters walk toward the gravesite of Ashley McGillinen. He walked with his master in the opposite direction toward the open fields in front of the ranch. They found two fieldstones and Chin Su directed him to sit down.

"Master, I am not sure my mind is clear," Brock began. "I am no longer certain what is real and what is vision."

Chin Su reached across to place the palm of his hand on Brock's forearm. "Tell me your vision this day."

"It happened as it does everyday. The woman child angel rides her horse across the valley. She dances on the horse and with the horse. Then she rides away."

Chin Su asked, "This day something different has occurred?"

“Once again I enjoyed the noon meal Mrs. Barber packed for me. I thought I might nap and enjoy the peace and strength of nature that surrounded me. I only had begun to sleep when the angel appeared before me from out of nowhere. At first I didn’t know who it was next to me and in waking sleep I followed instinct. In an instant I was fully awake and the angel was beneath me. She felt so solid. Real. I expected the angel to disappear from under me. She didn’t. She smiled and greeted me.”

“Perhaps your angel is not a vision. Perhaps this is a warm living being,” Chin Su suggested.

“She felt like a warm living being. Her breath was warm and sweet on my face. I kissed her. Her lips were sweet like honey,” Brock breathed heavily in memory.

“And what else?” Chin Su asked wisely. There was something different in this discussion. There was something different about his little tiger.

“I didn’t ravish her,” Brock said softly. He said it too softly for Chin Su. “She was my dream and I didn’t ravish her.”

Something was very different Chin Su thought. He never reprimanded his little tiger for his rakish ways. Chin Su knew for a long time that Brock was searching for something in a woman that he needed. Chin Su knew he would never find it in the woman Brock had taken. For many years Chin Su watched the battle Brock fought within his being. Little tiger wanted the warmth and comfort of a woman’s love, but he feared it. He feared losing it as he had lost his mother. Brock chose women that would mean nothing to him and he anything to them. Chin Su knew this was not the vision Brock he had thought it was. Brock had found the woman he had been searching for. This woman was his true mate. Chin Su furrowed his brows with worry. Brock would have to face his own greatest fears. Chin Su wondered just for a moment if Brock was capable of doing it. Chin Su had prepared his ward for this moment and this was the moment. Chin Su recognized it as the boy’s final trial. This meant Chin Su’s journey was nearing the end. Some where near he would find his sister?

“What is it master,” Brock asked recognizing the change in his companion and tutor’s face.

“Tomorrow you will go and not sit to watch your vision,” Chin Su ordered firmly. It was a tone of solidity that never before had flowed from his being. “Embrace this for what it really is. It is your greatest fear that you face and will conquer. Finally my little tiger, you will see, fight, and win the battle of your inner self.”

“Master?”

“This is all there is to say,” Chin Su cut him short and walked away.

Brock sat dumbfounded. He folded his legs and went into deep meditation. Hours passed and darkness fell. His limbs were numb and pained him to walk as millions of prickly needles attacked his lower body. How he made it to his room even he didn't know. Brock removed his clothes and fell into bed. Brock was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. In his dreams he saw her, he kissed her, and he faded away reaching for her.

“Are you sure he's all right?” Kerry asked once more with concern. Brock relished Mrs. Barber's cooking. This was very strange indeed. Chin Su had assured her Brock was well, just tired.

“He is simply tired,” Chin Su answered once more.

Kerry admired his patience. This little Chinese man was becoming a part of this well run household. Deep inside she felt the Stuart women's instincts. Chin Su would become a part of this family. She knew it. Chin Su would be staying and so would Brock. The discussion of dinner returned once more to Bennett.

Bennett's courting of Julia Whitman was proceeding very well. Bennett hadn't been this happy since his father took Kerry McGillinen as his wife. He hadn't been happier since his mother had given him a baby brother, and another, and another.

“You're very happy this evening,” Kerry commented to her oldest son. She observed his bright face and small smile. She had seen that very face so many times when he was happy. The day he saw Garrett, Jared, and the rest of his brothers and sisters. She had seen that face when she brought him Victoria, his wolf dog. She saw that face with Eye of Hawk, Tracker, Uncle Ryan, and most of all when he had special time with her or his father.

"I was just thinking about how happy I am," Bennett bubbled and then he told his mother his most recent thoughts.

Tears threatened to fall from Kerry's eyes with Bennett's revelation. She held them back and asked, "When are you planning to ask Julia to marry you?"

"Do you really like her Mamman?"

"I do very much."

"I'm going to ask her father on Sunday and then propose after church service if Mr. Whitman approves."

This time the tears did flow. Kerry tried to cover her emotions. Even she wasn't certain if she was crying in happiness for her son, or sorrow because she was losing him. "Heavens, soon I'll be a granny."

Braden rose from the table. He walked behind Kerry's chair. Leaning over his wife he took her in his arms and hugged her. "And I'll be a grandpapa." He kissed her neck, her shoulders, and he nibbled her earlobe. "I don't feel like one and you certainly don't look like one."

Kerry looked turned and looked into her husband's adoring eyes. "You don't look like one either." Kerry whispered into his ear. "I don't feel like one when you touch me like this. I feel like the first time I tasted you and we made Garrett."

Braden whispered back, "You excite me the same way every time I look at you."

"Do you want to make another baby?"

"Let's try."

Kerry rose from her chair and took her husband's extended arm. They left the room and Kerry looked over her shoulder. "We future aged grandparents are somewhat tired. Good Night, children."

Jared and Garrett looked at each other and grinned.

Bennett smiled warmly knowing that is the same love he had found with Julia.

Anthony, Braden Jr., Christina, and Ashley continued their meals as if nothing unusual had happened.

Earlier in the day at Geneva's Branch, Blue found herself searching for her mother. She found her mother in the great room of the ranch house working on a deerskin jacket for her father.

Twiggy's hands were nimbly sewing on red seed beads on the jacket. The red seed beads were part of an elaborate geometric pattern that would be a special Christmas gift this year.

Blue knew her mother only took the jacket out to work on it when her father was not about. Blue needed to talk to her mother. "Are Samantha, Lucy, and Little Ryan still in school with Lei Ling?"

Twiggy looked up at her daughter. She knew immediately what had happened. Her daughter had the woman scent. Her daughter's face was pink and her lips ever so slightly swollen. "We're alone, quite alone."

Blue didn't waste a second. "Ma, remember you always told us girls how you rode into Pa's life and knew the instant he lifted you from your horse that he was someone special?"

"I do." Twiggy wanted her daughter to feel comfortable enough to tell her what happened. She did not want to be a harpy and ask all sorts of questions even though she wanted to know what happened to her eldest daughter. Twiggy knew if she was too inquisitive, her Blue might not tell her everything.

"If I tell you I felt that way today, what would you do?"

"I'd ask you who he was," Twiggy answered taking her daughter's hand and tugging her closer.

Blue squeezed her mother's hand and knelt on the floor next to her mother's rocking chair. "His name is Brock. He's the randy Jared and Garrett told me about. Bennett's friend from school."

"I see," Twiggy replied and brushed a loose curl away from Blue's cheek. "Tell me all about this my darling."

"He's been watching me for a week as I ride Ginger and dance with her. I've watched him for almost a week," Blue told her mother. She didn't tell her mother he was naked as a jaybird when she watched him. "I sneak up on him and watched him do a strange dance. It's so beautiful and graceful."

Twiggy knew there was more to come. "Continue."

“Well today he didn’t dance and I got kind of scared. He was lying so still.”

“And you went up to him?”

“Yeah, he was sleeping, but I didn’t know at first. I thought maybe he got snake bit. The rattlers are out after winter hibernation and they’re mean when they’re hungry.”

“You woke him?”

“Ma, in a blink of an eye he grabbed my arm twirled me in the air and had me on my back,” Blue related excitedly.

Twiggy choked on a gulp of air. She tried to hide the fear and surprise. It was important to find out what really happened and not jump to any conclusions. “On your back?”

“Yeah, he was over me and had my hands locked down on the grass,” Blue recounted. “I never saw any one move that fast in my life. He’s so pretty. He smiled at me and said ‘You!’”

“Is that when you felt special?” Twiggy was a bit concerned. The fact Brock was a randy made her nervous for Blue. Even Twiggy knew what a randy meant.

“Yeah, but just a little. He called me a dream and kissed me. Have you and Pa ever kissed?”

Twiggy arched a brow. This randy kissed her daughter. She wanted to find Ryan’s rifle and make that randy smart dearly, but she also saw the shimmer of happiness in her daughter’s eyes. It was that special glimmer and the electricity that she had felt with Ryan. Twiggy touched her lips and remembered Ryan’s first kiss. It was her first kiss of thousands. Every kiss was still wonderful. “Yes, we kiss.”

“I never see you kiss. You snuggle,” Blue stated positively. “The kiss was wonderful and the snuggle felt so special. I felt tingly all over.”

Again Twiggy arched a brow. Tingly? “You kissed and snuggled?”

“He asked me if I never saw my Ma and Pa kiss. I said no. I told him you snuggle and then I showed him how to do it,” Blue giggled. “He never heard of snuggle.”

“You showed him how to snuggle?”

“Did I do something bad? You and Pa snuggle and Brock showed me how to kiss.”

Twiggy stroked her daughter's head. Her baby was so innocent and so sweet. "You didn't do anything bad."

"Do you and Pa kiss?" Blue's question was innocent and inquisitive. Her gray eyes meeting her mother's rich brown ones.

A sparkle danced across Twiggy's being. "Oh yes. Your Pa and I kiss every night and every morning."

"You do?" Blue's surprise was genuine.

"Your Pa and I made kissing our special time," Twiggy explained to her attentive daughter. "It's so wonderful between us that we share it with no one else. Not even you." Twiggy smiled broadly and tweaked Blue's nose lovingly.

"It was wonderful," Blue sighed remembering those soft lips on her mouth.

Twiggy felt a twinge. It was the time to talk to her daughter about men and women. "It starts with a touch, then perhaps snuggling, but kissing will lead to babies."

"Is that how it's done?" Blue asked innocently. "Kissing I mean. I mean that's how you make babies. You mean I could be having Brock's baby?"

"Not quite like that," Twiggy tried to explain calmly and without turning twenty-five shades of embarrassing red. "What I said was, kissing will lead to babies."

"Mama, animals don't kiss they, you know," Blue stated in confusion.

"Oh but they do. The animals kiss in their own natural ways," Twiggy replied. "You know how Pa has to wrap the mare's neck when a stallion mounts her."

"Brock didn't hurt me. It felt good. It made me all tingly inside."

"Just like your Pa for me," Twiggy sighed. "Let's have a long talk and I'll tell you everything a woman needs to know when she meets that special someone. That special person that she just knows she wants to be with for the rest of her life."

"That's the way I feel, Mama."

"I know honey," Twiggy said thoughtfully. She began to explain all the wonders of a man and woman joining. She explained the joy and happiness of becoming one with each other. Twiggy explained how the physical pleasures release a man's seed

and when a woman is fertile after her monthly flow, how they combine and start a baby. A child that is created from the love the two have shared. Twiggy also explained to her daughter that it only happens with someone special and a woman should keep that part of her sacred until that special person comes along. Twiggy also warned that a woman shouldn't share with any man until one or both are willing to take responsibility for the child that most certainly would be created. "Any questions?"

Blue smiled up to her mother. "No. Mama, I love you."

"I love you," Twiggy repeated. "Now up to bed and get a little nap before your Pa comes home. If he sees you like this he'll know just like I did. I think this should be our little secret for now."

Blue nodded and went to her room for a nap.

*Geneva's Force*



## *Chapter 11*

Blue was in her room and had removed her blouse and britches. She lay on the bed with only her drawers and chemise. Slowly she let her tongue slide over her lips. She still tasted the fruity cobbler. Blue sighed remembering Brock's sweet kisses. Quickly she jumped from her bed to the dresser drawer where she kept her private journal. She had written in every day since seeing Brock doing his dance. She of course left out the fact he wasn't wearing any clothes. Blue kept a sharpened charcoal pencil in the drawer. She would write, then sharpen the pencil with her small knife and return the journal and pencil to the drawer. After Blue retrieved her secret journal she sat on the bed cross-legged and wrote in it everything that happened today. She included her mother's talk and that she just knew she was in love and this was the man she would spend the rest of her life with. They would be happy just like her Pa and Mama. Blue returned the journal and pencil to the drawer and hid it under her chemise tops and fancy drawers. Blue laid down on the bed and fell asleep.

Twiggy was nervous. She hoped she explained everything Blue needed to know. She prayed Ryan wouldn't find out. At least Ryan shouldn't find out yet. Blue needed to find her own way and Ryan had sent many a suitor running scared already. Twiggy had just returned the jacket, beads, thread, and needle to her locked sewing chest when she heard Ryan behind her. He put his arms around her waist and Twiggy jumped almost a foot off the floor.

"What's wrong honey?" Ryan asked quickly feeling her nervousness. He easily picked her up to carry her to his favorite chair. Once they were seated properly, he on the chair and Twiggy on his lap, he snuggled Twiggy. "Tell me what's wrong. You're as jittery as a cat about to take a bath."

Twiggy snapped raggedly, "I wouldn't be jittery if you didn't sneak up on a person. You're as quiet as Tracker and Soft Moccasin."

Ryan hugged Twiggy a little tighter. "Speaking of Soft Moccasin, he was with me on the north forty today. I invited him for supper."

"I'll be glad for the company," Twiggy smiled trying to obtain calm in her heart. "Just don't you two sneak around in my house."

"Aw honey!"

"Don't honey me," Twiggy grumbled. "You nearly scared a year's life from me."

"I'm sorry. Forgiven?"

"You're forgiven you big bear," Twiggy giggled and patted Ryan's large chest. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," Ryan said uneasily. It was a fib, not a lie. He didn't want Twiggy to worry.

"And we're going to have a blizzard tomorrow," Twiggy growled. "You don't go with Soft Moccasin or Tracker all day unless you're looking for something. Don't try to protect me. I need to know if I should be watching for something or. . . Someone?"

Ryan sighed heavily and started rubbing Twiggy's arm nervously. "Some of those bigoted stupid miners are trespassing on Geneva's Branch. They're getting all fired up by the mining companies and their bosses. Soft Moccasin helped me find the routes they use and we booby trapped them."

"You didn't see any did you?" Twiggy asked. She was fearful for her husband. Ryan had tried to keep her from finding out about the skirmishes with the ranch hands and damages to land, animals, and fencing. Twiggy also knew that Bright Moon's warriors had taken up watch on all Geneva's Branch boundaries. Deep down to her toes she knew there would be trouble for her

family and she was frightened. Blue was well protected as long as she stayed to the south and heart of Geneva's Branch. Samantha, Lucy, and Little Ryan stayed on the ranch. They didn't go farther than Bright Moon's camp and anywhere else on the ranch they went with their father. In the south Geneva's Branch merged with Geneva's Hope. Kerry's ranch was being watched over by Eye of Hawk's tribe.

"No," Ryan assured his wife. "But we set some might good traps. They'll think twice before they trespass on Geneva's Branch."

"Promise me you'll be careful," Twiggy sniffed. She just felt something bad would happen. "I wouldn't put it past any of those low lives to bushwhack you."

"I promise I'll be careful," Ryan whispered in her ear. "I've got a whole heap of loving years left with you that I won't let anyone take away from me."

Cho Ling appeared. "Supper is leady."

The family sat down to eat.

Ryan looked to Blue's empty chair. "Where is Blue?"

"She's napping," Twiggy replied trying not to sound nervous. She jumped an inch from her chair when Ryan bellowed his question. Blue's lips were still slightly swollen from her first kiss and her body was still a happy blush from her encounter with Brock. Twiggy didn't dare let Ryan see Blue. He would know immediately what had happened.

"Napping?" Ryan scowled. "Is she sick?"

"No, just tired."

"Blue doesn't get just tired," Ryan argued.

Samantha, Lucy, and Ryan looked at their mother questioningly. Blue never took naps before.

"She does when it nears her woman time," Twiggy snapped. "Now hush, this isn't a discussion for a dinner table. It's about time you face the fact our Blue is a woman with woman problems." Twiggy bit back a smile. She had just told Ryan the truth. Blue was a woman with real woman emotions. If Ryan assumed she meant something else, well he just didn't understand.

Soft Moccasins came into the dining room and took an empty seat. It was obvious to him something was going on, but it

would be improper to ask questions of his hosts. Instead he waited silently at the table until Ryan took his fork and knife and started cutting his steak into smaller portions for consumption.

Ryan blushed in proper embarrassment. He began eating his dinner and the rest of the family followed his lead. It was the quietest dinner table Twiggy could remember. Thank heavens Ryan and Lucy began talking about their day in school and geography lesson. Apparently Lei Ling taught the children about China.

After the meal Ryan led the family into the great room and everyone settled in to their accustomed routine.

Twiggy made excuses about checking about the children's lessons with Lei Ling. When Ryan left the room she pulled Soft Moccasin to the side and spoke quietly with him.

Ryan told Samantha and Lucy to stay in the great room. He needed to check something outside and he would be right back. Quickly he made his way to the back hallway for the addition he had added to accommodate his growing family and took the steps three at a time.

Blue heard a soft rapping on her door. "Yes?"

Ryan entered her room and sat on the side of her bed. With his large hands he gently swept her messed hair away from her face. "Your Mama told me you had some woman problems. I asked Cho Ling to keep a plate warm for you when you get hungry."

"Always worried about us, aren't you Pa?"

"The three of you will always be my little girls," Ryan sighed. "It's too hard for me to accept you are growing into a beautiful and wonderful woman. Just like your Mama."

"And Auntie Kerry," Blue teased. She loved her father. This Brock was the first man she ever met that she sensed was as kind, loving, and giving as her adored father. "You've always told me how much I look like her."

"The spitting image!"

"I'm so proud to be your daughter. I want you to know that. Blue sent a warm smile to her father. She stretched out her hand and touched his cheek. Was that a tear in his eye? He would turn his face and say he got a cinder caught in his eye. Her Mama

did tell her Pa the truth, in a way. She was having woman problems. They were of the heart, not the body. She knew her Mama would never lie to her Pa. It wasn't their fault if he misunderstood the meaning of woman problems.

If only Ryan knew it was mother like daughter and daughter like mother. He might be even prouder. Or, he might be furious to know that some man had piqued his eldest daughter's interest.

"Are you feeling good enough to eat dinner?" Ryan asked worriedly.

"Yes, Pa. I'm famished and well rested. I'll dress and be downstairs in a bit."

"I can't stop worrying you know."

"I know, Pa."

Brock was lying on his bed. Sleep evaded him. He tossed and turned. It was difficult to concentrate on anything but Blue. She was beautiful. She was angelic. A vision? No she was real. Why was he feeling this way toward her? He could have taken her in that copse. Why didn't he? She was too special that's why. What was he saying? Why was he scared to death? What emotions are attacking him? He's never had feelings like this. What was he afraid of? Chin Su told him the time has come to face his fear. What fear? Finally he slipped into the abyss of sleep.

*A blonde haired woman approached. She was wearing a fashionable travel suit. Brock was a little boy again. "Mamman!"*

*"Brock, we seem to have visitors. Papa and I want you to go play hide and seek. Go hide from the visitors. Don't let them find you."*

*Brock obeyed his mother. This was a fun game, but why did his mother look so worried. He ran as fast as his little legs could carry him to a secret hiding place behind a rock grove in the garden. The secret place muffled sounds. He did hear horses hooves and strange voices. He heard the voices of his mother and father. Then there was silence. In his mind he was thinking they were looking for him. He waited and waited. He heard many strange voices and finally he heard the horses hooves go away.*

*"Here I am! Here I am!" he shouted happily. Something was wrong. Something was strange. His mother and father lie on the ground near their small house. He ran to his mother. She was very still and cold. His father called him weakly. "Your mother is sleeping son. I'm going to sleep soon. Try not to be afraid tonight. Our man Ming will be back tomorrow. Remember we will always love you and live in your heart." The voice faded and Brock felt alone and afraid. He tried to be brave for his father. He snuggled into his mother's arm and tried to sleep. She was so cold. Brock ran into the house and pulled his mother's quilt from her bed and brought it out to lie on his mother. He curled up on top of the quilt and tucked the edge over his body to cover his little body. Letting his tears fall, Brock finally fell asleep. As the morning arrived a strange face hovered over little Brock. He screamed in terror. Powerful arms pulled him from his mother and father. He kicked, screamed, and bit the stranger. The stranger spoke to him quietly and gave comfort.*

*The dream continued. A closed white lotus flower began to open. It was the most beautiful lotus flower he had ever seen. The white was not merely white. The white was brilliant and shimmering. The water it rested upon was crystal blue. The flower slowly opened. In the center were his parents holding hands. In the center of their hand was a sapphire blue lotus. This blue lotus matched the crystal waters. Slowly the flower opened to reveal his woman child Blue holding his hand. In their hands was a shimmering diamond lotus that remained closed. In his dream he heard his mother. "My son, you confuse your feelings from mother to wife. We are always with you. It is your time. It is your destiny. Embrace what you know must be done. Your happiness and future lie with your Blue."*

Brock woke with a start. His heart was beating rapidly. It was as if his parents had touched his soul. Brock's muscles rippled across his abdomen as he took heavy slow breaths. Brock concentrated on the dream. *Face his fear.* He threw his covers off revealing his long muscular legs. Only a part of the quilt covered him from his waist to his thighs. At last he realized exactly what his fear truly was. He was afraid to love. He was afraid of family. The shock of finding his dead mother and dying father made him

afraid to love and want a family. He felt that to love and be dependent on another person created great pain when lost. Their death had hurt him more than a child could explain. All these years he had kept this fear bottled up inside. Yes, he gave himself a reputation of rogue. He chose only women of the night or women giving their bodies, but not their hearts. He wanted no special love until he saw this woman child. Yes, she was his destiny. Brock could not and would not deny it. Chin Su his master had taught him to trust his feelings and his dreams. Brock understood this dream. Tomorrow he would return to his woman child. He would ask her to marry him. Brock lay down under the covers once again. He slept soundly until the morning light touched his face with warmth.

“Good Morning,” Mrs. Barber greeted Brock cheerfully when he entered the kitchen. “You’re a sleepy head this morning. Master Bennett has already left to visit his lady love.”

Jared sat sulking on a chair snapping beans. Today he would be helping Mrs. Barber make strawberry preserves from the wild strawberries they had picked yesterday. Jared did not want to be a cook when he grew up. This punishment was hell for him. Jared wondered how women like Mrs. Barber could enjoy this so much. He started to empathize with women that hated this work as much as he did. Not everyone was cut out to do some jobs. It didn’t matter if they were male or female. This is a lesson he would long remember.

“I was restless last night,” Brock replied taking a piece of warm buttered bread from a plate on the sideboard.

“You went to bed too early last night,” Mrs. Barber commented. “Are you going off again today for a ride?”

Brock nodded. He had just swallowed a large bit of buttered sweetened flapjack.

“Your sure do seem fond of those rides of yours,” Mrs. Barber noted.

“And your lunches,” Brock smiled to Mrs. Barber. “I haven’t eaten this well in years.”

“As if you’re so old,” Mrs. Barber teased.

“Would you mind making a lunch for two?”

“Are you meeting someone in the middle of nowhere? Or are you just twice as hungry?”

“I’ve met someone and I want to share a lunch,” Brock grinned.

“Well that tells me a bunch. Aren’t you being a bit secretive?”

“Not at all,” Brock smiled. He was thinking of his woman child snuggling in his arm. He liked this snuggling she showed him yesterday. “I’ve found a friend and I’d like to share lunch.”

“I’ll be more than happy to fix two lunches,” Mrs. Barber returned taunting the handsome guest by winking mischievously. “Jared, bring me the berry cobbler I made yesterday. It’s Master Brock’s favorite.”

Jared got up to his full height and walked to a cupboard door and pulled out the square pan. “It’s my favorite too!” Jared sighed heavily inhaling the fresh baked aroma.

“Finish snapping those beans and maybe I’ll cut you off a small slice.”

Jared’s demeanor changed immediately. His hands moved quickly and snapped more beans in the next few minutes than he had in the last hour.

Mrs. Barber busied herself making the two lunches. She looked at Jared’s new bean snapping frenzy and winked at Brock. “Nothing like a little incentive.”

“It would work for me,” Brock agreed readily. He continued consuming the large breakfast Mrs. Barber had made for him. She had made flapjacks, ham, and sausage, eggs, muffin, and bear claws. Brock had a large appetite that he attributed to the fresh clean country air.

After finishing his breakfast, Brock thanked Mrs. Barber and complimented her on her wonderful cooking. He took the two baskets and left the kitchen. Walking past the livery he noticed Garrett slipping between buildings heading toward his horseless carriage. Brock chuckled and shook his head. Punishment or no, every chance Garrett got, he took to be with his mechanical monster. A few moments later Brock had mounted his horse and was on his way to rendezvous with his Blue.

Brock mused on his way to the open valley where Blue performed her dance every day. *There is something right about this time and place for me. She is before me as my heart and soul. Blue is a part of myself. I feel it. I know it. She is my soul mate, my destiny. No other woman has entered into my world as she.*

Stopping at a tree along the creek, Brock dismounted taking the roll behind his saddle. He chuckled admitting to himself these western saddles were very functional in transporting items. Shortly after he had spread the blanket smoothly, placed the food baskets upon it, pulled the glasses for wine, and placed the wine bottle by the baskets. He stood looking at the setting to make sure everything was perfect when he heard the pounding of horse hooves. He turned to see Blue riding her Appaloosa coming into view.

Blue's heart was beating rapidly. She began to anticipate seeing Brock. He was important to her. Like her mother had always told her, she would know her mate. Suddenly her life was upside down. How could she love this stranger? Yet she knew it was right. Her cousins had called him a rake. Still she knew he would love her forever and never wander. Would she leave her home? Could she leave her home? Would Brock ask her to leave her family? The thought of leaving Geneva filled her with dread. She couldn't leave her family. Suddenly Blue saw Brock standing under a tree along the path she used for her equestrian ballet.

Ginger felt her owner's change and slowed to a trot.

"Ginger, what's this? He isn't hiding on the hill." Blue nudged Ginger toward Brock. "I wonder what's on his mind?" As they drew near, Blue noticed the blanket on the ground and the two baskets.

When Ginger was stopped Brock walked to her side and held his arms up placing his hands around Blue's waist. Gently he lifted Blue from the saddle. "Good day my lady. Would you join me for a small repast?" Slowly he slid Blue down the hardness of his body from his chest down to his thighs and placed her feet on the ground.

Blue turned into jam. This is the same movement her mother described to her when her father lifted her mother that first meeting. She felt the strength of his body as she slid slowly down.

Her breasts hardened immediately as the slipped past he hard muscled chest. She closed her eyes and remembered that golden sinewy body she watched unashamedly while he did his strange dance. Blue knew this man was her mate, just as her mother knew Ryan was her life mate.

Brock placed Blue gently on the ground but his arms did not release her. Brock enveloped Blue and bent to kiss her sweet lips. This was love. This was life. His lips wandered to her temple and then he spent a moment nibbling her earlobe before he returned to her waiting lips. When he returned they were parted for him. He laved his tongue over those lips before he entered and tasted her mouth.

Time stood still for Brock and Blue. They were in heaven as their spirits soared and entwined in the destiny of true soul mates. Magic? Divine pairing? Whatever anyone may call it, both knew they were meant to be together. Finally they broke apart and gazed into the mirrors of their souls. Into the depths they stared at each other.

Brock returned to Blue's lips with delicate butterfly kisses. He whispered softly, "I love you. I love you with all that I am."

"I love you. I love you with all that I am," Blue returned in soft breaths.

"Marry me. Be my wife. Be my life."

Blue looked into Brock's eyes and placed her hands on his jaws pulling them closer to her lips. With a brush of breath Blue answered, "Yes."

Brock's heart began to beat rapidly and his face radiated a joy Blue shared in her own.

"I brought a basket," Brock reminded himself as well as Blue.

"I'm famished," Blue replied taking Brock's hand and walking to the blanket.

Together they sat on the blanket. Blue began to unpack the food from the basket. Brock opened the wine and poured it into the crystal glasses he brought with him. He handed the crystal to Blue. "To us and our future." He clinked his crystal to her crystal and sipped the wine.



After the bottle of wine had been consumed and the packed lunches devoured, Blue and Brock lay on the blanket together. Blue snuggled into Brock's arms and they lie together contentedly. The world drifted away and soon they were napping.

"What do we have here?" A powerful male voice asked standing above the sleeping pair.

*Geneva's Force*



## *Chapter 12*

Brock responded instantly and instinctively. His leg swung out slamming against the Tibia and Fibula bones of the voice. His other leg bent and thrust into the abdomen of the bent over figure and released such a powerful force the unknown body was tossed into the deep field grass and wild flowers some four feet away.

Blue jumped up and looked for Ginger. She wasn't thinking of quick get a way, or even being caught in a man's arms. She was looking to get her rifle. Her father tried very hard to keep the town intruders a secret, but she heard the ranch hands talking outside the barn when she was brushing Ginger. Startled and furious with herself for being surprised she darted for Ginger and stopped short when she heard numerous Shoshone oaths.

Everyone heard the rattler at the same time.

The intruder remained motionless. He quieted immediately even afraid to breathe. The rattle was right next to him. In the fall he had disturbed the sunning snake.

Blue opened her mouth to question her friend's presence. She shut it quickly as she realized Brock was making sweeping moves with his arm and body similar to a snake's movements.

Brock concentrated on the rattlesnake. They made eye contact and he moved slowly with focused mind and eyes. Brock become one with the snake and would know when it would strike

at him. Completely absorbed he did not hear Blue calling to him. His concentration could not be broken or the snake would win and he would be bitten.

“Brock, stop moving for God’s sake,” Blue shouted. “Hold still or that rattler will bite you!” Brock did not respond. “Brock, stop moving! I’ll get my rifle.” Blue became frustrated when Brock did not respond. Then she noticed something different about Brock. He wasn’t the tall handsomely seductive man she had lunch with. Brock was now the man doing the beautiful dance she watched secretly a few days ago. Blue blushed down to her toes when she remembered being mesmerized by his dance and his beautiful naked body. Blue realized the snake’s black lifeless eyes and her Brock’s eyes were in a stare down. “Brock!” His name came in a whimpered choke. Fear consumed her like she had never felt before. This love emotion was new and wonderful. The joy and contentment she felt in this man’s arms could be lost forever.

The snake coiled slowly. It was ready to spring, but it waited. The time would come when its eyes would hypnotize the large beast. The snake was patient and would wait. While the large beast moved it was still a danger.

The intruder lay motionless on the grass watching the play out. He allowed his mouth to open agape. Even the dancing tall blond man mesmerized him. These movements were spiritual. He knew that. The snake and man were one in power and one in nature. Blue Pool should hear of this. Blue Pool should know of the powerful medicine this sun haired man possessed.

Blue was frozen to the spot. She was unsure of whether to run for her rifle, or run to her love should he be bit.

Brock stopped moving and the snake coiled tighter to spring with fangs bared for the attack. Brock moved his arm swiftly and the snake jumped for it.

Blue held her breath and for the first time felt faint.

In a flash of light Brock’s arm swung out grabbing the snake behind its head in mid air. Before the snake knew what happened and could coil around the hand and arm that held it, Brock’s arm spun in circles and tossed the snake to fly yards away from them.

The frightened snake landed with a thud and slid quickly away from the dominant large beast it had tried to battle with.

Blue watched the snake as it flew across the sky. No sooner had the snake landed than Blue felt Brock's strong arms around her.

"Are you alright, Love?"

Blue pressed her face against Brock's massive chest. She shivered for a moment thinking of the danger he had put himself in.

"Don't be afraid. The snake is gone." Brock combed his fingers through Blue's hair comfortingly. He felt her slight shiver and pulled her closer into his body with his strong arms. He loved her Lilac scent. Blue was his Ch'i. Never before had he felt this possessive and protective of a woman. This wasn't lust or sexual release. Brock wanted to hold and protect this fairy creature with his life. "It's alright, Love," he whispered again. His warm breath caressed her hair.

Blue abruptly placed her hands on Brock's chest and pushed away from him. Anger at the thought of losing him rushed forward like an avalanche. "Are you crazy? What were you thinking? You could have been bit? Why didn't you let me get my rifle and shoot it?"

Brock stepped back in surprise. He saw Blue's eyes change from their haunting gray to almost silver. He watched her lower lip quiver as she spewed out her upset. She was worried for him. God, no one ever worried for him except Chin Su and that was because he was the master. No woman ever cared that much for him. Yes, there was no doubt Blue was his love, his soul, his Ch'i. Brock allowed a smile to form on his lips. "I am crazy for you. I was thinking about protecting you. No, it could not have bit me. The life did not need to be taken."

Blue's brow furrowed. "What? Are you talking about the rattler's life?"

"He is right. We stepped into the home of the snake. We were the intruders."

"You just be quiet Soft Moccasin. This is between me and Brock," Blue shot back angrily at the man still lying on the grass.

“You know him?” Brock asked immediately. “You know this Indian?”

“Don’t tell me you are going to get high and mighty all of a sudden,” Blue snarled. “Are you one of those uppity city men after all? You think a white woman shouldn’t know, talk with, or be friends with Indians?”

Shaking his head with a broad smile, Brock walked to Soft Moccasin and offered his hand to help him up. “Did I hurt you?”

Soft Moccasin grabbed Brock’s hand and pulled himself up slowly. “I don’t think you broke any bones, but I will need Blue Pool’s salves for the bruises. What kind of fighting did you use? It is similar to our wrestling, but different.”

Blue walked between them and pushed Brock forcefully. “Answer my question,” Blue nearly shouted.

Brock grinned wickedly. His hand snaked around Blue’s waist and pulled her to fit into his arms. “I am definitely not one of those uppity men. I am most grateful you are not, my love. Now answer my question. Do you know him?”

All of Blue’s mad faded. This man was more than wonderful. He also saved both their lives risking his. Blue turned to place her back against Brock’s strong frame and lifted his hands in hers to wrap around her. “I surely do know this no account sneaky spy. What are you doing here Soft Moccasin?”

Soft Moccasin was dusting off his jeans and white cotton shirt pretending to ignore Blue. “Damn, I got a grass stain on my new white shirt. Sugar Leaf is going to give me a set to for sure.”

“Serves you right for sneaking up on Brock,” Blue snapped. “Who sent you spying on me?”

Brock looked down at the tiny woman creature in his arms. “Why would an Indian be sent to spy on you?”

“Because he is best friends with my father and belongs to Bright Moon’s camp.”

Brock furrowed his brow and looked to Soft Moccasin.

Soft Moccasin felt the intense scrutiny and chuckled to himself. That stare must have scared the rattlesnake. The broad grin turned into a shining white tooth smile. “As a matter of fact Blue, it was your mother that asked me to watch out for you.”

“What?” Blue couldn’t believe what she heard. When she shared her secret with her mother Blue was convinced her mother understood and wouldn’t interfere.

“Don’t get wound in a knot,” Soft Moccasin chided. “Your mother just wanted me to make sure this rake friend of yours wouldn’t break your heart and had honorable intentions. I’ve been watching you since you rode out. The picnic was difficult enough, but when I saw the two of you lie down on the blanket I thought it was time for me to make myself known.” Soft Moccasin looked directly into Brock’s eyes. “Are your intentions honorable?”

Brock sized up the Shoshone Indian standing before him. He certainly didn’t look like the Indians he had seen in tintypes or in the shows he attended in the East. There weren’t any feather headdresses, beaded deerskin trousers or shirt. Only the thigh high beaded moccasins he wore showed a native touch. Soft Moccasin plopped his new black Stetson on his shiny shoulder length black hair. He didn’t even sound like the Indians he heard in those shows he paid to see. Soft Moccasin was obviously well educated. This Indian was not small of stature like the ones Brock had seen briefly in his travels with Chin Su and his Uncle in California. Soft Moccasin was nearly as tall as he was. Soft Moccasin did not have the broad frame, but even thru the white shirt Brock observed hard muscles. No indeed, this was not an Indian he was expecting to meet in the Wild West. “My intentions are quite honorable. I have asked Blue to be my wife.”

“Something funny?” Soft Moccasin questioned observing the odd smile on Brock’s face.

“After looking at you I realize I went to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show too often. You simply aren’t a typical Indian.”

Soft Moccasin liked the honesty of this man and chuckled, “Seems to me those Indians in the shows are simply what you white man expect and not what we really are.”

Blue stood dumbfounded. She was unable to believe this conversation was continuing in such good humor.

“Are there any more at home like you?” Brock snorted hugging Blue a bit tighter.

“A whole camp actually. You want to meet them?”

“I’d love to. Can Blue come with us?”

“Come with us. She is part of the camp. Her grandfather is Blue Pool and he will be the one to heal these pains in my legs you gave me,” Soft Moccasin snorted.

“So you’d like to meet my grandfather?” Blue snickered turning around to look up at Brock. “Would it bother you if I had Shoshone blood? Would you still want me to be your woman?”

“Love, you have red blood the same as mine. I know you are my soul. That is all that matters to me,” Brock replied seriously. “Why else would I fall so insanely in love with an imp like you the first time I ever saw you?”

“Really?” Blue was just as taken every bit as much as Brock. She knew the first moment she watched him dance she was in love with him. It was just like the instant love her mother and father had shared. The romantic attraction had hit her like mother like daughter. “Come meet my grandfather.” Blue removed herself from Brock’s warm arms and started picking up the remaining wine, glasses, and food. She repacked the baskets and Brock picked up the blanket. Brock mounted his mare and gave Soft Moccasin a ride to his horse that he had hidden in the hill nearby.

On the way to the camp Brock found he couldn’t take his eyes off Blue. She was perfect. Everything was perfect. She was hard and soft in the wink of an eye. Her sandy brown hair floated in the wind freely reflecting golden sparkles of sunshine. He found himself getting very hard at the sight of her riding bareback. Those jeans left little for the imagination and this wasn’t lust or pleasure. A sudden and strong feeling of possession and protection overtook him. And even stranger, it was a great feeling. He would make her his forever and soon. Grandfather would be the first step. Did it matter he was Indian. She certainly didn’t look Indian, but it didn’t matter. Is her father Indian? Or is her mother? Would he meet them at the camp?

Ginger needed no bridle. Blue had whispered to her to go to grandfather and she knew that meant camp.

Blue was beaming in happiness. Her Brock was going to meet her grandfather and it didn’t bother him a bit when he understood he was Shoshone. It didn’t matter that Blue Pool was her mother’s adoptive parent. Blue Pool was a grandfather of her

heart and she was named for him. Blue Pool was a major part of her life and she wanted Brock to meet him. Blue wanted her grandfather to meet her chosen man and receive his blessing. Perhaps he would have a dream as he had with her mother.

Brock tried to take his mind off Blue at least for a moment, “Soft Moccasin, how long have you known my Blue?” He bit his lip immediately. That was a stupid question. Those words claimed his woman. It was a territorial statement.

