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GREEN RIVER REVOLT

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GREEN RIVER REVOLT

by

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GREEN RIVER REVOLT

In the 1880s Lucille Martin revolts against men who will not allow women to vote or own property. In spite of all her work at home her brother inherits the family farm, so possessing a teaching degree, she finds it easy to leave her family. A tall woman, with the masculine occupation of teaching, she joins a wagon train to Wyoming, where women have the privileges she covets.

The wagon train members are captured and held prisoner. Their outlaw captors claim the property legally belonging to the members. Lucille is forced to cook in the outlaws' restaurant and watch the property meant to be hers snatched by a man named Gorman, whom she assumes is one of the outlaws.

Gorman sets out to prove his innocence, while Corey Black, outlaw and killer, gambles for the women in town. Lucille must work hard to protect her friends.

Together Lucille and Gorman fight to reclaim the valley, but he is badly wounded. He escapes with the help of friends and Lucille must decide if she will accept him if—or when—he ever returns.

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Prologue

"I will win the right to vote! I will win the right to have property in my own name!" Lucille stormed about the big farmhouse living room. She stopped in front of her six-foot father, who stood only two inches taller than she did. "You say I can't own property or vote here, so I will win those rights in Wyoming!"

"Wyoming? And how will you get there?" scornfully asked her petite stepmother.

No one answered her.

"You earn your keep plenty here," her father admitted. "We ain't chasin' you out. You got your teaching certificate if you don't like living on the farm."

"Why would you want such silly things? You don't need to vote or do those unladylike things. Women shouldn't control property. They haven't the ability."

"Unladylike things!" Lucille gave an unladylike snort. "I can throw hay on a wagon like a man! I'm expected to milk cows for the creamery. Who plows the garden? Me, that's who. It's all right to be unladylike for those things, but not a word about owning my own cows, or my own privilege to say what our taxes will be, even though I help earn the income."

"Why do we deserve this tirade?" Lucille's stepmother held a dainty handkerchief to her tiny mouth. Lucille considered it like her to put her own feelings first.

"Tirade?" Lucille said between long paces. "What have you done to me? I'll tell you what. Look at you. Look at Agnes and Agatha. Barely five feet tall, any of you. You make me feel like a big, clumsy old cow. And that isn't all. When I was skinny and pretty you shoved me in the kitchen so any beaus couldn't see me. You insisted the older girls needed courtship and marriage first. Look at me now. Five foot ten and four hundred pounds!"

"We didn't tell you to eat all that pie and potatoes," Ardith Andrews Martin said defensively. "And especially those chocolates. Why do you want to get away?"

To get away from the simpering, brainless females in this house. Lucille didn't want to make things worse, so she refrained from saying it.

"I'm sorry, Lucy," said her father. He, too, paced the floor. "Since you don't have a husband, you'll get a share of my estate. Your brother Horace will inherit the farm, of course. He is wanting an advance on his share when he marries Agnes so he can start farming at Hibold's place. I'm giving him cows and pigs."

"I'll take cash," Lucille said. Somewhat mollified Lucille added, "I'd appreciate cash. Women vote and own property in Wyoming. They don't here. I can teach and have my own life in Wyoming. I'm taking the train to St. Louis in the morning."

"I'll get your money and wire it to the bank in St. Louis." Her father's voice sounded weary and sad. "It will be there by the time you are. Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

"I've already contracted with a wagon train out of Council Bluffs to teach for all the children who are going to Wyoming with their parents."

Hubert Martin drew a big sigh. Lucille caught the fleeting accusation in his eyes as he glanced at his second wife of only a couple years.

"I'm sorry, Pa," Lucille said. "I just feel I'm destined to be in the forefront of this move for women's rights."

"So be it, Lucille, so be it."

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CHAPTER 1

Wyoming 1882

Sparks flew! The big man's glinting green eyes met hers. Lucille Martin was furious! She marched forward to confront the wretched man. Too late she realized, using her five foot ten inches of height, to chastise this one would not work like encounters with smaller men. Worse yet, she'd come all these hundreds of miles, now this! She couldn't afford to back off. She resisted the urge to jump up and down in rage like one of her school pupils.