Soft Moccasin picked up on the innuendo. Oak of Twig, Blue’s mother was right. Blue wouldn’t be so much in love with love if this man didn’t care deeply for her. This was the only man Blue had ever shown an interest in. Blue’s mother just wanted to make sure the snuggling Blue was showing this man wouldn’t go to far. “I’ve known Blue since she was born. My sister and I came with Bright Moon’s camp when we moved here. It was only a short time later Blue was born.”

“So Sugar Leaf is your sister?”

“No, my wife,” Soft Moccasin chuckled. “You think I’m too ugly to snare a woman, Snake Warrior?”

Brock turned and stared intently at the Shoshone warrior riding next to him. “Actually I thought you are too pretty to be caught by one. I’d like to meet the woman that captured your heart as Blue has captured mine.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way to the camp.

“Grandfather!”

Brock turned immediately at the sound of Blue’s voice. And he saw her grandfather for the first time. Blue Pool was a striking figure. Tall with an erect carriage Blue Pool walked forward. Although aged with long white hair falling freely on his shoulders, it was obvious Blue Pool was a man of distinction. Brock immediately admired the striking figure. Chin Su had taught him well in respecting the wisdom of the elders.

Brock also started to take note of the surroundings. Again, this was nothing like he expected for an Indian camp. There were sturdy log homes and a few comfortable looking wooden frame homes. The frame homes had porches. In the back of the camp he saw fields of vegetables and to the south he noticed hundreds of

beef cattle grazing. Children were about the camp with fathers learning to make bows, arrows, snares, and shields. Some children were with mothers learning to prepare hides, quill, and make clothing from the soft hides. Many more children were sitting by grandmothers and grandfathers listening to stories of past heroic deeds and hunts. Brock immediately felt the warmth of home and love.

“Blue, my namesake and granddaughter. What man do you bring to meet me?”

Blue leaped from her saddle and ran into her grandfather’s welcoming open arms. Ginger nickered and walked slowly off to the other horses grazing in an open field. The mares greeted her.

“Grandfather, this is Brock Hampton,” Blue introduced reaching out her hand to the dismounting blonde giant.

“Ah, the randy visiting Geneva’s Hope,” Blue Pool chuckled extending his hand in the greeting of American friendship.

“Randy?” Brock questioned furrowing his brow. Not only was Brock surprised that this Indian knew his reputation, but his English vocabulary was a shock as well. He believed most Indians could only speak a few broken words of English.

“You are the friend of Bennett Wessex are you not?” Blue Pool chuckled. “We have heard of your ways with woman. What brings you in the company of my granddaughter?”

“I will not deny my friendship with Bennett Wessex, but I feel my reputation is exaggerated,” Brock defended. “I am here to meet you. I have asked your granddaughter to be my wife.”

Blue Pool’s eyes opened wide. He looked to his granddaughter and watched her fall into the arms of the giant. “Is this your truth, my Blue?”

“Yes, grandfather.”

Blue Pool laughed. “Then so it is. What do you offer for my granddaughter? Surely she is equal to the price her father paid for her mother?”

“Grandfather!”

“It is only right!” Blue Pool declared stubbornly. “You have the honor to be given the same dowry price as your mother.”

“Grandfather,” Blue sighed. She remembered the stories her mother, grandfather, and people repeated of the great dowry paid for Oak Twig. Brock didn’t have land, cattle, blankets, or ponies. How could he pay for her? How could her grandfather do this to her?

Blue Pool looked directly at Brock and stared into his eyes. “Are you willing to pay equally for the daughter of our Oak Twig?”

“I am, but I need to know what the price is.” Brock erringly assumed the price was money. He had a lot of money and losing a small portion would not bother his account in the least. He was badly mistaken.

Blue Pool smiled wickedly. “Come to our lodge. Sit by our fire. Share our meal and hear the story told of our Oak Twig and her chosen man.”

“Listen to my story,” Blue Pool began slowly. His American was nearly flawless after residing in peace and harmony on this land. Living with the ranch hands and the patient teaching of Lei Ling, all in the camp now spoke American and Shoshone. A few from the camp learned Chinese. It was the land of Geneva’s Branch, his daughter’s home. Blue Pool sipped the hot broth Brook Pebble served him, his guests, and Brock.

Blue sat cross-legged on the floor near her grandfather. Across from her was her Brock. He was seated beside two middle aged Shoshone. One was Yellow Star and the other was Broken Cup. Brock was told they were Blue’s uncles. Soft Moccasin also joined the family group.

Blue Pool began his story. “Our people were starving, sick, and dying under the cruel hand of a government Indian agent. There was no recourse but to flee. Our Chief Bright Moon heard of a Shoshone camp living in peace and harmony with Mother Earth on a land called Geneva’s Hope. It was the camp of Eye of Hawk and his father before him, Cougar’s Paw.” Blue Pool stopped speaking and allowed his guests to agree with his words.

“Cougar’s Paw was a great and wise chief of people. He learned to live in harmony with an honorable white man and

Mother Earth,” Broken Cup praised. “It was our hope to join his camp.”

Blue Pool nodded in agreement. “My daughter, Oak Twig, knew the American tongue. After our escape from the reservation, she was chosen to accompany me and meet with Eye of Hawk and this Grady McGillinen. We would ask them to let our people join our camp. It was not to be. The Great Spirit guided us to the land of another. My daughter met her mate and this man was true to our ways. This man loved my daughter and asked for her. It was then I had a vision and knew this man would be the future for all of us. He followed our ways and offered a dowry for my daughter’s hand.” Again Blue Pool paused. He looked to Yellow Star, his oldest son.

“Oak Twig’s man came to us. He brought us food, blankets and medicine. He offered his land to be our safe camp. Like Eye of Hawk, we learned the ways of the whites and they learned the ways of the people. With the combining of such wisdom, we live happily. Yet the story of Oak Twig’s dowry is a tale still told at our campfires.”

“Oak Twig’s man offered in dowry, 300 head of beef cattle, 150 milk cows, 10 rams, 30 ewes, 10 lambs, 25 calves, 40 ponies, and 400 woolen blankets. He also gave wood to build homes and seed to use for our crops,” Blue Pool finished with a proud and happy smile.

Yellow Star spoke once more, “This man also brought food and medicines. A white doctor brought white medicine to cure the disease brought to us by white men. Our women bore us healthy children. Our children grow tall and strong. There is no more hunger in our camp.”

“Skywriter’s vision was correct. We are a fortunate and happy people that live with one foot on each culture,” Blue Pool said. He outstretched his arms in a symbolic gesture. “So you see before you.”

Blue reached for her grandfather’s hand. Surely he couldn’t expect Brock to equal her father’s dowry payment. “Grandfather?” Was all Blue managed to say when he raised his hand in silence. The fear and appeal in her eyes was quite evident to him.

“My child, Skywriter had a vision for you and it is my understanding that this man you love as your mother loves your father, must know the payment of your father. When your Brock does, he will pay the same price. I will say no more in the matter. The price to be paid will help our people. This is all I will say.”

Blue looked quizzically at her grandfather. Her head turned to Brock when she heard him speak.

“I have heard the story. I honor the way of the people. There is no price that is too high for the love of my Blue. I also had a vision. There is no doubt in my heart or soul that Blue is my woman, my mate, my energy, and my force. It will take some time for me to equal this price and I will do so. As for the understanding of your vision, I will pray to my Great Spirit and ask for direction.”

Blue Pool placed his arm around Blue and patted her shoulder lovingly. “This man was sent to you by Tam Apo just as your father was sent to your mother. He will soon understand the price for you. Do not worry my namesake. My child.”

Blue leaned against her grandfather’s shoulder and whispered, “I shall not worry. Well, maybe a little worry?”

Blue Pool’s broad hand stroked Blue’s cheek and he kissed her gently on her forehead. He then turned to Brock and spoke softly. “Take my Blue home to her mother. It is time you meet the mother of my Blue. You will meet my daughter Oak Twig. It is our way that you be chaperoned. A Shoshone maiden is most precious and valuable. Soft Moccasin will accompany you.” With those words Blue Pool rose and opened the door. All rose and left the home of Blue Pool and Brook Pebble.

*Geneva's Force*



## *Chapter 13*

Once more Blue allowed Ginger to lead the way to her home. Her heart was soaring with happiness, but also filled with fear. What vision did Skywriter have of her and Brock? She agreed quickly to Brock meeting her mother knowing her father would not be home until late in the evening. Why was she afraid of Brock meeting her father? Did she fear that her father would never allow any man to wed her? Did she believe that her father thought no man was good enough for her? Even she had believed that until she met Brock. Her father just had to accept him. Her father would have to believe in their magic as he believed in his own with her mother. Her father mustn't believe in all they heard of the behavior of this rake. Brock loved her. This was different. Brock would be her husband and they would be happy forever, just like her parents.

"Blue, what are you thinking so deeply about?" Brock asked worriedly. "Are you afraid I won't meet the price?"

"I am worried for that, but that's not what I was thinking about."



“Don’t worry. I had a vision like your grandfather. Everything will work out. I know it.”

Blue grinned in a childlike manner. “There, I’ve put my worries away. I trust you. I love you.”

“Enough of such wasted talk,” Soft Moccasin reprimanded. “We’re coming to the ranch.”

Brian Duffy stroked his chin with his hand as he waited in the newly built Ely Town Hall. It was a one-story structure made of solid brick. The architect had used a strong Victorian facing design that he personally approved. The town council sat on their assigned chairs surrounding an oval mahogany table. The table was highly polished and he could see the reflections of the present Council members. Sunlight from the morning skies filtered into the chamber from the two large windows facing the street. Smoking was not permitted in the council chamber in deference to Mrs. Miles.

Duffy looked out the tall window to view the last council member cross the street. His eyes came back to the room and its fine wallpaper of English Ivy. Paintings of Ely landscapes surrounded them. In the corner was an ornately carved wet bar. After this meeting they would each have a drink of brandy and Mrs. Miles would have a sherry.

Mayor Duffy appreciated that his council had agreed to meet on such short notice. He knew they were all anxious to appoint the new Marshal and at last the opportunity had arisen. His thoughts were interrupted as the carved double door to the chambers opened.

“Glad you could make it Parson Pierson,” Joseph Crawford rose from his chair in greeting. He offered a handshake to the preacher and returned to his seat.

“Sorry to be late, but a parishioner needed my assistance with a personal matter.”

“These things happen, Parson,” James Taylor assuaged. “And Joseph, you have to admit this meeting is considerably short noticed.”

“The matter is urgent,” Joseph replied. “I found out that Sheriff Cage is bringing in another henchman for his protection schemes.”

“My daughter told me that filth is working with Chinese slavery for the train gangs, brothels, and opium dens,” Jason Whitman added.

“We have to protect Ely from the scum of mankind Cage and Sikes represents,” Brian Duffy declared.

“The fact that Zeke Brancherd and Tom Porter aren’t here doesn’t have anything to do with it,” Rusty Jamison chuckled.

“Does it Mayor Duffy?”

“I thought those two would never be out of town on business at the same time,” Joseph chuckled wickedly.

“It doesn’t matter that they are here or not if we are unanimous on our vote,” Brian answered with conviction.

“We are unanimous on your choice Mayor Duffy and Councilman Crawford,” Hannah Miles offered.

“Indeed,” Jason Whitman agreed. “For the record however, I believe we should have Mrs. Miles scribe our reasons.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Ryan McGillinen to arrive?” Joseph asked.

“It’s quite a ride from Geneva’s Branch. We just wanted him so he could hear we have found our Federal Marshal. After all, it was Ryan that persuaded his friend Federal Judge Samson James to give this Council the authority to appoint a Federal Marshal,” Brian answered. “He should be informed of the choice.”

A huge figure suddenly cast a shadow over the Council Table. “Did I happen to hear my name bandied about?”

“You certainly did. Thank you for coming Ryan,” Brian Duffy greeted.

“You’re just in time,” Joseph chimed in with a broad smile.

“We’ll call this meeting of the Ely Town Council on this seventh day of May in the year of our Lord 1896,” Brian Duffy announced. “Mrs. Hannah Miles, secretary will scribe the notes of this meeting. Present today are Pastor Matthew Pierson, Joseph Crawford, Jason Whitman, Doctor Richard Adams, and James Taylor. Absent are Zeke Brancherd and Tom Porter. The purpose of this meeting is to vote on the office of Federal Marshal as

mandated by Federal Judge Samson James. Councilman Joseph Crawford has presented a candidate. The chair recognizes, Councilman Joseph Crawford to name said candidate with reasons for submission.”

Joseph Crawford nodded to Chairman Mayor Brian Duffy. He rose from his chair. Joseph was still a towering figure as he stood beside the highly polished mahogany table of the town hall. He took a moment to clear his throat. “As you know, this Council has watched the justice and honor of our law enforcement collapse into chaos after the death of Marshal Kent Ewal. A despicable character brought in from Ruby on a temporary basis has turned his foul greed and power unleashed upon our town and county.” Joseph dipped his large strong frame to reach for a glass of cool water. After taking a sip he continued. “With the aide of Ryan McGillinen, present at this meeting, I submit the name of Brock Hampton to be considered and recommended for the duties of Federal Marshal by this Council.”

Ryan’s face turned white as his jaw dropped in surprise. Why in the world would the Council recommend an Eastern Rake and Randy for the honored and permanently responsible position of Federal Marshal? Wasn’t that Eastern Green Horn just visiting Geneva’s Hope with his nephew, Bennett? Ryan’s face obviously showed his emotions

Joseph Crawford had been looking at Ryan as he spoke and held his hand up palm out. Ryan would not have known what happened in his store and his reasoning for pursuing this visitor of Geneva’s Hope. There was something about the boy that Joseph knew he could reach to keep him as Federal Marshal, and Joseph knew he was the best choice for the position. Joseph firmly believed that Brock’s appearance in his mercantile was an Act of Providence. “Marshal Ewal was a man of peace. He sought peace and rarely used his firearms unless he had too. As a man that had seen enough death and destruction during the War Between the States, white massacres, as well as Indian massacres, he knew it was better to fight ignorance and apply non-violence to violent people and incidents. Marshal Ewal knew that peaceful control was and is the better answer to keep the peace. When Brock Hampton walked into my store and confronted the evil in Sheriff

Cage and Deputy Sikes with defensive and non-violent action. I knew he was the right man for the job of Federal Marshal. I present this man to the Council for consideration.”

“Mr. Chairman,” Ryan addressed. “May I ask a question of Mr. Crawford?”

“The Chair recognizes, Mr. McGillinen.”

“Joseph, just what happened in your store?”

“I was assisting Brock Hampton purchase new clothing when Cage and Sikes entered my store. Derrick was helping Julia Whitman with her purchases. Cage was watching Brock like a hungry rattler. He probably thought he could somehow blackmail the Eastern Dude and get money from him. Sikes began harassing my clerk, young Derrick. He’s just a boy and Sikes was physically hurting Derrick. Calmly, Brock requested Sikes release the boy. Immediately Sikes began bullying Brock and using his deputy badge as a weapon. When Brock wouldn’t respond to the bullying, Sikes drew his gun. In an instant Sikes was disarmed and writhing on the ground screaming in pain. I looked to see Brock’s boot grinding into Sikes hand. I’ve never seen the likes of that kind of defense. Even Indians can’t wrestle like that.”

“My daughter, Julia, told me the same story,” Jason Whitman offered. “It happened just like that.”

Joseph nodded in agreement. “Cage pulled his gun to shoot Brock, but the boy didn’t blink an eye. He smiled as if he knew he would be able to take the sheriff down as well.”

“Did he?” Ryan queried

“No, your nephew Bennett disarmed Cage with the same blinding flash of movement Brock Hampton had used,” Joseph recounted.

“Bennett?”

“Yep, it was beautiful.”

In the momentary silence Doctor Adams added, “Cage had to have his shoulder set and Sikes fingers were so badly broken Cage had to send him off to ramrod his bullies at the Ruby Mine. Sikes may never shoot a gun with that hand again.”

“All this is off the official record,” Brian directed as he looked to Hannah.

Hannah grinned, "We are now waiting for a vote on Joseph Crawford's motion for nomination of Brock Hampton as Federal Marshal under the auspice of Judge James directive."

Brian gave Hannah a wink. "Thank you Mrs. Miles."

"Off the record, how is it going in the Ruby mines area?"

Ryan asked. He was of course concerned because the miners were moving out further looking for that hidden and most times non-existent wealth. The miners were beginning to encroach Geneva Hope and Geneva Branch lands. This was one of the reasons he had approached his friend, Samson James.

"A lot of miners have been terrorized off their claims,"

Brian replied. "The benevolent Sheriff's company, Ruby Guild, has purchased the mines. Cage owns a good portion of the mines in Ruby area."

"But the mines don't produce much," Joseph stated. "Cage gets more income from his protection insurance money."

"Yes, protection from him," Hannah growled. "If we don't pay, our business could be vandalized or even burnt to the ground. I still don't understand how the government allows a man like Cage to get away with this."

"You have to file charges and have testimony in a Federal court, Hannah," Brian Duffy scowled. "We all know that if any one of us did so, he would destroy our businesses or even family. Then the law, run by him would investigate and find evidence to implicate you."

"Then let's quit wasting time and offer the position of Federal Marshal to this Brock Hampton," Jason Whitman ordered. "For the Ely township record, I nominate Brock Hampton for the position of Federal Marshal."

"I second the motion," Joseph Crawford added.

"All in favor of the nomination raise your hands," Brian Duffy said formerly.

Everyone on the town council raised his or her hand.

"Motion carried unanimously by the Ely Town Council present at this meeting."

"Mr. Chairman."

"The Chair recognizes Hannah Miles."

"Just who is going to approach Mr. Hampton?"

“Joseph Crawford and myself, will journey to Geneva’s Hope tomorrow,” Brian Duffy offered.

“Are you really certain you can get this randy to take your Federal Marshal position?” Ryan asked skeptically. “No matter how wonderful you think he is, he may not want to be a Federal Marshal. He is an Easterner you know.”

“Don’t condemn a man because he is educated in the universities. Your brothers can handle their own, as does your brother in law, Lord Wessex. Your nephew, Bennett is quite capable as well,” Brian Duffy reminded Ryan.

“All of them were raised and experienced properly with Nevada,” Ryan said stubbornly. “They all have roots here. Your randy doesn’t.”

“Sometimes you have to go with your feelings, and I just know deep down in my gut that Brock Hampton is the right man and was sent to us by Providence,” Joseph argued. “In my heart I never gave up on finding my daughter. I lived firmly in my hope for finding Dayton. My gut feelings were true and look at what I have.”

“Me for a son in law,” Ryan chortled.

“You for a son in law, my beautiful daughter, three beautiful granddaughters, a grandson, and more happiness than a man can hope for,” Joseph replied with a wink and smile. “I intend to keep my blessings safe. Therefore I will convince Brock Hampton to become our Pine County Federal Marshal.”

“I didn’t come here to argue your choice,” Ryan conceded quickly. “I hope for all our sakes this works out, or I wouldn’t have asked Samson to intercede.”

“This will work, I know it,” Joseph replied. “Do you want to come with us to Geneva’s Hope, or meet us there?”

“I’m sure you two can handle it,” /Ryan stated. “I’m up to my neck in vandalizing miners. We’ve had cattle rustled, fences damaged, and even harassment of our Shoshone family on the Branch.”

“Sorry to hear that Ryan,” Brian Duffy sympathized. “We need to move fast now. Matters are becoming worse.”

“That is an understatement,” Ryan agreed. “If we don’t get the law back into its rightful jurisdiction, this State will not be safe for any man’s family or property.”

“Chuck, tonight your job is to sneak into Geneva’s Hope with the kerosene and put it next to the horse barn,” Ron Sikes instructed. “Early in the morning Earl will ride in like he’s going to visit and when no one’s looking will spread the kerosene and start the fire. I’ll be waiting with my rifle and shoot that no good bastard that crippled me when he comes out of the ranch house. Everybody got it?”

“Sure do boss,” Earl snickered in malice. “I’d love to see them uppity McGillinens get theirs. They think their so high and mighty.” Earl still held a personal vendetta against Ryan McGillinen ever since he had been fired from Geneva’s Branch. It didn’t matter to him that he had made unwelcome advances to Aurora Blue, or was overheard by Ryan McGillinen making lewd comments about her. She was only a chit after all, even if she was the boss’s daughter. He had gone to Geneva’s Hope and Braden Wessex wouldn’t hire him either. Braden’s words after the interview still burned in his thoughts. *This interview is at an end. I am sorry but you do not near our high standards of employ. The most valuable and paid for asset of our employees is their ability to think and reason. I’m sorry, but I do not sense that with you.*

Sikes rubbed his crooked fingers. “Them McGillinens sure are uppity. Them pretty women and girls think no one is good enough for them.”

“Yeah,” Earl agreed quickly. He remembered the brush off Aurora Blue had given him.

Blue let Ginger go into a full run. Brock followed her at what he considered break neck speed. That Appaloosa was a fine and rare animal. Brock knew horseflesh. At the porch of the ranch, Blue literally leaped from Ginger and ran into the house before Brock or Soft Moccasin reined in their mounts.

“She’s some rider, hey?” Soft Moccasin chuckled addressing Brock.

“She’s also some woman,” Brock replied softly. His heart was molding around this angel of destiny.

“Mama?” Blue shouted repeatedly through the house.

“What on earth is it child?” Twiggy responded opening her arms to encase her daughter. “Has some one been hurt?”

Blue ran into her mother’s arms. “He’s here Mama. He asked me to marry him and I said yes.”

A gasp stuck in Twiggy’s throat. “Who is here?”

“Brock, Mama. Oh please like him. I need you to like him. I love him Mama. I know we are meant to be just like you and Pa.”

“Dear Tam Apo. You brought him here? What if your Pa had been home?”

“I knew he had that meeting in town,” Blue answered quickly. Her gray eyes were twinkling with happiness. “I wanted you to meet him first.”

Before Twiggy could respond to her daughter, a massive shadow filled the doorway.

“Madam.”

Twiggy craned her neck to look at the stranger as his form filled their hall. He was even taller than her husband and built just as solid. She thought he was beautiful with that blond hair and those sparkling blue eyes. A small shiver ran across her neck. In that moment she knew this man would be her daughter’s husband. There would be no question. A tug of joy and pride combined with a twinge of sorrow stung Twiggy. Her daughter was grown up and a woman.

“Welcome to our home,” Twiggy welcomed warmly as she stretched her arm extending her hand in greeting.

“Madam,” Brock repeated bowing politely. “I am honored to meet the mother of my future wife. It is for this purpose I come to you. I would respectfully ask you and Blue’s father for her hand in marriage. I have had the honor of speaking to her Grandfather. The dowry for your daughter will be paid as quickly as I can arrange it.”

“Dowry?” Twiggy gasped placing her hand on her daughter’s shoulders.

"Blue Pool has told Brock he must pay Pa the same dowry Pa paid for you," Blue said hesitantly.

Twiggy looked at her daughter and then to Brock. She couldn't believe her adopted father asked that price. First thing tomorrow she would pay Blue Pool a visit and find out what was going on. She decided to change this subject immediately. "I am certain this is best discussed with Blue's Pa. He isn't here and won't be home until late this evening."

"Perhaps I should return in the morning."

"I would suggest it to discuss your proposal with Blue's father, but I ask you accept my invitation for a cup of hot choco-lit with us so I may get to know you," Twiggy invited.

"Thank you, I would enjoy acquainting ourselves," Brock replied nobly. "I absolutely love hot chocolate."

"It's Mama's favorite too!" Blue beamed happily taking Brock's arm and leading him to the large room.

Twiggy excused herself and went immediately to the kitchen. She asked Cho Ling to make a pan of hot chocolate drink and serve the same in her silver service. Twiggy knew Bennett's friend was of the upper class. Twiggy wanted to impress him for some reason. Perhaps it was because she wanted Brock to know that even Blue was raised by her father in the west and was generally a tomboy, she was also a lady. Twiggy smiled thoughtfully remembering how Blue's Aunt Kerry had taken her in hand to educate Blue and herself in society's social graces. A loud chuckle escaped her lips when she thought about her husband. Ryan didn't care if you served hot choco-lit in a fine china cup or a tin cup. He just wanted Twiggy to be happy and there was never a monetary limit for the comfort and happiness of his wife. Twiggy hoped Blue and Brock could have the same relationship. It appeared that would be the case.

Brushing her black apron to smooth it, Twiggy entered the large room and entertained her guest, Brock Hampton.

## *Chapter 14*

Cho Ling entered the large room carrying the service filled with hot chocolate and three fine porcelain china cups. He placed the tray on a large table and smiled to the tall blonde man.

“Wercome.”

As Twiggy reached over to pour the chocolate Brock spoke to Cho Ling in Mandarin. Twiggy did not know the language but recognized some of the sounds as those spoken between Cho Ling and his wife Lei Ling. A side-glance to Brock showed her curiosity as to where he learned the Ling’s language.

Cho Ling was shocked and nearly stumbled backwards. He returned the greeting and thank you in his native language. He asked Brock where he learned Mandarin and complimented Brock’s nearly flawless dialect.

In consideration to his hostess, who just happened to be the mother of his future bride, Brock replied, “I was raised in China and my personal friend, companion, and master is Mandarin Chinese. I was able to tell by your dress and accent that you also were Mandarin.”

Cho Ling nodded happily. “If Miss Twiggy would allow, I would like to invite your friend to visit with my wife and I. I am a very good cook. You and friend like my food.” Cho Ling looked to Twiggy for approval.

“Since it would seem that Mr. Hampton will soon become a member of our family quite soon, I think it would be a wonderful

idea,” Twiggy offered. “Please bring your friend with you on the morrow, Mr. Hampton.”

“I wish you would call me Brock. I would feel a little more comfortable in my suit if the mother of my intended called me by my first name.” He placed his arm over Blue’s shoulder and boldly kissed her on the forehead as he drew her into his arm.

Twiggy arched an eyebrow at the possessive move. She knew Ryan would hit the ceiling if he saw any man take such a liberty with his daughter. He would be especially protective of his daughter from Bennett’s friend who was known as a randy. Brock Hampton carried a strong reputation of being a breaker of a woman’s heart and chastity. It would be best to bring it out in the open immediately. “Brock, we are aware of your reputation. I have to admit that although I see my daughter has deep feelings for you, and you appear to have feelings toward her. Well, you have ah er well...”

“A blighted reputation?” Brock finished. “Madam, it is true that has been my behavior until meeting Blue. I can only hope you believe me when I tell you that since I have arrived in Nevada I have sensed a belonging. I’ve felt family and know that is the wound I have in my heart. I need to heal that wound. Then I met Blue and my entire life has changed. I know Blue is my heart, my energy, my force, my spirit. We were two individuals that will unite into one force. I will never stray from my love. I will give your daughter my heart and soul. She will equally possess all that I have. You have my pledge.”

Twiggy did not respond. She remained silent in her thoughts. There was little doubt her daughter would have the love and fulfillment Twiggy shared with her Ryan. Slowly Twiggy sipped her chocolate. She resolved to make Ryan see their happiness and get his blessings for their daughter. There would still be the matter of the ridiculous price in dowry. Yes, she would talk to Blue Pool tomorrow.

“Mama?” Blue was nearly squeezing the blood from Brock’s fingers with a death grip of fear. Her mother’s silence frightened her. Did she hate Brock? What did her silence mean? Suddenly Blue felt alone and frightened. If her mother would not support her in this marriage, Blue would have no hope to convince

her father. Blue couldn't go against her father. She adored the ground Ryan McGillinen walked on. If her Pa rejected her she would only have half a heart. If her mother and father both were united against Brock she would not marry him. Her parents were also her life.

Twiggy saw the fear in Blue's eyes. "Rest your heart my daughter. I will speak to your father later tonight. He must be made to accept this love is blessed by Tam Apo."

Blue released her hold on Brock and ran to her mother. She placed her head on Twiggy's lap as tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. "I love you, Mama."

Brock rose from the divan. Slowly he walked to Twiggy's chair. He bent over Blue's mother and gave Twiggy a gentle kiss on the cheek. "Thank you." Brock then lifted Blue by her waist to an upright position and ensconced her in his arms. "Come with me Blue. I'll leave for now and return in the morning to speak to your father."

Blue walked with Brock toward the hall, but glanced over her shoulder to her mother and smiled happily. Her lips moved silently. "Thank you. I love you." The two disappeared into the hall and walked toward the door.

Twiggy allowed several tears fall. She had held her emotions in check until the two were out of sight. *Where did the time go? When did her baby girl grow into a woman? Her baby girl would now be a man's wife. Oh Ryan, when did our baby grow up?*

On the porch Brock pulled Blue into his arms. "You're mine now and I am yours. You are Yin and I am Yang. You are my beginning and I am your ending. I swear to you on my life I will treasure you as long as I live. I've known from the first time I saw you that we were meant to be. I know I have a shaded reputation. I ask that you believe in my love. Please Blue, believe in me."

Blue stretched her arms to cup his face with her palms. "Dearest, I knew the first time I saw you we were meant to be. It's just as with my Pa and Mama. It doesn't matter to me about your past. We have our future." Blue was relieved and happy to know her mother would accept Brock into the family. She was certain

her mother would convince her father. *Oh how could Pa not like Brock anyway?*

"Oh Blue," Brock gulped and bent down to cover her mouth with soft feathery kisses. "I love you."

The two lovers were unaware of a pair of young eyes spying on them. Samantha McGillinen was hiding behind a large oak tree watching her sister and the tall blonde man. "Oh Ho! So this is the mysterious stranger you saw naked dancing. This is the man you want to marry. You brought him home and Pa isn't here. I wonder what Pa would think about all this big sister?"

"Samantha!" Lucy shouted from behind. "Whatcha doing behind that big old oak? You playing hide n seek?"

"Shhhh!" Samantha turned to face her younger sister and brother. "It's Blue's man. He's a courting on the porch."

"Huh?" Little Ryan quizzed scratching his forehead. "Blue's got a beau? Does Pa know?"

"No he doesn't you little runt, and don't you tell neither!" Samantha reprimanded. That was something she wanted to do. "Don't either of you tell anyone I was watching neither."

"Spying and tattling is bad. Mama said so," Lucy announced righteously.

"I wasn't spying or tattling," Samantha defended. When she turned around she watched the man mount his horse, bend down and give her sister another kiss. As she came out from behind the tree Brock was on his way toward the ranch gates.

Blue ran back to her mother and the two hugged and kissed. Blue thanked her mother over and over again for welcoming Brock into the family and not holding his reputation against him.

"I think I have more understanding than you can imagine when it comes to misconceptions and invalid beliefs," Twiggy assured her daughter while hugging her tightly. "Tonight we'll tell your Pa. He should know about this and tomorrow I want to have a long talk with your grandfather about this dowry."

Blue laid her head on her mother's shoulders and sighed, "It is a bit much isn't it?"

As mother and daughter talked, Lucy and Little Ryan ran to the kitchen for Cho Ling's special cookie and milk after school day

treat. Samantha quietly went upstairs into her sister's room. She pulled out the secreted diary and began to read the most recent entries including a special meeting today with this fairytale prince. This diary was one of the most interesting books Samantha ever wanted to read. It was more fun to read because it was a forbidden and secret book. When she finished the recent entries Samantha hugged the book and placed it back into the exact place it had been hidden. "Oh Blue, how romantic. I hope my husband sweeps me off my feet. I hope he and I can have the same love as Mama and Pa! I'm so jealous of you big sister."

Ryan was happy to come back home earlier than expected. The Town Council had agreed unanimously to approach this Brock Hampton and offer him the position of Federal Marshal. Ryan had to admit that even he was impressed with the stories he heard about the man. He liked the part about being quiet but confident. Ryan also liked the fact that Brock was as large and wide as himself, yet just as gentle. Tomorrow he would go to Geneva's Hope and meet his uncle, Mayor Brian Duffy and Joseph Crawford. They would then ask Brock to take the position. Yes, the Council had made a very good decision. He just hoped this Brock would take the job and that he truly was the right answer for Pine County. Cheater suddenly reared his head. A definite warning from the mustang that another horse, a mare was nearby. Ryan reined Cheater in and made a fast gallop to a copse of pine trees on a hill where he could watch the road. Ryan dismounted and calmed the stallion. It was a few minutes later he watched a tall broad stranger riding a Geneva's Hope mare. "Now who do you think that could be?" Ryan asked Cheater. "I'd stake a bet that it would be that Brock Hampton. He sure fits the description. I wonder what he's doing on this road? Well, I'll meet him tomorrow. Right now I want to get home to my Twiggy and my children. What do you say Cheater? Want to get home to that new mare we got from the range?"

Cheater nickered softly.

"I thought so."

When Ryan returned home Lucy and Little Ryan greeted him. Twiggy was upstairs in Blue's room. There was so much to discuss between them. They talked about Blue's future, what type of wedding she wanted, where did she think they would live. Would Brock consider moving into Geneva's Branch. Cho Ling and Lei Ling had prepared the meal for supper and Samantha was setting the dinner table. Ryan handed Lucy and Little Ryan licorice sticks he bought at their grandfather's mercantile while he was in town. They told their father about the school day.

When Cho Ling called the family to supper, Blue and Twiggy finally appeared together in the dining room.

"There's my pretty women," Ryan greeted. "The two of you look happier than two pigs in a mud puddle." Ryan pulled the chair out for Twiggy to be seated and squeezed her shoulder. "I missed you, love."

"Missed a pig?" Twiggy teased. "I guess that makes you a real porker."

"As long as you still love me, I'll be anything you like," Ryan teased back. "My you are in a happy mood. Something happen today?"

Samantha blurted out, "Blue brought her beau to meet Mama today. They're getting married."

Ryan's face turned to hard steel.

Twiggy inhaled a gulp of air and became rigid.

Blue wanted to either sink to the floor or dive across the table and choke her sister. She chose a verbal attack on Samantha. "Samantha McGillinen, just how would you know any such thing?"

Samantha became immediately defensive and responded without thinking, "I know you've been spying on him and then started meeting him. Why you even saw him naked!" She stuck out her tongue.

Blue turned crimson. She was so embarrassed. How would Samantha know that? Then it struck Blue like a bolt of lightning. Samantha had been reading her journal. Before she could say a word her father rose from the table and took Blue's hand.

“Come with me young lady. You have some explaining to do.” Ryan led her out of the dining room to the parlor. He gave a loud angry bellow to Cho Ling to hold supper.

Twiggy followed them into the parlor after she asked Lei Ling to keep the children in the dining room. She spoke to Samantha angrily. “When this is finished you will do some explaining to me Samantha McGillinen!”

Samantha was already regretting her outburst. If she didn’t get the first spanking of her life, she would be surprised. She sat back down in her chair.

“You’re gonna get it!” Lucy and Little Ryan chimed in taunt.

Twiggy just managed to enter the room when Ryan slammed the door to the parlor closed.

“Aurora Blue McGillinen, just what is this about viewing a naked man?” Ryan demanded. “What the Bloody Hell is going on here? What beau? How long have you been meeting this man? Who is he? Why wouldn’t you tell me about this?” Ryan’s bellows were thunderous and Blue started shaking.

This was the first time in her life she was actually afraid of her father. His eyes were wide and glassy with anger. His jaw was set tightly. It looked like every muscle in his body had turned to solid stone. The brilliant red flush of his skin made Blue even more terrified.

“I... I ah.... I ... well that is...,” Blue stuttered helplessly.

Twiggy placed her hand on Ryan’s arm. “Blue has been meeting him for some time now. They met by accident and just like us my love, it was love at first meeting.”

Twiggy’s touch and loving voice had an immediate softening affect on Ryan. It was just a brief respite for Blue because her mother raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware of your viewing his nakedness at any time. I believe that does require an explanation.”

Blue’s heart and mind were racing. Her knees were knocking together and she knew those legs of hers wouldn’t hold up much longer. She collapsed into the divan behind her. Bending over, Blue circled her legs around her knees to stop them from

knocking together. Samantha was going to get it for this, even if it took her a lifetime. Blue would even the score with her sister.

"We're waiting!" Ryan roared heatedly. He crossed his arms over his broad chest as he leaned against the fireplace.

"Please don't shout at me Pa," Blue begged in a fearfully quiet voice. "I will tell you. It isn't as bad as it sounds, really. I'm just so afraid of you right now."

Blue's statement cut Ryan to the quick. He didn't mean to terrify his daughter. That was far from the truth. He adored his children. His daughters were everything to him. He would have nursed them if he could. When they were born he was the happiest man in the world. His anger was lost immediately.

Twiggy felt badly as well. Quickly she ensconced herself next to Blue and pulled her daughter into her arms. "There now, Blue. Don't be afraid. You can tell us anything. You know that. Your Pa doesn't mean to frighten you." Twiggy glared up at her husband. "Do you?"

Ryan ran his fingers through his hair violently and then brushed them off on his denim pants legs. In a much softer tone he spoke, "I never want you to be afraid of me, baby. If I was angry it was because no one told me anything about anything. It was a shock, that's all. You should have told me. I guess that made me angry too. Something as important as a beau and you didn't tell me. I only mean to take care of you and protect you from..." Ryan stuttered trying to come up with the right word. "...from the wrong kind of men." He took his place on the other side of Blue and his long arm extended around his daughter and his wife. "Tell me now. Tell me everything and tell me why you were afraid to tell me about this beau of yours."

Blue swallowed hard and inched a little closer to her mother. "Pa, you sort of scare my suitors away."

"I do not!" Ryan denied emphatically. He looked to Twiggy for support and found none.

"Actually you do," Twiggy confirmed.

"Well, if I do that shows you they were nothing more than a bunch of lily livered cowards and definitely not deserving of my Aurora Blue!" Ryan chuckled.

Her father's answer made Twiggy giggle.

“I love Brock!” Blue declared boldly. “He’s not a coward, Pa.”

“Brock? Brock Hampton?” Ryan shouted. He jumped from the divan and ran his fingers through his thick hair once again.

“You know Brock Hampton?” Twiggy questioned her husband with surprise.

“Never met him, but I know of him.” Ryan began pacing the parlor. “It seems your beau made an impression with the Ely Town Council. They met today to ask him to be Federal Marshal.”

Blue twittered with joy, “That’s wonderful! I wasn’t sure he’d understand how much I love my home and wouldn’t want to leave. I would if he wanted. Now I know he’ll be staying here. Imagine me married to a Federal Marshal. Doesn’t that beat all, Mama?”

Twiggy hugged her daughter. “If it makes you happy, then I’m happy. That’s quite an honor for your beau to be offered such a position.”

“It’s crazy is what it is,” Ryan bellowed. “Blue, I can’t have you marry a man of the law. He would be gone all the time. He could be shot and killed. You might be in danger by people seeking revenge. No! I won’t have it.”

“He hasn’t taken the position yet,” Twiggy countered. “He hasn’t even been asked yet if I understand your Pa. You assume a lot if you think a city bred man like that would take such a position.”