"Outlaw! Renegade! You shot at us! You put holes in my Conestoga canvas and broke the hoop. You could have killed us!" How dare the man sit on that fancy horse, big as a mountain, his curling red hair flowing in the breeze from under that monstrous hat, and stare at her like she was crazy. He acted as if they intruded on his personal territory, when the territory really belonged to her and other members of the wagon train.

"Could have, lady, could have." He nudged his Appaloosa horse back and forth before them all, ignoring her as he looked out over the Conestoga wagons as though counting them, before returning his attention to her. His beard jerked with the emphasis he put on each word. "We outnumber you folks two to one. If we wanted to kill anybody, they'd already be dead. I want you all out of this valley! I'll gladly let you go peaceably, and there will be no harm done. There are other places you can settle."

She stomped her foot and dust flew up in a choking cloud. That hulking brute put an end to all her hopes and dreams for a place of her own. One for which she had already paid good money. Words failed her, for the moment.

Banker Shafer moved up beside her, his head even with her shoulder. His jowls wobbled and his hands clenched. He shook one pudgy fist at the red haired giant. "We have legal title to land in this valley. It's registered in Cheyenne. You are the one trespassing, sir."

"Paper doesn't mean a thing if you can't hold the land. If you come any farther you will not be allowed to leave." He removed his big white hat and ran long fingers through wildly tousled hair, before replacing it on his head.

Lucille gasped incredulously. "We'd be prisoners on our own property? Prisoners? I can't believe this!"

"We'll not give up our property!" Sixty-year-old Hiram Clovine¹ reached for his gun. A blow to the head from a gun butt promptly struck him down. Lucille rushed to his side, glaring up at his assailant.

"That red haired outlaw is on the Wanted posters," Martha Adams said softly as she too came to Clovine's side. "It's lucky Ben got away, and I think young Shafer is missing." The two of them helped Clovine to his feet.

"So is the one in the black bowler hat—wanted," whispered Lucille. The man in the round hat seemed big and broad, and so serious featured he made her frown.

From beside Mr. Clovine, Lucille put shaking hands on her ample hips and stared up at the man on the horse. "You can't mean to keep us all prisoners!"

"Watch me." The big red headed outlaw dismounted from his Appaloosa horse and strode right up to her. She drew in an anxious breath, but refused to back down.

"By gosh, you are tall for a gal," he said.

How dare he look at her as if he was a starving man that had just discovered chocolate cake. The next moment his eyes narrowed and he frowned, then he gazed out over her head and shouted to his men. "Get all those workable wagons to the edge of town in a row like houses. Push the cattle on the range east and north along the river where there's grass."

"How dare you order us about like ... like..."

"Like so many slaves," he finished for her. "Or prisoners?" His grin infuriated her more.

"We will not be prisoners." She put all the sarcasm she could muster into her next words. "I suppose you've never heard of the 1877 Desert Land Act." Emphasizing every word clearly she continued, "We have title to this land, bought and paid for. We each have one thousand one hundred twenty acres, sir. Eight hundred of that we paid One Dollar and Twenty-Five cents per acre. Don't you dare try to keep us from our land. My house lot is all paid for, and it's in my name."

"You may have title, lady, but we're on it. I have money invested and buildings on town property. Now get your butt up on that wagon with the rest of the women and move along. You give me any more back talk, I'll personally take you across my knee and paddle your lace trimmed drawers."

With red hair and long beard rippling in the wind the man strode about shouting instructions and orders while Lucille fumed in¹² outrage. She'd fled Wisconsin because her father and brother had denied her the right to have property in her own name. Now, this oversized galoot intended to keep her from property she bought and

paid for with money her grandmother left her. It was more than a modern day woman should have to put up with.

She watched helplessly as armed men stopped by each wagon. Dust from running animals billowed about her in choking clouds. Thundering hooves of more horses deafened her as riders raced past and out of sight. With her right hand, she shaded her eyes from the noon sun. A half circle of outlaws held guns on men from the wagon train. Her own driver had disappeared to safety in the boulder field beside the trail. Thankfully, young Jodie Adams and Tom Shafer, with others on horseback rode into the boulders on the mountainside. Defiantly she lifted her skirt in front with both hands and ran to climb aboard her own wagon. Cora, her female companion, cowered on the wagon seat, right where she'd left her.

Lucille brought a Henry rifle, belonging to her driver, to her shoulder and pulled the trigger as an armed man galloped by. It snicked a disheartening click. She'd forgotten to lever a shell into the chamber.

As more shooting broke out her horses lunged in terror. To keep balanced, Lucille wildly clutched at the broken hoop of her wagon, but tumbled backward from the bench seat. Her voluminous white pantalets fluttered before her eyes as her legs tilted higher than her head. One elbow settled in the slimy contents of an upended lard bucket. The sleeve of her yellow gingham blouse got smeared as she tried to right herself and get to her feet. Her last box of chocolates were crushed.

"Oh, you wretched beasts!" Lucille shrieked. "You dirty outlaws!" Unable to sit upright she rolled to one side, further plastering lard and chocolate from shoulder to hip.

Grasping the wagon's wobbly corner support, she struggled upright and pitched forward across the seat back. With the heavy Henry in one hand, she grabbed wildly at the brake with the other hand.

"Whoa!" She shouted and shouted at the four terrified, runaway horses. One big black animal stumbled and fell in the traces,

bringing others to their knees. The leader tore loose and ran,¹³ dragging broken straps.

Lucille stumbled to the ground from the joggling, stalled wagon, holding the big weapon, her only protection. Ahead of her, Reverend Bricker sat straddle-legged beside his overturned covered wagon, his hands raised above his head, facing a young gunman. His wife and daughter skittered about, wringing their hands. Bricker's young son stood beside his father, staring at the outlaw.

"Chaos," Lucille muttered despairingly as she surveyed the scene. She hitched her brown skirt from around her feet. She trudged around sagebrush, through the dust, to the wagon of her friend, Bettina Belon. A dressmaker's dummy stood incongruously intact by the seamstress's overturned wagon. Lucille found no humor in it. Bettina's driver had also disappeared.

"Lucille!" Bettina screamed as two well-armed men dismounted beside her.

"Leave her alone! How dare you!" Lucille rushed between Bettina and the two men. Lucille glared at the scrawny man and the shorter, chubby kid, daring them to advance. In one smooth, swift motion, she swung the rifle, making a satisfying thud with the barrel on Scrawny's head. Her back-armed swing knocked the kid to the ground.

Just let that big galoot try paddling me. I'll give him a knock side the head, too.

"C'mon, big gal, give up," yelled the kid on the ground. Lucille stared in dismay down his pistol's black barrel. She lowered her trembling arms as she realized what she had done. Lucille dropped the gun. Her wobbling knees could barely hold her up. Scrawny nursed a sore head but prodded Bettina over beside her.

"Boss ordered no women shot," snapped the cadaverous man with the big pistol, "or by Gawd, big gal, I'd put a bullet in thet loud mouth of yourn."

A new rider, unkempt and toothless, leered at them. He gleefully told the men, "It's over. There's a big bank safe in one wagon. Lotsa store goods. We'll eat good for awhile."

"'Bout time," the kid said. "This tall drink of water done knocked Tede in the head. He ain't feelin' none too good."

"Too bad," Toothless told them. "Get 'em to the wagons. We're takin' 'em to town. I wonder how Gorman will control all these outsiders."

Lucille and the two women stared at each other for a moment before moving toward the wagons. The thick sable brown hair she was so¹⁴ proud of straggled in a dusty curtain before her eyes. Stalking in stiff-legged fury, she moved along. She stopped, pinned up her hair, drew two deep breaths, and moved forward with Bettina and Cora. While trying to straighten her pink sunbonnet, Bettina stumbled, then clutched Lucille's left arm. Cora sobbed as she trudged on their right.

Lucille breathed in hurting wheezes from the high altitude, unlike her native Wisconsin. She already hated Wyoming's barren country. Besides that, she hadn't eaten today. The brown twill skirt caught under her sturdy walking shoes and her clothes were a mess. With squared shoulders, she tilted her head defiantly, refusing to let fall the tears burning behind her eyes.

"Git yerselves aboard those two wagons, ladies."

Lucille glared at the man called Tede as he spat tobacco juice to one side. She joined the other women, girls and frightened children of wagon train members.