“He’s brave and strong just like you Pa. He will become Marshal. I just know it,” Blue interjected. “This territory was even more dangerous when Grandpa came here and you were raised here.”

“It’s more dangerous now!” Ryan snapped thinking of the miners, Sikes, and Cages that had taken over. He was still worried now. It wasn’t cattle rustlers that were about Geneva’s lands. These were cold-blooded killers. These were men that had no regard for life or morality. These were men that destroyed for the pleasure of destruction. He feared for his family, his hands, and the Shoshone. It was even him that asked Judge James to give the town power to deputize a Federal Marshal. The same man who

would be his daughter's husband. *How in the Bloody Hell did this happen? When did this happen?* His head was spinning and wasn't certain what to do. "You're too young to get married, Blue."

Twiggy arched a brow. "Too young?"

"Mama was the same age when you married her," Blue argued.

"It's not the same," Ryan grumbled. He knew it was a weak argument.

"It is the same!" Blue said stubbornly. I love him just like Mama loved you and knew from the first."

Ryan rubbed his neck nervously. "I was asked by Ely Town Council to meet with your great uncle and grandfather to ask this beau of yours to be Marshal. I'll talk to him at Geneva's Hope tomorrow. I promise."

Blue smiled.

"Just talk," Ryan warned.

"Yes Pa," Blue beamed rising from the divan "Let's eat supper now."

"Not so fast young lady," Twiggy retorted pulling Blue back down to her seat. "You still haven't explained this seeing Brock naked yet."

"Oh that!"

"Yes that," Ryan growled crossing his broad arms over his chest. "Has this future husband comprised you?"

"No Pa," Blue quickly responded. "Brock has been an absolute gentleman at all times."

"You know very well he has a reputation as a randy, rake, rogue, or whatever you call men that use women," Ryan chided. "I'm asking you to tell me the truth, baby. Did he touch you in the wrong way?"

"You have to believe me. Brock didn't do anything like that," Blue replied calmly. "The only thing we did was snuggling. For a man of his reputation, he didn't even know how to snuggle. I had to show him."

"That's because a rake doesn't snuggle, baby," Twiggy explained. "They only know how to trick a woman into sacrificing her most precious gift. Just like I explained. Did he do that?"

“No, Mama. He didn’t touch me like that. He loves me. We’re special. He said so and I know it.”

“If he did touch you he would be a gelded Marshal,” Ryan grumped.

“He didn’t!” Blue shouted in defense.

Then how did you see him naked?” Twiggy pursued.

“I knew he was watching me. I decided to watch him. I would pretend I was headed home and then sneak back and watch him. He did a most peculiar dance and he was naked when he did it. I knew I shouldn’t have looked, but Mama he danced so...so... gracefully.”

Twiggy’s reproving glance made Blue feel like a naughty five-year-old girl caught in a cookie jar. That look was more than enough punishment. It was her mother’s evil eye of guilt. Even a switch wouldn’t hurt as bad or as long.

“Just how long and where was he watching you?” Ryan asked nervously. Maybe the lands between Geneva’s Hope and Geneva’s Branch weren’t so safe for his family after all.

“When I was riding Ginger and doing my dance between Geneva’s Hope and Geneva’s Branch, Ginger let me know someone was watching. I looked up and saw him. He tried to hide, but I knew he was there. And he returned everyday for almost two weeks before we snuggled.”

“I think we can discuss this more a little later,” Twiggy said feeling a little better now that this nakedness was settled. “Cho Ling must be furious that we’ve allowed supper to wait this long and I have Samantha to discipline. How on earth did she know about you seeing Brock in the all together? She was in school when you went out to ride each day.”

“I think she’s been reading my secret journal, Mama.”

“You wrote all about this in your journal?” Ryan questioned blushing from the bottom of his feet to the silver sprinkled sandy brown hair on his head.

“Yes. I wanted to write down everything so I would remember, just in case he would only be a part of my life for a short time. I knew who he was when I spotted Duster. The only stranger I know that would be riding a Geneva’s Hope horse would be Bennett’s friend. I know all about this Brock. Jared told me.”

"Let's eat supper," Ryan restated his wife's words. "I'll talk to the man tomorrow and make my own determination. We'll discuss this again when I return home. In the meantime I think Samantha should be sent to bed right after supper and not allowed to read her favorite dime novels for a week. What do you think my love?"

"I think that punishment is perfect for the crime," Twiggy agreed rising to take her husband's arm. "I also suggest that you find a new and more secret hiding place for your journal, Blue."

"Yes, Mama," Blue answered walking toward the dining room. "Can I soak Samantha's pantaloons in vegetable oil now? Or maybe dump her favorite dime novel in a wash bucket?"

"Don't you dare young lady! You may be old enough to wed, but you're still young enough for me to take over my knees for a sound thrashing," Twiggy warned. "You leave Samantha Alyson McGillinen to me."

"And your Pa," Ryan added.

Blue looked over her shoulder and grinned broadly.

"Mama, Pa, I will obey you, but you've never laid a hand on us children yet. I somehow don't feel threatened by it. Your punishments have always been far worse."

"Really?" Ryan questioned.

"Really! A guilty conscience is a lot worse than a quick smack." Blue winked and left the room.

Twiggy and Ryan held on to each other as they watched Blue leave the parlor.

Twiggy's eyes started to fill.

Ryan's eyes misted while taking his thumb and gently wiping the tears from Twiggy's eyes.

"When did she grow up?" Ryan sighed. "I still remember packing moss in her cradleboard."

"I know," Twiggy choked.

Hugging Twiggy tightly Ryan changed the subject. "What are we going to do with Samantha?"

Twiggy grinned. "You go back to the dining room and start supper. I'll go to Sam's room and retrieve all her new dime novels. She'll be without them for a week."



“That will really hurt her,” Ryan remarked giving Twiggy a long hug and gentle kiss before releasing her.

“I know.” Twiggy giggled a little. It was Ryan that had stated the punishment. He was so bemused with the news of Blue he couldn’t think straight.

*Geneva's Force*



## *Chapter 15*

Brock was concentrating about paying this dowry for Blue and his upcoming nuptials. He appreciated that Duster found her own way home. It was almost dusk when he returned to Geneva's Hope. He waved in greeting to Chin Su who was walking toward him.

"Is everything settled?" Chin Su queried Brock while a ranch hand took Duster's reins.

Brock removed himself gracefully from the saddle and replied. "Everything is as it should be. I know this woman is my Ch'i and I will be happy. I met her mother today and her grandfather."

"This is good news," Chin Su stated walking next to Brock. "I too have come to realize it is this place and time that will return my sister to me. My journey has finally come to an end. We have both found our home and destiny here."

"I know Blue is my destiny. I'm going to need some help from my Uncle and some of the Geneva ranch hands though."

"Why is this?"

"It seems grandfather is a Shoshone high esteemed shaman and is demanding the same dowry for Blue that her father paid for his daughter. It's a lot of cattle, horseflesh, sheep, and blankets. Not that the pittance would encumber me. No it is something else he said that troubles me. I'm hoping you can help me with it."

"I am with you to walk the roads together. You know this."

"He said Blue's father gave more than the physical dowry. I too must pay the dowry, but more importantly provide the same

and equal dower. This includes something more than physical. I'm afraid currently I'm at a loss."

"I'm certain you will find the answer soon enough."

"I wish I could think better," Brock smiled. "I can't stop thinking about Blue. She's so special. Even I can't believe I'm going to be married to a woman I've only met recently."

"Yet you know it is the right path?" Cho Ling questioned.

"There is no doubt on that my master."

"Brock!" Bennett called out to his friend from the porch.

"We were beginning to worry for you. You've never been this late from your daily ride."

Brock and Cho Ling walked immediately to Bennett.

Uncharacteristically Brock hugged his friend for several minutes.

"What's this" Bennett queried curiously.

"You aren't the only one about to participate in wedded bliss," Brock explained not even attempting to cover his wide smile. "I've met my mate. She is Yin to my Yang. I've proposed and she has accepted. I've met her mother and grandfather. Tomorrow I will meet with her father."

Bennett's eyebrow arched twitching in suspicion. "You? Married? Is this some kind of prank?"

Brock lost his smile. "No, this is not a prank. I'm completely serious. I met this angel by accident and I just know that we are destined to share our life together."

Bennett backed off his surprise and responded, "Sorry old chap, but you and marriage? Well it is a surprise. I'm happy for you. Do I know her? What's her name?"

"There is probability you know her, her name is Blue."

Bennett turned ashen white. He choked out, "Blue?"

Brock nodded. "You know her?"

Bennett fought to gain his composure. He nodded in the affirmative. Finally he released his breath to say, "Yes I know her. She's my cousin. My Uncle Ryan's oldest daughter Aurora Blue."

Brock started laughing, "She sure doesn't favor your brother Jared like you said she did. She's absolutely beautiful."

"Stop that laughing this instant," Bennett snarled regaining his composure. "You're the one who assumed she looked like Jared. If you paid attention you would understand that Jared and

my sisters favor our Mamman. My other siblings favor my Papa. My mother is beautiful.”

“She certainly is,” Brock agreed quickly. “My Blue is even more beautiful than your Mamman even if it is a close race. By the way, if your cousin is named Blue, why did you call her Aurora all the time.”

“Blue is her family and pet name,” Bennett explained in a strained voice. *How could this be happening? How could this lustful selfish rake meet his cousin? To make matters worse, what would happen to his friend when his Uncle Ryan found out Bennett’s rake friend courted his daughter? This was a fine mess. Why did he ever bring Brock out here?* “Our family refers to Blue by her given name, Aurora, when spoken around outsiders.”

“Soon I won’t be an outsider. Blue will be my wife. Did you ever think this could happen? I’ll be family!” Brock bragged happily.

Brock didn’t see the fist coming and was on his knees a moment later.

“What the Bloody Hell is that all about?” Brock roared wiping the trickle of blood that ran down his cracked lip.

“How dare you use my cousin? You think she is like your other trollop play toys? She isn’t! Blue is a lady born and bred. An innocent lady!” Bennett snarled with intensity Brock had never seen before in his friend. “If you think you can use her like your other doxies, well, you had better think again. You will have our entire family to deal with. I suggest you leave immediately. You’re not welcome here anymore!” Bennett was livid. Blue was family. He wouldn’t let anyone hurt his family, not even his best friend. As far as he was concerned, Brock had overstepped the boundary of friendship.

Chin Su placed his small hand on Bennett’s shoulder. “It is not what you believe little one.”

Bennett bowed his head to look into the eyes of the small Chinese master.

“You do not see beyond your experience,” Chin Su chided. “The whole in Brock’s Ch’i has been filled. He no longer hides his pain in the lust of man. This woman, Blue is his destiny. Your

Brock is no longer empty. Your Brock is full and complete. Believe this and bless his happiness.”

“You believe this and know this to be true Master Chin?” Bennett questioned earnestly. “My Brock is not using my cousin for lust?”

“I too have seen how little tiger has used his man’s lust to cover the hole in his Ch’i. I have also seen the change in him these past weeks. I tell you this woman, your cousin, is our destiny. She is the filling of Brock’s emptiness and will lead me to the end of my journey.”

“Is this really true?” Bennett turned and asked his friend Brock.

Dabbing his bleeding lip Brock nodded. “It is true. I understand why you think I would take advantage of Blue’s innocence because of my past indiscretion. You must believe what I feel and do now is true love. Blue is my heart. I intend to marry her. This is why I came to you for help. I had no idea she was your cousin,” Brock suddenly started laughing. “By the way, she is no where near as ugly as you made her out to be.”

Bennett rolled his eyes and with a deep sigh offered his hand to help his friend back up to his feet. “Alright, I’ll help. What do you need other than the entire United States Army to protect you from Uncle Ryan when he finds out you are courting his daughter?”

“Actually I need to wire my uncle in San Francisco. It seems I am going to need his help to arrange for the dowry asked for by Blue’s grandfather.”

“Why would Joseph Crawford ask you for a dowry?” Bennett queried. This was confusing.

“Who is Joseph Crawford? Do you mean to tell me the mercantile owner we met is Blue’s grandfather.”

“Joseph Crawford is Blue’s grandfather. Whom are you talking about?”

“Blue Pool is Blue’s grandfather. He even said Blue was his namesake. Although I have to say Blue’s mother doesn’t look Indian at all. Your Uncle Ryan isn’t Indian is he? Hey, what’s going on here?”

Bennett chuckled. “Blue Pool raised Aurora Blue’s mother after she was taken captive by the Indians. He is Blue’s adoptive grandfather. We’ve got quite a family history to share with you. Tell me, what is this dowry?”

Brock told Bennett about the cattle, horses, sheep, seeds, and blankets. Brock shared his idea to give all that was asked for to Blue’s people. Money was no object for the price of his heart. It was that same price in equality beyond the material purchases that bothered Brock. He wasn’t certain what that meant or what he was expected to do. It would have to be one step at a time. Bennett took him to his father, Braden. In the Geneva Hope office was a telegraph that had been installed several years ago so it would be easier to stay in touch with the now extended family and fortunes.

Braden was sitting in his office going over the ledgers with Garrett and Jared when Bennett walked in with Brock.

“Papa, Brock needs to use our telegraph. He needs to send an urgent wire to his uncle in San Francisco.”

A worried frown covered Braden’s face. “Is everything alright? Is there any trouble I should know about?”

“A whole lot of trouble, Papa.”

“My God, what is it?”

“Brock is getting married,” Bennett announced.

Braden sank onto his chair with surprise and relief. “So sudden? Is it someone we know?”

“Indeed,” Brock answered cheerfully. “I have asked your niece Aurora Blue to be my wife and she has accepted.”

Garrett turned pale.

Jared turned purple and lunged for Brock’s face with a balled fist ready to connect to his chin.

Brock simply sidestepped Jared’s lunge and watched the giant go sailing across the room to land with a thud on the floor.

Jared’s eyes were level to the soft kid boots of his mother as she entered through the doorway.

“What the devil?” Kerry exclaimed walking gingerly around her son. “Jared, is there something you’re looking for on that floor?”

“Pride?” Jared grumbled. He slowly rolled over to sit on the carpet and stared at his new adversary.

“We just received surprising news my love,” Braden explained arching a brow. His eyes twinkled with merriment at the thought of Ryan having to deal with this rakish friend of Bennett’s. “Our son Jared is a little over exuberant at the news.”

Kerry walked immediately to Brock’s side and her hands reached up to his face. “It’s obviously happy news. I can tell that.”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Braden contradicted.

“Tell me your news Brock,” Kerry encouraged.

Brock repeated his happy words.

Kerry swayed on her knees and reached for a chair. She sat down and the color left her face.

Brock furrowed his brow. “I don’t understand this family’s reaction to this news. I thought you would all be happy for me and Blue.”

Kerry choked out a shallow, “Do you really love her? My brother Ryan wouldn’t be the easiest person to deal with should your intentions be less than honorable.”

“Lady Wessex,” Brock coughed. “My intentions are completely honorable. I have never felt this way toward a woman. Blue is special. She is my soul. I love her with all that I am and will be.”

“And what is it exactly that you will be?” Braden queried. Here was the heart of it. Brock was neither titled nor employed. As far as Braden knew, this young man never had any interest in his future. He knew rakes like Brock used women for one purpose only. He didn’t condemn Brock for what he was, but he was concerned for his niece’s future.

“I beg your pardon?” Brock asked in surprise.

“I think Papa wants to know just how are you planning to set up a future. Just how will you take care of Blue and provide for a family?” Bennett interjected.

“That is precisely what I mean,” Braden responded showing his deep pride for his son’s astuteness.

“You’re marrying Julia. I don’t recall this question being brought up,” Brock defended and he didn’t even understand why he felt he needed to do it.

“Bennett has already started working on the Ely Times with Julia’s father. He is purchasing land near Ely and having a home built there. Bennett also has taken care of his own investments for some time and has amassed a sizable sum as a nest egg!” Kerry proclaimed. “As far as we can see, you have not taken any interest in any employment, let your uncle handle all the business affairs, and you feed only lustful needs.”

“So you see, your news is hardly comforting to our family,” Braden reinforced. “Have you thought of where you are going to live and how you are going to take care of a family? Families do happen you know. That is what part of marriage is about, the responsibility of parenting.”

“We wouldn’t have created five wonderful sons and two beautiful daughters if we hadn’t thought about their care, how to raise them, and their futures,” Kerry added.

“It was wonderful to create them,” Braden cut in. “It is even more wonderful to watch them grow with your guidance.”

“It seems you all think I haven’t thought about these things and that I would hurt Blue just to achieve manly lusts?”

“It had crossed my mind,” Jared grunted from his squatted position on the floor.

Brock reached across to Jared and pulled him up. “I understand your qualms. You’ve also made me realize that simply loving Blue isn’t enough. You must understand that between Blue and me is a strong force. We were meant to be together. I will contemplate your concerns. They are valid concerns. I will move heaven and earth to have my Blue. That includes her family. Which is the reason I have come here tonight. I need your help.”

“And that would be?” Braden queried. He had to admit he liked Brock and his spirit.

“Brock has already been to see Blue Pool,” Bennett answered for his friend. “Blue Pool has decreed that Brock must pay the same dowry Ryan paid for Oak Twig.”

“What?” Kerry gasped. “How and why in the world would Blue Pool do that knowing Brock as we all do. He knows Brock has no ranch, cattle, sheep, blankets, seeds, or horses.”

“Precisely why he would demand it,” Braden smirked. “He understands the need for Brock to prove his intentions. Money is just money. Turning money into the needs of mankind is the trick.”

“The heiresses of Geneva understand Mother Earth. You must also my friend,” Bennett stated firmly. “If you don’t understand these things, then Blue would never be happy as your wife, no matter how strong the force. So what is your plan? How can we help you?”

“I need to borrow your telegraph. The money I have will be turned into all the material requested by Blue Pool. As for the other, I will think on these things and I will find the answer,” Brock replied.

Chin Su had been quiet until this point. He added his statement in defense of his student and friend. “My companion for these past decades has never had a need to learn of these ways you speak of. We have both determined this visit to your land is the beginning of our lives and the end of our journey. Before there was little need to do these things you speak of until this time in our destiny. All answers to concerns will fall neatly into place by our destined arrival. You will see.”

“Thank you Chin,” Brock acknowledged gratefully. “Now may I use your wire?”

“Of course,” Braden offered rising and walking toward the door. “It is kept in the library. I’ll show you. Who are you going to wire?”

“My Uncle,” Brock answered walking with Braden. “My Uncle has many friends in the San Francisco Gentleman’s Clubs. There are ranchers, sea captains, businessman, and merchants. You name them, my Uncle is their friend. I’ll have the dower here by rail in a week or two.”

“You’re not concerned that your uncle may or may not help you? You believe his friends would help you?”

“Money buys everything, but believe it or not, they would most likely help me because of my reputation,” Brock related almost mischievously.

Braden said nothing but arched a brow.

Brock snickered. “Most of those men know me to achieve everything I set out to do, and most of the men hope to find me off the marriage market to leave room for them. It seems women seem to forget they are around when I am.”

Braden allowed a small grin. “I’m certain many men will be glad to see you shackled and many women will be sobbing with broken hearts.” He opened the door and showed Brock the telegraph. “Do you need any help with the code?”

“No thank you,” Brock answered. “That is one of the few trades I have learned over the years. Of course, I’ve still mastered none.”

Braden put his hand on Brock’s shoulder. “Good Luck old man. I do wish you well. I of course wish my niece better.”

“Your niece will be treated like a queen. You have my word.”

“I believe you. I can only hope you survive her father. I nearly didn’t.”

Brock looked up at Braden quizzically. “Sir?”

“I’ll tell you about Ryan McGillinen and my Kerry McGillinen. Sometime, not now.” With those words Braden left the room and closed the door for Brock to send his wire in privacy.

*Geneva's Force*



## *Chapter 16*

Sikes eyes continually panned Geneva's Hope barns in the soft light of dawn. Water drips cascaded his eyeglass. He hadn't planned on the brief morning rain shower.

Sheriff Cage didn't know what Sikes had planned. When the deed was done he would let Cage know what a great accomplishment he had perpetrated. The imbecile Chuck Mead had snuck in and planted the kerosene. Sikes watched from a covered hill just outside the ranch perimeter as Earl came for a visit pretending to meet his cousin Max who was a ranch hand at Geneva's Hope. Earl was stealthily pouring the kerosene around the stables and barns. In full daylight he would walk to the ranch house and call for Max. The 20' fuse cord Earl lit would ignite the kerosene while he was with his cousin. No one be able to blame Earl. Or so Sikes thought. Everything was going as planned. Everything except that damned rain this morning. It was all right though. Sikes wanted damage, not complete destruction. After all, when Cage took over the Ely area, he wanted to reside in Geneva's Hope as the new land baron. The purpose of this excursion was to

kill that blonde giant. This was pure revenge for his broken hand. He would never again be the fast draw lawman. His fingers were still bandaged and the pain was great, but he could still aim and shoot a rifle. *Brock Hampton will die today.*

The early morning light filtered through the clouds. Earl would be meeting Max for breakfast soon. Sikes saw him enter the barn called the garage. To Sikes surprise, one of the Wessex boys, the one called Garrett came out from the ranch house and walked straightway to the garage. Sikes had no idea that Garrett had been sneaking off to his horseless carriage every morning before beginning his punishment chore of mucking stalls in the stables.

“Tarnation!” Sikes exclaimed. This was not a time for Earl to get caught spilling the kerosene. His eyes focused on the garage through the eyeglass. Minutes passed and no one came out of the garage. He heard barking and saw Bennett’s wolf dog run into the garage with her two pups. There was snarling, barking, and then a yelp. A few minutes later Sikes breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Earl walk out of the garage and head toward the bunkhouse. It was a shame that Garrett had to get hurt, but he was a part of that group at Joe Crawford’s Mercantile. He deserved it. Sikes breathed in relief that his plan was still intact and working.

Outside the main barn, Earl made a roll and lit the cigarette. He casually tossed the match over to where the kerosene had been spilled. He missed. Cursing himself, Earl was about to light another match when he cousin Max called him.

“You done pissin yet? Vittles is on.”

Earl responded to Max and decided it would be best to wait a little before he tried igniting the kerosene once more. If he stayed for breakfast and then left after eating, he would be less likely to be associated with the fire. He had tied Garrett and that wolf dog up. Those two wouldn’t be setting off any alarms any time soon.

Garrett woke up to a friendly wolf pup licking his face. His hands and feet were bound. His mouth was gagged. He looked over to see Bennett’s wolf dog, unconscious. Her paws and mouth were bound. The other pup, Muffin, was licking her mother. Garrett shook his head and managed to get to a sitting position. He

had to get out of here somehow. Why he was bushwhacked and who had done it was a mystery. Something was not right, but he didn't know what. Then he smelled the kerosene and saw the can on the dirt garage floor. Fire! This creep was going to burn the garage and barns. Garrett had to get out somehow. He had to warn everyone. Slowly and carefully he began to inch toward his tool table. If he could reach his tools, he would get something to cut his ropes.

Brock woke to the morning light feeling wonderful. His every thought lately was of his Blue and being together with her. He thought of making love to her, but he thought more about sharing his life with her. Brock thought of the children they would create and how they would raise them to make a difference in the world. Braden had been wrong in his thinking on that point. Brock had thought deeply and clearly about his union and procreation with Blue. He stretched pulling every muscle taut and then began his exercise program he practiced religiously every morning.

Kerry had risen early and was in the kitchen with Mrs. Barber, discussing planned social functions and dinners surrounding Bennett's and now Brock's planned nuptials.

Jared arrived during this early morning discussion and began his chores. He was so happy this would be the last week of punishment. Jared was anxious to be out and about on the land once more.

Braden reached for his Kerry to find an empty bed. He hated it when he was amorous and Kerry was not in close reach. Rising from the bed he donned his trousers, boots, and shirt. A low curse fell from his mouth as he headed down the hallway in search of his Kerry. It wasn't beyond his capability to find his wife and carry her back to bed as he had done many times before. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd still never have enough of her. Braden stepped off the stair landing and headed for the kitchen when he smelled the smoke. Turning quickly he ran to the front door and opened it. He saw the smoke, flames, and ranch hands

running toward the windmill pump. He heard the clamor from the hands, "Fire! Buckets! Someone get them hoses Garrett rigged up!" Braden didn't hesitate. He ran toward the windmill pump and water tower. Soon he was pulling down the hoses Garrett had set up in case of such an emergency. The windmill would bring up water from the well as fast as the men drained to fight the fires. Braden looked around. There were fires everywhere, the bunkhouse, barns, stables, and even Garrett's garage.

Braden failed to close the door properly when he ran out seeing the smoke billowing and flames licking at the stone and wood structures on Geneva's Hope. Soon the odors permeated their way towards the kitchen.

"Mrs. Barber, did you leave something on the stove?" Kerry asked turning to look through the door towards the kitchen.

"Jared is supposed to be watching," Mrs. Barber sighed placing her quill, ink, and paper on the table in the small dining room. "I'd better check."

"My goodness, it smells strong," Kerry added rising to join their cook. "I may add another week to Jared's punishment for being so careless."

"He'll feel the sharp side of my tongue for certain," Mrs. Barber threatened angrily. "He'll be cleaning those burnt pots for a full day or two."

Mrs. Barber charged into the kitchen and found Jared bending over the stove and lifting both the teakettle and coffee pot. He seemed to be staring in bewilderment at the two items in his hand.

"Jared? What are you burning?" Mrs. Barber demanded walking with a powerful and direct gait towards her young assistant.

"Huh?" Jared looked up to Mrs. Barber rushing toward him. "Nothing is burning here. I smelled something and checked right away. Where is that smell coming from?"

Kerry lifted her head and inhaled deeply. She walked to the back door near the stove in the kitchen and opened it. "My God!" she shrieked in horror. "The barns and bunkhouse are on fire!" Kerry stood stiffly at the doorframe. Unbelief and shock dazed her for the second or two it took for Mrs. Barber to look

over her shoulder and Jared to see the smoke haze coming from the bunkhouse.

Jared pushed his mother out of the way and began a run toward the bunkhouse. He took a moment to yell back to his mother, "Stay in the house Mama, get the boys up and send them down to help."

Kerry awoke from her daze in complete control. "Mrs. Barber. Please wake up the boys and send them to help with putting out the fire. Please wake Braden and let him know what's going on. I'll be with Jared."

"Be careful your ladyship," Mrs. Barber replied in a strained and worried voice. She ran toward the back stairs to wake the Wessex boys and Lord Wessex. Mrs. Barber went to Bennett's room first and pounded on the door. "Wake up Master Bennett!" she screamed almost hysterically.

Bennett jumped from bed immediately. He was concerned by the frantic tone Mrs. Barber voice had. It was definitely a panicked voice. He grabbed his pants literally jumping into them. Buttoning his fly he opened the door. He was surprised with Mrs. Barber's frantic pale face. Lines of worry and fear were etched into her middle-aged face. It was then Bennett smelled smoke. "Fire?" he asked without needing an answer. "I'll wake my brothers. You wake Little Rain and get my sisters with her. Then wake Papa and Mamman. My brothers and I will start fighting the blaze."

"Aye Master Bennett," Mrs. Barber nodded nervously. "Your Mamman is already outside with Jared. I was supposed to get you and your brothers."

"You got us, now get Papa and Little Rain. My sisters should be taken to a safe place," Bennett ordered reaching for his boots. "Bloody Hell, fire! How did this happen?" he mumbled angrily. He woke Anthony and Little Braden, but he couldn't find Garrett anywhere. He knew Jared was outside already, so he assumed Garrett might be also.

Mrs. Barber ran down the hallway toward his lordship's bedroom and ran smack into a wall. It wasn't really a wall. It was Brock.

Brock had started down the hall when he smelled smoke and was walking a bit faster when he literally ran into Mrs. Barber. He noticed her pale complexion and worried face. As calmly as he could he asked, "Is the house on fire?"

Mrs. Barber shook her head violently in the 'no' motion. "It's the barns and out buildings."

"I'll go to help," Brock said without thinking. He released her shoulders and headed toward Chin Su's door. As his hand went to knock, the door opened.

Chin Su opened the door already dressed. "Wood is burning. There is a fire."

"Yes, come with me."

The two men ran down the stairs and outside. Immediately Chin Su and Brock were in the middle of many ranch hands pulling livestock from the barns.

"Dammit!" Sikes cursed loudly from his perch on the hill overlooking the ranch. He had been waiting for Brock to show up and now he was moving too fast and in the middle of two many people including Earl. He would be patient. When things calmed down he would get his chance. *Revenge is worth the wait.* Slowly he placed the rifle back into the cradle of his arms and waited.

"Pa?"

"I see it baby girl," Ryan replied knowing the question before it was asked. His horse Cheater, a wild mustang, was already acting skittish for the smoke scent.

"I think it's..."

"It is, Baby Girl," Ryan responded. He nudged his knees into Cheater. That was their sign to run fast. Cheater knew that nudge meant he would have a free head to run. "Let's get going. I'm sure they will need our help. God only knows what started the fire. I pray your mother, sisters, and brother will be safe. Maybe you should go back and warn them."

"No Pa," Blue countered. "Brock is there. I want to make sure everyone is fine including my future husband." Blue stroked Ginger's withers. Ginger knew she was allowed to open up to a full run and this horseflesh hated to have any other horse beat her

including a fine stallion mustang specimen like Cheater. In moments, Ginger was ahead of Cheater.

Both frantic riders reined up quickly when five Shoshone warriors from Bright Moon's camp appeared from behind a copse of trees.

"Soft Moccasin," Ryan addressed holding his panting mustang in check. "Do you know what's happening at Geneva's Hope?"

"No. The watch warriors sent Little Hoop to the camp telling us of the smoke scent from Geneva's Hope land. We gathered twelve or more warriors to ride. Six would go to Geneva's Branch and the other six to Geneva's Hope. We met six watch warriors from Eye of Hawk and together the people went to Geneva's Hope. We feared for your family's safety and were riding to you," Soft Moccasin answered quickly.

"Why would you feel our family was in danger?" Blue asked curiously. Fires did happen. There had been rain this morning. Perhaps a lightning bolt had struck a barn.

"The smoke smells of kerosene," Circle Eye replied. "This fire was made from man."

"I appreciate you coming for my family," Ryan replied with relief. "I smelled the kerosene myself. I worried for my family and the Wessex family. Circle Eye, Smeared Nose, and Quiet Foot will go to Geneva's Hope with Blue and me. I'd like it if you and the rest went off to protect my Twiggy and children, Soft Moccasin."

"We'll see you soon brother," Soft Moccasin responded. Speaking in Shoshone he ordered the four other warriors to follow him.

Ryan, Blue, and Shoshone warriors were once again riding hard toward Geneva's Hope. Worry and fear marked the faces of the travelers. Troubled thoughts of terror raced through their minds as they raced toward the ranch.

Braden's face was blackened with smoke. He had just led Stockings out of the barn and was trying to calm him. It was difficult for his frightened horse to even get its owner's scent. Braden smelled like smoke and was covered with ash and cinders.

He looked to see his Kerry. Her clothes were blackened like his from the smoke and she looked like she had been cleaning the hearth. Her face and hair were covered with soot. God, she still looked beautiful to him. Kerry was applying a bandage to a burn on the arm of a ranch hand. Braden looked around and saw his sons working hard and side by side with the hands putting out errant flames. One of his boys was missing. Braden called to Bennett, "Where's Garrett?"

The fire was getting under control. The morning rain had been a blessing. The flames would have easily spread across to the ranch house if not for the fact the flames never became too powerful because of the dampened wood.

Bennett yelled back to his father, "I don't know. He wasn't in his room when I woke up the boys."

"I saw him run to the garage at first light," Gil snickered. "The rascal always does first thing in the morning."

"The garage is still burning," Braden cried out worriedly. He was immediately concerned that something might have happened.

"I'll go check," Brock offered. He was closest to the garage and knew exactly where to look for Garrett. In a few short strides, Brock was in the garage. He hadn't expected the building to be this smoky. He could barely see a thing and bent lower to get fresher air. Nearly blinded by the heavy smoke, Brock walked toward the horseless carriage. He tripped and fell on something. The something moaned. It was Garrett. Brock knelt down and found Garrett bound and gagged. If Brock had suspected foul play, he was convinced of it now. Quickly Brock removed the gag and through the half-conscious boy over his shoulder and walked out of the garage. On his way out he bumped something else that gave a whimper and two figures moved in the shadows whining softly.

Braden watched as the figures emerged from the garage. "Bloody Hell," Braden cursed running toward the limp figure on Brock's back.

Kerry saw Garrett's body at the same time. She was closer and got to Brock first. "Garrett? Garrett? Dear God, Garrett?" As Brock laid Garrett down to untie his bounds. Kerry was

already stroking her son's face. She felt his breath on her hand and released a gasp of relief. Worry covered her face once more when she felt a large knot crusted with blood on the back of her son's head. "Who did this?" Kerry asked her semiconscious son. She choked back her tears. Garrett started coughing and coming awake in his mother's arms.

With all the noise they hadn't heard the whining of the wolf pups until now. The pups began to howl in fervor.

Christina broke free from Little Rain's hand and ran toward the pup's howling. Christina's light weight was a bit inhibited by the heavy mud. "Muffin? Biscuit?"

Braden closed the gap between his fallen son and wife when he saw his daughter running toward the garage. "Christina! Christina go back to Little Rain immediately," Braden roared with anger and fear. This was a dangerous place for his precious daughter. He was relieved to see Brock intercept her.

Brock scooped her up before her little legs took her to the very smoky garage. "Whoa there, Christina. That's a dangerous place to go. You won't like it in there."

"You don't understand," Christina wailed. "Misty, Bennett's wolf dog is missing and I hear her pups. My pups! Well actually Ashley's and mine. They must be trapped in the garage. You've got to let me save them!"

"You stay here," Brock ordered as he put her down. "I'll save them for you princess. After all, what are knights in shining armor for?"

Christina gave Brock an arched eyebrow. "Knights in shining armor my patoot!"

"Ah, I'm burned to the quick. But never fear my lady. I shall rescue your pet."

Braden hurried through the heavy mud caused by the thousands of gallons being poured over all the buildings as the hands fought the fire. His boots felt like lead as the muck pulled him deep with each step. He pulled Christina into his arms. They both watched Brock return to the garage. Brock smiled and went back into the smoky building once more. This time there was more smoke. He fell to his knees and crawled to see. The yipping and howling of pups was getting louder. He knew he was heading

in the right direction. Brock lowered his head more. His lungs were beginning to burn from the smoke. At last he found the bound dog struggling for freedom. Her pups were yipping at her. It was to Brock's mind the pups were trying to free their mother from her bonds and rescue her. Brock knew that an animal this frightened would be dangerous. He decided to keep the dog in her bindings and left the cloth wrapped around her mouth. He hoisted the dog on to his back and began the slow crawl out of the garage. The pups followed nipping at his heels. He wasn't certain if the pups realized he was helping their mother or nipping at him because the pups thought he was hurting their mother. The dirt floor of the garage was as a mire and difficult to crawl upon. Brock's massive body weighed down more by the wolf dog on his back made traversing the muck even harder. Brock's lungs were filled with smoke and burning. He needed fresh air and soon. Concentrating with all his Ch'i, Brock finally saw the light of day through the open door. With the last of air in his lungs and energy, Brock crawled out the door. The pups following close behind them.

Many eyes had been watching the garage as Brock came out once more. This time he was on his knees and coughing violently. Brock was trying to get fresh air in his lungs.

Chin Su was the first to assist Brock. He placed a dampened cloth over Brock's nose and mouth ordering him to breathe deeply. He instructed Brock to breathe deeply and then cough vigorously to clear his lungs. Chin Su took a knife sheathed in his belt and released the bound dog.

Misty bounded quickly and after checking and licking her pups, she walked to the coughing giant and licked Brock's blackened face and hair. It was a thank you.

Christina was squirming in her father's arms. She wanted to go to Misty and her pups. She also wanted to thank her brave knight.

Sikes was tired of waiting and thought this would be the clearest shot he would have at the giant. He started to take aim when he noticed a cloud of dust heading toward Geneva's Hope. He knew they were horses and he knew it would be more ranch

hands that were on the range, or they were Shoshone from Eye of Hawks people. It could have been both. It was now or never. He took aim once more. His fingers were stiff and sore but he bit his lip and aimed his rifle. The giant stood and he had a good target. Sikes squeezed the trigger.

Braden stood by Garrett and Kerry. He was once again reprimanding Christina from squirming in his arms when they heard the crack of rifle shot. Christina suddenly went rigid in her father's arms and then sagged into a lifeless lump. Something warm splattered Braden's face. It was blood. Braden struggled to hold the suddenly limp girl in his arms. He focused on his daughter and saw blood oozing from her arm. A look of panic and alarm filled his face.

Kerry looked up and saw her daughter slump in Braden's arm. Kerry saw the blood and torn flesh of her daughter's arm.

"My God, she's been shot!" Braden's face screamed out a message of terror and Kerry's heart stopped beating for a moment. She began to rise from Garrett's side when two more rifle shots were heard.

In the next breath Brock felt a stinging warmth by his head. The surprise put instinct into action. Blackness was beginning to take over his body when his back was hit by a jolt that felt as if a ranch hand had just pushed a red-hot branding iron through his shoulder. His body slumped into the mud.

Kerry looked up to where she believed the shot sounds had come from. She saw a flash of light and knew it was a rifle reflecting the sun. Anger and rage filled her thinking. Kerry grabbed the colt from Gar's holster and began shooting toward the flash of light she had seen. "You bloody bastard!" Kerry shouted. "You'll hang for this." Without thinking clearly, Kerry spent the six bullets in the colt shooting at the specter that had attacked her son, shot her daughter, and wounded a guest. Kerry was about to order the ranch hands to get that murdering phantom when Shoshone warriors surrounded her.

Little Bear removed the emptied gun from Kerry's hand. "Where?"

Kerry pointed to the spot she had seen the flash. They saw a figure mounting a horse and riding away.

The Shoshone warriors took up the chase quickly.

## *Chapter 17*

Braden struggled in the mud walking towards the ranch house. Christina was bleeding heavily and there was no way he could ascertain how much damage the bullet had caused his daughter.

Kerry struggled against the mire as she issued orders to take Garrett and Brock back to their rooms. An angry order reverberated throughout the melee, "Someone go to town and get the doctor!" Kerry struggled against the mud to walk toward her husband carrying their unconscious daughter.

One of her shoes became mired in the muck. Kerry pulled until the shoe remained in the quagmire. Angrily Kerry lifted her other foot and pulled off the remaining shoe. Once she was barefoot, Kerry acquired more agility. Soon she was next to Braden and together they carried Christina to her room.

Mrs. Barber was already in the kitchen fetching rolled bandages she had kept for emergency and pouring hot water from the teakettle into a basin. She also took her bag of medicines and salves.

Little Rain still carrying Ashley followed Braden and Kerry up the stairs to Christina's room.