"Come, little ones, face these ruffians like real pioneers." Lucille urged as she helped the parents calm their children. Men slashed the canvas from the wagon hoops, so they could watch the prisoners. Lucille's arm stung from being stabbed on the jagged edge of something. Crimson blood stained her yellow blouse sleeve amid the lard smears and she blotted most of it away. The broken Conestoga hoop must have snagged her arm as she climbed down

from the wagon. She sat down hard on a wooden chest in the wagon as the resistive horses jerked this way and that.

When the dust settled Lucille saw the banker and Delbert Hack, the storekeeper for their planned town, held in the half circle of attackers.

Big Red rode to the wagons. His long hair and beard showed auburn and gold in the bright sunlight as he dismounted from his colorful Appaloosa horse and strode forward. He looked daring and wild, handsome and arrogant. Standing out against a backdrop of snowcapped mountains, green pines and fresh leafed scrub willows he made her pulse rate zing like bees on a flower. Lucille felt shame at her attraction to him. It had to be fear that made her heart thunder in her chest.

"I am Red Gorman of the town of Gorman. You have invaded my valley!" His shout rang out to every stalled wagon and every remaining wagon train rider. "Your leaders refuse to go back! It's

have no choice but to keep you here until I decide what to do about you all."

Lucille shaded her eyes to see better. She stared in fascination. His broad shoulders strained the seams of an expensive looking green silk shirt. Levi's clung to long, powerful legs and his polished boots shone black in the sunlight. Lucille gave a delicate snort in derision. One knee of those revealing pants had a fray-edged tear. An open buttonhole allowed his shirt to spread apart on his massive chest. She sobered immediately. He looked dangerous.

"These men won't hurt you if you follow orders!" He removed his big white hat and waved a signal to men scattered among the wagons. Lucille heard their shouts to drivers to move the wagons forward. The slow procession started down the slanted, sagebrush covered, grade into the valley. She looked back at her stalled wagon. The loose horse stood beside the others, waiting patiently by his familiar teammates, now that the noise and chaos had ended. Overturned wagons or those with missing horses were left behind, hers included. To Lucille the valley ahead didn't look much better

than the desolate route they had just come, traveling through sagebrush and the dried grasses of a winter not yet turned to spring.

She watched Hack and Shafer, along with numerous ranch hands, being hustled afoot, like so many sheep, as the wagons were driven down into an immense valley bordered on all sides by rugged hills and snow capped mountains.

"This is supposed to be home?" Lucille said bitterly. In a hazy corner of her numbed mind, she noted the Green River really flowed in greenish cascades as it kinked and tumbled its way over and around huge boulders on its way down the valley. From the rushing current, the river formed a small lake nestled to one side. What would they do now? How could they claim their land?

Wedged together, the women sat silently until Martha Adams whispered, "My husband is missing. I wonder how he got away."

No one answered, but they gazed hopefully around them into the rugged foothills and scrubby trees along the roadside.

They rode slowly past Red Gorman as he sat astride the beautiful Appaloosa. Lucille felt his relaxed attitude could change in a split⁶ second. The green of his deep-lidded eyes met hers for a moment. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he grinned. The rascal had the nerve to wink at her! Lucille hastily averted her eyes and concentrated on scrubbing sticky goo from her fingers with a pocket-handkerchief. Her heart thundered in her chest. Like the others in her group, she was surer than ever she'd seen that face on a Wanted poster in Cheyenne.

Men swore furiously as they plodded in the trail ruts behind the wagons. She heard a commotion. "I hope more of our people escape. This is ridiculous. I haven't heard any shots, have you?" Lucille said to no one in particular.

No one had.

On a level stretch of trail Lucille stared at a crudely lettered sign reading "Gorman." The few buildings ahead looked like the usual small town.

On her right, she heard the clang, clang of a blacksmith pounding on metal. His small corral had only three animals in it. As their wagon turned right, down what must be the main street, she immediately looked left. All eyes were on the monstrosity of a house set among towering cottonwoods. Three stories high, with a huge porch on two sides, it dominated the landscape. If this was the main street, then that obscenely big structure sat right on what should have been her town lot. Lucille shuddered as they went on past. Vacant lots were interspersed with rough little buildings on the right. On the left, beyond the monstrosity, a long, low building had two big plate glass windows and a door at the far end.