"Dear God," Kerry whimpered touching her daughter's limp hand. "What beast would hurt an innocent child?"

Braden's face was blackened with smoke. His hair was filled with mud, soot, and ashes. His clothes were also blackened by smoke, covered with mud, and smelled of acrid smoke. Braden's face was set tight with jaws clenched. His

thoughts were somewhere between rage and fear. His large blue eyes were filled with terror and desolation. Gently he laid Christina upon the bed.

Kerry knelt next to the bedside and looked upon her daughter's pale face. "Dear God!" Kerry stood up and carefully touched the bleeding arm. "Braden. Braden!" she repeated to get her husband's attention. "I need a scissors. We must cut Christina's frock."

Garrett was taken to his room with the help of his brother Jared. It took four ranch hands to carry Brock up to his room. They had taken off their neck scarves and used them to put pressure on his back wound. The head wound was superficial and had already stopped bleeding. The ranch hands knew the back wound was bad.

Chin Su had followed them in. When the ranch hands placed Brock on the bed face down, Chin Su began removing Brock's clothing.

"Do you want us to help," Jim Parker asked. "We've helped with a heap of hurt and gun shot."

"Yes," Chin Su replied quietly concentrating on the task of removing Brock's shirt. He had pulled a small sharp tapered knife from his boot and was cutting the cloth. "Will you please get that bottle of Irish Whiskey from that trunk over there."

Jim responded immediately. He rummaged through the trunk and found several bottles of the Irish whiskey on the bottom. Jim opened the bottle and attempted to give it to Chin Su.

Chin Su had returned to Brock after he had removed a white linen lawn shirt from Brock's armoire. Chin started tearing the lawn shirt in strips. He handed three strips to Jim. "Soak the strips with that whiskey."

Jim poured the whiskey until the linen strips were saturated. He held them while watching Chin Su take the rest of the whiskey and pour it over Brock's back.

Chin took one of the strips and started wiping the dried blood away until he could finally see the wound. He shook his head and then took another strip folding it and placing it on the wound. "Hold this on his wound. It will help stop the bleeding,"

Chin Su ordered Jim. Once Jim had his firm hand on the wound, Chin took the last strip and began cleaning the blood away from Brock's temple.

"Is he gonna die?" Jim asked worriedly.

"The wound to his head is superficial. It is mainly a powder burn," Chin Su explained. "The bullet is lodged in his shoulder bone. There is no major damage. He'll be alright once we get the bullet out."

"Mac went to get a doc," Jim told the Chinaman.

"The sooner the bullet comes out, the better," Chin Su answered. "There is more chance of infection if the bullet stays in too long. Infection is always the danger in gunshot wounds."

"With all that good whiskey you poured into it," Jim chuckled knowing the boy would be all right. "We should have some time."

Chin Su smiled to the ranch hand. "We do, but I want to take the bullet out."

"You know how to do that?"

"For all things there is a first time," Chin returned.

Bennett was organizing the clean up after the fire when Ryan and Blue rode in.

"What happened here?" Ryan questioned sliding from his horse. "How did the fire start?"

Bennett wiped a muddied hand across his soot-blackened face. "We aren't certain. We all smelled kerosene, so we're sure it was started on purpose." Bennett picked up a charred piece of lumber. "It could have been worse. We had some rain this morning so there was little burning and the roofs didn't catch."

"Looks like you'll just need some patching," Ryan noted. "Who do you think did this?"

"We haven't a clue," Bennett answered shaking his head. "There have been incidents, but this?"

Blue had been looking around for Brock and noticed only Jared, Anthony, and Little Braden were out and about with the ranch hands. "Where are Uncle Braden and Auntie Kerry?" Blue asked not wanting to seem overly concerned about Brock.

Bennett's brow furrowed and his lip quivered. "Mamman and Papa are with Christina. She was shot during the shooting."

Ryan went rock solid with rage. "Where are they?"

"They took Christina into the ranch house."

"Oh no," Blue cried. She bolted for the house followed closely by her father.

Circle Eye, Smeared Nose, and Quiet Foot dismounted and started helping Bennett and his brothers.

"Where are our brothers from Eye of Hawk's camp?"

Circle Eye asked Bennett.

"They took off to find the shooter," Bennett answered.

"I'm worried about my sister. If I weren't so filthy I'd go up to her and I have a lot to do."

"You need to finish this with your brothers," Circle Eye reminded unnecessarily. "The family is with your sister doing what they must do."

"Yeah," Bennett responded checking the horses being brought back to the barns.

"Smeared Nose and I will look into the fire start," Circle Eye stated looking around at the mess.

Blue stood at the doorframe staring at Kerry working over Christina. The little girl's frock had been cut off. Christina was lying on the bed in only her chemise. Blue looked on the floor to see the blood soaked dress, muddy shoes and stockings. Ryan's hand came down tenderly upon her shoulder. Blue choked back her tears.

"Go in Baby," Ryan whispered gently squeezing Blue's shoulder. "Maybe we can help."

Mrs. Barber was next to Kerry holding a pan with hot water. "Praise be to the Lord, it's just a bad graze."

Kerry spread the healing salve on the wound. Tears were still glistening on her cheek. "Yes, we are so grateful." Her arm wiped across her face preventing the tears from falling.

Braden was on his knees next to Christina's bed. His hand gently stroked Christina's hand while Kerry began to bandage the wound. He spoke to his daughter, softly and lovingly, "It's going to be just fine sweetheart. Wake up for Papa, wake up angel."

Ryan moved past Blue and reached for Kerry's shoulder. He whispered, "How is she, Sis?"

"Ryan, oh Ryan," Kerry choked. "Someone set fire to the barns and stables. Then shot my Christina."

"Is she going to be alright, Sis?"

"The wound isn't bad, but she hasn't gained consciousness since she was hit," Kerry said starting to sob. She turned into her big brother's chest and let his arms enfold her and her tears.

Braden remained on his knees stroking his daughter's hand. "Wake up angel. Talk to Papa."

"I didn't see Garrett," Ryan mentioned.

"Whoever did this cold cocked Garrett," Kerry replied showing anger. "He's got a knot on the back of his head as big as an apple. If it hadn't been for Brock, he would have died of smoke."

Blue heard Brock's name and was about to ask for him. She hadn't seen him either. When Blue opened her mouth to ask, Christina started moving and thrashing about in her bed. Everyone in the room turned their attention to the little girl.

"Muffin! Muffin!" Christina cried out suddenly sitting up. Her little head spun around when she felt the burning in her arm. Christina felt dizzy and sick.

Braden jumped from the floor. He sat on the bed and cradled her in his arms.

Christina laid her head on her father's chest. "I don't feel good. I hurt."

Braden held her firmly and his hand stroked her head. "It's alright Christina. Papa is here. You'll be better soon."

Kerry was biting her lip. She wanted to laugh, cry, and scream at the same time. Her daughter was awake and would recover.

"Muffin? Muffin?" Christina asked again. "My knight said he'd save Muffin."

"Your knight?" Blue asked her cousin. How sweet to think of someone as a knight.

Apparently the wolf pup heard her name and ran from the kitchen where she had stationed herself near her mother Misty and her brother Biscuit. In a few seconds Muffin entered the room and

jumped on Christina's bed wagging her tail and licking Christina's face.

"Muffin, the knight did save you," Christina said happily forgetting her hurt arm.

The adults were so relieved that Christina would recover; no one seemed to mind the muddy wolf pup on Christina's bed.

Blue scratched Muffin's ears. "What knight saved you, Muffin?"

"Mr. Brock," Christina answered quickly avoiding Muffin's tongue.

Once again, before Blue could ask for him, Mrs. Barber took the hot water bowl and started walking out.

"I need to check on the boy," Mrs. Barber stated while walking out of the room.

"Has something happened to Brock?" Blue asked her Aunt Kerry.

"I'm afraid he's been shot," Kerry replied taking a position on the bed next to her husband and daughter."

Blue didn't wait a second. She bolted out of the room and followed Mrs. Barber. Her mind was full of nightmare images. Her Brock had been shot. How bad?

Ryan asked Kerry, "Was Brock hurt bad?"

"I think so," Kerry answered, "but I thought Christina was hurt worse than she was. I can only hope he isn't hurt too bad. I should check on him and Garrett."

"You just worry about your children," Ryan stated. "I'll go see what I can do for the boy."

Blue followed Mrs. Barber into Brock's room. She pushed Mrs. Barber aside and went straight to Brock. He was still unconscious. Chin Su had managed to remove his clothes and cover his lower torso with a clean sheet. Blue's face paled when she saw Brock's wounds.

"I'll be taking care of him," Chin Su offered. "You must be Miss Blue. It's best if you leave. I must cut that bullet out."

Blue cringed a little. "Have you done this before?"

"There is always a first time."

"I have. Mama and I have had to do it a couple of times. Our ranch hands had accidents. She taught me how to clean the wound and sew it tight. Let me do it."

Chin Su knew instinctively she had the knowledge and the determination. It would be best. "Tell me what to do."

"Maybe you should wait for the physician," Mrs. Barber interjected. "I know someone was sent to fetch him."

"The longer you wait, the more chance of infection," Blue stated calmly. She was anything but calm. It took all of her will power not to let her hands tremble. She would be strong for her Brock. "Mama taught me everything I need to know about gunshot wounds."

"You're just a girl," Mrs. Barber objected. "Wait for the physician."

"Miss Blue will do it," Chin Su said confidently. He took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. "You will do it."

Blue's cold hands felt warm. She felt strength in her hands, arms, and right to her heart. Chin Su's eyes seemed to reflect beautiful ebony glass. A calmness enveloped her. "I will do it." Blue removed her hands and stood over the unconscious body of the man she loved. "The wound has been well cleaned, but I will need a tiny forceps to remove a few pieces of lint I see. This wound must be completely cleaned before I cut into his skin and muscle to pull out the bullet. Mrs. Barber, I know Jared uses a small forceps. It should be in his toilet room with his shaving soap. Get it for me."

Mrs. Barber shook her head but left to find the forceps. She went into the toilet room and found it exactly where Blue said it would be. She wondered how Blue would know that. Voices brought her attention to Garrett's room. Jared and Kerry were talking to Garrett.

"How is Brock, Mama?" Garrett asked. "He saved my life."

"I know, we owe him a great deal," Kerry answered soothingly. "We don't know how he is yet. He was hurt worse than Christina. We're waiting for the doctor. Lay down son, and put this ice on the lump."

"Which lump?" Jared teased. "He has a lot of them. They all make up his ugly big head."

Mrs. Barber shook her head again. Those brothers really cared for each other despite their teasing. She quickly returned to Brock's room with the small forceps.

"Thank you, Mrs. Barber," Blue appreciated taking the forceps from her and laying it in a bowl on a table by the bed. The bowl was filled with Irish whiskey. "I need you to get your sharpest knife and boil it in water for me. It will have to cut through his muscle down to the bone."

"I'll get the sharpest one I have. That boy's muscle will be tough," Mrs. Barber replied with a chuckle. She wasn't happy about Blue doing this. Whenever she was uneasy Mrs. Barber found herself making bad jokes. She left the room and went to her kitchen and followed the instructions.

Blue smiled to Mrs. Barber. "He does have tough muscles." Blue turned back to Brock and concentrated on the task at hand. Carefully she picked at the offending lint pieces in his wound with the whiskey-sterilized forceps.

"Blue? What are you doing?" Ryan's voice whispered next to his daughter's shoulder.

"He's been hurt bad, Pa," Blue answered concentrating on Brock's wound. "I'm doing what Mama taught me to do."

"This is the man you want to marry?"

"Yes, Pa. I love him. We're special together. I feel it."

"Like your Mama and me?"

"Yes, Pa. Just like you and Mama."

"They tell me he was quite a hero. Christina calls him her shining knight."

"He's a good man, Pa. I know he is. Deep down he isn't that randy everyone thinks he is."

"Need me to help?"

"When I cut him to get the bullet would you hold him?"

"Of course I will, baby."

Then there was silence. Blue finished picking out the lint at the same time Mrs. Barber returned with her sharpest tapered knife.

"I brought a needle and strong thread I boiled with the knife," Mrs. Barber offered holding the boiled water pan with cloths. "You'll need it to sew him up when you're done."

For the next half hour everyone didn't say a word. When Blue cut into Brock's back by the wound he thrashed, but Ryan held him firmly. The pain from the cut caused Brock back into unconsciousness once again. Blue cut deeper until she found the bullet. It was lodged in his shoulder blade. Blue took the forceps from the whiskey bowl and pulled out the lead. She dropped both the bullet and the forceps back into the bowl. Chin Su continued to wipe the blood with the whiskey soaked linen strips as Ryan held Brock down. Mrs. Barber stood by the bed with the sterilized pan of water. Blue took the sterile needle and thread. Carefully Blue folded the cut skin over the wound and pressed the flesh down and together. She then sewed the skin together with tiny delicate stitches. When she was finished, Blue felt exhausted.

"I'll take over from here," Mrs. Barber ordered. "I have my salves and medicines. I'm sure I've bandaged more people than you have."

Blue nodded and gave Mrs. Barber a smile. "I'm sure you have."

"What are you doing?" Mrs. Barber asked Chin Su. He was softly whispering strange words and had cupped his hands over the wound.

"Before you apply the medicines, I will return the Ch'i for healing with medicine," Chin Su answered. He then removed his hands for Mrs. Barber to apply the salve and bandage.

Ryan released his hold on Brock and spoke to Chin Su, "I could have sworn I saw light under you hands."

"Perhaps you did. Ch'i is very powerful," Chin Su replied and then looked at Blue. "Your daughter is also very powerful with Ch'i. Perhaps this is why these two are brought together."

"Perhaps, but first I'd like to know what exactly Ch'i is. And I won't just let any man take my baby girl," Ryan grouched.

Chin Su grinned broadly. "Ch'i is the power or force of nature. Our world."

A voice interrupted the group. "I was sent up here. I was told Brock Hampton had been gunshot."

“Doctor Adams!” Ryan greeted. “He’s over here and the lead he took is over there.”

Doctor Adams lifted the wad of bandage from Brock’s back. “Who did this?” he asked looking at the fine stitches and salve on the wound.

Blue said nothing. She sat next to Brock and stroked his shoulder gently.

“My daughter cut out the lead shot and stitched him up,” Ryan announced proudly.

“She did a fine job,” Doctor Adams praised. “A fine job indeed. It looks like everything was kept very clean. He shouldn’t have an infection with proper care.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Blue said quietly resting her head next to Brock’s massive arm.

“Looks like my medical skills aren’t needed here,” Doctor Adams chuckled. “I’ll look at Christina’s wounds and the knot on Garrett’s head.”

“I’ll take you there,” Ryan offered.

“By the way Blue,” Doctor Adams addressed Blue turning from Ryan’s lead. “Thanks for doing such a good job. It was Brock I came here to see to talk to him.”

Blue looked up but at that moment Brock moaned and drew her attention back to him. “I know,” Blue responded to the Doctor. Her father had told her of the Ely Council’s decision to ask Brock about the position of Federal Marshal.

“I’ll be back later,” Doctor Adams told Blue.

“I’m going home to Mama, Blue,” Ryan stated. “I know you want to stay here. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Pa?”

“Yes, baby girl?”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Ryan warned half-heartedly. “Take care. I love you, Blue.” He turned and left the room.

## *Chapter 18*

Blue stayed by Brock's side all night. She had pulled a chair next to his bedside, wrapped herself up in a blanket and slept on and off throughout the night. His moans would wake her. She would check the bandage and sometimes change it after he had a spell. Fortunately he never developed a fever.

The morning light filtered through the window when Brock woke and saw Blue curled up in the chair. Her head was resting on her arm. Her other arm was folded around her legs. His back was sore. It was really sore. He didn't even try to move. Instead he concentrated on the angelic face of his Blue. How did she come to be here? For that matter, what had even happened?

Chin Su walked into the room. He had checked on Brock on and off through the night as often as Blue. Sometimes she was asleep when he came into the room and sometimes they checked Brock together. "You are awake. This is good."

Blue nearly fell of the chair with the start of Chin's voice. Her vision was still sleep blurry when she focused on Brock. "You are going to be fine. Do you hurt badly? Chin Su has medicine to help with the hurt. Do you want some?"

"One question at a time please," Brock teased. "I'm fine already knowing you're here. I hurt real badly! Yes, I want Chin Su's medicine, but first a kiss would be nice."

"I think you're better already," Blue smiled. She bent over to kiss Brock's lips. "Don't you ever get in front of a lead shot again! You hear?"

Brock savored her kiss. When she finished he grinned. "I think I got shot in the back, not the front."

"You know what I meant," Blue chastised. She kissed him again. "You scared a year's growth out of me!"

"That wasn't my intention," Brock teased. "I want to try and get up. I'm hungry and I want you to tell me what happened. Is Christina okay? I heard a shot and saw blood. Is Garrett okay? Anybody else get hurt?"

"Whoa, one question at a time. Remember?" Blue chortled repeating his very words. "Christina received a flesh wound to her arm. She's fine. Garrett has a headache and wants to see you to thank you for being a big hero. By the way, Christina thinks you're a knight in shining armor. No, no one else got hurt."

"I wish I was wearing armor when that bullet hit," Brock chuckled. "It would have saved me a bunch of hurt."

"Let's get you up so you can eat," Chin Su suggested. He and Blue carefully helped Brock turn to a sitting position.

"Now I've got you," Brock sniggered putting his arms around Blue. His back hurt, but he wanted a long kiss first. He got it. Blue held his face with her hands and her lips met Brock's. They tasted each other's sweetness dipping their tongues in and out. Brock broke their contact first. "What happened Chin Su? Why does my back feel like I was stabbed by a knife?"

Chin Su smiled. "You were stabbed by a knife. A sharp knife."

"Now who the Sam Hill did that?"

"I did," Blue answered. "I cut out the lead shot and sewed you back up."

"You?" Would this little cut of a girl ever stop surprising him? His fate, his life, and his destiny was the most wonderful, strong, capable woman he would ever know in his lifetime.

"Me!" Blue responded. "Mama taught me when she mended gun shot wounds for the ranch hands."

"My angel of mercy," Brock praised taking his good hand and stroking Blue's face. He turned to Chin Su. "It still hurts like the devil. Can you make me one of your potions? I want to find the person that did this to me in the first place."

"I made it last night," Chin Su informed as he handed the vial to Brock.

"Glad to see you're up," Mrs. Barber interjected carrying a tray holding a silver service. "I've brought tea and breakfast for you. You gave us quite a scare young man. Blue and Chin Su, you can go downstairs and eat. I've kept your food warm. I'll see to Brock for now."

Two figures appeared behind Mrs. Barber. Jared and Garrett Wessex each carried a tray of food.

"Glad to see you are up," Jared stated placing the tray on the table next to his bed. "Believe it or not dude boy, we worried about you."

"I hope I never turn into some kind of hero," Garrett muttered. "It's pretty darn dangerous if you ask me."

"No one did ask you," Jared snickered. "Obviously, you aren't the one with a bullet hole in your back."

"How's that bump on your head?" Brock asked. He greedily began eating Mrs. Barber's great breakfast. He truly was hungry.

"Fine, thanks to you," Garrett replied. "I am grateful to you. Thanks for getting me out of that burning garage."

"Any damage to your horseless carriage?" Brock asked with genuine concern. He knew how much that contraption meant to Garrett.

A smile creased Garrett's lips. "Just a little smoke damage."

"How's your sister, Christina?"

"Almost better," a voice bubbled from a small figure running into the bedroom. Braden Wessex and Kerry following their daughter. "Muffin is good too! All thanks to you. Mama said you got hurt like I did. I got a bandage, see?" Christina lifted her arm in the sling. "It hurt. Does it hurt you?"

"Slow down Christina," Braden chided. "You're not all that better yet. Brock isn't either." He bent down and scooped his daughter into his arms.

"Yes I am Papa. I'm much better," Christina argued. "I want to give my knight a kiss. Then he'll feel all better."

“Just like your Mama. Strong willed and intent,” Braden chuckled putting Christina on Brock’s bed.

“Only the best for you,” Kerry quipped to her husband. “How are you feeling Brock? Doctor Adams told us our Blue operated on you and did a fine job of it. He said she did better than he could have done.”

“Your niece has quite the talent,” Brock said proudly. “I’m stiff but it’s itching. That means the wound is already healing. That is some woman I’m going to marry.”

“I’m surprised Ryan left you in one piece for his daughter to sew up,” Braden jibed.

Kerry cast her husband a deadly glare. “I’m certain my brother appreciates the fine man and husband Brock Hampton will be.”

Braden cocked a wary brow. “I’ll believe that when I see him walking Blue down the aisle.”

Christina looked at her parents in confusion and then shrugged her shoulders. She reached for Brock’s face and planted a big smoochie kiss on his cheek. “Thank you for saving Muffin, Sir Knight.”

“You are welcome fair maiden,” Brock responded giving Christina a small bow from his waist up. “Twas an honor to serve you.”

With that Christina reached for her father. He obliged her immediately and picked her up placing her in the safety of his arms. “Are you coming Jared? Garrett?”

“Of course sis.” Jared and Garrett said in unison.

“We’ll be back later,” Jared turned to tell Brock. “Garrett and I have a lot to clean up this morning. Smeared Nose thinks he knows where the fire started.”

“I’ll be down later myself,” Brock responded. “I want to find out about all of this myself.” Brock ate the rest of his breakfast in quiet and thoroughly enjoyed every bite. Mrs. Barber was an excellent cook. He took the vial of pain medication and washed down the bitter taste with a cup of tea. Brock was determined that if his Blue had the grit to cut him open and sew him up, he would have the grit to be up and about to find the perpetrators of this attack.

Chin Su came back into the room as Brock was attempting to put his shirt on. He had managed his drawers, socks, boots, and trousers by himself. The pain medication was working, but his shoulder was still too stiff to get the arm into the shirt.

“Need some help little tiger? Not that you would ask for it.”

“Yes Chin, I would appreciate your help.”

Chin walked up Brock and easily slid the arm into the shirt. He brought the shirt behind Brock’s back and helped Brock put it through his good arm. Chin buttoned the shirt and belted the trousers. “Why do you feel you have to be up? This could be the time for you to take advantage and let your pretty little women dote on you.”

“Things are going on here that need taking care of. If they aren’t, my pretty little woman wouldn’t be safe.”

“How do you think you can make it safe?”

Brock scratched in head. “That I don’t know, but I mean to find out. Somehow I know this is all part of my destiny. I will find a way.”

“I feel this also. Together we will enter this destiny,” Chin Su stated.

“Together we will make a difference. I know it.”

They walked downstairs and went directly to Braden’s office.

Brock was surprised to find Braden talking with Doctor Adams, Joseph Crawford, Blue, Blue’s father, and another man he did not recognize.

Braden rose from behind his desk, “Ah, there is the subject of our conversation. Do come in Brock. We were about to come upstairs to see you.”

“What the devil?” Brock mumbled to himself. He felt Chin Su push him forward.

“Captain Hampton, a wire for you sir,” the elder valet of the private club addressed the man sitting on an overstuffed chair playing chess with a friend.

“Thank you Giles,” Shelby Hampton appreciated taking the neatly folded paper. He put on a pair of spectacles and read the

letter. A broad smile swept across his lips. He slapped his knee. "Well I'll be."

"What the devil?" Shelby's chess partner grumped. "I've never seen you this happy so early unless you've managed to beat me in a game. Which rarely happens. What does that wire say?"

"My nephew, Brock," Shelby shared. "He's getting married."

"Great news! That will make half the men of this club ecstatic. They won't have to worry about their wives trying to get in his drawers," Jonas McPherson a retired cattleman clucked.

"You hear that George?"

"What?" George Smothers a railroad magnate questioned looking up from his paper.

"Shelby's Brock is getting leg shackled."

"Hallelujah!" George cheered. "At last my Ann won't nag me about our daughter meeting this rake of yours."

Shelby started laughing. "It seems the boy needs my help."

"Now that I don't believe. How could an old goat like you help that divine gift to womanhood?" Charlie Fitzsimmons chortled joining the conversation. Charlie was in the mercantile business and had several stores up and down the coast of California. He knew Shelby from his seafaring days and had bought the Captain's cargoes.

"Do tell," Jonas encouraged. "We are your captive audiences. Just how will you help your nephew with his intended?"

Shelby didn't lose the grin plastered on his face. "My nephew is expected to pay a most unusual dower. He needs me to supply it."

"Money? The boy has more than enough money he can get from his own accounts," Lionel Bookman the bank magnate of San Francisco's largest bank said in surprise.

"That's the rub," Shelby snorted. "It isn't money."

"What?" came the uniform cry from half the men in the Parlor Room.

"My nephew is expected to bring cattle, sheep, horses, blankets, and seeds."

“Where the Bloody Hell is the boy?” Roger Hamilton, owner of the largest horse ranch on the Barbary Coast asked. “That type of dower sounds European. Gypsy?”

“Actually he’s in Nevada,” Shelby informed.

“They do things strangely there I’m told,” Jonas laughed. “I didn’t think they were that strange.”

“I don’t care! I’m happy for the boy. He needs to settle down. Brock will have my full support,” Shelby stated seriously. “I think I may need all of you to help me accomplish this task list.”

“You have my support,” Roger Hamilton roared. “To keep my wife in my bed I’ll even give you the blasted horses as a wedding gift.”

“Hear! Hear!” Charlie cheered. “I’ll donate all the blankets. My wedding gift to the couple.”

“You’ll need to transport the dower,” George Smothers reminded. “I’ll donate the cars to take the requested to a Nevada railhead.”

“I’ll give you the cattle and some of my drovers and wagons to get the cattle and horses to where you need them to be,” Jonas volunteered. “We’ve got everything covered except the sheep.”

“I have a friend in Nevada that owns a sheep farm,” Lionel offered. “It will be my gift to the newly weds. I’ll contact Red McCann. I’ll wire him the bank drafts of purchase and he’ll drive the sheep to .... Where?”

“A place called Geneva’s Branch. It’s north of Ely,” Shelby read from the wire.

“How many of everything have we volunteered to buy?” Lionel asked.

Shelby read the list.

“I’ll double it, I’m so glad your nephew is getting married,” Lionel sniggered.

The doubles came quickly.

“You going to the wedding?” Jonas asked his chess partner.

“I surely will. I think I’d even like to travel with the drovers,” Shelby suggested. “I’m tired of being a stuffy old gent. I think I need a little adventure in my life after all these years of mundane gentleman’s club.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more old man,” Jonas conferred. “I think I’ll join you.”

Soon one third of the men in the private club was planning a journey to Ely, Nevada and the wedding of Brock Hampton.

“I can’t wait to meet the woman that leg shackled that rake of yours,” George Smothers chortled.

“Have a seat,” Brian offered showing Brock an empty chair. “After what you’ve been through you needn’t be standing. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Brian Duffey.”

“Bennett’s Great Uncle,” Brock remembered. “I’m pleased to meet you.” He extended his hand in greeting.

“You of course remember, Doctor Adams, and Joseph Crawford,” Brian continued.

Brock nodded, “Gentlemen.” He took his offered seat. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Actually we are here to see you. As the Mayor of Ely I am the spokesperson,” Brian announced sitting on the edge of Braden’s desk.

Brock raised an eyebrow. “I must admit I am quite surprised to find out you are here to see me?”

“You’ve left quite an impression on most of us on the Town Council,” Joseph explained. “You are exactly what Pine County needs and has been looking for.”

“For what?” Brock questioned. He couldn’t imagine what they needed him for.

Brian Duffey straightened and stood stoically. “We want you to take the position of Federal Marshal for Pine County.”

“Me?” Brock nearly strangled. “How can I be qualified as a Federal Marshal?”

“You are the most qualified,” Joseph Crawford intercepted in comment. “To keep the law we need someone that won’t abuse it. We don’t need or want a gunfighter. A Peacemaker is sort of an oxymoron. Don’t you agree?”

“Well I have to admit I don’t see how shooting any gun keeps anything peaceful,” Brock agreed with a chuckle.

“Our points exactly,” Doctor Adams stated. “Those of us who have not seen your talents have heard about them. We want

someone that maintains a calm presence and uses no violence, but can control situations.”

“That someone is you, Brock,” Joseph Crawford said firmly. “We need you to bring the law and justice back into Pine County.”

“What happened here yesterday is a small sampling of the violence that is threatening to spill over,” Braden added. “Without proper law enforcement an innocent child may not be so lucky as to survive a wound. An innocent child, woman, or even visitor could be cut down without cause or reason.”

“You’ve met our law,” Joseph reminded. “The merchants are paying protection fees. Money given to the very law that would destroy our stores, family, or person if not paid.”

“Inconceivable!” Brock muttered.

“Our homes and family are endangered,” Braden included. “You saw that yesterday.”

“I was the one that asked Judge Samson James to give Ely Council the authority to obtain a Federal Marshal,” Ryan stated speaking for the first time. “The times for our families, land, and friends are dangerous. These past days I’ve had round the clock watches for Geneva’s Branch. I have not until this moment worried for my wife and family. We need Federal protection. From what I’ve heard of you, it is you we need.”

Brock took a deep swallow. His future father in law was asking him to take a position. This position would give him a solid life and future with Blue. Suddenly thoughts shot through his head in lightening speed. This was the answer. Ryan had given Blue Pool’s people protection as well as the dower price. He would be giving Ryan, the people of his land and town this same peace and protection. The complete dower would be filled. Brock was ecstatic. He felt the Ch’i surround him. This was his destiny. He felt it. “I accept. I will start by finding out just who shot me and shot little Christina. I want to find out who started this fire. I also want you to have merchants under the duress of the Sheriff to give to me their payment schedules and amounts. I want to know who picks up these payments. I start immediately.”

Blue had remained silent. She was so proud of her future husband. He had taken a position of nobility. Perhaps Christina

wasn't too far off the mark when she called Brock her knight in shining armor. Blue beamed as her great Uncle Brian swore Brock in as Federal Marshal and pinned the badge on him. She looked to her father. Ryan was watching the proceedings with interest. He turned and winked at her. He mouthed two sweet words to her. *Good Man*. Blue couldn't be happier. Not only had her father accepted the man she loved. Her father was as proud of her choice as she was. When the swearing in was over Blue went to Brock's side. She beamed with pride as the men and family took their turns congratulating him.

Brock felt Blue at his side. He automatically placed his arm around her shoulders protectively. "My life, love, and destiny."

Blue snuggled into Brock's embrace. "I will be by your side."

Brock tipped her face up with thumb and forefinger. "Good, I'll need you to patch me up."

Blue looked in her love's deep blue eyes. "When I first saw you I knew we would be together. I saw you lying on that bed facedown gunshot and I felt you and I would grow old together as long as we are one. We will be more than husband and wife. We will be partners. Remember that Marshal Hampton."

Brock felt it too. He wanted Blue more than any woman. He wanted her now. He felt his body heating and loins growing hard. This wasn't lust this was true love. This was the love Bennett had been talking about on board the ship. Brock's mouth watered for Blue's sweet lips. No, this wasn't sport. This was love!

"I hear you and my granddaughter are getting married," Joseph Crawford interrupted. "I couldn't be happier for you. You'll make a fine husband for her."

"Thank you sir," Brock acknowledged. "If you don't mind, I'd like some private time with my fiancé."

Brock led Blue out to the gardens. For a few stolen moments they snuggled, kissed, and promised each other their devotion.

*Payton Lee*

END

## *Chapter 19*

Blue and Brock's quiet moments were too short. Christina and Ashley went to the garden to retrieve them.

"Mama says that noon meal is served," Christina related. "You got to come Sir Brock. Everyone is waiting. This is a big party."

Reluctantly Blue and Brock returned to the ranch house. They were strolling toward the house hand in hand when they came upon Bennett and Julia sitting on a bench. Bennett's mouth was locked on to Julia's lips.

"Ben!" Brock shouted. "It's time to eat something other than your lady's lips."

Bennett jumped nearly two feet off from the bench. "Brock! I ought to..."

Brock snorted, "Ought to take lessons from me."

"Over his dead body," Julia smirked brushing an unseen wrinkle from her pleated skirt. "I like him just fine the way he is."

"Brock, your shining armor is tarnishing," Blue tsked.

"I was talking about Tai Ch'i, my lady," Brock lied. He merely wanted to taunt his friend a little bit. "Let's go in and eat."

Bennett and Julia followed them into the house.

"I'm not sure I want to have a double wedding with Sir Talksalot," Bennett sniggered loud enough for Brock to hear him.

“The preacher may be blinded by the polished armor of the world renowned knight.”

After the meal Blue and Brock walked outside to be alone. It was not to be. Ryan followed them and took possession of his daughter.

“Time for us to head back,” Ryan stated taking his daughter’s arm. “The hands have Cheater and Ginger saddled. Your Mama wants us home right away. I don’t want to be away from home for too long. Not with these attacks going on.”

Blue looked to Brock. She couldn’t help herself revealing the longing. “I think I should stay with Brock.”

“You aren’t husband and wife yet, girl. You are still my daughter,” Ryan said a little sharply. “I want you home safe with me and your Mama. You are still my responsibility.”

Brock’s hands gently rubbed Blue’s arms. “Go with your father. I’ll be really busy for the next couple of days. I’ll be investigating the entire goings on around here. I want you to be safe in the meantime.”

“But,”

“No buts my love,” Brock stopped her from talking by placing his finger gently on her lips. “I’ll be by Geneva’s Branch to see you at every opportunity. I also have to purchase our house in town and get things started so you can keep your self busy fixing up our new home.”

“A domestic is not how I see myself as your wife,” Blue growled menacingly.

“I don’t either, but we must have a nice place to keep our children,” Brock whispered mischievously.

Ryan didn’t miss the exchange and looked to see the difficult state Brock was suffering at the moment. “That’s enough!” Ryan roared. He literally picked Blue up and carried her to the stable plopping her on Ginger. The horse snorted in irritation.

Blue comforted her horse. “It’s alright, Ginger. Pa’s just in a mood.”

Ryan grunted. “Home girl. Your Mama is waiting for us.”

Brock stayed on the ranch porch and waved to his fiancé. There was a lot to be done and not the time to challenge a protective father.

Chin Su came from behind. "Where do you start?"

"We start, Chin. My first official act is to make you a Federal Deputy Marshal."

Brock walked to the bunkhouse. He was determined to start his new position by solving the mystery of Geneva's Hope fire.

Smear Nose and Wolverine had stayed behind. Brock found them between the garage and the barn. Both had been the first affected by the fire.

"What have you found?" Brock questioned. How many times had Bennett told him about the investigative talents of indigenous peoples?

Smear Nose rose to his full six-foot height. He nodded to the corner of the garage. "Someone brought that kerosene can here after spreading the contents around the barns and stables. The fire started here."

"Have you figured out about what time the fire was started?" Brock queried.

"The fire was started about the time of the morning meal."

"Did your Shoshone brothers find the shooter?"

Smear Nose shook his head. "The shooter had too much of a head start. My people tracked him right to Ely. They couldn't go in and the shooter knew it. But we have the mark of his horse. This we know will identify him." Smear Nose reached his arm across the small space between them and fingered the Federal Marshal badge. "You took the badge."

"Yes, and I want you and Wolverine to be my deputies."

"You know we cannot do this. Your people will not allow such things." Smear Nose then stroked his chin. "You can make us your scouts. This is acceptable with your people."

"Done!" Brock agreed readily. "When I took the wolf dog out, her muzzle had been tied with a neck scarf. Did you find it?"

Wolverine nodded and rose from his studying the ground. He pulled an unusually colored and patterned neck scarf.

“This scarf is really unusual. I’m going to take it to the ranch hands and see if they recognize it.” Brock removed himself from his new scouts and walked to the bunkhouse. His large frame filled the doorframe. “Any one recognize this?”

Max Huntsman had just returned from planking the barn walls with new lumber. Repairing had already commenced on Geneva’s Hope. He looked carefully at it. “My cousin Earl wears one like that.”

“Is he around?”

“No, he left last night after supper. He needed to get back to town. Earl spent the day helping us fight the fire and cleanup.”

Brock nodded. “Thanks Max. I’ll be sure to give it to him. I’m going to town today. Where does his stay?”

“He lives at the Ruby boarding house in Ruby when he’s not working in the mines. You won’t find him in Ely. He visits here every now and then. I’ll give it to him.”

“No problem. My next stop is Ruby. I don’t mind at all,” Brock insisted and left for the barn to get Duster. Chin Su was waiting for him with his own mount, a painted mare. Smeared Nose and Wolverine had mounted their ponies and were waiting for Brock on the road to Ely. Brock was ready to mount when Jared suddenly appeared.

“I’m coming with you,” Jared stated barring no comment when he moved to his horse Squash. “Whoever this was made it personal when they hurt my brother and sister.”

“Well Chin, you suppose we can let this kid come with us?”

“You have no choice!” Jared grouched cinching Squash’s saddle.

“I guess you’ll just have to become one of my deputies then.”

Jared gulped and a whoosh of air clogged his throat. “Me? A Federal Deputy Marshal?”

“As long as you follow my rules!” Brock ordered. “You’ve got a job.”

“Yes Sir!” Jared bubbled and mounted Squash.

The men left for Ely. On the road, Brock shared his complete plan for bringing law back to Pine County. Jared had to

shake his head in wonder at the strategic brilliance of Brock's mind. The Shoshone warriors felt they had found a great chief in the ranks of the white man. Chin Su found some flaws in the plan pulling from his own vast experience. Brock took his advice and changed some of the plans. The Shoshone were more convinced this new Federal Marshal was a great warrior chief. A wise chief always considered the advice of older more experienced warriors.

The citizens of Ely took to the boardwalks as they watched the new Federal Marshal and his troupe enter the town on horseback. The Ely Town Council had already given the Ely Gazette the story of Brock's accepting the position. Several young women sighed as they viewed the tall beautiful new lawman. The young women were already planning ways to become acquainted with the Federal Marshal.

Brock didn't even notice the ogling women. His mind was intent on one thing. Sheriff Amos Cage. His first stop would be the Ely Jail. He would arrest Cage for Federal trial in Carson City for numerous crimes including the protection racket. In his pocket he had the list of the beleaguered merchants. Every merchant would be visited and told they no longer would have to pay protection fees. Brock also was scanning the town for a proper home he could buy for his expected new family. Since the only ones he viewed worthy for his future wife and children were brick homes built by established families, he decided he would have one built. Before he left for Ruby to find Earl Huntsman, Brock would stop at Ely's Bank and obtain drafts from his accounts in San Francisco. He hoped there would be an answer from Uncle Shelby at the wire office. For that he didn't have long to wait.

James Milton raced out of the wire office with a paper in hand. "Marshal, I got a wire for you from your Uncle Shelby."

Brock reined up Duster and waited for Milton to hand him the wire. He opened it and it was obvious to his deputies the news was good news. Folding the wire he tipped his finger on his hat to Milton. "Thanks!" Brock continued to the Ely jail.

Dismounting, the four entered the jail. It was abandoned. A coffee pot remained on round stove in the corner and a cup filled with cold coffee remained on the desk. Numerous papers were

scattered on the desktop and floor. Brock and Chin Su picked them up and looked through them carefully. Another stack of neatly organized papers were found in the top desk drawer. Smeared Nose looked through the papers. "Most of these men I have seen coming from Ruby and crossing Geneva's lands."

"So this is the backbone of Cage's law enforcement? The dredges of society? The bullies of Pine County?"

"Time for a good house cleaning!" Jason Whitman said from the shadows of the cell rooms. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Jason Whitman. Owner and Editor of the Ely Gazette."

"How long have you been here?" Brock questioned.

"Probably an hour or so. Once I printed the paper regarding your position and distributing it I came here to check on Sheriff Cage. The varmint had already high tailed it out of town. I believe he knows he is in trouble and he is the sheriff for Ruby."

"You think he left for Ruby?" Chin Su questioned.

"No doubt in my mind," Jason replied. "He's probably returning his badge and collecting his ill gotten gains before taking off for greener pastures."

"I hope to thwart him in that goal," Brock vowed.

"You planning on making those Braves deputies?" Jason queried. "I don't think the kind people of Nevada would take very well to that."

"Smeared Nose and Wolverine already warned me about that," Brock laughed. "They are my scouts. You have anybody in mind for minding the store here in Ely when I'm traveling across Pine County?"

"Will Cunningham is a good man. He's got a good head on his shoulders. He can't work in the mines any more after his leg was broken. It never mended right. He has a wife and two children. The man could use the work," Jason offered.

"Set him up for me. I'm going to the bank and set up a private fund for my deputies and scouts. I'll send an advance to Mr. Cunningham. I'm sure he could use it. Deputy doesn't pay much. Will it do for him?"

"Probably more than he brought from the mines. By the time the mine companies finish charging for equipment the miner's

pay is nearly nothing,” Jason shared. “I’ll get him over here in a few minutes.”

“Good. Jared you stay here and wait for him with Smeared Nose and Wolverine,” Brock ordered. “Chin Su and I will go to the bank and get your advance pay.” He turned to Jason Whitman. “I also need to talk to some one about building a house for me. I’ll be moving to Ely with my wife.”

“Bennett and Julia told me about Blue. Congratulations,” Jason offered to Brock over his shoulder. “Tom Perkins is the town builder. He has an office next to Joseph Crawford’s Mercantile.”

“Thanks,” Brock appreciated. After the bank he would contact Perkins. After discussions he would look at house plans when he came back from Ruby. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours. We’ll eat and I’ll get rooms at the hotel. We’ll leave for Ruby first thing in the morning.”

At Geneva’s Branch dinner table Blue had received an apology from her sister Samantha. Twiggy had praised Blue for learning her lessons well on mending wounds.

“Since your fiancé has taken this position you can concentrate on your wedding dear,” Twiggy said lovingly. “We can start sewing your wedding dress. Auntie Kerry wants us to decide whom to send invitations to. The wedding will take place in Ely’s Church and the reception at Geneva’s Hope. Auntie Kerry and I need to coordinate the guest list, flowers, dresses, bridesmaids, and just everything. We are going to be very busy.”

“Mama, I do believe you are more excited about this wedding than I am,” Blue chortled happily.

“My oldest daughter is going to marry a Federal Marshal and you think I shouldn’t be excited?” Twiggy laughed.

“This is exciting,” Samantha bubbled. “He’s so handsome, and big, and strong, and...”

“Just a man,” Ryan grumbled. “I need to beef up the patrols on Geneva’s Branch. I want you children to know that you will be with someone all the time. I’m going to keep more ranch hands closer to the ranch. No one, and I mean and I do mean no one, will

go outside the house without an armed escort. Blue, no more riding on the south range.”

Blue didn’t say a word of protest. It was obvious her mother planned on keeping her busy. She did wonder when she would see Brock again. He would be kept busy being a Marshal. She wished she could already ride by his side. She knew that is where she was meant to be.

In Ely Brock was a little frustrated. He had planned to be in Ruby by now, but it was the week end and several miners had come into town bent on a good time that caused problems for the local merchants and residents. The miners were surprised when they were felled with lightening moves and no guns. The local jail housed nine such miners for disorderly conduct. Three days in the cells and then released with a warning that the next offense would be thirty days. Brock needed to add another deputy along with Max Huntsman to take care of Ely until his authority and type law was well set. Ely was an open target playground for miner riff raff under Cage’s direction. Brock also needed extra time to purchase land for the home he would build for his future family. He chose several hundred acres just south of Ely. It would be a small working ranch with a large Victorian brick house built upon it. He had been promised the house would be built in a year. Brock decided he would rent rooms at the Ely Hotel until the house was built and hoped that would be all right with Blue. It was strange to him. He couldn’t stop thinking about Blue. If it wasn’t for his new profession he thought he would go mad with obsession and dreams about his wedding night.

Brock also had to spend an extra two days dealing with the merchants and compiling evidence against Sheriff Cage. Although everyone knew Cage was behind the extortion, Brock didn’t have solid evidence against the Sheriff. He needed written documentation from Cage’s hand and there simply was none. It was turning out that Cage was as slippery as an eel and fit his name well. The sheriff was cagey.

“I’m telling you those injuns were on my tail,” Sikes complained to Cage. “I need to get outta here real quick like.”

“Shut up!” Cage roared impatiently. He was putting on his wig after applying a false mustache and makeup. It was the disguise of an older man he used for his business and banking in Ruby. He pretended he was his own father keeping the name Amos Cage, but others believing him to be his father. “We’ll be on our way to Denver tomorrow. I have to transfer all my accounts over to the Denver Bank. You really messed this one up. I should lock you up myself and let that new Marshal take you in.”

“You can’t do that. I know too much,” Sikes barked.

“Maybe I should just shoot you,” Cage growled.

Sikes backed off in fear. “If you do I got our papers of partnership that will be given to the law.”

“By that idiot brother of yours?” Cage snarled. He finished placing the wig on his head and adjusting it. “I could shoot him too!”

“He ain’t no idiot, and no, he don’t got the papers.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re partners. I just want you to quit whining. Wait here and I’ll finish this transfer. I have to protect our business dealings and profits.”

“It shore was smart of you to make everyone think you are your Pa.”

Cage smirked and left the hotel room. His appoint with the bank President was only a few minutes away. He would have Ruby Guild’s papers and operations transferred to Denver. This new marshal wouldn’t have jurisdiction in Colorado. “Damn!” Cage swore to himself. He wasn’t ready to leave Nevada, but better his current wealth than none at all. If only that idiot Sikes hadn’t carried out his stupid plan of revenge. He would have to keep a closer watch on Sikes from now on. Revenge? Cage wanted his own revenge and was planning that already. He read the marriage announcement in the Ely Times. The new marshal would be marrying Aurora McGillinen. Cage would have her taken right under that fancy dude’s nose. He would have his way with her and let Sikes have her as well. Let the marshal get soiled goods back. Cage really hated the proud and rich Wessex and McGillinen family. It was a hatred grown as a boy. The wealth of the McGillinens was well known. They had bought the mines around Geneva’s Hope. One of those mines belonged to his father.

His father sold it to Grady McGillinen and then used the money to drink himself to death. He and his mother turned to prostitution for them to survive. She died of the clap when he was only fifteen. He had been on his own ever since and hated the McGillinen family for it. Walking in the bank he was greeted by the bank president.

“Good morning Mr. Cage. We have all the paper work ready for you. I’m sorry you must move to Denver, but you can be sure we will manage all the funds from Ruby Guild for you and transfer them to Denver.”

In his disguise, Amos Cage secured his ties and money from the Ruby Guild.

“We heard your son resigned as Sheriff, he said he wasn’t needed anymore with the new Federal Marshal,” the bank president mentioned at the closing of the business. “Will he be moving with you to Denver?”

This was Cage’s opportunity to send the new marshal on a wild goose chase. “No, it appears my son has decided to follow up an opportunity in San Francisco. He’ll be visiting now and then, but there are potential investments there. I may follow him later. Good day to you.”

Once Cage was settled in Denver, he would come back with new hired guns and Sikes to seek his revenge. Right now he needed to pay off his men here in Ruby. He would leave the foreman at the mines. They believed it was the older Amos Cage that was their boss. The hired henchmen were waiting for him at the mine office just outside of Ruby. He would remove his disguise and meet them, pay them off, and tell them he was on his way to San Francisco. Even his henchmen thought the mine was owned and operated by the old Amos Cage. The fools!

## *Chapter 20*

Brock, Jared, Chin Su, Smeared Nose, and Wolverine sat in the sitting room of the hotel suite Brock had rented. Nothing had gone well in Ruby. They missed Sikes and Cage. Everything was a dead end. The only thing they had was the testimony of Smeared Nose and Wolverine identifying the horse tracks of Sikes horse as the one they tracked on Geneva's Hope after the shooting.

"The bank president and his disbanded henchmen said Cage left for San Francisco," Jared repeated.

"It doesn't seem right, too easy," Brock countered.

"I agree with little tiger," Chin Su agreed. "It's as if we are being lead. It doesn't seem right someone leaving so suddenly would make it so easy to be found."

"We have tracked many animals," Smeared Nose offered. "The human animal who does not wish to be found is more difficult to track."

"Exactly my point," Brock agreed.

Their attention was drawn to a knock on the door.

"Marshal? Marshal?"

"Who the Bloody Hell could that be?" Brock commented rising to answer the door. He opened the door to a cowboy identified as one of Cage's henchmen. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in?" the cowboy asked politely.

Brock saw no reason not to let the man in. After all, all his deputies were with him. Brock was a man that responded to feelings. He felt this meeting would be a good one. "Come in."

Once the door was closed the man put his hand in shirt pocket. The pocket was under his coat.

Jared's hand slid to his holster. Chin Su tensed ready to strike instantly.

The man pulled out a slim leather pouch. Inside was a Pinkerton badge. "I'm Oakley Andrews, Pinkerton Agent."

"So you're Andrews," Brock said sitting down on the sitting room divan. "Take a chair. I've heard about you being an undercover Pinkerton agent. Why show yourself now?"

"I think you know why," Oakley replied. "There is no point to be undercover and try to find out anything about a man that's flown the coop."

"You were fired," Jared teased.

"That's about it!" Oakley chuckled. "Pinkerton wired me to report to you."

"What do you have to report?" Brock asked.

"Amos Cage showed up to give us our pay and release. He made a point of telling us he was heading to San Francisco," Oakley related. "Only thing is, I don't believe it. Cage trusted only a few. Those men relayed his orders to us. I tried to get into that inner circle and was making it when suddenly this man appears telling us himself he quit the Sheriff badge and was leaving for Frisco. A man like that doesn't change his pattern that easily. He was deliberately trying to give a false trail."

"We've already figured that one out," Jared scorned. "You have a new information?"

"I know you're looking for Sikes," Oakley announced. "He seems to have disappeared."

"Do you know where he is?" Brock said leaning his large frame forward in interest.

"Not at the moment, but where Sikes goes, Earl will follow like a lap dog. Sikes has completely disappeared. Earl hasn't," Oakley told the men. "Earl has taken me into his confidence. He bragged about burning Geneva. He was surprised to find out you lived."

"What if this Earl saw you come in here?" Jared asked.

"He wouldn't pay no mind," Oakley replied. "I rent a room here. I also left a drunken Earl at the Sagebrush Saloon."

Brock sized up the situation quickly. His instincts were honed as well as his training in Tai Chi. "How will you contact us when our friend and incapable assassin goes to his master?"

"You intend to follow Earl?" Jared asked the Pinkerton.

"Like a shadow," Oakley replied. "I'm currently one of his best friends."

Brock chuckled. "How many drinks did you buy him?"

"Oh I'd say," Oakley snickered scratching his chin thoughtfully. "About half a bottle."

"Are you going to get him drunk when you want to contact us?" Jared questioned.

"Nope. That works only once and awhile," Oakley answered. "Seems to me there would not be one good way. I'll come up with different ways, as I need to do so. If it isn't me personally I'll always use the code Bacon. You'll know any message is from me when you hear or read the word." Oakley answered. "Headquarters told me to contact you and I have. I'll be going now."

"Not so fast," Brock said abruptly. "What do you know about Sheriff Cage? You have any evidence on his extortions?"

Oakley tipped back the brim of his Stetson. "Do you?"

"No hard evidence at all," Brock growled. "Only allegations. He was careful not to have anything in writing."

"He's pretty careful about giving orders orally only. Even those are carried by others," Oakley agreed. "I think I'm getting closer. There's something odd about Cage's father. Can't put my finger on it, but I know that is the connection."

"Where is he?" Brock queried.

"That's just it. He left a few days ago. Said he was heading to Denver. I'm certain that's where I'll end up. Where Papa goes, Amos goes," Oakley snorted. "Where Amos goes, Sikes goes, and where Sikes goes, Earl goes. I just know I'll end up in Colorado."

"Judge Samson wants hard evidence," Brock informed.

"You keep in touch with us. I'll be staying here for two weeks. We have a lot to clean up here. Then I'm going to see my woman. I'll be near Ely until we hear from you. We'll keep looking around

here and Ely. More importantly, we have to restore the peace and safety of Pine County dwellers.”

“I read you’re going to be married in three weeks,” Oakley stated to Brock. “Mighty lucky man finding a woman who wants to share her life with a law man.”

“Blue is mighty special,” Brock bragged. “I took a bullet, she cut it out and sewed me back up.”

Oakley shook his head. “Wish I could find me one like that. Gotta leave now. I’ll let you know if anything comes up.” The Pinkerton agent Oakley Andrews left the room.

“You miss Blue?” Jared asked of Brock.

“I do,” Brock confided. “I am half a person when she is not near me. Besides, my back is itching terrible. I need my woman to cut those stitches out.”

Chin Su looked past the jest. He knew Brock was serious. There was a great change in his little tiger. Brock thought things out more clearly, he no longer rushed head into danger or adventure. A silence of self-confidence now surrounded Chin Su’s little tiger. His team of deputies was a perfect balance of wisdom of age, youth, and knowledge of land. All his deputies shared in their own way a power of the Ch’i and understanding of the land.

About twenty-five miners ended up in the Ruby jail for thirty-day sentences when Brock left Ruby with his deputies. He stayed longer than the two weeks planned. Brock helped Ruby select a new Sheriff. Tom Dawden needed some help getting Ruby peaceful once more. Everyone was disappointed that they still didn’t find a shred of evidence against Amos Cage in his Ruby Jail stronghold.

Brock was getting fidgety on Duster. He had been away from Blue much longer than he liked. The group was nearing Geneva’s Branch. The only thing on the lawman’s mind was a long kiss and warm arms of the woman he loved. A day or two until their marriage and he promised himself Blue would be by his side every minute. Nope! They wouldn’t be apart more than a day or two.

“Ryan has set up more guards,” Smeared Nose noted. “The ranch has twice its usual hands staying near the house.”

Blue was standing on the porch staring out across the scenic beauty of Geneva's Branch. She was taking a break from the wedding dress fitting. Her mother was finishing the hem. In two days she would marry her Brock. He had sent her messages while he was in Ely and Ruby. His delivered notes told her everything that was going on and more importantly, he loved her. She noticed movement in the distance. Blue started walking toward the shadowy figures. She broke into a run when she recognized Duster.

Brock saw Blue's figure running to him. At first he didn't recognize her. He'd never seen her in a dress before. That long sandy hair started flowing in the wind and he knew immediately. Duster received a smack on the flanks and broke into a full run.

Before Duster came to a screeching halt, Brock had dismounted and the two lovers were embraced. Brock showered Blue with soft, quick, gentle, kisses. He started on her forehead following to her brows, cheeks, neck, ears, and ending with a long deep kiss on her mouth.

Blue's arms wrapped around Brock tightly. He felt wonderful. His solid massive body was a safe haven in a storm. She stretched to receive his kisses. Every muscle in her body was taut in anticipation of sharing each other's embrace.

Releasing her lips allowing Blue to breathe, Brock whispered. "I never knew any man could miss a woman so much. I need you Blue. I need you like the morning needs the sun and the night needs the moon."

"Together, always," Blue returned softly.

"You two going to the ranch, or just stay here?" Smeared Nose joked.

They had finally caught up to Brock. At first they had no idea what had sent the Marshal racing toward Geneva's Branch. When they recognized Blue, the deputies took their time catching up.

"Go on ahead," Brock ordered. "Blue and I are going to enjoy a few quiet moments as we walk to the ranch."

Blue wrapped her arms around Brock's waist. "Quiet huh?"

Brock lifted her up by her arms and spun her around. Her skirts and hair were flying. "You know darling, I didn't recognize you at first. Wearing that dress and all."

"Do you like it?" Blue giggled as he placed her gently back on the ground.

"Darling, I'd like you in flour sack."

"I'll see what I can do."

"There's one way I would really like to see you," Brock whispered seductively. "In two days I'll have you my way."

Blue stopped and looked into his eyes. The lids were heavy and the sparkle was replaced with a reflection of great wanting. "I want you too."

Brock put her arm on his and started walking once more. "You are my destiny. You can read my soul."

"As you can mine."

A large figure appeared at the front door. Ryan greeted the men but never took his eyes off the two figures holding on to each other walking toward the house.

"Uncle Ryan," Jared offered noting his uncle's grim stare. "They really love each other. Brock is a good man. He is a really good man. I've been working with him now for over a month. He'll make Blue happy."

"That is something I want to find out and believe for myself," Ryan snapped out. "Take the men into the house and have Cho Ling fix you something to eat. Twiggy is in the great room working on Blue's dress."

"What are you planning to do, Uncle Ryan?" Jared asked warily.

"Just go on," Ryan ordered. "This is Pa business."

Reluctantly Jared obeyed and the men went into the house.

Ryan walked briskly to the embracing couple. He took Blue's wrist and yanked gently pulling her away from Brock. "Into the house, Blue."

"But Pa!"

"I said into the house. I want a word with Brock," Ryan growled. It was the tone he used in his voice when he wanted no arguments.

Blue was frantic. She ran into the house to find her mother.

"I won't just let any man marry my daughter," Ryan addressed folding his arms over his chest and staring directly into Brock's eyes.

Brock immediately sensed a challenge. "I promise to make Blue happy. I will care for her with my life."

"Those are just words!" Ryan growled. "I've heard heroic things about you, but I've never seen you as a man needs to be."

"What exactly do you believe a man needs to be?"

"This!" Brock snarled and broadsided Brock using his arms as a battering ram against his chest.

The attack temporarily knocked some wind from Brock's lungs but didn't down him. Gasping for air Brock queried, "Sir?"

Ryan snorted and charged once more. He raised his right arm in a fist ready to slam into Brock's Chin.

Brock easily sidestepped the attack. "This isn't necessary. I will take of Blue with my life."

Ryan regained his balance after missing his target. He charged again.

Brock sidestepped the blow once more. "Please Sir."

"Dammit, fight like a man!" Ryan growled angrily.

Twiggy was being pulled to the door by Blue. Her daughter was nearly incoherent babbling about Brock and Pa and fight.

"Auntie Twiggy," Jared called running to her from the parlor window. "Uncle Ryan is about to get hurt real bad."

That was all Twiggy needed to hear, she ran to the front door and out on the porch to watch her husband flying through the air and landing with a loud thud on the ground. Twiggy ran to Ryan. His body was shaking.

Blue was behind her mother and both knelt by Ryan McGillinen. Blue looked up at Brock and shouted, "What did you do to my Pa?"

Ryan's eyes were shut and his body was shaking vigorously.

Twiggy panicked. She leaned over his body kissing his forehead and crying, "Ryan, Ryan my love, where does it hurt?"

Ryan opened his eyes and snorted, "All over!"

It was then Twiggy realized her husband was laughing.  
“You big dolt!” Twiggy exclaimed and swatted her husband on his arm.

“Ow! That hurt. I told you I hurt all over.”

“You can hurt even more,” Twiggy grumped. She turned to look at Brock and smiled. “Why don’t you finish the job? I think this old man could use a good come up pence.”

Blue curled her lips in a frown and spoke angrily to her father, “He could have hurt you bad you know.”

Brock bent over reaching for Blue and raising her up with his hands on her waist. “I wouldn’t hurt him. He’s your Pa. Besides, I know he just wanted me to prove to him I’m man enough to take care of a treasure like you.”

Blue beamed and let her man ensconce her in his arms.

Ryan rolled over still laughing and stood up straight.  
“Speaking of treasure. I still don’t know if you will marry my Blue. I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her dowry. I just may call this wedding thing off.”

“Pa!” Blue screeched.

“Pay him no mind,” Twiggy appeased. “Nothing and no one will stop your wedding, Blue. I repeat no one will dare over consequence of my wrath!” She turned to look at Ryan. “Do I make my point?” Twiggy stomped toward the house purposely giving Ryan her back.

Sheepishly Ryan replied, “Yes my love.” He walked to Brock and slapped him on the shoulder. “Not bad. Not bad at all. It takes a man to fell me. Just remember a woman can fell her man with a look, a frown, or a smile. Excuse me, I have a wife to make up with.”

“And I have a woman I want to have alone for awhile,” Brock answered. He took Blue’s hand and together walked to the shelter of the big oak trees in the yard.

Under the arms of the budding oaks Brock and Blue kissed and snuggled. Like two young children finding a new toy they enjoyed each other with kisses, touches, and words of love.

“I missed you bad,” Brock told Blue.

“I was beginning to think you’d miss your own wedding,” Blue confided wistfully.

"I'm not about to risk that. I would never have believed I would find someone like you. I knew the moment I saw you, I was in love with you. I knew you would be my life," Brock reassured stroking her hair tenderly with his fingers. "I love you hair," Brock remarked threading his fingers through her long locks. His mouth found hers and for moments neither needed to breathe. They only needed each other's life force.

Blue felt warm and strange feelings traveling through her body. A heat warmed her blood. Her breasts tingled as they were crushed into Brock's chest. A liquid heat filled her between her thighs in her woman's place. "Do we have to wait for our wedding?"

"Darling, you don't know what fire you're playing with," Brock choked. "I want you right now more than I want to breathe, but you are too precious to me. When we love each other as husband and wife I want to make it special. Very special."

"But these feelings," Blue croaked.

"I'm on fire too! We'll be good together. This isn't just mating between us. It is sharing," Brock whispered into her hair. "I want us to love as husband and wife and no other way. These feelings I have for you fill me completely. I'll leave for Ely tomorrow and be waiting for you at the church on Saturday."

"But," Blue responded snuggling into Brock's chest.

"Hush, just kiss me."

Ryan took Chin Su into the dining room with Jared, Wolverine, and Smeared Nose.

"Have a seat," Ryan directed. "I'll get Cho Ling to get you some food. You must be tired and hungry."

"That we are Uncle Ryan," Jared answered for the group.

A few moments later Cho Ling appeared carrying a large tray holding cuts of cold cooked meat, bread, and butter. Twiggy made Samantha set the table for the hungry deputies.

Lucy sauntered into the dining room carrying large mugs to place on the table. Cho Ling reappeared with pots of coffee and tea.

Behind him Lei Ling entered carrying a pitcher of cold milk taken out from the icebox.

Chin Su rose slowly from his chair. His face paled to a chalk white from the yellow tinged ivory countenance. His hands began to shake violently and his breathing erratic.

Wolverine was the first to notice Chin Su's pallor and odd behavior. He nudged Smeared Nose to look. Both warriors were about to leap from the table and catch their new friend thinking he was suddenly afflicted with an ailment and dying.

"Lei?" Chin Su shouted. "Lei Su?"

Lei Ling looked up at the person shouting her name, her old family name, and a forgotten name. The pitcher slipped from her hand and smashed on the floor spilling its contents everywhere. "Chin?"

Upon hearing his name Chin Su ran to Lei Ling. His arms about her in a strong embrace.

"What the?" Jared voiced for the group.

## *Chapter 21*

Cho Ling was carrying a tray of fresh bread and butter when he came upon his sacred and holy wife being embraced by another Chinese man. A jealous rage surged through his body and the small Chinaman charged like a raging bull at the offending Chinese male holding his Lei. The butter bowl shattered on the floor with its contents spilling out on the hand woven rug. The bread loaves flew across the room with one landing in Smeared Nose's lap.

"Thank you for my bread Apo," Smeared Nose chuckled looking to the heavens.

Jared had never seen Cho Ling in such a state and his mouth dropped open.

Wolverine ignored the melee and continued eating.

Cho Ling pulled Lei away and began an attack on the interloper with a raging gusto and solid silver tray. Slamming one blow on the man after another. Chinese expletives that only Lei Ling and Chin Su understood were flowing from Cho Ling's mouth like a rushing river.

Finally, Chin Su had enough. Not knowing just who this man was didn't seem to matter anymore. Chin Su had found Lei and this attack was interrupting his reunion. With two moves Chin Su laid Cho Ling on the floor across the room.

"No!" Lei shouted at Chin Su and ran to Cho Ling. Kneeling beside Cho Ling, Lei lifted his head to cradle it on her lap.

Cho Ling looked at his wife and spoke to her softly in Mandarin, "Who is this man who takes my heart from me?"

Lei Ling stroked her husband's head tenderly and whispered, "It is my brother. I have not seen him in almost thirty years."

"No excuse to hold you so," Cho Ling grumped.

Ryan and Twiggy came into the dining room with Lucy, Samantha, and Little Ryan.

"What the Sam Hill is going on here?" Ryan roared.

Twiggy immediately began to pick up the scattered loaves of bread. She instructed Samantha to get a damp cloth and clean up the butter from the rug.

"Who created this mess?" Ryan demanded walking into the room and staring at Jared.

"If I knew Chinese I might be able to tell you Uncle Ryan," Jared quipped.

"Cho Ling didn't like his woman being held by Chin Su," Smeared Nose offered.

Ryan arched a brow and looked at Chin Su.

"He attacked me," Chin Su explained taking steps to stand next to Lei Ling. "I simply ended his assault."

Cho Ling took his wife's hand and held it affectionately. "Is he really your brother?"

Lei Ling nodded and looked to Chin Su.

Chin Su offered Cho Ling his hand.

Cho Ling grasped the offered hand and rose with Chin Su's assistance. He bowed slightly and greeted the Shaolin Priest. "I apologize for my actions. I did not know you are the Chin Su of my Lei. You are welcome in my life."

Since both men were speaking in Chinese, no one had any idea what was being said.

"Your Lei?"

"Lei Su is my wife. In this place she is known to others as Lei Ling," Cho Ling explained.

"I am honored," Chin Su said bowing. "How long have you been married to my sister?"

"I was blessed with Lei fifteen years ago," Cho Ling elucidated. "My employer, Mr. Ryan had taken me to Carson City

with his family. Just outside of the town some traders had set up sales of indentured Chinese people that were no longer needed by the railroad. Lei Ling was one of them. I saw her and I lost my heart. Mr. Ryan noticed my longing and bought her papers. We were married that day in Carson City.”

“And I’ve never regretted a moment since then,” Lei added. “Cho Ling is a good and caring husband. He has kept me in happiness. I have found this family and no longer cry for my lost family. These people have filled my life.”

No one noticed that Brock had entered the room with Blue and was listening intensely to the conversation.

“You’ve found your sister?” Brock queried in fluent Mandarin.

Chin Su’s face was radiating with joy. “I’ve found her. My journey is at an end. I have found my family and here I will stay.”

“Destiny.”

“Would someone please tell me what the Sam Hill is going on?” Ryan roared once more.

“Chin Su has found his sister,” Brock translated. “He has been searching for her for about thirty years since she was taken by slavers.”

“Tenacious aren’t you?” Jared chortled addressing Chin Su. “How could you ever believe you would find your sister after that length of time.”

“I just knew it, believed it, and felt it,” Chin Su replied stroking his sister’s hair. “I owe you very much Cho Ling for taking her care.”

Cho Ling’s jealousy didn’t cease finding out this man was his wife’s sister. He removed Chin Su’s hand from Lei’s hair. “You owe me nothing for loving *my* wife,” Cho Ling replied enunciating the word my.

Ryan was getting frustrated. He was tired of this private conversation in Mandarin. Although Cho Ling and Lei often exchanged words in their native language, this time was different. Ryan was upset that his new son in law understood every word and was participating in the conversation. It just didn’t set right in his heart that his baby girl would find a man better than her own father. He wanted someone to take care of Blue, but he felt let

down that someone might be better at anything. “Will you speak American!” Ryan roared.

Everyone in the room either jumped or turned their heads toward the growling master of Geneva’s Branch.

Brock was the first to reply. “Lei is Chin Su’s long lost sister. Chin has been searching for her for almost thirty years. She was taken by slavers and put up for sale as an indentured servant. Bought and sold much like the Negroes of the South, but Chinese used for brothels, cooks, railroad gangs, etc. in California.”

“I was aware of those things when I purchased the papers for Cho Ling and Lei,” Ryan acknowledged.

“Our Mr. Ryan never made us work for those ill gotten papers, brother,” Lei informed. “He took us to his heart in Geneva’s Branch, ripped and burnt those papers and gave us fair wages from the very beginning,” Lei told her brother in American. She wanted Chin Su to know immediately what a good and kind man Ryan McGillinen was and had been. “We are very happy here, and I love my husband. Cho Ling is a good man.” Lei knew that her brother was a Shaolin priest and it meant a great deal to her that he understood she was very happy and well treated in this household. “What happened to me in the past is gone. Cho Ling taught me this. We live happily together for each day.”

Twiggy and Samantha had finished cleaning the mess of Cho Ling’s jealous rage.

Holding the severely bent silver tray in her hands Twiggy brought a breath of laughter in a now calmed situation. “Thank heavens you weren’t serving our choco lit cake at the time. I can stand losing the silver tray, but frankly I would have been upset if I lost the cake.”

Ryan formed his face into a scowl and picked up the damaged silver tray. “I’ll have to give this to Garrett to fix for me. In the meantime, I suggest that the three family members have a quiet reunion in the parlor.”

“Boss! BOSS!” a ranch hand called from the front of the house. “Boss, you better get out here and see this!”

Ryan’s brows merged together in a very tight scowl. “What the Sam Hill is happening now?” He turned quickly on his

boot heels and bolted for the front door. These past few months had brought one thing after another. What was it this time? More rustling? More damage on the ranch? Another new visitor? He lost his precious daughter to a stranger and suffered vandalism. He worried for his family. Ryan was ready to explode. He still needed to find out about Cho Ling's Lei and yet here was another disruption.

Ryan ran out to the call of his hand's voice to stop in mid track. He shook his head and couldn't believe his eyes. He rubbed them vigorously. Coming up the main path to Geneva's Branch were drovers herding over 600 head of cattle. Behind the cattle were over 300 milk cows and about 50 calves. Following the cattle were about a hundred horses. Between the horses and large sheep herd were several covered wagons. "What the..."

Brock and Blue had followed Ryan out as well as the rest of the family. All but Brock and Chin were in awe of the spectacle.

To everyone's surprise, Brock grabbed Blue's hand and raced to his horse Duster. He and Blue mounted Duster to gallop and meet an older looking man in the midst of the drovers.

"Uncle Shelby!" Brock called. He was thrilled to see his uncle. For a time he started to think his uncle didn't get his wire. He was beginning to fear for the dower demanded for Blue when Ryan told him the dower had not yet been met. Like the cavalry, his uncle showed up in the nick of time. In the distance Brock saw a parade of Bright Moon's warriors coming up from the hills behind his uncle.

Brock reined his horse up to his uncle.

"This is the bride I presume," Shelby Hampton stated looking at Blue sitting in front of his nephew. "By Gawd she's beautiful, son. How did an ugly little duck like you manage this one?"

Blue raised her brows. Brock was anything but an ugly little duck.

Shelby brought his hand down on Blue's. He noticed her surprise at his greeting. "I've always called this Adonis an ugly little duck. The boy is too pretty by far. I never wanted him to get a sense of self importance."

"It always worked, Uncle Shelby."

"There you are," Shelby snorted. "So ugly little duck, when are you going to introduce me to this beautiful young woman?"

The smile on Brock's face was as broad as the Grand Canyon. "Uncle Shelby, may I have the honor of introducing my fiancé, Aurora Blue McGillinen." He squeezed Blue's hand. "Blue, my Uncle Shelby."

Shelby leaned over his horse and gave Blue a kiss on her cheek. "Lucky boy."

"What is all this?" Brock asked his uncle. It appeared that his requests for dower were doubled and he was very surprised to see his uncle's club cronies scattered around them interacting with the professional drovers.

"Well boy, when my friends heard of your needs they decided to bestow their wedding presents in person," Shelby explained.

"Presents?" Brock asked.

"Damn right. Your entire dower is presents from my friends. I didn't spend a penny. Everyone is happy to take you off the market," Shelby laughed heartily. "This is a major celebration and I haven't had this much fun in years and years."

"A celebration enough to bring all your cronies," Brock stated looking around to see many familiar faces from the club.

"And they haven't had this much fun in ages," Shelby bubbled. "We've had a hell of a good time. Excuse me, Aurora."

"Please call me Blue, I prefer it."

"Blue? That's a strange name for a young lady," Shelby commented cocking a brow to Brock.

"I'm named Aurora Blue for a blue dawn. I was born Christmas Eve near dawn. It was a blue-sky morning. The Shoshone often give names to their children for birth events."

"Why didn't they call you Christmas or Eve?" Shelby teased.

"I was also named for my grandfather, Blue Moon. He is a Shoshone Shaman and very important in the camp," Blue added. She was testing the waters to see what kind of man Shelby Hampton truly was. Brock certainly seemed open minded.

“So my boy is marrying some type of royalty, eh?” Shelby chuckled. “It is strange to me that you don’t look very Indian.”

“I don’t?” Blue replied batting her lashes innocently.

“Not a bit my dear, course Brock doesn’t look very Chinese and my nephew has been raised by one of the finest Shaolin priests I know,” Shelby stated. “Chin Su has been more of a father to Brock than I have most of the time. I sure hope you won’t hold that against him. There are a few people I know that aren’t fond of Brock’s Shaolin influence. I say the Hell with them. Oops, sorry dear.”

“Blue’s grandfather Blue Pool adopted Blue’s mother when she was taken captive as a child from a white family by the Crow. It seems Blue Pool raided the Crow village in retaliation for a raid on the Shoshone. He found Blue’s mother, adopted and raised her as a Shoshone maiden. Blue’s father met her mother and the truth of her true identity was found,” Brock explained.

Blue’s eyes opened wide. “When did you learn all about this?”

“Bennett explained it to me after we were engaged. He told me your mother and father’s story,” Brock explained. “It’s a beautiful love story. It’s almost as beautiful as ours.”

“Almost?”

“Yes, my love, almost,” Brock responded holding Blue closer to him.

The drover boss brought his horse next to Shelby. “Where do we put all these critters?”

“I guess we need to ask that man high tailing it toward us. The one on that big horse,” Shelby replied pointing in the direction of the ranch house.

“That’s my Pa,” Blue announced.

“You saved my wedding day, Uncle Shelby,” Brock laughed. “Blue’s Pa just about told me I couldn’t have his little girl because I didn’t pay the dowry. Now I have enough dowers to even give to Blue’s grandfather. Especially since it was Blue Pool that started this dowry business.”

Ryan reined in his mustang.

“Your dowry, sir,” Brock beamed. “And an equal amount to Blue Pool.”

“Where do you want the critters put?” the drover boss asked Ryan.

“We’ll take them to the pasture right on the edge of Bright Moon’s camp. I want these cattle and horses to calm down before we put them with the other herds,” Ryan ordered. “I’ll show you the way.” Ryan looked at Brock holding his daughter. “This dower came right on time for you. I guess I’ve lost my baby girl after all.”

“You’ll never lose your daughter for as long as you live,” Brock stated. “My Blue is your daughter always. The only difference will be that your daughter will be my wife.”

“Impressive! You’re also philosophical,” Ryan grinned. “We’ll discuss this later. Right now we have a dower to pasture. You’re coming with me of course?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

“I want to show Grandfather,” Blue crowed proudly snuggling into Brock’s protective arms.

“If I know Bright Moon and Blue Pool, they are already on their way here. If we’re lucky, we’ll meet them half way,” Ryan said calmly. He turned to the drover boss. “Follow me.” Ryan urged his mustang forward at a slow trot to lead the way.

The drover boss motioned his drovers to follow.

Ryan had been correct. Just before the drovers had led the cattle, horses, sheep, and wagons to enter the centered pasture, Blue Pool, Bright Moon, and several warriors met them.

Blue Pool recognized immediately it was his granddaughter’s dower. He could also tell it was double the amount requested. “Ryan, today your daughter brings you even more wealth. I see now why you wished for daughters.”

“You are getting half, Blue Pool. It is an honor for the privilege of marriage to your granddaughter,” Brock announced.

“And you give us the land of peace,” Blue Pool declared waving his arm around the offered dower.

“That is my understanding.”

“You wear the star of law. You bring peace with your presence for all nations. Under your star we are all the same. You

bring us peace. The dower is fulfilled.” Blue Pool said grinning broadly.

“I’ll be,” Ryan uttered. “And here I thought I could catch you on a technicality.”

“I swear to all of you, that I will uphold the law. The law will be administered equally and fairly.” Brock vowed.

“The dower is complete,” Blue Pool decreed. “My granddaughter has brought to our people the same blessing as my daughter. This is a good pairing. Perhaps these old eyes will see yet another generation and teach them the ways of the people.”

“This would be a good thing,” Brock agreed respectfully.

Saturday morning Bennett and Brock paced in the hotel room. They were both dressed in black serge suits, white linen shirts with stiff collars. Each groom had a white rose in his lapel courtesy of Geneva’s Hope rose garden.

Grady sat on a chair watching his grandson and his future grandson in law. He grinned at their nervousness. It was the same for him when he married their grandmother.

Braden sat quietly on a chair watching his son with his own thoughts. He questioned himself on how time had passed too quickly. His young son had grown into a man.

“Will you stop pacing?” Bennett snapped at Brock.  
“You’re making me nervous.”

“You’re the one pacing,” Brock growled back. “You’re acting too nervous to be a happy groom.”

“Me? Look who is talking? The Rogue of Eastern Europe, England, Scotland, and Ireland,” Bennett retorted.

“All that was finished when I met Blue. You always were jealous of me,” Brock barked. “I am not the least bit nervous.”

“You are nothing but an over inflated peacock! Jealous? Hardly!” Bennett snarled. “I’m not the least nervous. Your pacing is driving me crazy.”

“If you are not pacing, why is there a worn hole in the rug?” Brock sneered.

Bennett looked down. There wasn’t any hole, but it was obvious by the carpet pile his shoes had left a solid indentation.  
“Oh shut up!”

Uncle Shelby had entered during the discourse and announced. “Gentlemen, if you can keep your tempers in check, the carriage is ready to take you to the church.”

“Mind your manners boys,” Grady chided. “Our parson doesn’t take kindly to arguments or fisticuffs in his church.”