A new building, long and well built, centered the block beyond a side street that boasted only one small building. This must be where they planned to take the wagonless people.

The titled lands of the Bascom wagon train people included the entire valley and several lots marked off on their map for a town. It didn't look like holding title to something meant they would get it.

The two town streets were covered with businesses and houses. She again heard the blacksmith striking metal.

Miserably dejected, Lucille realized her inheritance had been stolen by Gorman's men. There would be no fine home. Nor did she see any school building.

"All out!" With crudely phrased orders, the prisoners were shoved into the long, warehouse type structure. Lucille smelled raw wood⁷ and saw that high windows lined each side of the room. Plank tables with tall, heavy legs were scattered in the long narrow room, as though ready for store goods.

Families huddled together, comforting frightened and hungry children. Lucille looked out over the crowd, but couldn't find the banker's twenty-year-old son, Tom, among the disgruntled people. She knew rancher Clem Adams, his one daughter, and several drovers were missing as well as her own driver

"What have we gotten into, Mr. Clovine?" Lucille asked the eldest man there. "That red haired man is the killer on those Wanted Posters in Cheyenne."

"Are you sure?"

"Red hair, green eyes, six-foot-four, favors green silk shirts, Appaloosa horses and is fast with a gun. He was labeled dangerous."

"Damnation, I don't know. It ain't likely he'll let anyone free to tell where he is."

"I didn't think outlaws really looked like ordinary people."

"Well, the size of him ain't ordinary. Handsome devil. I don't know anybody fast with a gun unless it's Ben." Clovine said.

"Ben isn't here."

Hiram Clovine surveyed the wagon train people beyond her shoulder. "Ben will get us out of this," he told the people calmly. "Mark my words. Ben will do it." Clovine had a bruise on his high forehead below his shock of thick white hair.

Lucille wondered if he meant to convince her, the people, or himself. She hoped Ben lived up to the sturdy old man's expectations. According to Bascom people's assumption, she and Ben were to have had the first wedding in Bascom. Now Ben was gone. He could be wounded or even dead. She clung to the hope he had escaped unscathed and would be back to rescue them.

Lucille turned wary eyes as Scrawny and a man with a big nose entered the warehouse. She was pleased to see the welt she'd put on Tede's forehead. The men threw rough blankets to the prisoners, along with brightly patterned quilts very obviously from the homesteader's own wagons. There was no sign of the red haired outlaw. She'd like to see him up closer. No doubt he had scars or warts. An outlaw should not look so handsome. The two men left as quickly as they had come.

She wiped the bloody scratch on her arm with a strip from her white petticoat. She scraped most of the thick lard from her brown skirt. 18

"Mr. Clovine, your head wound needs to be cleaned properly," Lucille said. He grimaced as she prodded and wiped at the big bleeding bruise with another bit of petticoat, then wrapped a clean strip around his head.

"I had to let them know I didn't like what they were doing."

"I hit that skinny one on the head, but he had a gun. I don't think they mean to kill us, do you?" Lucille finished the bandage on the old man's head.

"Hard to say," Clovine replied. "I wouldn't aggravate them right now."

Families picked their own areas of floor space and clung together. As dark descended, Lucille slipped into a fitful doze on the hard floor, using a hunk of wadded up petticoat for a thin pillow. The long, miserable night passed slowly.

In the morning's chill air, the guards hustled the prisoners outside to the privy. Lucille saw that some of Ben's stolen Morgan horses were in the town's corral. A drover she remembered as Forie Drescher, eyed the horses as well.

"You try fer them broomtails, mister, I'll shoot the next man in line," a lanky guard told him. No attempts to escape were made.

"If I have to feed you folks until your wagons are organized, you can damn well earn it." Lucille stared all around but could not locate the unmistakable owner of that deep voice. Big Red arose early.

The male prisoners were prodded across the street, and the women returned to the warehouse. Lucille watched out one window. The men were lined up, nailing boards together for a boardwalk in front of a building. Did he mean to use them as slave labor to finish the building of his town?