Uncle Shelby laughed. “It’s a good thing these two boys have separate carriages. The brides might be a bit upset finding their grooms had a pair of shiners.”

“Or warmed pants. They aren’t too old for me to give them a good strapping on their behinds to remind them to behave,” Grady threatened harmlessly.

“I’d hold them down for you,” Braden volunteered.

## *Chapter 22*

Jason Whitman and Ryan McGillinen, the fathers of the brides, were nervously waiting outside the hotel suite that had been rented for Julia, Blue, the wedding party, and the mother of the bride to dress.

“How long does this take?” Ryan mumbled. “It took less time for Twiggy to give birth to Blue.”

Jason rechecked his pocket watch. “I have no idea, but we’ll be late for the ceremony if they don’t come out soon.”

“That wouldn’t upset me in the least,” Ryan replied smiling broadly. “It doesn’t seem real that my baby will be getting married. Where did the time go? One minute I’m carrying my baby girl in a cradleboard and the next minute I’m giving her into marriage. She doesn’t seem old enough yet.”

“I understand what you are saying. Julia has been my life since her mother died. Suddenly I’ll be sharing my girl,” Jason sighed.

There was a moment of silence and both men realized the same thing. “Gawd, they will soon have children of their own.”

“I’ll be a grandfather!” the men exclaimed together. Both men shook their heads.

“Are you nervous too?” Jason queried.

“My palms are sweating like a running fountain and my knees are wobbling like two legs on a three leg chair,” Ryan responded. “How about you?”

“Scared to death that I am going to break down and make a fool of myself,” Jason answered.

“I have a feeling I will break down. If you break down, we’ll be in good company.”

“How do I look Mama?” Blue gushed happily twirling in the beautiful wedding dress her Aunt Kerry and Grandmother had worn. The dress had been taken care of lovingly by Kerry all these years. Blue was thrilled to wear it when Aunt Kerry had offered it. True to the McGillinen Clan, it needed little alterations.

Twiggy’s eyes were misted when she choked out her response. “I do believe you are the loveliest bride I have ever seen.” Her hand immediately picked up her lacy handkerchief and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Kerry was breathless. She looked at her niece and could only think of her own reflection in the mirror when she wore that dress nearly twenty years ago.

Samantha and Lucy finished primping by softly patting the ribbons on their bridesmaid dresses.

“I can’t wait until I’m the bride,” Samantha bubbled. “Then I’ll be just a beautiful!”

“I can wait,” Twiggy reprimanded. “One daughter for a time is enough!”

Kerry finished helping Julia with the buttons on her gown. She was Julia’s honorary mother for the wedding. “Bennett will be breathless when he sees you.”

Samantha Crawford offered each bride a pearl necklace she and Joseph had bought for the brides. “Here is something new.”

“And something borrowed,” Kerry took two bracelets off her wrist and put one on Julia and one on Blue.

“And something blue,” Twiggy offered. “Besides my daughter, Blue.” She handed each bride an ice blue reticule to hold for the giving of money at the reception.

An anxious knock at the door disrupted the hugs and kisses.

“Ladies!” Jason uttered. “You will be late for the ceremony if we don’t leave soon!”

Kerry was the first to step outside. She opened the door for Julia.

“Papa,” Julia whispered placing her hand upon his offered arm.

Jason eyes filled with tears instantly. “You’re beautiful. You look like your mother did on our wedding day.” Finding he could barely stand, he walked toward the stairs with his daughter wondering how he managed to stand upright.

Kerry stood by her brother when Twiggy and Blue walked out the door.

“I don’t believe it!” Ryan said completely stunned.

“It’s déjà vu,” Kerry whispered.

“It’s you twenty years ago!” Ryan gasped. “Right down to the diamond tiara, veil, satin dress, and bouquet of wild prairie flowers and white tea roses.”

“You remember the day well, brother.”

“How could I ever forget the day you stopped being my baby sister and became a Brit’s wife?”

“Braden’s wife.”

“Same thing,” Ryan choked back his tears. “This time my baby girl is becoming a wife.”

“And my son is marrying Julia,” Kerry wept. “When did they grow up?”

Blue looked into her father’s soft gray eyes. “Pa?”

“I’m not ready for this, baby girl.”

“Yes you are, Pa,” Blue smiled and took her father’s arm. “Let’s go to the church. It is my wedding day.”

Twiggy quickly lifted the lace handkerchief to her eyes. The tears were streaming down her cheeks. She took her husband’s other arm and together they walked to the carriage. Julia and her father were already seated in the front carriage when Kerry joined them.

Arriving at the church they were met by many townspeople that gathered for the wedding. There was no seating in the small church since the McGillinen family took up nearly the entire

church. The only McGillinens not present were the ones currently in England and Ireland. Dwayne, Breena, their twin daughters and youngest son did make the journey with the elder Astors, their children and grandchildren. Aunt Alyson and Uncle Duffey sat with Morning Song and Grady. Blue Pool and Bright Moon were present with their wives. Eye of Hawk, Little Bear, and Tracker were present with their wives and family. Uncle Shelby with all his friends from San Francisco was present as witness for Brock.

Reverend Weems chuckled at the crowd when he greeted the two carriages. "We should have a McGillinen wedding when the Bishop visits. I'd be certain to impress him with this crowd."

The Reverend greeted the brides, bridesmaids, and fathers of the brides. He then led the mothers to their places in the front row. He then signaled for the harpsichord player to begin.

All stood and when Braden saw Blue entering with Ryan he felt weak kneed. He swayed and pulled Kerry to his side. "Bloody Hell! It is you!"

"Was I that beautiful in the gown?" Kerry whispered.

"You were the same vision of beauty," Braden returned. "I can't believe it. It is just like seeing you walk down the aisle on Grady's arm all over again. I remember the pearls and diamonds sparkling like stars surrounding you and reflecting rainbows on the white satin gown. The lace on the gown reminded me of little clouds. The rainbows darted about your hair when the sun hit your diamond tiara. The veil gave you an angelic quality that took my breath away."

Kerry had no words. She leaned into her husband's arms. They both wept.

Kerry and Braden held each other up when Bennett and Julia said their vows.

Ryan openly wept and sobbed when Blue and Brock repeated their vows. Twiggy wept until her lace handkerchief was soaking wet.

Samantha and Joseph Crawford beamed with pride for their granddaughter.

Jason Whitman and Uncle Shelby held on to each other for support.

When the Reverend introduced Mr. and Mrs. Bennett Wessex and Marshal and Mrs. Brock Hampton the church vibrated with cheers and applause. The new couples were greeted and congratulated by the gathered townspeople when they left the church. It took more than an hour before the couples finally climbed into their carriages for the ride to Geneva's Hope and the reception. All were invited to the reception. Braden and Kerry made certain there was enough food for the entire town of Ely should they all decide to celebrate with the family.

Unknown to them, a pair of eyes were watching the church through a spyglass.

"Looks like that new Marshal tied the knot. Won't Sikes and Cage be interested in that?" Earl commented.

"Why would Sikes care?" Oakley asked sarcastically

"Cuz that Marshal married Ryan McGillinen's daughter, that's why! Old Sikes fancied that Blue for hisself. Oooweee, Sikes will be madder than a puissant," Earl crowed.

"When are we meeting Sikes? Will Cage be coming with him?" Oakley queried.

"Sikes told me they're both coming in from Denver sometime next week," Earl announced. "We are to meet them in the Red Alley district."

"Cage coming to collect his booty?" Oakley inquired.

"The last of it," Earl quipped. "Cage is sure mad that the new Marshal put an end to his protection money. He ain't too happy about losing his job as sheriff, neither."

"When did he go to Denver? I thought he went to San Francisco?"

"Cage is cagey. He told everyone he was heading to Denver. He don't go nowhere without his Pa near. Of course he went to Denver where his Pa was. You still are too new in this group. You'll learn."

"I expect so," Oakley agreed. "We just keep watching the town?"

"Yup! Cage and Sikes want to know how often the Marshal comes town, what he does when he is in town, and what

the town is like when the Marshal's gone," Earl parroted his orders.

"Nothing seems to happen if the Marshal is here or not," Oakley grouched. He was tired of being with Earl the underling in the group. It seemed like he would never get any hard evidence against Cage's racketeering. At least he knew Cage had shifted operations to Denver. He would send word to his Denver contact to start checking banks and transactions for Cage or his father.

"You'll be seeing some fun soon enough when Sikes finds out the Marshal snatched his girl," Earl laughed. "Wonder what Cage will think. He seemed partial to the McGillinen women hisself, but he truly hates that Marshal."

Garrett drove Bennett and Julia's carriage. Jared drove Brock and Blue's carriage.

"Jared?" Brock called over the clip clop of the horse's hooves. "Is everything taken care of?"

"Took care of it last night," Jared responded turning and giving his cousin, Blue, a broad smile.

Blue leaned into Brock. "Care of what?"

"A surprise for my new bride," Brock replied holding Blue's chin and pressing his lips gently to her lips. "We are a special couple. We will have a special night."

Blue was thrilled that Brock had planned something special. "Tell me!"

"It's a surprise, but here is part of the plan. We're expected to spend our wedding night at Geneva's Hope like Bennett and Julia. When the time comes for us to change from our wedding clothes, I want you to put on your duck pants and riding boots. Jared will have Duster and Ginger saddled for us."

"Where are we going?" Blue asked eagerly.

"Our place," Brock answered with a big grin.

"You couldn't have built a ranch yet. Did you rent a hotel room?" Blue quizzed.

"You'll understand later," Brock replied. "Until then I think I'll make use of this time snuggling with my bride. When we get to Geneva's Hope we will be separated for too long of a time."

"Start snuggling husband," Blue laughed.

Brock pulled her on his lap. "Now I can legally snuggle!"

Brock's predictions had been accurate. After a large meal of beef, pork, lamb, corn, casseroles, and champagne the musicians began playing music. Blue danced with her uncles, her cousins, her grandfather, her father, Uncle Shelby and his friends, the drovers, the hands, and a number of townspeople. She barely saw her husband beyond seeing him dance with her aunts, great aunts, mother, grandmothers, cousins, sisters, and townspeople. They had a brief moment together when they cut the wedding cake with Bennett and Julia.

Julia and Blue were exhausted from dancing and being awake since dawn. Their reticules were filled to overflowing with bridal gifts of money. Presents were stacked up in Geneva Hope's library to be opened at another time. Their Great Aunt Alyson had carefully catalogued all the gifts with the names of who gave them and who the gifts were for.

The guests were beginning to leave when Kerry and Twiggy led the young brides up to their rooms to change.

"What's this?" Twiggy asked when Blue ignored the beautiful translucent peignoir her mother had previously set out for her.

Blue walked to her bags and pulled out a pair of duck pants, a clean white linen shirt, and her boots. "Brock has something special planned, Mama. Do you want to help me get ready?"

Twiggy raised a brow. "Something Special? And you are wearing pants?"

"He told me to wear them," Blue replied absentmindedly.

Twiggy raised both brows. "I can't imagine what special thing your new husband has in mind, but as my daughter, of course I will help you."

Blue dressed quickly and took her bag. Brock was waiting by her door. To Blue's surprise Brock drew her into his arms and

kissed her passionately. “My love. My life,” he whispered in her hair.

Twiggy choked back her emotions. She watched them walk arm in arm down the hall toward the back stairwell. “Be safe and happy my darlings.” She returned to the dwindling party.

Brock and Blue rode at a slow pace toward the Ruby Mountains near Geneva’s Hope. Ginger and Duster enjoyed the slow gait as they made their way in the dark.

Blue never asked where they were going. It didn’t matter. She was with her husband. Although they did not yet unite as man and wife, she felt as Brock did. They were kindred souls united by a force as strong as time and the universe.

Blue noticed an isolated Shoshone lodge in the distance. She smiled knowing immediately this was her special surprise. The Shoshone warrior would call for his bride and take her from her family’s lodge. The warrior would then take her to his lodge set in a private place. It would be here under the stars they would unite as husband and wife.

“You are wonderful husband,” Blue whispered leading Ginger down the path toward the conical lodge.

“Our special place under the stars for my wonderful wife,” Brock returned. All these years he had tasted and enjoyed a variety of women. He had no intention of marrying. Once he met Blue, all he could think about was uniting as one. The change from rogue to devoted husband was nearly instantaneous.

At the lodge Brock dismounted Duster and lifted Blue from Ginger. He allowed her to slide slowly down his muscled form. He was instantly hard. Time was near to be a husband. It was so different this time. Lust had no part of this wanting. This was his spirit he was uniting. He lowered his head to kiss his wife.

The kiss was heady. It was intoxicating. Brock broke the kiss to let Blue breathe although he felt he needed no breath. Blue was his life and breath.

Brock held the flap of the lodge for Blue to enter. He followed right after her.

Blue gasped. The inside had been brightly decorated and filled with every comfort of a Shoshone lodge. Bear and Buffalo

skins were placed near the center. Embers revealed a small fire had been built in preparation of their arrival. A tripod held a black pot filled with pine nut porridge. Several brightly decorated parfleches were tucked neatly near the circumference of the lodge. Blue knew they were gifts from the Shoshone people to the new bride. Inside the parfleches she would find tools, clothes, and food. "How long will we stay?"

"I was hoping about a week," Brock replied. "I know I have responsibility to the people of Nevada, but for now I want to be with you alone. It is selfish, but I can't help myself."

"It's what I want also," Blue agreed. "This is so special. Thank you."

"Jared helped me arrange it. Eye of Hawk's wife and several women of the camp helped. I was told some women from your grandfather's camp helped," Brock answered lingering near her ear with soft whispers. "I do want this to be a very special time for us."

"It will be." Blue took her husband's hands and wrapped them around her slim waist. She began to unbutton his shirt. "I want to feast on your beautiful body again."

Brock laid his head upon Blue's hair savoring the sensual fingers of his new wife. "Again?"

"I've seen you naked. You are magnificent," Blue answered huskily.

"I've undressed you in my dreams many times," Brock stated breathlessly. Blue's fingers were circling his male nipple. The sensation was erotic to an extreme.

"I didn't have to dream," Blue responded before she leaned into Brock's chest and laved her tongue on his nipple. She used her teeth and gently nibbled the hardened nub.

"Oh God," Brock whimpered. "Oh Jesus!" His plan was to be slow and gentle, but Blue's machinations were driving him to a deep edge of masculine need. He removed his shirt while kissing Blue's hair, eyebrows, cheeks, and ears. "God, I need you." He fumbled trying to remove his belt.

"I'll help," Blue offered kissing his chest and letting her tongue lave a path to the top of his pants. Blue removed the belt with quick efficiency. "You are an Adonis my love." Without

hesitancy Blue dipped her hand into the pulsing bulge evident in her husband's pants. She touched his throbbing manhood. "Do you like this?" Blue questioned stroking the powerful muscle of his manhood.

"I'm going to die!" Brock croaked. Never had a woman led the way in copulation. He had always been the seducer. Yet, this felt so right. The practiced and experienced hands of her husband undressed Blue quickly. His hands pulled her naked body to his.

Together they dropped to their knees. Blue and Brock were cocooned in the tactile, emotional, and spiritual senses of their joining.

To each the physical joining was a paroxysm of pleasure and spiritualism combined.

## *Chapter 23*

Blue woke in the warmth of Brock's arms. The fox pelts soft under her body. She moved her head to find her new husband smiling down at her. His hand playfully squeezing her young breast with his fingers teasing the puckered nipple.

"How are you feeling?" Brock queried.

"As wonderful as your smile."

"I love you."

"And I you," Blue replied throwing her leg over Brock's thick thigh. Her hand found his masculine hardness.

A low growl erupted from Brock's throat. "Blue, you drive me to near madness."

"What a nice thing to say," Blue moaned. Already she wanted her husband again. A fire in her mind and body caused her to touch her husband's body in worship.

Brock positioned his body over Blue and entered to Blue's welcoming warmth. Never had he enjoyed such sexual pleasure. The joining of bodies between him and his new bride was perfection.

Together they reached the peak of euphoric ecstasy. Together they soared to heights of pleasure.

Blue's breathing was still erratic when she gently wiped the moisture beads from her husband's face. Wet golden curls swirled around his forehead and cheeks.

It took longer for Brock to calm his runaway heart. A warm serenity and peace was now his Ch'i. He knew it was because he had found his true soul mate and his part of earth that would be a true home and where his force with his mate would be the strongest.

Brock embraced his wife and was still reeling in the magic of their love. He knew all the parts of his life came together now. He would be forever tied to this land and the keeping of the peace in this land of heaven's beauty and virgin forest. Blue was his destiny and Geneva their fate.

It was this moment Brock determined he would no longer build a home in Ely for Blue, but expand Geneva lands with a purchase of land butting both Geneva's Hope and Geneva's Branch. He would call his ranch Geneva's Force. Together he and Blue would be the force to protect and expand Geneva lands. He would speak to Uncle Shelby about it next week.

"Another smile, husband?" Blue purred.

"Lying near you keeps a smile on my face," Brock teased.

"I like being next to you, but I have a need to bathe, dress, and eat," Blue replied.

Brock's growling stomach gave agreement.

They laughed at the noise and rose from their bed.

Blue and Brock placed a soft blanket around their bodies and went to the hot spring near the lodge. The warm bath was more than relaxing and cleansing. It was fun.

Blue and Brock splashed one another like little children.

Brock washed Blue's hair, neck, and back.

Blue returned the favor and playfully used the soap on Brock's magnificent body and dipped down to clean his masculinity.

Brock responded instantly. He lifted his wife to rest her buttocks on his thighs inserting his manhood into the warm haven of his wife's femininity. His mouth descended over her lips and his kiss was both possessive and passionate.

Blue locked her arms around her husband's neck savoring the passion ride.

Later Brock released his wife allowing her to slip sensually down his rock hard body. "I will never get enough of you."

"Should you ever tire of me," Blue warned with jest and tapping her husband's nose. "I would have to shoot you."

"At least I will never have to face that future," Brock laughed.

"Good. I think we are clean enough," Blue giggled. "I'm starving. I could eat a moose."

"Raw or cooked?" Brock returned.

"At this moment, it could be raw."

The couple walked back to the lodge under the same blanket.

Blue prepared a hearty meal from the foodstuffs left by the Shoshone women.

Brock felt completely sated by mid morning. "This is heaven and I'm in the middle of it. I almost wish we could stay here forever."

Blue went into her snuggle position and purred contentedly, "So do I."

"I want his blood," Cage growled angrily after reading Earl's report. "He destroyed everything I had built."

"The bastard married my Blue," Sikes grumbled quietly. "I want his blood and more."

"It's the time to get my revenge," Cage snarled. "We leave tomorrow for Ely. Hampton is in Ely with his purty new bride." Cage had no idea where Brock was. He only heard that Brock and Blue McGillinen would be married in Ely. His plan was not to attack Brock directly. He knew diversion would be more successful. Once again he would take the guise of being his father. His plan would work. He was certain of it.

That reminder soured Sikes even more. He remained silent. Cage was not a person to reveal his own anger. It was

enough the two had the same resolve to kill the foreign usurper that took their territory.

The two men mounted their horses to meet Earl and Oakley just outside Ely. It would be a long ride from Denver. The discomfort and length of the ride would add to the anger already festering.

At the first campfire out of Denver Cage started sharing his plan for revenge.

“Damn it,” Ryan complained. “It’s been a week. Where the hell did he take my baby girl?”

“You know they went to a lodge for the week of togetherness,” Twiggy answered nonchalantly. She was working on a weaving as a gift for Blue and Brock’s new home. “Our baby girl is a grown married woman now. You have to let go, Ryan.”

Shelby was sitting in the main room sketching out a plan for a ranch house. His friends had left. He accepted Ryan’s invitation to stay at Geneva’s Branch. For the past week he found a peace and serenity he never enjoyed before. He had already found a property near Geneva’s Branch that he purchased. Wouldn’t Brock be surprised when he presented the home and land as a present for the new bride?

Shelby had also spent a lot of time with the Shoshone people and Blue Pool. He learned that women were the most important and valued people of a camp. Contrary to his religious learning that a woman was second to man, he was surprised to understand the Shoshone concept of women being the creators of life and men the destroyers. He also learned that women owned the property. Men had to tow the line or be kicked out. He really enjoyed that concept when he thought of his nephew. That is why he decided to build this house on the land he bought and give it to Blue. He would ask Blue if he could live with them. He would be a good and polite resident.

“Twiggy is right,” Shelby agreed. “Besides, the Indian way of privacy to get to know one another is a pretty good idea if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn’t ask you,” Ryan grumbled. He knew Twiggy and Shelby were right. He just didn’t want to give up his

baby girl. The vacancy hurt him deep inside. He took care of Blue and all his children from the moment they were born. He found the pain of losing Blue was even deeper than the loss he felt when he lost Kerry.

The retort from Ryan upset Twiggy. Shelby was a guest in their house and she would not have Ryan's foul mood affect the happiness in her household.

"Ryan Patrick McGillinen!" Twiggy snapped. "You will not speak to our guest like this or you will find yourself a guest in the bunkhouse!"

Ryan couldn't bring himself to apologize. He knew he was being completely unreasonable, but he couldn't stop the pain. It was deep and lonely. Even though Braden had married Kerry, she still lived in Geneva's Hope. They were still close and they saw each other at least once a month, but most often two or three times a month. Twiggy and Kerry had become friends and as close as sisters. The fear of not seeing Blue nearly every day was unbearable.

Twiggy watched as Ryan stomped out of the house. She knew he would be saddling Cheater and going out for a ride. Although Twiggy missed Blue as much as her husband, she focused on her responsibility and spent more time with Samantha, Lucy, and little Ryan.

"The last time I saw a hurt like that was when I found Brock and Chin Su in China. He had just lost his mother and father. The boy was only four years old. He found his mother and father dead. Mountain bandits murdered them."

"We heard Brock's parents were no longer alive, but no one told us how they died," Twiggy remarked. A sudden thought saddened her. "Did Brock see his parents die?"

"He did not see them murdered, but being such a small lad at the time he didn't have the concept of death. He came out from hiding after the bandits had robbed the mission and left. He found his parent's bodies. He thought they were sleeping. He pulled a blanket from the house and covered his mother, my sister," Shelby gulped and swallowed the lump in his throat. "He went to sleep near my sister's body. Cho Ling found him and has taken care of him ever since."

“When did you find out all of this?” Twiggy inquired. The vision of that sad scene had cut directly to her heart.

“I was on one of my return sea voyages and arrived only a week after the tragedy,” Shelby shared. “Jonathan had been expecting me. Cho Ling greeted me instead. He had buried Veronica and Jonathan without Brock knowing. The little lad still didn’t understand what had happened.”

“Then you brought him back with you?”

“I was a sea captain. We stayed on the high seas until Brock was thirteen. He had the best tutors money could buy. Nothing was too good for Jonathan’s son. He also saw the world and was trained by Cho Ling. No boy could have had a better teacher than a Shaolin Priest.”

Twiggy’s curiosity was piqued by Shelby’s quick acceptance of a strange culture influencing his nephew. “Did you ask Cho Ling to stay with you?”

“At first I was quite surprised by the fluent English the little china man spoke,” Shelby remembered. “The surprise was quickly forgotten when Cho Ling told me of my brother’s death. We talked for many days. He was searching for his sister and learned she was taken on a ship. I invited him on board my ship and stay with us while we searched for his sister.”

“And he has found her now,” Twiggy smiled. Of all the pain in the families, there was happiness in full measure. Geneva was like that. It made hope a reality.

“Cho Ling told Brock he felt this was the end of their journey and the beginning of their new life,” Shelby agreed. “The little China man is almost spooky in his fortune telling.”

“Not Spukey,” Twiggy corrected. “My raising father is a Shaman and is also wise in future events.”

Shelby chuckled. “I forgot.”

“Mama?” Samantha shouted from the front door.

“Yes?”

“Pa and I are going riding.”

“Be careful, sweetie!”

“We will, Mama.”

Once the door was heard closing Shelby asked Twiggy, "Does he go riding with his children a lot?"

Twiggy smiled broadly. "All of our children were on horses before they could walk. Their Pa held every one of them in a cradleboard and on his lap in the front of the saddle. Yes, he rides with our children a lot."

"He really misses Blue," Shelby stated. "I think I really envy a man that is that close to his family."

"Our family is Ryan's life," Twiggy sighed happily. "Twenty years ago if Blue Pool would have told me how happy I would be today I wouldn't have believed a word of it."

"How is Ryan going to handle this marriage?"

Twiggy bit her lip in nervousness. "I'm not sure how Ryan will handle it. I think it will depend on your nephew?"

"What is Brock to do?" Shelby asked curiously.

"If Ryan can see our Blue regularly, at least two or three times a week for a while. I think he will be able to deal with our baby growing up to be a woman."

Twiggy sat next to Shelby on the divan. "Do you think you might be able to speak to Brock?"

Shelby took Twiggy's hand and patted it gently. "Of course I will speak to Brock. I will also speak with Chin Su because he has even more influence with Brock."

"Thank you," Twiggy said simply. She rose to put on her apron and called to her other three children. It was time for them to begin their morning chores before classes began.

Lei Ling still maintained her classroom hours rigidly regardless of the time she spent with her brother Chin Su since he returned with Brock before the wedding. Chin Su was an additional guest in the Ryan McGillinen household.

It was mid morning when Twiggy heard Blue calling for her. At first she shook her head thinking she was imagining things, but when she heard the horses hooves thundering near the house she dropped her weaving and ran to the front door.

Blue leaped off Ginger's saddle and ran to her mother. Brock leaned over Duster's mane to retrieve Ginger's reins. He smiled proudly as his new young wife ran to her mother's open

arms. The two hugged each other so tightly they nearly squeezed the breath from each other.

“Baby, not that I’m not glad to hold you again, but why are you here?” Twiggy questioned happily. Her hands cupped her daughter’s face. Tears were running down her cheeks.

Brock handed the reins of the two horses to Gene, one of Geneva Branches hands. He came up behind Blue and put his arms around her waist. “We came to ask a favor of you and your husband.”

At that moment Uncle Shelby appeared at the door. He was surprised to see his nephew and new niece. Before he could react or greet Brock he was nearly knocked down by Little Ryan.

Little Ryan grabbed on to Blue’s leg and squeezed with all his might. “You’re back! Pa said you wouldn’t be coming back that you was married now. Are you gonna stay? Did you get unmarried? I missed you. Don’t go away again.”

Blue’s hand mussed her little brother’s hair. “Whoa, one question at a time.”

Little Ryan looked up and grinned. “First time Pa was wrong and I’m glad. You’re back. Why did you bring him with you? He took you away!” Little Ryan’s eyes narrowed with a glint of anger to focus on Brock. He pointed his small finger in accusation.

“Ryan!” Twiggy gulped in embarrassment. “Stop right now and go to your room.”

“Blue is my sister. I’m not going to let go. If she goes again she is taking me. We are family!”

It wasn’t funny, but it was funny. Twiggy bit her lip to hold back her laughter.

Blue nearly fell when she tried to move. Little Ryan was firmly attached.

Brock grinned but took Uncle Shelby’s arm pulling him to the side. “I’d like a word with you Uncle Shelby.” They walked toward the barns.

Blue managed to extricate herself and walked in the house with her mother and little brother. Lucy was soon hugging her big sister’s waist as they walked into the main room. “Where’s Pa?”

"He's out riding with Sam," Lucy responded. "He's been so sad since you left. He rides out a lot. Sam goes with him now to keep him company. She's trying to make him feel better and hopes he won't miss you too much."

"She's trying to take your place," Little Ryan interjected.

"It's been really hard on your Pa losing you," Twiggy added. "He'll have to get used to it. I hope this is one of many visits. It will be easier on your Pa if he can see you often."

"That is one of the reasons Brock and I came to visit," Blue stated. Her eyes sparkled to reveal a contentment and happiness.

Twiggy's finger traced a line from her daughter's brow, down her cheek, and touched her lips. "I can see you are happy and content. You are a true woman now. He is good to you?"

Blue beamed. "Yes, Mama! He is very good to me."

"What is the purpose of this visit, my Blue?" Twiggy questioned.

"We'll discuss it when Brock returns. He wanted to talk to Uncle Shelby about buying land for a ranch near here and building our house."

"I thought he was building a house in Ely for you."

"We spent a lot of time talking in our lodge. We both agreed we love the land and open spaces," Blue answered. Her face showed a special seriousness that Twiggy recognized when her daughter would say something she was serious about. "Brock takes his obligation to Geneva and the people seriously. He wants to help create a haven of security. We both agreed and want this. Becoming a part of Geneva is what we both want."

"You've discussed this thoroughly with Brock?"

"We discuss everything, Mama. I love him more for it. We both promised we will share everything and keep no secrets."

Twiggy smiled. Their daughter truly had married into the same happiness she and Ryan shared. If only Ryan could release his sorrow and accept not the loss of his daughter, but the gain of another family to love.

"When Brock returns we would like to discuss our plans with you. A family discussion."

Little Ryan and Lucy also vied for Blue's attentions. They began telling Blue about everything they did since her wedding.

“You want what?” Shelby chuckled. Brock had no idea what his nephew was asking for was already started.

“Blue and I agreed we don’t want city life. We want to live in the open area near Geneva. Actually we want to create an additional Geneva. It would be another haven of natural beauty, peace, and serenity.”

Shelby couldn’t contain himself. He began laughing. “I feel the same way, son. I couldn’t see myself returning to the stuffy men’s club in Frisco. I enjoyed myself too much on the drive. I felt alive for the first time in a long long time.”

“I’d be proud to have you stay with us,” Brock stated with a return smile to his Uncle’s hysterics. “Especially because I need your help to buy some land and start building a ranch house.”

“That’s just it my boy, it is already started. I bought the land to the west of Geneva’s ranch lines. Right along the Ruby Valley. I was just working on ranch plans. We’ll work on it together.”

Brock smiled broadly. The Force of Tai Ch’i was working with great power and he had never been so happy in his life. Blue had changed his life from emptiness to a fullness of happiness. His Uncle Shelby was even reveling in the power. After being denied a family at such a young age he was enjoying a complete family and a wife meant to be his greatest joy. “I’d like that, Uncle Shelby.”

“We have to make it big enough,” Shelby laughed. “With your new family, guests, and babies. I can’t wait until I have grandchildren to spoil.”

“We are working on it,” Brock replied grinning. He put his arm on his uncle’s shoulder. They walked back to the ranch house.

Together they walked into the large family room. They were thrilled with the animated conversations taking place with Blue as the center of attention. Chin Su, Cho Ling, and Lei Ling had already joined the family.

“Pa, let’s ride out to the west forty,” Sam suggested reining her horse Chocolate.

"A good ride, Sam," Ryan agreed. "We need to check on the cattle there."

"Pa, Blue isn't gone forever is she?" Sam queried. She was worried about the change in her father. She was worried their family and relationships would change. Sam worshipped her father just as Blue did. Their entire family worshipped Ryan McGillinen. "I love you, Pa. You've changed."

Ryan reined Cheater to look at his daughter. "I love you, Sam. What do you mean changed?"

"I mean that since Blue married you have been sad. You have us worried. Don't you love all of us? Aren't we enough to love you? Is Blue the only one you love? Even more than Mama?"

Ryan choked. Had he been that depressed? Had he hurt his family is his selfish pity of losing his Baby? Was the marriage that bothered him? Or was it realizing he would lose all his family to marriage? Was it really fear of losing his family? Here he was actually building a wall to protect his heart and fears that was alienating his family with the little time that was left as a family.

Sam stared directly into her father's eyes. She waited patiently for an answer.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Ryan muttered. "Sam, I love you. I love all of you. I've been wrong not to see what is really bothering me."

"You miss Blue that much?"

"Of course I do. Just like I would miss you, Lucy, and Little Ryan. I'm getting old. I'm afraid of that. I'm afraid of losing you, your sister, and your brother. You are all growing up and soon you'll leave me," Ryan confessed.

"You started out with just Mama," Sam stated with wisdom beyond her age. "Mama loves you. You love her. Together you can be just the two of you and still enjoy the larger families we bring you. I know I want children. Not like Lucy of course, but I want children and I'm sure Blue, Lucy, and Ryan will bring more. Just look at Grandpa Grady. He started with just you and look at how happy is when he is with all of us. All of his grandchildren."

Ryan leaned over the saddle and picked up Sam's hat. "Where are you hiding in there Plato, great philosopher that you are?"

"Oh Pa," Sam laughed and blushed with pride.

"Let's go check out the west forty. Then we'll go home and share some choc o lit cake with our family." Ryan felt better already. He admitted his depression and accepted it. He smiled. He realized that once he faced his fears, analyzed them, and accepted them things were going to be better. Much better. He was also swelling with pride for his daughter Sam. What wonderful children he and his wife had created.

## *Chapter 24*

Brock and Shelby joined in the family discussion. Brock took a seat near Blue, but did not oust her family sitting next to her. He enjoyed the love he was feeling. He was a part of this family and wanted to enjoy all the good vibrations.

Blue looked toward Brock many times. She was enjoying her family, but she wanted nearness to her husband. She wanted them to be together when they shared their plans with the family. She wanted to wait for her father, but it was time to speak with her mother. How many times had her mother and her discussed plans so they could discuss it correctly with her Pa? Blue stood and walked to sit on her husband's lap. Settling in his lap she snuggled into his large frame.

Brock accepted his wife and embraced her. God he loved it when Blue snuggled into his lap. He was exceedingly grateful to the powers that be his wife had shared and taught him the fine art of snuggling.

"We have a favor to ask of all of you," Blue began.

The room silenced and Twiggy raised a brow in question.

Brock continued, "Blue and I will be building a ranch near here."

"I thought you planned to live in the city near the jail?" Twiggy questioned.

"During our time together, Blue and I agreed that city life is not for us. Ely will eventually get a new sheriff. I'll give the house to the town for his residence," Brock announced.

"Brock is a Federal Marshal. He will be called for law and order anywhere in Pine County. We both want a special place to call home," Blue added.

"In the meantime, we were hoping you would mind sharing your home with us until our ranch house is built and furnished," Brock requested.

Twiggy's mouth dropped. This was too wonderful for words. Blue and her husband would be in residence. Perhaps this depression her husband was going through would end. It was affecting their entire family. She had to admit she was delighted as well. Instead of shrinking, her family was getting larger. Brock was an excellent addition to the family. Until Ryan's depression, Little Ryan had adored her sister's beau.

"You are welcome," Twiggy offered.

"And Pa?" Blue asked hesitantly. Her father had accepted her husband, but there was a block between them. It was she and she knew it.

"Of course we will get his permission," Twiggy offered.

"Your Pa hasn't been the same since your marriage."

"He's been real sad," Lucy piped in.

"Is that true?" Blue asked her mother.

"Yes," Twiggy admitted. "I was going to ask you to visit often. I felt the separation anxiety would be eased if you did."

"Well, I'll see Pa a lot more if we live here," Blue grinned.

"Son of a Bitch," Earle crowed. "Lookie there. If it ain't the pride of Geneva's Branch hisself. Right on time."

"He's been out riding every day since the wedding,"

Oakley complained. "We can't go on riding on the Branch like we are just passing through. I have the feeling we are being watched. We are being watched by the Indians."

"You are such a liver liled coward," Earl scoffed. "That's why Cage doesn't trust you know. You're always whining about something."

"I don't whine," Oakley snapped. "I'm careful."

"Too careful," Earle laughed. "You worry like an old lady."

"I'm careful," Oakley growled. "What about the Indians on this ranch?"

"They keep to themselves in their camp. Since Cage and Sikes left they ain't as worried. This ranch used to be crawling with scouts," Earle explained. "Ain't seen a scout since."

"The perfect time for Sikes and Cage to return," Oakley realized.

"Ain't you gotten some brains suddenly," Earle sneered.

"What is their plan?"

"Cage will let us know when he gets to Ely," Earle replied. "Let's head back to Ely and wait for Cage. We can let him know about McGillinen's riding."

"I thought he wanted Marshal Hampton?" Oakley queried turning his horse toward Ely.

"And Sikes wants Blue. He owes that little filly what fer," Earle laughed wickedly. "I figure Ryan McGillinen is going to be the bait. Cage isn't about to meet that snake Hampton head on."

"When do you expect Cage?" Oakley asked.

"In a couple of days," Earle replied. "He sent a wire right after the bastard married Blue McGillinen. I had sent one to tell him about the wedding."

"It will be good time to take his revenge," Oakley mused. He was beginning to worry. He still had not made it into the elite group of Cage and Sikes little dominion. He was close now. He was close enough to get evidence against them. Would he have time? It looked like Cage was about to wage war against the Marshal and the McGillinens. Would he have time to get the evidence before any one was hurt? He hoped so.

Ryan and Sam rode their horses directly into the barn. Ryan dismounted and began to unsaddle Cheater.

“Pa, look!” Sam exclaimed. It’s Ginger! Look there is Duster! Pa, Blue is here!”

Ryan saw Ginger. He smiled to Sam. “Go on into the house and greet your sister! I’ll take care of Chocolate, I’ll be in right after you.”

“Pa, I know how much you miss Blue. I’ll take care of the horses.”

“It’s okay little angel. You’ve made me understand a lot today. That includes understanding me,” Ryan responded. “Go on.”

Sam dismounted and began to run toward the barn door. She hesitated. “Are you sure, Pa?”

“I’m sure,” Ryan chuckled. He took Chocolate’s bridle and led her to her stall. “Just tell Blue I’ll be in shortly. Go on angel.”

Samantha was jubilant. Her father hadn’t called her angel in months. He hadn’t called her their affectionate name for her since Brock Hampton had showed up in Blue’s life. She turned and shouted. “I love you, Pa!”

Ryan smiled. He was still holding Chocolate’s saddle when he turned and shouted back. “I love you too, angel. You’re pretty special! Did you know that?”

“Not until now,” Sam bubbled. She ran to the house.

Cho Ling and Lei Ling were setting the table for dinner when Samantha burst through the door. “Blue?” she shouted. Lei Ling nearly dropped the plates from the startle.

“In famiry loom,” Cho Ling directed.

Samantha ran into the main room and nearly jumped on top of Blue. Her sister was sitting by the weaving loom talking to their mother. Her new husband was by a table sketching on some paper with his Uncle Shelby sitting nearby and commenting. Little Ryan was fascinated with the paper his brother in law was working on. Chin Su was also commenting on the paper. Lucy was sitting next to her mother listening intently to her mother and sister talking as her mother worked on a weaving.

Blue enveloped her sister, Sam, in her arms and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

Twiggy stroked Sam's back affectionately. "Where is your Pa?"

"We saw Ginger and Duster," Sam answered breathlessly. "We knew you were here. Pa knew I missed you, Blue. He said he would take care of the horses and then come right in."

Twiggy raised a brow. Her husband let Sam greet her sister first. Had his depression left at last when he saw Ginger? Or could it be his depression had turned to anger or resentment? Twiggy was worried. Things could be wonderful if her adored husband would be able to control his emotions. Ryan walked in the room just then. Twiggy held her breath. He smiled broadly looking at his first-born and opened his arms.

Blue ran into her Pa's embrace.

Ryan held his beloved daughter and tears misted his eyes. He was so happy to hold her again. He had feared her new husband would keep her away from her family, from him. He was wrong and Samantha had been right. This was the beginning of a larger family he could love. He was big enough to share even more love. He looked to Brock. "Thanks for bringing her home for a visit."

Blue hugged her father even tighter. "It will be more than a visit if you allow it."

"Allow what, princess?" Ryan asked hugging his little girl.

Brock rose from his chair. "If I may be permitted to ask, sir?"

"Go right ahead," Ryan allowed still hugging Blue.

"We are asking if you will extend your hospitality until our ranch house is built. We'd like to stay here until then."

"But I thought you wanted a house in Ely?" Ryan queried.

"We want our own Geneva," Blue explained resting her head comfortably on her father's broad chest.

Ryan raised his brow. He looked directly at Brock. "Is that true?"

"Yes sir," Brock answered. "My Uncle Shelby has already purchased land near Geneva Branch and Hope. We will need a place to stay until the ranch house is built. I know how close your family is and I was hoping we could stay here if it isn't too much trouble."

“Not any trouble at all,” Ryan beamed. “If I have too I’ll put more additions on the house. If this works out I’ll be as big as Geneva’s Hope.”

“Not necessary, Pa,” Blue laughed. “Unless you want to build onto Geneva’s Branch to compete with Uncle Braden and Aunt Kerry.”

“No plans to do so,” Ryan laughed. “You of course are welcome to stay as long as you need. It makes me happy to have you closer for awhile and know you will live near.”

Twiggy rose to stand next to her husband and daughter.

Ryan lifted an arm from Blue to place around Twiggy’s shoulder and give her a big hug.

“Are you happy with this my husband?”

“If I were any happier I would burst.”

“Guess what we are going to call our ranch?” Blue queried expectantly.

“Haven’t any idea at all,” Ryan returned.

“Brock, tell Pa,” Blue ordered.

“Anything you say, sweetheart,” Brock agreed. “We intend to call our home, Geneva’s Force.”

“And it will be the force of contentment and peace,” Chin Su added. “We know our Ch’i had not only fated this to happen, but will keep it so.”

“Food is leady,” Cho Ling announced.

The entire family crowded into the small dining room for supper. Ryan couldn’t be happier. Maybe there was something to this Ch’i thing after all. Right now his family was together and things couldn’t be any better. No one thought about Cage, Sikes, or the havoc they had wrought on Ely and other cities in the Ruby Valley Mining area. The family didn’t have a care in the world.

“What do you think they’re doing up there?” Ryan grumbled. “Did you hear that?”

“I hope they are sleeping. I would like to sleep,” Twiggy snapped irritably. “And hear what?”

“The bed is squeaking,” Ryan stated.

“What bed? Our bed?” Twiggy asked.

“No, you know,” Ryan edged.

Twiggy was at the end of her rope. She finally believed Ryan had accepted his daughter's marriage and husband. Today they were blessed with having their eldest daughter once again living under their roof. "Ryan, I do not hear anything. It is all your imagination."

"He's touching her."

Twiggy turned to face Ryan, balled her fist, and hit his shoulder. "You touch me. It's called love. We created four beautiful children with our love. Our Blue will create beautiful grandchildren for us. It is the circle of life, the will of Tam Apo."

"But..."

"Oh stop it!" Twiggy exclaimed. "I'm happy to have our Blue living with us again for a little while. You haven't lost a daughter. We have gained another family. If you don't accept it, then perhaps you might live with Blue Pool for awhile."

"You would throw me out of my bed?"

"I would not only throw you out of this bed that doesn't squeak. I will send you to live in the camp. Perhaps my love father will explain to you the happiness of giving a daughter to a loving man!" Twiggy replied with exasperation.

A smile started on the corner of Ryan's mouth until it spread across his lips. His eyes filled with a look Twiggy quickly recognized. "Maybe I should make this bed squeak a little."

Twiggy grinned and stroked her husband's strong chest. "It would definitely drown out the noise I can't hear."

Ryan pulled Twiggy to him. He concentrated on other matters.

## *Chapter 25*

“Cage and Sikes is here,” Earl announced entering the small room the two men rented from the Red Valley Hotel in Ely. “Brought ten men from Colorady.”

“Won’t that cause a stir? So many men here in Ely?” Oakley asked.

“Told ya that ya asks too many durn questions,” Earl cackled. “They ain’t here. Just Cage. The rest of them is waiting for us to meet em?”

“Isn’t Cage afraid he’d be recognized? Why take a chance coming into town?”

“Oakley, ya need to shut up,” Earl chided. “I’ll tell you this, apparently Cage ain’t afraid of gettin recognized. He came to town to scout around and listen to what’s up. He’s in the saloon.”

“Best place to find out what’s going on,” Oakley agreed casually.

“Yep, I done told him about seeing Ryan McGillinen taking rides by hisself or with a kid every day,” Earl crowed. “He was might preciative.”

“I bet he perked up,” Oakley agreed. “Course I can’t see what good that will do him. Them Geneva lands are surrounded and protected by Snakes. He only wants the new Marshal any way.”

“Ya shur is dense. We’re gonna get McGillinen to force that Marshal and his woman to into Cage’s trap.”

“His woman?”

“Yep, Sikes is still worked up over that filly,” Earl shared. “It’s all part of the plan.”

Oakley realized he was always asking questions. It brought suspicion on him. He shrugged, walked to his cot and lit a cheroot. "I see."

"Ain't ya gonna ask what the plan is?"

"No."

"Ya ain't curious?"

"Nope," Oakley replied inhaling a long drag from the cheroot. "I've learned you will tell me what I need to know when you're ready." It tore him up inside. He didn't become a Pinkerton to rot in a dingy hotel room. He wanted to catch bad guys. This job was driving him crazy. He wanted Sikes and Cage. Pinkerton wouldn't let him interfere. Pinkerton ordered him only to get information. That's what a Pinkerton did. They did detective work. The Marshal would do the legal work. He had met secretly with Brock Hampton on every one of his trips to Ely. Oakley had told him he and Earl were sent to spy on Ryan McGillinen and the family. Brock considered the information, but both believed it was a watch for him, not his father in law.

Brock's response was to become more visible. He was looking for a show down with Cage. It was time Cage did his time behind bars.

Cage sat quietly at the bar. He was in his the disguise of an old man. Once again he was pretending to be his father. A conversation was continuing on behind him. He listened to every word.

"Turns out that Shelby Hampton bought more land near them Geneva lands," Henry Simmons stated. "He and that Marshal came to town to look into building a fine ranch on it."

"Heard tell they is stayin out at the Branch," Frank Manse added. "Comes to town nearly every other day."

"He and his group take this Marshalling purty serious," Joe Halders injected.

"Yeh, and he goes to that land the other days with his uncle to keep an eye on the workers makin them buildings out there," Frank Manse shared.

Cage was pleased. He could make a trap outside of Geneva lands. Tomorrow he would send four of his men to scour the area

and find a good place to take care of his business. He wanted to make certain the bodies would never be found. He would personally kill Brock after a lot of suffering. Sikes could do what he wanted with the girl. Maybe he would enjoy her to torment the Marshal. The thoughts caused him to grin.

Frank Manse left his friends and walked to the bar for another drink. He glanced at the man standing there. "Hey, ain't you Sheriff Cage?"

Cage looked through his spectacles. "That's my boy," he growled. "He left this town and lit out for Frisco."

"That a fact?" Frank chortled. Everyone knew Cage ran for cover, polecat that he was. There was no reason to change a father's point of view. Once Frank got a closer look he noted the whiter hair, mustache, and spectacles. The resemblance was remarkable. "Is there a reason you decided to visit Ely?"

"It's no business of yours," Cage snapped.

"No it ain't," Frank agreed. "Just trying to be sociable is all."

"Sorry, this town's treatment of my boy gave me a bad taste," Cage replied. He had contrived a story before he arrived in Ely. "My boy asked me to pull out his money from Ely Federal Bank and send it to him in Frisco."

"The Bank closes in an hour, you best get going considerin this is a Friday," Frank offered.

"The bank closes at two?" Cage asked with surprise. He knew what time the bank closed. It would make him look like a stranger to the town.

"Yep."

Cage downed his drink. "Thanks, mighty obliged." He walked slowly using his cane to the bank. He did need to pull out the last of his funds in this bank. He would use part of it to pay off the mercenaries he hired in Colorado. He walked out of the Saloon quickly and ran directly into Oakley Andrews. Cage recognized Oakley and knew he was recognized.

"Cage?" Oakley queried.

"Nope, that's my boy," Cage snapped.

Oakley looked closely at the man in front of him. He smelled glue and makeup. It was obvious to him it was Cage in

disguise as his father. This was his cover. This is how he took care of the extortion cash and handled legal matters. Everything came together at last. He would send a report to Pinkerton as soon as he could. "Sorry, the resemblance is remarkable." Oakley stepped aside and continued on to his hotel.

Cage realized Oakley had recognized him through his disguise, but had said nothing. For the first time he trusted Oakley. He would allow Earl to let him in on the plans and be a part of it.

Blue woke slowly. A finger gently stroked her cheek. She felt his warm breath on her forehead. Yes, her husband was already awake. She snuggled into the frame of his warm muscular body. "Hmm."

"I love you my life," Brock whispered and brought his mouth down to hers.

Blue's arm automatically wrapped around her husband's neck. Her fingers played in his longer curly blonde hair. "I know what you've got in mind," she teased. Her hand dropped from his hair and moved it down to stroke his firm masculine muscle. "Pa might hear us."

Brock groaned when Blue's silky caress surrounded his hardened manhood. "A chance I'll have to take," he mumbled becoming more engrossed in seducing his wonderful young wife.

It didn't take too long. During their week alone in the lodge they discovered those special places that brought each other to heights of ecstasy.

Breathing heavily their bodies still wet from the excitement of their joining, Blue settled into Brock's loving arm.

A heavy knock startled them.

"Blue? Blue are you awake?" Ryan grumbled on the other side of the door.

"If I wasn't Pa, I would be," Blue chortled.

Brock sighed. "Ask him what he wants," he whispered. "I can't wait until our home is built."

"It's not that bad," Blue countered.

"No, your Ma is wonderful," Brock replied.

Blue smacked Brock's shoulder playfully. "What do you need, Pa?"

“Breakfast has been ready for a half hour,” Ryan stated.  
“You are usually up at dawn. Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine, Pa. I’ll be down to breakfast in a minute.”

“Glad to know you haven’t turned into a slug a bed like that man of yours.”

“Ryan!” Twiggy called. “Ryan Patrick McGillinen, you get down here right now and leave those two alone.”

“Just checking on them,” Ryan answered apologetically.

“Get down here this instant! This instant! Do you hear me?”

“Coming my love,” Ryan called turning into the hall and quickly going down the staircase.

“Like I said,” Brock chuckled. “Your Ma is wonderful.”

Blue smiled, “Yes she is, but so is Pa once you get to know him.”

“He’ll never let you go,” Brock said resignedly. “It will always be a gap between us.”

“I will always be his little girl no matter what,” Blue said profoundly. “Marriage to you has nothing to do with it. I could be sixty years old and Pa would be ninety. I would still be his little girl. I think I understand. I see Grandpa Crawford with Ma. There they are, two grown people, yet Ma is still his little girl. What would you do if we have a little girl?”

“The same damn thing,” Brock laughed. “Why do you have to be so intelligent and philosophical?”

“If I wasn’t, we wouldn’t be married, would we?” Blue asked seriously.

Brock leaned over and kissed Blue’s lips gently. “No we wouldn’t my life.”

After a gentle long kiss and a little more snuggling the two rose from their bed and dressed for breakfast.

“What are your plans today?” Twiggy asked Blue and Brock over hot sausages and eggs at breakfast.

“I was hoping you and I could go to town, Ma,” Blue answered. “I want to start furniture and fabric shopping for our new house. The workmen have promised to have the main portion

of our home finished before winter. We need to order the furniture now.”

Twiggy brightened up considerably. “I’d love to go with you. We can take Sam, Lucy, and Little Ryan to see Grandpa and Grandma Crawford.”

“And do some shopping in Grandpa’s store,” Blue added.

The twinkle in Twiggy’s eye’s delighted Ryan. “Will you need some notes?”

Twiggy was about to reply when Brock butted in.

“There is no need. Everything will go on my tab. My wife has what the French call Carte Blanche, or no limit.”

“I was referring to my wife!” Ryan growled. “I pay my own wife’s way, thank you very much!”

Brock pinked with embarrassment. He thought it wise to remain silent.

Shelby Hampton eased the situation by addressing Ryan. “I was wondering if you would like to oversee the building of the ranch with us, Ryan?” Shelby queried. “After all, I don’t think anyone in the area other than Grady McGillinen knows this area better than you do. You can give us advice in the foundation, support beams, and window placements.”

“Blue told me you built Geneva’s Branch with your own hands,” Brock added quickly. “We can all see what a fine house this is.”

Ryan puffed with pride. The Branch was his joy and he did build it with his own hands. He plastered every wall himself as well. “I’d be happy to help.”

Sikes turned around and did a double take. Yes, it was Blue. She was riding on her Appaloosa. Her mother, sisters, brother, her Aunt Kerry, Uncle Braden, cousins Jared and Garrett, Chin Su, Cho Ling, Lei Ling, six hired hands from Geneva’s Branch and two ranch hands from Geneva’s Hope. “It’s a dang parade,” Sikes mumbled angrily. There would be no opportunity to get Blue today.

Enjoying the company, none of the troupe realized they were being watched. They were unconcerned about a thing. Naturally with a large entourage there would be no thought of any

problem. Every since Kerry was taken by Everett Mann, no McGillinen woman was allowed to go unescorted into Ely. Kerry had the largest entourage on Braden's order. Blue had surprised everyone when she sneaked into Ely that day she had a confrontation with Sikes. Her father would never have allowed her to go with only her cousin unless he was with her.

Sikes headed for the hotel Cage was staying at.

"She's here," Sikes shouted once he entered the room.

"Alone?"

"Nope, a durn army is with her!" Sikes exclaimed.

"It isn't in my plan to get any of them in Ely," Cage replied casually. "I've already set my plan in motion."

"You get them hired outs from Colorady building that there new ranch house?"

"Of course," Cage answered smugly. "Every night they return to Ely and give me reports. It turns out Shelby Hampton visits nearly every day. Our Brock appears no less than twice a week with his Uncle. I'm sure to get him."

"And the girl?" Sikes asked hopefully.

"We can't get her until we got the men," Cage replied. "I'm more interested in that uppity Marshal. The girl is secondary."

Sikes growled angrily. He was in this to get Blue McGillinen. "She ain't secondary to my plans."

"I know," Cage stated solemnly. "You'll get her soon enough."

Several days later a shadowy figure made its way down an alley near the Ely meeting hall.

Brock sat on a chair in the front of the meeting hall watching the town people walk on the way to their homes before sunset. He had received a note this morning delivered by young James Hawtern, the young boy working at the Ely Hotel. Oakley Andrews would meet him in the town hall after sundown. He would go in the back way and Brock would go in the front pretending to check on the building.

By the time Oakley had made his way to the back door of the meeting hall it was dark. The back door had been left open. Oakley knew Brock had received his note and would be waiting inside. He walked into the hall and closed the door quietly. The floor squeaked under his boot step. A light flickered under a door illuminating the floorboards.

Brock looked up when the door opened. "Something must be really important for you to send for me. You are taking a risk of getting caught."

"This is important," Oakley responded seriously taking a chair to sit upon. "First, Cage is masquerading as his father. I sent a query to Pinkerton Agency. I found out that Cage's father died when he was a child. He pretends he is the father to handle money deals, washing extortion money, and handling legal matters that include buying property, mines, and the like."

"That's how he worked it," Brock mused. "It makes sense."

"That's not all," Oakley continued. "Cage hired guns. I don't know where they are. I only heard about them. Tomorrow Earl told me to be ready to ride. Sikes will meet us outside of town and Cage's plan will be put into action."

"What is it?" Brock questioned eagerly.

"I don't know. I won't know until tomorrow, but I know he is watching Geneva's Branch and the comings and goings at the ranch you are building. Something is going to happen tomorrow and I think you should be alert."

Brock's question was too simple. "Where?"

"I believe it will be at the ranch you and your uncle are building," Oakley responded. "I have no proof, it's a gut feeling."

"Just a gut feeling?" Brock chuckled. "An ambush out there makes perfect sense. Plenty of trees for hiding, not to mention those large sage bushes all over the property."

"And no Shoshone guarding the land," Oakley added.

A large grin crossed Brock's lips. "That is something I intend to take care of. I'll talk to Blue Moon and see if he needs some more room for his camp to grow."

Oakley's brow furrowed. "We were talking about an ambush. Hell, you don't even carry a gun!"

“Live by the sword. Die by the sword.”

“That is one of the stupidest quotes from the Bible I’ve a mind to hear,” Oakley retorted.

Brock cocked a brow. “Really? It’s one of my favorites.”

“I’ve just told you about a plan to kill you and you’re quoting the bible,” Oakley stated angrily.

“A coward carries a gun to hid his fear and weakness. The man that doesn’t carry a gun has the advantage of strength and surprise,” Brock explained.

“Strength?” Oakley queried in disdain.

“The gun is perceived as strength by the bearer. The victim is perceived as weak. These perceptions allow the victim to conquer with surprise strengths,” Brock replied patiently.

Oakley sat back against the chair. “That is lunacy!”

“Thanks for the information,” Brock appreciated. He realized it was hopeless to try to explain further. Oakley might or might not ever understand. There was no point in pursuing the matter. “I’ll be on the alert tomorrow.”

“Stay in town,” Oakley warned rising from his chair and heading to the back door and the shadows.

“I’ll think on it,” Brock acquiesced. He had already planned to go the home site with his Uncle Shelby in the morning. They had spent most of the day purchasing supplies for the buildings that were going up.

Brock did think on it as he walked his nightly rounds before going to the hotel to be with Blue.

“There you are,” Blue greeted turning to watch her husband enter the hotel room. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“So I see,” Brock chuckled viewing his wife in the sexiest silkiest peignoir he had ever seen. It wasn’t just the peignoir, it was the woman in it. He was always thrilled to have Blue by his side at night since their wedding regardless of where he was. “You are a vision!”

“Keep saying that my love and I will use your magnificent body for my lusty whims,” Blue whispered wrapping her arms around Brock and standing on her toes to kiss his lips. “Want to snuggle?”



“Oh Lord of Heaven,” Brock groaned. “I’m your slave to command.”

## *Chapter 26*

Blue woke to the soft breath of her husband warming her cheek. “Good morning,” she purred.

“Every day is brighter with my beautiful bride at my side.”

“At your side I will stay,” Blue whispered lovingly. She sat up with a sheet barely covering her breasts. “Speaking of which we should get up, dress, and meet Uncle Shelby if we are to deliver the lumber, nails, and other things to the building site.”

“I have a slight change of plan,” Brock answered as he rose to dress. “If you don’t mind, I’d like you to find your cousin Jared and go with him to the Branch. I’m going to write Chin Su a note and I’d like you to deliver it to him.”

Blue stared in admiration at her husband’s nakedness. “Parading around like that mesmerizes me. You can ask me to do anything,” Blue teased.

Brock turned full face with a large smile plastered on his face. “Talk like that could make you my wife.”

“I hope so,” Blue returned. “I have no intention of sharing that body with anyone!”

“If I didn’t need you to get Chin Su in a hurry, you would have this body on top of you again,” Brock tempted.

“Since you are in an all fired hurry, I’ll have to forget my needs and get dressed,” Blue laughed reaching for her camisole and drawers.

As Blue dressed Brock finished dressing and began writing a note in Chinese. He folded the note carefully and handed it to Blue who was nearly dressed.

"Find Jared and ride quickly to the Branch," Brock instructed. "I will need Chin Su at the ranch site before sundown."

Blue sensed immediately urgency in her husband's tone. "What is it? What is going on?"

"Trust the Ch'i," Brock comforted. "Follow my instructions. It is important. Then listen to Chin Su. Everything is there in the note."

Blue carefully opened the folded paper. Her brow furrowed tensely. "This is Chinese scratching."

"Yes," Brock replied simply. "The note is for Chin Su."

"Brock?"

"Trust me and the Ch'i."

"If something is going on, I want to know about it," Blue insisted.

"Nothing to concern ourselves about. I was told there was a trap being set. I'm setting a bigger one. We'll have quite a conversation about it this evening."

The confidence in Brock's voice was reassuring. "Alright, I'll get Jared and leave within the hour," Blue conceded. A small fear edged into her mind. Blue squelched her fear. Trust and understanding was the sound basis of their marriage. Brock never hid anything from her. If there was a trap and he was confident, she would be confident. She finished dressing and left the room with Brock. They stopped to grab a few rolls from the breakfast spread laid out on the tables in the hotel dining room.

"Hurry to the Branch, my love," Brock urged. "Do you know where Jared might be?"

Blue laughed boisterously, "Where there is food, there is Jared. He's right over there!" Blue pointed to the table near the window. Jared was sitting there enjoying a large plate of pancakes, eggs, ham, steak, bacon, and toast.

Brock kissed Blue on the cheek. "Go get him. I'll wake Uncle Shelby and get him going."

"Aren't you going with Uncle Shelby?"

"I'll follow him later. I have a thing or two to get done first."

"Be careful," Blue said quietly. "I'm listening to my Ch'i and I just know that there is danger lurking nearby."

"You are my soul," Brock grinned. "Now go along."

Blue smiled and went directly to her cousin.

"Where did Brock take off too?" Jared asked looking up at his cousin while he stuffed another bite of pancake into his mouth.

"He went to meet his Uncle Shelby," Blue replied sitting on a chair next to Jared. "He wants you and me to get Chin Su. He gave me a message to give to Chin Su."

"I hear you right?" Uncle Shelby queried frowning. He was sitting on his bed in the Ely Hotel. He had been dressing for the days trip to the construction site when Brock knocked. "You setting yourself up for a trap?"

"One of the gang is secretly a Pinkerton. He doesn't know how or when, but the ambush is planned for today," Brock answered thoughtfully standing next to his uncle. "I'd prefer you didn't go to the ranch site today."

"You have a plan?"

"I can't say I do. It's hard to plan when you don't know what the party is all about," Brock joked.

"It seems to me that if both of us don't show up at the wagons today, they might call off your party," Uncle Shelby stated boldly. "I've never shunned a party before."

"Uncle Shelby," Brock countered. He removed his hat, raked his fingers through his hair nervously and replaced the hat on his head. "These men are dangerous. I don't want you to get hurt."

Shelby Hampton looked up at his nephew. "Boy, I've been through many a tight and dangerous path before you were out of nappies." He laughed stroking his chin. "Being near you here in Ely has given me back my youth, by George!"

"It's too dangerous," Brock insisted.

"I'm going. I won't hear another word," Shelby replied. He rose from the bed and adjusted his vest. "What are you planning?"

"I don't know what men are involved. I believe there have to be some of the men working on the ranch that are in Cage's pay. I don't want innocents hurt. Some of the men driving the lumber wagons may or may not be involved. I think it is best if I ride up to the ranch alone," Brock shared.

"You'll make a great target," Shelby chided. "And what about a gun?"

"Then I'll be an armed target. I don't think Cage would shoot me down in front of the men he hired," Brock grinned. "Code of the West and all that."

"You're counting on them hired hands not settling well with murder in cold blood?" Shelby asked solemnly.

"Yes," Brock answered simply. "I believe that will be my strength and surprise."

"I know you expect me to argue with your logic, but I agree. Too many unknowns and too many innocents," Shelby agreed. He reached for his coat. "You go on. I'll see you later. Right now I want some breakfast and then I'll go on with the wagons."

"Uncle Shelby!" Brock protested.

"Pshaw boy, it will look more natural if I ride today like I normally do," Shelby insisted. He moved to the door and pushed Brock aside. "Just in case, I'll bring along my small pistol."

Brock raised an eyebrow. "I've never seen you carry a pistol."

"A captain always carries a pistol," Shelby chuckled. "The sailors know a captain has one. They don't have to see it. That's all you need to know."

Brock stepped aside. "I love you, Uncle Shelby. Be careful."

Shelby Hampton stopped in his tracks. Did his nephew actually tell him he loved him? This is something he longed to hear since Brock was born, but how did a man tell a boy he needed to hear and feel that? How could a man even say it? Yet his nephew was more of a man than any man he had ever met simply

by saying his feelings. Marriage was a good thing after all. Just maybe he would investigate the possibility of marriage himself. He straightened and looked Brock directly in the eye. "I love you, Brock!"

"Blue!" Samantha called from the porch of Geneva's Branch. She had been looking out the window daydreaming when she noticed Ginger trotting up the path. Of course Samantha had recognized her sister and her cousin. She ran out of the house yelling to her mother over her shoulder.

Twiggy had been baking cookies with Lei Ling and wiped her hands on her apron when she heard Samantha shouting that Blue was riding up the path.

Lei Ling continued rolling the sugar cookie dough into balls.

Samantha was running down the path followed by Lucy and little Ryan when Twiggy shaded her eyes from the sun. Although her eldest daughter was married, Twiggy didn't feel a twinge of separation. Blue and Brock lived with them while their ranch was being built. Only occasionally would Blue and Brock spend a night in Ely.

Jared and Blue dismounted where Samantha had greeted them. Lucy and Ryan were soon sharing in the hugs. Holding onto the reins of the their horses, Jared and Blue walked to the ranch house.

Twiggy hugged her daughter. "Where is Brock, honey?"

"He's in Ely, Ma," Blue responded. "I have a message for Chin Su from Brock. Where is Chin Su?"

"He and Cho Ling are cutting firewood behind the house," Twiggy answered. Twiggy didn't put down a sense of dread. Instead she asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Brock was told Cage and Sikes are nearby. He was also told that they are planning a trap for him today," Blue blurted out shockingly. "These are his instructions for Chin Su. He needs him for his plan."

Twiggy splayed her fingers over her heart. She pulled Blue into her arms and ordered Jared, "Go get Chin Su, Jared. Blue and I will be in the house."

Jared left for the back of the house.

"It will be fine," Twiggy soothed rubbing her hand over Blue's arm as she led her into the parlor.

Blue turned and squeezed her mother. "I know."

Chin Su entered the parlor soon after mother and daughter were sitting together on the divan.

Blue didn't say a word. She handed the note to Chin Su.

Nothing was said. Everyone in the room felt the silence was deafening.

Chin Su read the note, once, twice, and three times. He showed no emotion in his person or eyes.

"I will go now," Chin Su stated quietly. He refolded the note thinking he placed it in his trousers. The note fell to the floor.

Blue and Jared rose to go with Chin Su.

Chin Su addressed Blue, "You will stay here. Jared, you will come with me."

Blue was stunned. It had not occurred to her that she would not be at her husband's side when he faced this unknown trap.

Twiggy instinctively reached for her eldest daughter. She pulled her back down to the divan. "Stay with me."

Blue looked to her mother and turned back to find Chin Su and Jared. They were already gone.

In moments, Chin Su had mounted Ginger. Jared mounted Squash. They rode off toward the Geneva's Hope.

Jared brought his horse up next to Chin Su. "Are we getting more help from my Pa?"

"We are being watched," Chin Su stated calmly. "I want them to believe we are headed there. Once out of their sights we will begin the journey to the ranch site."

"Are they watching us? Or is Blue in danger?"

"I am not certain," Chin Su answered. "Blue should be safe with her family in the ranch. My Ch'i feels no danger for her."

"It's the old man," Jay remarked to Cage standing next to him. They were well hidden in a heavy copse of trees. The horses

were down in a small valley a few yards away. "I don't see the Marshal."

"Looks like we'll have to make a special invite," Cage chuckled menacingly. "Good thing the old man still made his regular run with the lumber."

"What are we gonna do?" Jay questioned.

"You and I are going down to meet the wagon right now. The old man is still close enough to town. Reb and Jim are with him. That only leaves the one. We'll send him back to town to fetch the Marshal," Cage said while stroking the stubble on his chin.

"What's your plan?" Jay asked curiously.

"You'll see," Cage cackled. He started walking back to the horses.

"Riders coming," Max warned reaching for his holster.

"It's jst Jay," Reb shouted and reined his horse to meet the two men.

Max relaxed as the men approached. "You coming from the ranch?"

"Nope," Cage replied. He pulled out his .45 and shot Shelby.

Max was covered by blood. His shock delayed any reaction.

Reb growled, "Hey! I don't cotton to shooting any unarmed man!"

"He's only winged," Cage snorted. "I shot him in the arm." He waved his gun menacingly. "Now you there," he addressed Max. "You get on the horse of Reb's and bring the Marshal back to this old man."

Shelby was helped up by Max and Reb. They placed him gently in the wagon.

"I don't hold to this," Reb complained.

"To bad," Cage replied. He pointed his gun and shot Reb in the chest. "Those who aren't with me, are agin me. You got something to say?"

Jim shook his head. Max went to Reb's horse and mounted. He reined the horse around and galloped toward Ely.

Cage watched with an evil smile basking on his lips as he saw Max racing toward the town. His interest returned to the wagons and Shelby Hampton. "Leave that wagon here with Jim and me," he ordered pointing to the other two wagons. Those were his hirelings driving. He knew after taking care of Reb, the others would not cause him any problems. Things were going to get uglier and he didn't want lily livers around him. "Take the other wagons up to the camp so no one gets suspicious. Understand?"

The drivers nodded quickly in acknowledgement.

"Jay and I are staying here," Cage instructed. "Take the wagons to the camp and go to the Needle Shack. Wait for me there."

The wagons jolted forward with driver's nodding their heads vigorously. Obviously none of them wanted to take a chance of arguing with the boss man.

"Yassuh, old Cage is cagey," Sikes smirked pleased with his little play on words. "There's the little gal with her cousin."

"Quit yapping and start following," Oakley snapped testily. He was getting tired of hanging close to Sikes. He couldn't stand the man. The man was stupid and smelled like a dead pig. His orders from Pinkerton were clear. Stay close to Sikes until he got all the information Pinkerton needed to close in and bring Sikes and Cage to justice. It was starting to occur to Oakley that the Pinkerton was a future he didn't particularly care for. He wanted to be a lawman, but this was not the lawman he intended to be.

"What you in such a snit fer?"

"None of your damn business," Oakley snarled.

"If yer in a snit fer being out here fer so long, pull in yer long johns," Sikes laughed. "This is it. We're finally getting the Marshal and I'm gettin his woman ta boot!"

Oakley's back stiffened. "What the hell you yappin about now?"

"It turns out that Cage is closing the net and he finally trusts ya," Sikes informed. "It seems ya didn't open yer mouth to let anyone know he is his Pa."

"You know?" Oakley asked baffled.

“Cage has been playing his Pa for some time now,” Sikes replied. “I’d knowed all along. We used the disguise to take care of the money and investments after we’d arranged for donations from our suckers.”

At last Oakley had the confession he had been waiting for, but Pinkerton told him not arrest Sikes or Cage. He had been told only to send the information to the Pinkerton Office. “So what are we out here for?”

“You and I are going in and pick up little miss uppity. We take her to Needle Shack. Cage will be waiting for us there with the Marshal,” Sikes bragged.

Oakley stared at Sikes like he grew two head. “We’re just going to walk into a fully staffed and armed ranch. We will politely ask the Marshal’s wife to join us for a ride?” Oakley snapped irritably. “Are you and Cage out of your minds?”

Sikes leaned over the saddle pommel and laughed. “Cage is real smart. He weren’t for sure about Miss Blue being here, but if she did come he told us to wait until midday. Most of the hands would be on the range except the weak and old ones. The woman folk won’t give us no problem.” Sikes reined his horse and headed toward Geneva’s Branch. “We’ll wait a bit and git the girl. Cage will be waiting for us to show up near dusk.”

Oakley followed willingly. He made an instant decision. He would protect the women even if he blew his cover. To hell with the Pinkerton Agency!

“Marshal! Marshal!” Max shouted riding his horse in a full run.

Brock was keeping Ginger to a slow gait. He was waiting for an ambush. Something made the hair on his neck stand straight up when he saw Max riding toward him at a full gallop. His first thought was his uncle. Would Cage hurt Shelby to even the score?

Max was out of breath when he reined his horse to a stop. “It’s your uncle,” he gasped grabbing for air. “He’s been shot. Someone called Cage.” Max held up his hand indicating Brock to wait while he took another breath. “Shot one of his own men. Right through the heart!”

“Shelby?”

Max took another gulp of air. "Shelby's winged. Cage is using him to draw you there. That buzzard sent me to get you into his trap."

"Where is Shelby?"

"He's in one of the wagons. Cage sent the other two wagons on ahead with some of his men."

"How many men belong with Cage," Brock questioned. "Any there left to take care of Shelby?"

"No, Shelby is in the wagon," Max answered. "Cage is waiting there with Jay for you."

"Get back to Ely. Bring back a comfortable buggy and the Doc," Brock ordered. "I'll handle it from here."

"Marshal, I think we should both go back to Ely and get help," Max argued. "That Cage is crazy. Shelby is winged. He'll make it."

"Get back to Ely. I know it's a trap. I'm prepared for one. It'll be okay," Brock assuaged. "I have my own plans working. I just need my Uncle Shelby taken care of. Once they get me someone has to come for Shelby."

"I'll take care of him," Max promised. He left for Ely.

Brock urged Duster on. He wanted Cage far away from Uncle Shelby.

## *Chapter 27*

“There he is,” Cage crowed squinting at the rider approaching. “Looks like your nephew cares for you.”

“He’ll kill you,” Shelby said confidently. He was holding his arm. The arm was only burning with pain. The gunshot wound had stopped bleeding. Cage hadn’t suspected him of carrying a weapon. He still had his hidden pistol. He would use it if he got a chance, but two targets and his wound were not the odds he liked. He was looking for surprise.

Brock rode up to the wagon and slowly dismounted. He walked over to his uncle ignoring Cage and his henchman on the horses watching him. “Are you hurt bad?”

“No son, a mosquito bite is all,” Shelby joked.

Brock cast a glance at the body near the wagon. He didn’t turn his head. He concentrated on his Uncle.

“If you don’t want to see your Uncle die,” Cage warned menacingly. “You’ll come with me right now.”

“We aren’t going to face off here?” Brock questioned. He already knew that Cage was too much of a coward to face his foe man to man.

“You’re too full of tricks,” Cage bellowed. “Besides, I got a nice surprise fixed up for you. Come along now or I shoot your uncle.” Cage raised his gun and aimed for Shelby’s head.

“Don’t go son,” Shelby voiced.

"Max will be coming for you," Brock replied. "This has to be done. It has to be ended." He mounted Duster. "Let's go, Cage."

"Ain't we gonna tie him up?" Jay queried. "We didn't check for a gun."

"He'd like us to come near him," Cage snarled. "He'd take us both down. The Marshal don't carry a gun. He plays dirty tricks. The best way to handle him is keep your distance and keep your gun trained on him."

Unfortunately Cage was right. If either of them came close he would easily take them both out. But he also needed to find out what this surprise was. When this would end, he wanted it to end completely.

"Head toward Needle Shack," Cage commanded. "We'll be right behind you with our guns on your back."

"Time to collect the little missy," Sikes announced after checking his pocket watch. He motioned his mustang toward the ranch. They had been waiting in a copse of trees for some time.

Together they rode slowly up to the ranch house, dismounted, and walked casually to the door. Sikes reached for the door. He smiled when it opened.

"I knew it wouldn't be locked," Sikes crowed. He walked in like he owned the place.

They stood in the hallway listening for any sounds. They heard female voices in the room to the right.

Blue looked up to see Sikes standing in the doorframe. Behind him was a tall young handsome man.

A small gasp caused Twiggy to look where Blue was staring.

"Who are you?" Twiggy demanded.

Samantha looked up from her book. She saw the two men and her eyes locked with the handsome stranger.

Oakley scanned the room and found a beautiful young girl looking at him. He couldn't break his eyes away. Something hit him hard. It wasn't an object. It was a feeling. It was an emotion. For the first time in his life he felt a sense of comfort. Was he thinking family? Of course, this was a family. He rationalized but

could not break away from those beautiful gray eyes. It was though she could see him right down to his soul.

“Why, I jest came to take Miss Blue on a picnic,” Sikes chuckled. He pulled out his gun and aimed it directly at Twiggy. “If you won’t accept my invitation I’ll have to hurt Mama over here.”

“I’d love to go on a picnic,” Blue volunteered bravely. She walked toward Sikes.

When Sikes walked toward Blue, Oakley came into the room. He kept his hand near his gun. His mind was made up even before he fell into the gray pools of mystery.

“Blue, don’t go with him,” Twiggy begged. She walked toward the gunman.

“Watch it Mama,” Sikes warned waving his gun. “Leave the little girl alone or you might get hurt.”

Ryan was returning from an early morning ride when he spotted the two riders entering his home. He thought he recognized one of them as Sikes. In minutes Cheater had taken him to his front door from the hillside. He took his rifle from the scabbard and walked into his house.

“Hold it right there!” Ryan bellowed. He aimed his rifle at Sikes.

Sikes pulled Blue in front of him. “Shoot me and you shoot our little missy. Put it down.”

Ryan hesitated until he spotted Oakley Andrews. He laid the rifle down slowly.

Sikes edged toward the door waving Ryan away from it.

Ryan stood his ground.

Everything that happened next was a blur in slow motion to Oakley.

Sikes shot Ryan in both legs and dragged Blue toward the door. Twiggy screamed when she saw Ryan fall. Little Ryan ran to Sikes and started pounding him with his fists. Sikes backhanded the boy with his gun hand. Little Ryan crashed against the wall in a heap. Samantha ran towards Sikes and started pulling Blue away. Blue escaped and Sikes grabbed Samantha by her hair. Samantha screamed in pain.

Something inside Oakley snapped when he watched Sikes grab Samantha's hair and he heard her scream.

Twiggy pushed her way through to Ryan and Lucy followed holding on to her mother's skirt with tears of terror filling her eyes.

Oakley pulled out his gun from his holster and shot Sikes right through the heart.

Sikes looked at Oakley with surprise in his eyes. His hand splayed across his bleeding chest. Sikes raised his gun and shot at Oakley as his knees caved in under him.

The shot went wild and winged Oakley. A small burn across his flesh followed by a little blood across the tear in his shirtsleeve.

Samantha went directly to Oakley. "You're wounded."

"A little burn," Oakley smiled. "I want to see to your Pa."

The gunshot had sent hands from the ranch scrambling to the house.

Twiggy was hovering over Ryan. She had grabbed her petticoat, ripped it pieces and was applying pressure to Ryan's leg wounds.

Ryan was sitting up and wincing in pain. "I was worried until I saw you, Oakley," Ryan remarked tiredly. "He dead?"

"Very," Samantha piped in.

"You know this man?" Blue asked her father kneeling next to him helping her mother put pressure on the wounds.

"Oakley Andrews," Ryan moaned. "Pinkerton agent."

The room was suddenly filled with ranch hands and Cho Ling appeared holding a cleaver.

"Help me get Ryan to bed," Twiggy ordered.

"I'm bleeding," Ryan stated gritting his teeth as the hands lifted him up.

"I noticed," Twiggy growled.

"I'll get the sheets dirty," Ryan complained.

Twiggy rolled her eyes. "Get him to bed and help me get his clothes off so I can wash those wounds."

"The bed sheets," Ryan protested.

"To hell with the sheets!" Twiggy snarled leading the way to their bedroom.

“Don’t even try arguing with a woman,” Ryan moaned on his way to the bedroom.

Samantha disappeared into the kitchen and returned minutes later with a bowl of warm water and towels. “Let me look at that wound.”

Oakley lost his soul in those gray eyes. He sat quietly and let Samantha administer care.

Blue was busy with Lucy and Little Ryan soothing and quieting their fears.

Bennett Wessex emerged from the Ely Restaurant with his new young wife, Julia. He watched the dust swirling at the end of the street and recognized Max Erdmann riding hard down the street.

Max leapt from his mount before the horse stopped when he was in front of the Doctor Adams’s office.

“Something is happening,” Bennett commented.

“It’s the ink in your blood,” Julia teased squeezing his arm with her hand. “You are a born newspaper man. Let’s interview Mr. Erdmann.”

“Max is a hired contractor at the ranch house Brock is building,” Bennett mused out loud. “Perhaps someone was hurt.”

Doctor Adams came out of the office suddenly with a coat half on and a bag in hand. They walked toward the back where his buggy and horses were kept in the ready during the day.

Bennett and Julia followed them.

“Doctor Adams?” Julia called for his attention.

“Mrs. Wessex,” Doctor Adams acknowledged.

“What’s happened?” Bennett queried. “Did some one at the construction sight get hurt?”

“Worse,” Max expounded. “Shelby Hampton was shot by Cage. He jumped us and shot Mr. Hampton in cold blood.”

“Brock?”

“I met him on the trail. He’s heading toward Cage’s trap. We got to get help,” Max stated fearfully. “Mr. Hampton needs us right away. Can you get some help from the town? Go up to the construction site.” Max hoped he was making sense.

Bennett reacted immediately when his brain analyzed the brief information. "Julia, get your father at the paper. Have him send someone to Geneva's Hope and tell me father what's happened. Maybe he can get some townspeople to form a posse. I'll go with Doctor Adams and Max."

"Brock doesn't carry a weapon," Max added with no reasoning.

"I know," Bennett replied. "He's like to get himself killed. Blue will never forgive me." The thought struck Bennett hard. "Blue isn't with him?"

"No she went to her Pa's house with Jared."

"Thank goodness," Julia rasped splaying her fingers across her throat.

"You go on ahead," Bennett said. "I'll get my gun and horse. I catch up to you."

Oakley stood after Samantha had cleaned his flesh wound. "I'm going to face Cage."

"I'm coming with you," Blue blurted out when she heard Oakley.

Lucy tugged at her sister's dress. Little Ryan rubbed his eyes forcing them to stop tearing.

"No you ain't," Little Ryan shouted. "You can't leave us."

The Ranch hands were aware of the drama going on around them. Everyone was like family at the Branch. Lyle Kirstenbach had taken a special interest in Little Ryan because his own son and wife had died of the fever some ten years ago.

"I think we need to check on the cattle and horses, Ryan," Lyle encouraged. "With your Pa down, you need to handle the place. I'm sure the boss would want you to make sure everything is running right."

Ryan's fear subsided as his chest swelled with pride. "Yeah, I got to take care of the ranch til Pa is up and around." Ryan walked to the door and motioned for Lyle to follow.

Lyle grinned. He was successful in calming the boy and helping him get over his fear and the terror he had just witnessed.

Oakley protested once Little Ryan had left the room. "It's too dangerous."

Lucy still clung to Blue's dress.

"You're supposed to bring me to Cage. You will do it," Blue commanded. "We'll stop at Granpa Blue Pool's lodge. I want plenty of Shoshone warriors behind us."

"They'll be waiting at Needle Shack. They'll see anyone coming," Oakley explained hoping Blue would understand.

"Precisely why I want the Shoshone warriors. They can follow us in and not be seen by anyone, including lookouts at Needle Shack," Blue explained. "Come with me Lucy, you can help me change. Wait for me, Oakley or I'll shoot you to keep you here. This is my husband we are discussing." Blue took Lucy's hand and led her up the stairs to her room.

"Jared and Chin Su are already on their way there," Samantha interjected.

"What?" Oakley asked in disbelief.

"Blue and Jared brought Chin Su a note," Samantha continued.

"Let me see it," Oakley demanded.

"It's in Chinese," Samantha declared.

"I have it," Lei Ling said entering the room with a bucket full of soapy water and a brush. She was terrified by the havoc and blood. It reminded her of the Bandits that raided her home, killed all her family and her husband and took her as a slave. She wanted to wash away the blood as quickly as possible.

"Read it," Oakley blurted out bluntly.

Lei Ling was startled by the order, but obeyed immediately. She dropped the brush and bucket spilling water on the floor. Her hand pulled the note from her pocket. Still shaking she read and translated the note.

"Honored Master, the time has come full circle. In the beginning I was a child and you a few hours tardy. At the end and the beginning of this circle we will use our Ch'i and defeat the sorrow in our lives.

I have been told a trap has been set for me. I will need you to live our Ch'i and find me. This is something we will do together. We know this. Come with Jared and we will end this.

Keep my Blue with her family. I feel she is needed there.

Little Tiger.” Lei Ling refolded the note and put it in her pocket.

“The Marshal expects to take out Cage and his gang with an old Chinaman and young deputy?” Oakley croaked.

“My brother is not an old Chinaman,” Lei uttered with irritability. “Chin Su is a Shaolin Priest.”

“I have no idea what that is,” Oakley replied tiredly. He didn’t mean to offend the woman. “Cage has nearly a dozen men on his payroll here.”

“Chin Su considers that a fair battle,” Lei Ling bragged. She picked up her bucket and went to the hall. She fell to the floor and began scrubbing earnestly.

Oakley returned to the family room and began to pace the floor waiting for Blue.

“A Shaolin Priest is trained in fighting that goes beyond mankind’s understanding and strength,” Samantha informed.

Her voice was like an awakening with a cold shower. He had forgotten she was still in the family room. His head snapped and looked toward the voice.

“I’ve seen it,” Samantha stated. “Chin Su even showed me a little to understand it. Those hired men of Cage’s won’t have a chance.”

“You’re so sure of this?” Oakley queried. His heart was doing flip-flops. This woman child was beautiful and smart.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Samantha smiled. “That and Blue getting twenty to thirty of Bright Moon’s Shoshone warriors following along. I would state emphatically that Cage is in a losing battle.”

Blue walked down the stairs in her jeans with Lucy close behind. “Go to Lei Ling and help her,” Blue ordered.

“Don’t go,” Lucy pleaded.

“I have to honey,” Blue responded stroking Lucy’s cheek.

Twiggy called from the back bedroom, “Blue? Samantha? One of you get Granpa Blue Pool. I need him and his medicines.”

“How is Pa?” Samantha called worriedly to her mother.

“He’ll be fine if I can get those healing salves,” Twiggy answered. “Hurry!”

Samantha pushed her way past Oakley and Blue was right behind her.

Oakley followed in close pursuit.

Blue and Samantha ran to the barn and had two horses bridled and mounted before Oakley found his horse and mounted it. It turned out to his observance didn't need saddles. His mouth dropped in admiration watching the two women become a fluid motion and as one with their horses.

Oakley was hard put to catch up with the McGillinen women and probably wouldn't have if they hadn't stopped at a lodge in the center of other well-maintained lodges. He realized he was in the middle of an Indian village that was completely different than he had ever seen. There were a few conical hide lodges, but there were barns, cattle, sheep, as well as horses. He saw irrigated rows of growing vegetables and fruit trees. Oakley marveled at the children playing while the grown ups both male and female worked judiciously on one project or another. It was a village, but it was a small city as well.

Two ancient men from the center lodge walked to greet the McGillinen women. He listened carefully as Samantha and Blue spoke to the men. He couldn't understand any of the words. It was obvious to him that they were speaking Shoshone. His face must have been hard because his jaw was set hard. He was still trying to put a proper plan in place when he met with Cage. He had to explain Sikes' death. He became impatient with his own dilemma and turned to walk away from the conversation he couldn't understand. He walked into a solid wall of Shoshone Warriors. Their faces were grim. Oakley was shaken. He hadn't dealt with Indians before. A grin crossed his face when Blue's words came back into memory. It was true. He didn't hear those Indians surround him. "Dammit!"

"Dammit you," Tall Rail shouted back. "Why are you here chasing our sisters?"

Samantha and Blue Pool were walking to the lodge to retrieve the medicines Ryan McGillinen would need.

Blue and Bright Moon were following the conversation with the warriors and Oakley.

"He didn't chase us," Blue announced. "Oakley merely followed us. We are going to Needle Shack. It is the place where Cage is holding my husband."



“Granddaughter of Blue Pool is asking for warriors to follow her, and not be seen. She wishes to free her husband and capture the evil men who hold him,” Bright Moon explained. “Blue has told me this Oakley has saved her father’s life and protected her and her family from great harm.”

More warriors had surrounded Oakley by then. About twenty Shoshone Warriors left the group to get their rifles, guns, bows, and arrows. Shoshone Warriors were mounting their horses when Blue and Oakley left the camp for Needle Shack.

## *Chapter 28*

“Wave at the workers real nice and then keep going,” Cage ordered when they neared the construction site.

Brock obeyed meekly. His control would win out in the long haul. Chin Su would be near him soon. His Ch’i told him there was nothing to fear. This would not be his end, but his beginning. This land of Nevada and the lands of Geneva were his Force. Chin Su knew this also. They talked of the future and the strength of this future many times.

It was mid day when they rode to Needle Shack. More of Cage’s men were waiting there. Brock could smell food being cooked. He counted six men outside.

“Get down!” Cage ordered gruffly.

Brock obeyed silently.

“Get in the shack,” Cage commanded.

Brock walked in and found four more men. One worked at a cook stove. Two sat by the small table playing cards. One more stretched out on the small cot.

“Amos, Nat, and Glen get out,” Cage snarled. “Carl, you keep cooking. I’m so hungry my stomach is gnawing my spine.”

Jay came behind and pushed Brock in the shack further. “Sit down on that chair.” He pointed to one of the chairs emptied by Amos and Nat. “You ain’t too brave anymore are you? Nothing you can do without your big deputies and their guns. Wished you packed an iron now don’t you?”

Brock sat down on the chair. He turned toward Jay and smiled. “He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword. I heard that’s what the good book says.”

Jay chuckled. He backhanded Brock across the face with great force. "The good book also says turn the other cheek. You gonna do that?"

Brock slowly brought back his face to look at Jay. He licked at the drop of blood by his lips. His cheek burned from the strike. "Looks like I have no choice."

Jay laughed heartily. "No I guess you don't."

Cage brought a set of hand shackles he had used when he was sheriff. "Put your hands behind the chair," he directed to Brock. Cage then handed the shackles to Jay. "Put these on him."

Cage walked to the cook stove and grabbed a plate on the shelf. He wiped it with his shirtsleeve and handed it to the Carl.

Carl complied and filled Cage's plate with ham strips and beans.

Cage put the plate on the table and turned to take a mug. He poured some coffee from the pot resting on the edge of the cook stove.

"Hope you ain't hungry," Cage sneered at Brock. "You seem to be all tied up."

Brock didn't answer. He remained silent the entire time it took for Cage to eat the meal. Brock was thinking about what a stroke of fortune that they used those iron shackles and not rope to secure his hands. He would be able to free himself very easily. He would simply have to wait for the right time. When Chin Su arrived it would be the right time.

Jay, Jim, and Carl took their plates outside.

Brock counted thirteen men. He surmised there would be four or five more around including a few from the construction site. A total of twenty men was hardly a match for him and Chin Su. Brock figured the shack was so small there would be no more than three or four of them inside with him at any time.

Brock broke the silence. "Why haven't you just killed me? That's what you plan on doing isn't it?"

"You're gonna die alright. You're gonna pay for busting up my business, my profit, and my future in Pine County. You are just going to suffer as long as possible. I'm gonna hurt you bad before you die."

“Pain is pain regardless of the duration,” Brock replied logically.

Cage looked directly into Brock’s eyes and pointed his finger at him as he spoke. “The pain will be worse for you. It’s going to be that little woman of yours screaming in agony.”

It was difficult, but Brock kept his calm. Cage couldn’t possibly be referring to Blue. She was safe at Geneva’s Branch with her family. “I doubt that very much.”

“You won’t doubt a bit when Sikes brings your little Missy here from her Pa’s house,” Cage snorted noticing a brief glimpse of hatred. It was a flash, but he saw it. “Yeah, we’ve been watching your little woman for some time. Sikes will be bringing her here before the sun sets.”

Brock sat silently. He wouldn’t allow Cage to see the fear or fury that was raging inside. If he hurt Blue he would not only kill him painfully with skill, he would make him want to die several times over. He wouldn’t give in to Cage’s taunts. Blue was protected in her home and surrounded by her family. Besides, Chin Su and Jared would be here soon. They’d take things in control.

It had been two hours since Chin Su told Jared they were no longer being watched and they turned direction.

“We’ll be near Eye of Hawk’s camp when we cross that rise,” Jared stated pointing in the distance to Chin Su. “I’m getting reinforcements to come with us. There is no telling how many guns Cage has hired. You may think you and Brock can defeat Cage and his men. I still believe in help primarily in the aide of my Shoshone brothers.”

Chin Su smiled, “I do not think, I know I will defeat these men. Still, my Ch’i tells me to accommodate you.”

The two men rode hard until they arrived at Eye of Hawk’s camp.

Jared dismounted and was greeted warmly by a middle aged Indian of obvious stature in the camp. “Uncle, we need your help,” Jared said in Shoshone.

"We know of the trouble. Spotted Deer of Bright Moon's camp was sent to tell us and send more warriors with his to Needle Shack," Eye of Hawk responded.

A chill permeated Jared's spine. "What happened? Why would Spotted Deer ask for help?"

"My brother Ryan has been wounded and his family attacked by Sikes," Eye of Hawk shared somberly. "Our Blue and her friend are riding to Needle Rock. Bright Moon has sent twenty warriors. We have sent twenty-five more. You must ride quickly to be with them."

"When did they leave?" Jared queried.

"Now," Eye of Hawk responded as his pony was brought to him and he mounted. "I will not let these men who hurt my family and brother leave without punishment."

Jared quickly remounted. He galloped with pride next to his two uncles, Eye of Hawk and Little Bear.

Chin Su found himself riding in the midst of forty-five warriors and felt the power of their Ch'i. Everything was falling into place.

Braden met the rider on Stockings just before the ranch gate at Geneva's Hope. "Good grief man, what is the matter?"

Howard Varden gasped for air, "I was sent to get you and help. Bennett told me to fetch you and Hope's hands. Shelby Hampton has been shot."

"What?" Braden roared. "When?"

"This morning. It was a trap to lead the Marshal into Cage's hands. They've taken Brock hostage."

"Where's Bennett?" Braden demanded.

"He's gone with a few men to rescue the Marshal," Howard answered. "He knows he needs your help."

Braden turned Stockings around and returned to the ranch at a break neck speed. Howard had barely made it into the ranch when he was nearly run down by fifteen men on horse back and Braden was leading the way. They headed toward the construction site without being told that was the way. Braden had already deduced the location from Shelby being shot. The site was perfect for an ambush.

Blue would have been surprised if she knew that some seventy people were standing behind her in rescuing her husband.

Oakley would have been more assured if he knew about the help. Instead he was brooding about explaining to Cage about Sikes' absence.

"What are you stewing about?" Blue asked.

"How the hell am I going to explain Sikes' death and you riding with me?" Oakley complained. "Cage won't believe me. He'll kill me on sight. Lord knows what he'll do to you." Oakley was worried not only for his own life but worried more for Blue. He would be surprised if the two of them weren't shot out of their saddles.

"He will do to me what he intended to do with me when he sent Sikes to get me," Blue replied. "We needn't worry about that with Chin Su, Jared, and the Shoshone near by."

"Do you really think Cage will believe you came willingly with me?"

Blue chuckled, "He will when I put on my act, and it will be a noisy act so the Shoshone will be able to come close without being noticed."

They road quietly nearing the point on the ridge where they would be seen by anyone looking from Needle Shack.

"We will dismount here and leave our ponies," Eye of Hawk declared leaving his horse with the fluidity of water flowing in a stream. "Over that hill is the Needle Shack."

Chin Su agreed.

The two walked in the tall grasses and crouched when reaching the apex. Eye of Hawk pulled out his telescope and scanned the high hill. He located the cabin and watched four men moving around outside.

Chin Su noticed two more men further down on the hill.

Eye of Hawk voiced Chin Su's observation. "These men are open for attack. There is no thinking or planning. There is disorder. This is weakness. Easy targets."

They slid down the hill through the grasses.

Eye of Hawk spoke quietly to his warriors and the warriors from Bright Moon's camp. His arms pointed in different directions.

Jared understood the instructions.

Chin Su didn't have to. He was already walking in the tall grasses. He started in the tallest grasses where his head was barely visible. He moved with the breezes and found many boulders and tree copse to hide in as he moved closer and closer to the cabin on the hill.

Mud Turtle recognized Bennett Wessex at the construction site. He rode quickly to talk with his friend.

Bennett turned to the approaching horse. His face already severe with frustration added apprehension. There was no reason for Mud Turtle to be on this land unless something was going on.

Before Mud Turtle spoke he saw the dust of many riders coming. "Come with me."

Bennett mounted and rode with Mud Turtle to meet the approaching riders.

Braden Wessex was at the lead of the riders on his racehorse Stockings. He had nearly twenty-five riders with him including hands from Geneva's Hope and a few men from Ely.

"What's going on, son?" Braden demanded. "Where is Brock? Is Shelby alright?"

"I haven't found Brock yet," Bennett answered his father. "The men at the sight don't know anything."

"There are at Needle Shack," Mud Turtle informed.

Braden turned his attention to Mud Turtle. "What are you doing here? Something is happening for you to leave Geneva's Hope camp. Are others with you?"

"Eye of Hawk, our chief, has brought many warriors including some of Bright Moon's camp. We surround the cabin. We will pick the fleas from the dog quickly."

"Let's go," Braden urged.

"We will be silent as we pick the fleas," Mud Turtle replied. "Wait quietly until you can take the fleas away."

"I know where Needle Shack is. You can see everyone approaching for miles," Braden stated with wisdom. "We'll go as

far as that ridge.” He pointed to a rise over the site. “Let us know when you have all your fleas.”

Bennett grinned. “Mud Turtle, have you counted how many fleas are on the dog?”

“We believe there might be twenty,” Mud Turtle answered. It really doesn’t matter. “They do not know the way of the warrior.”

“Armed?” Braden queried.

“Yes, they have guns,” Mud Turtle smiled. “This is no problem for the Shoshone Warrior.”

Braden smiled. “I guess we wait this one out, son.”

“Only if Brock is not in danger,” Bennett insisted.

A seedy looking cowboy walked into the cabin. He addressed Cage, “Two riders coming in.”

Cage looked up from his mug of coffee. “Two? There should be three. Can you see who it is?”

“Nope, too far away.”

Cage rose from the table. “Stay here and watch him.” He walked out the door. Cage’s face hardened to stone and a scowl covered it.

Brock heard Cage talking to several men but he couldn’t make out the words. He wondered why two riders upset Cage. Why was he expecting three riders? Then he felt it. It was Blue. Somehow Blue was taken from her haven. He moved his hands and worked them free from the hand irons. His fingers caught them before they fell to the floor. He held on to them. This would be the first weapon used. He was grateful for all of Cage’s underestimations including putting him a chair that allowed his back to be at the wall.

“They’ve seen us,” Oakley remarked keeping his horse at a slow trot. “Are you ready for your act.”

“Just as we discussed,” Blue assured. “Just stick to the scenario and you must play your part. Don’t be afraid to lay it on thick. I’ll take it. This is for my husband.”

“I’m sure grateful he’ll know right away this is an act,” Oakley sighed deeply. “He knows I’m a Pinkerton.”



“Just play the part,” Blue ordered firmly.

“It’s the girl and Andrews,” Cage growled. “Where the Hell is Sikes?” He stomped toward his horse. “Watch my back,” he demanded. Moments later Cage was on his horse riding toward Oakley and Blue.

## *Chapter 29*

Cage rode down the hill to confront Andrews. Blue was poised. The acting wasn't very difficult. The moment Blue saw Cage she was filled with rage. Her eyes were dangerous daggers and her mouth was filled with venom and ready to bite.

As Cage approached Oakley reached for Blue's reins and pulled back to stop her horse. He managed to duck just in time when Blue swung her fist at him.

"Mangy coward of a dog," Blue shouted angrily. "You snake bellied varmint, let go of my reins! I want my husband."

Cage witnessed the scene. He hurried his horse. When he was next to Oakley he felt Blue's anger and hatred. "Where's Sikes?" he asked Oakley casually.

"Back on the trail, dead," Oakley answered coolly deceptive. He wasn't feeling to confident that Cage would buy his lies. Cage had never trusted him until recently. Oakley didn't wait for Cage to ask. He volunteered quickly, "Her old man followed us and Sikes wanted to confront him. Sikes lost."

"The old man?" Cage asked quietly.

"Dead on the trail," Oakley snickered. He hoped his acting was going over well. "I didn't wait to face him. I got him before Sikes hit the dirt."

Cage said nothing he looked at Blue as if he were looking at her to verify Oakley's story.

Blue didn't respond. She looked at Cage with such rage he should have fallen over dead from it.

The fact Blue didn't verify the story convinced Cage that Oakley was telling the truth. "Why isn't she bound?"

"Because you low down polecat, I am here because I choose to be. You don't think this little piece of dung here could force me to come with him if I didn't want to, do you?" Blue

ranted. "Take me to my husband, now!" She pulled against Oakley's hold on the reins.

"Simmer down Missy," Cage sneered. "You'll be with your man pretty quick."

"Let me go," Blue growled. "He's up in Needle Shack. I can get there on my own."

"Well now, I'm sure you can, but you'll go up there when I'm ready and I ain't ready," Cage snarled. "I've got plans for you and your man. I have to make sure you two weren't followed." Cage rode where they had just been. He looked for anything unusual. He stood in his stirrups and looked over the land. He saw nothing.

Blue whispered, "Don't worry, he won't see the Shoshone."

Oakley just shook his head. He certainly hoped Blue was right.

After several minutes Cage brought his horse around. "Take her up. I'll stay behind you."

They rode slowly up the hill noticing the several hired guns Cage was using as lookouts. Finally they were at the cabin.

Blue dismounted. She wanted to bolt into the cabin. Oakley was already restraining her. It was time for the show. She swung at Oakley and her fist landed right on his jaw. He stumbled back but recovered quickly and grabbed her hair.

Oakley pulled Blue to him by her hair. He hated doing what he had to do. He raised his hand and slapped her so hard she fell against the cabin.

Blue screamed in fury.

Oakley pulled her up and pulled her arm behind her. He started pushing her toward the cabin door.

Blue was screaming expletives at Oakley as her body was shoved into the cabin.

Brock heard Blue. He heard the flesh against flesh. At that point he was ready to charge the bully left to guard him and go outside, but something stayed him. It was Ch'i. Not yet he thought. When Blue was in the cabin and he saw her reddened cheek he nearly lost all control. Her look steadied him. Their eyes

met and their souls combined. Blue was in control. He could see it. How many times had Chin told him that many times things are not what they might seem.

The next moment his eyes focused on Oakley. What was he doing there with Cage? Oakley was the one that warned him about the possible trap. Did Oakley trade sides? No, he can't imagine that possibility. Blue's eyes. He returned his concentration to Blue's eyes. She told him in those eyes that both she and Oakley were putting on a charade for the benefit of the captors. Brock relaxed. He knew the right time to end this criminal gang was near.

Cage strolled in behind Oakley and smirked, "Well little gal, here's your man. I think you should be near him." He looked to Oakley. "Tie her up in the chair next to him." He handed Oakley some rope.

Oakley obeyed. He pushed Blue to the chair, forced her to sit, and began tying her hands. He tied the ropes loosely but put on a show of knotting the ropes.

Blue and Brock didn't break their eye contact. They shared a communication no one would ever understand. Blue told Brock volumes in those communications.

"I love you," Blue said out loud.

"I love you," Brock responded in turn.

"Ain't that sweet," Cage crowed. "You two are going to die together." His laugh afterward was maniacal. He went outside and bellowed some orders.

A hired gun returned with kerosene oil, another with old rags, and another with dry grasses.

Cage returned to order the placement of the rags and dry grasses.

Chin Su was next to the cabin hiding between two boulders and large sage bushes. With Blue and Oakley arriving, the lookouts were distracted. Chin Su watched as one by one, fifteen of Cage's hired hands were already prisoners of the Shoshone and being taken to the waiting posse of Braden Wessex that Mud Turtle told Eye of Hawk about.

Cage ordered the rest of the men outside to mount their horses and leave to meet up outside of San Francisco for their pay. He then poured the kerosene on the rags. Before he left the Cage sauntered over to Blue and grinned malevolently. He stroked Blue's chin. "Mighty pretty lady to burn. I regret it, but you'll pay for Sikes dying. I was going to let him keep you. What a shame I'm not interested." Cage pulled matchsticks from his pocket and laughed. "Shame I can't stay for the party."

Brock heard the movement outside. It was Chin Su, the silent panther.

Blue heard it as well.

Cage heard it when a body hit the side of the cabin. "What the Hell?" He started to the door. He was about to light the match on the side of the doorframe. Brock was out of the chair and made a flying kick to Cage's hand.

Cage landed outside in the dirt.

Blue freed herself from the bonds Oakley had loosely tied. She stood and smiled. Of course her husband would free himself of any bonds. She walked outside the cabin.

Cage dusted himself off and shouted for his hired guns. He looked around. There were no hired guns to be found.

Chin Su walked toward Cage. In his hand was the shirt collar of an unconscious hired gunman being dragged along the sage and dirt.

Cage looked at Chin Su. He looked at Brock. He returned his eyes to Chin Su. "Where?"

"All are in the hands of the Shoshone and on their way to Ely jail cells," Chin Su answered knowing what Cage's question meant. "You will soon join them."

Cage shifted his feet and looking for his saddled horse decided to make a run for it. He didn't see any of his men, but maybe this little Chinaman didn't know some of his men might have gotten away. He ran for his horse.

Chin Su dropped the unconscious hired gunman. He bowed politely. "After you," Chin Su offered to Brock with a bow.

In a flash of light Blue watched her husband take Cage down with one blow to his throat.

While Cage was trying to breathe, Blue handed Brock the rope she had been tied with. Brock tied him up and lifted him up to his horse, belly down. His hands and legs were tied together under the horse's belly.

Oakley appeared out of a copse of Sage Brush. "Finally the end of this."

Brock pulled Blue into his arms. "You scared me there for a moment."

"Only a moment was it?" Blue teased.

"And Oakley?" Brock asked Blue.

"He saved my life. He killed Sikes after the snake belly shot my Pa," Blue told her husband snuggling into his arms.

"Is your Pa alright?" Brock asked in concern.

"When I left he was bellowing up a storm. I think Pa will make it. Mama is taking good care of him," Blue replied. She turned to Oakley. "Thanks, and you did a great job play acting. Of course I think my cheek will smart for a week."

"If you hadn't saved my Blue. I think I'd give you some bruises in return," Brock warned. "I thought you weren't supposed to give away your cover as a Pinkerton?"

Oakley dusted off his denims with his hat nervously. "I reached a point in this assignment when I realized that being an undercover Pinkerton was something I could not be. I wanted to be a lawman, but not live with outlaws. I want to fight them."

Brock took Blue's arm and together they walked over to Oakley.

"Thanks for making that decision when you did," Brock appreciated.

"Let's get these coyotes to Ely's jail," Oakley encouraged. "I understand Blue's Uncle Braden Wessex and her cousin Bennett Wessex have a small army corralling these mangy men to take them back to Ely."

Shoshone warriors surrounded Blue, Brock, and Oakley. The Shoshone were on horseback. Several of the warriors had men tied like dogs on a leash. The tough hired guns of Cage were walking behind the Shoshone horses and being led to a copse on the other side of the hill where riders were coming to meet them.

Oakley mounted his horse. "Are you two coming to Ely?"

Brock held Blue closely. His chin was buried into the hair upon her head. "I have to check on my Uncle Shelby. I have to know if he is all right. I know you want to go back to your Pa, but I want you with me."

"I know Pa is fine. Mama and my entire family are taking care of him. That doesn't even include Cho Ling, Lei Ling, and a ranch full of hands helping to take care of Pa. Uncle Shelby only has you, Chin Su, and me," Blue clarified hugging her husband as if he would disappear if she let go. "We'll see to Uncle Shelby and then see Pa, together." Blue emphasized the last word. "We ended this together. We will always be together."

"Yes, my Ch'i," Brock whispered.

Blue and Brock arrived in Ely as Oakley, Bennett, Braden, Braden's posse, and ten Shoshone warriors were putting Cage and his men behind bars in the Ely jail. The entire town seemed to be out to watch.

Brock guided his horse to Doctor Adams's office. Mrs. Myerson greeted him. "Doctor Adams has gone to Geneva's Branch to look at Ryan McGillinen. We heard those outlaws shot him. If you are looking for your Uncle, he's back at the hotel."

"Thank you kindly," Brock acknowledged.

Brock and Blue rode to the hotel and walked to Uncle Shelby's suite.

Shelby was sitting at the table in the center of his suite enjoying a port wine. His arm was in a sling. He was smiling as he concentrated on a chess move. Charlotte Henders, a local Ely woman that ran a pharmacy and occasionally worked as Dr. Adams's nurse was sitting at the table. Charlotte was still an attractive middle-aged woman. Her silver hair sparkled in the gas lights. A bit plump but it rounded her face and made her smile larger. She was obviously winning the chess match. A wide smile greeted the couple when she looked up.

"Good day, Aurora and Brock," Charlotte greeted cheerfully. "You've arrived at the right moment. Mr. Hampton appears to be moving into a checkmate."

"What?" Shelby gurgled. "I haven't lost yet."

“We’ll continue this game later,” Charlotte indicated rising from her chair. “I’ll leave you and your family to your privacy.”

“I’m not beaten, yet.” Shelby grumbled scratching his head.

Charlotte turned to look at Shelby. “Don’t move any of the pieces. I’ll know.” She gave him a saucy wink and left the room.

“It looks like you will have an interesting recovery,” Brock teased his uncle.

“I am going to enjoy this,” Shelby grinned. “She’s a special lady.”

Brock offered his uncle a knowing wide smile.

Shelby resettled comfortably in the chair. “I never doubted for a moment you would return to me unscathed. I take it the scoundrel is apprehended?”

“Yes, they are all in the Ely jail. A wire has been sent to the army post. A detail will be sent to take them to Virginia City for trial,” Brock shared. “This time it will include assault and murder.”

Shelby rubbed his arm. “What happened out there?”

“Short story version,” Brock started. “Cage took me and sent Sikes with Oakley to kidnap Blue. Cage didn’t know that Oakley was a Pinkerton. Oakley stopped Sikes. He and Blue brought Shoshone warriors. I had sent Jared to fetch Chin Su. They brought more Shoshone warriors. Apparently Bennett sent for his father and Braden Wessex brought a small army.”

Blue laughed, “Cage didn’t have a chance!”

“Anybody else hurt?” Shelby queried.

“My Pa was shot by Sikes,” Blue answered. “We wanted to make certain you were mending. Now we’ll return to Geneva’s Branch. I want to know for sure Pa is mending.”

“I’m really sorry about that,” Shelby replied worriedly. “Send back word to me, please.”

Blue leaned over and gave Uncle Shelby a kiss on his forehead. “We will.”

A knock on the door pulled their attention from each other.

“Enter,” Shelby responded.

Bennett Wessex entered with his wife, Julia. Behind him was Braden Wessex and Oakley.



“We heard you will recover,” Braden quipped eyeing the chess game. “It appears you are a move away from Checkmate.”

“Oh great,” Shelby moaned. “I needed to hear that.”

Braden grinned. “I take it you are losing?”

Shelby brightened. “I’m only losing the Chess game.”

“If you are up to it,” Bennett interrupted. “I’d like to get a story for our paper.”

“If you’re not too tired,” Julia added taking out her pad and pencil.

“I’m here for the story,” Braden included taking a seat and perusing the chess board.”

“You two go see to Blue’s Pa,” Shelby chortled. “I’ve got a story to tell.”

Braden frowned. “Ryan? Is he hurt? I wondered why he wasn’t tagging behind his baby girl.”

“He was shot when Sikes tried to kidnap me. Listen to the story,” Blue informed. “Excuse us. We are going to see Pa.”

## *Chapter 30*

Ryan was sitting up on his bed. A tray of food lay before him. Twiggy was seated on the bed next to Ryan. She was stroking his hair gently. Samantha, Lucy, and Ryan were also in the room. Little Ryan lay next to his father. Samantha and Lucy were reading by the table.

Blue knew this was Ryan's wish. He was temporarily laid up and his strength could only be found in his family. After what had happened in his home and his own current helplessness. He needed the strength of his family and reassurances they were near in his circle of safety.

Ryan looked up as Blue and Brock entered. He left out a breath of relief. "You're alright. Both of you."

Blue moved quickly to her father's bed. She leaned over her mother and hugged her father. She felt Twiggy's gentle hand stroking her back.

"We were so worried," Ryan choked through tears. "It is so late."

"We rode in the dark to get here," Brock added quietly.

"The only thing that matters is that we are here together," Ryan answered. His voice shook with emotion. He looked at his wife.

Twiggy returned his gaze. They had an understanding that never needed words.

Brock noted the exchange.

“Come on children,” Twiggy stated. “It is time for all of you to prepare for bed.”

Little Ryan protested. “I want to sleep here.”

“You may,” Twiggy allowed. “Right now you must prepare for bed. Samantha, you help Lucy.”

Brock took a chair where Lucy had been sitting and pulled it by the bed. “I take it you want an accounting of what happened.”

Ryan grinned, “I didn’t expect you to be so smart.”

Blue curled up on the bed next to her father. “Pa, that’s a lie and you know it.”

Ryan hugged Blue. “Yes. I admit it, boy. I’m too happy right now to put on a show. So what happened?”

Brock and Blue related the entire story to Ryan McGillinen.

Ryan laid back his head against the large pillows supporting his back. “All of this for money and power.”

“That will be never ending,” Brock said prophetically.

“Perhaps that is why you and Chin Su came here,” Ryan stated wisely. “As the Marshal you can control this darkness and help protect our Geneva lands.”

“That is what I believe,” Brock agreed. “This temporary at best, but we will do all we can to protect it.”

“We?” Ryan asked. “As in all of us.”

“As in all of us,” Blue repeated.

“What is between the two of you?” Ryan queried. “There is something there. I cannot seem to touch it.”

“Perhaps because you do not want to touch it,” Brock replied. “Do not deny what you already know.”

Ryan raised a brow.

“When you and Twiggy looked at each other, there was a communication without words,” Brock informed. “Your wife and you share a bond beyond a marital paper. You share a confirmation of the unity of Yin and Yang. You are one in balance with each other.”

Ryan hugged his Blue closer. “Yes, that is the relationship I have with your mother.”

“It is our relationship, Pa,” Blue concurred. “From the first moment we met, we shared this special communication with each other.”

“Blue is my half making my whole, as Twiggy is your half making your whole,” Brock continued. “We are most fortunate to be fulfilled and completed.”

“I am fortunate,” Ryan agreed. “My life, wife, and family are very special.”

“As is the goal of Geneva lands,” Brock added. “In the universe there are mathematical equations that are solutions of perfection. We as humanity may never understand the solutions, it gives us happiness and cause to enjoy the fulfillment of our Yin and Yang.”

Ryan furrowed his brow. “This is upsetting. I actually understand you.”

Blue kissed her father on his brow. She rose from his side and placed her feet on the floor.

Brock rose and walked to Blue’s side.

Twiggy returned to the room.

Ryan patted his bed. “Come here,” he indicated to Twiggy. “Come here to my Yin.”

Twiggy raised her brow.

Ryan smiled. He pulled Twiggy close to him and kissed her. “Let’s snuggle.” He looked to Brock. “I understand. Take Yang there and be happy. We have many tomorrows left for care of Geneva.”

“Our Geneva lands,” Blue uttered lovingly.

“The name of our ranch is Geneva’s Force,” Brock informed leading Blue to the door.

“Force?” Twiggy queried.

“The force of Ch’i,” Blue responded. “Our Ch’i.”

Twiggy looked confused. She watched the young couple leave. She looked to her husband.

“Don’t ask!” Ryan sighed. “Let’s go to sleep. There is tomorrow to sort out the mysteries of life.”

Twiggy chuckled. Ryan closed his eyes. With Twiggy in his arms he fell asleep. He didn’t feel Little Ryan crawl into bed



with him. Samantha and Lucy brought sleeping rolls and fell asleep next to their parent's bed.

Upstairs Blue and Brock shared their bodies in the spiritual union only shared by those who understood what others do not. The strength of their union would be the power they used to protect the sacred lands and ideas of Geneva.

The Shoshone were a strong part of this Ch'i and the protection required of all that is nature.

Brock and Blue were the fulfillment of nature's need and gave them the force to protect her virginity as long as they lived.

### About the Author

A new author in the genre of historical romance, Payton Lee brings her characters to life. Twists and surprise turns lead her readers on to turn the page.

Smitten, an historical romance during the Hapsburg Dynasty. Payton Lee presents the love story of Prince Paul and Prince Rigan. Their story takes you across Europe, England, and Ireland. They return to Borogia and face the unknown assassin.

Read Payton Lee's [Geneva's Hope](#), the first in the six book series of the McGillinen family.

[Geneva's Branch](#), the second book in the six book series of the McGillinen family.

[Geneva's Return](#) is the third book in the Geneva Series. This saga book is about Ayden McGillinen who finds his love in England.

[Geneva's Promise](#) is the fourth book in the Geneva Series. It is about Dwayne McGillinen and Breena. They were childhood friends and find their way to each other's arms in Washington City.

Geneva's Hope, Geneva's Branch, Geneva's Return, Bear River Spirit, and Smitten are for sale at [iuniverse.com](http://iuniverse.com), [bn.com](http://bn.com), [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and [bamm.com](http://bamm.com)

All books are free for download at :

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Payton Lee lives in Orlando, Florida with her cats Picard and Kirk. Picard and Kirk also share the house with a pet dog, a rat terrier named, Peanut.