Their captors gave them no breakfast. At noon all prisoners were hustled out to the hard, rutted street. Lucille stared around her. To

her right was the livery stable where six of Ben's horses either rolled in the dust or ate from a pile of hay. Closer, and across from the warehouse, stood a gaudy saloon with an upper full length porch, all freshly painted cream and red.

Lucille looked to her left and her heart gave a sickening thud. That monstrous house really did stand exactly where her town lot should have been, toward the edge of town. Before she could stare long at the big, gray painted building they were hustled across the portion of newly constructed boardwalk and to a much older, restaurant⁹ type building.

Two big, very dirty, plate glass windows faced the walk. They reflected Lucille's bedraggled brown hair, smudged round face and angry blue eyes, before she followed Clovine through short, flopping half doors. Inside, Lucille looked around at a small liquor bar in one corner to her right. To the left plank tables and scattered benches filled the space down the long room. In another room, behind a long, wide counter she saw the rusty pipe of a big black cook stove. Her nose crinkled at the smell of burnt and spoiled food.

Scrawny Tede, that none-too-clean oldster, wearing a perpetual scowl and a big gun weighing down his right side, stood behind the long plank counter filled with eating utensils. Thick plates, scorched biscuits, a heavy kettle, big coffee pots and cups were set out. A huge skillet held some kind of dark meat. It, too, had a burnt smell to it.

"Do you expect us to eat that horrible looking, and smelling, food?" Lucille said aloud even though guards glared in her direction. The cook glared at her from under beetling gray brows.

Guards ushered the prisoners into a line by the counter behind Red. Lucille stared at the back of the very tall, broad shouldered man at the head of the line. His brick red hair and beard curled around his face. Red Gorman. Her eyes kept returning to him like humming birds to a red flower. He took one forkful of food and bellowed, "Tede, get your scrawny arse out here! You expect us to eat this scorched, half raw, greasy slop?"

Lucille winced as the cook's face turned gray. The big man roared, "Gawdamn, I can't stand your rotten cooking." He drew his big gun and fired. Splinters flew and a big yellow gouge appeared in the square post at the end of the high counter.

Prisoners and outlaws scattered in every direction. Some went to the floor. Lucille held her breath and stood like a stone statue.

Tede, jumped ignominiously. He threw his thin arms over his head defensively, ducking flying wood splinters as Gorman fired again. "Dammit, Red," he whined, "Cut it out. Git somebody else to cook." He looked around in desperation. "Let thet fat complainin' female standin' there do it. She looks like she allus et good." He pointed a gnarled, dirty finger at Lucille.

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All eyes looked at her. Her mouth turned dry. She swallowed and gritted her teeth. She stared at Scrawny, who was called Tede, and opened her mouth to protest.

"You cook?" The big man swung around to her.

She stood silently, glaring at him.

"I asked, do you cook?"

"I'm a schoolteacher, not a cook. Anyone can do better than this. And I am not fat!" She raised her eyes up to meet the big man's green gaze. Stubbornly she glared back, pursing her lips tightly in anger.

His jade eyes suddenly twinkled as he looked her up and down. She stared back. She would not quake before that wretched man.

"No, not fat," he said, "but a good looking, blue-eyed, plump partridge all the same. I'm Red Gorman, woman. I run this town. If you want your people to keep eating, you better cook until we get these damn land titles straightened out. Either that or put up with Tede's meals."

The green lightning of his stare jolted her clear to her toes. She couldn't look away. Outlaws weren't supposed to be that handsome, that fascinating or that magnetizing. She set her lips in a

disapproving downward curve and finally succeeded in looking at his shirt collar. It seemed the big redhead enjoyed staring her up and down to embarrass her. Plump partridge indeed!

"Woman, you got yourself a job." He continued to look at her. "Get to that kitchen. I want a decent meal by six o'clock. No watery spuds nor burnt meat. Understand?"

Lucille returned his green-eyed stare in stupefaction, too furious to think of a proper retort. Would he actually shoot her? Where had her schoolteacher discipline gone? Her fellow prisoners were speechless.

"Move it, woman. Don't wait all day. Six o'clock."

The murmur of suddenly protesting prisoners' voices faded as she stomped over into the big room beyond the high counter.

Tede waited in the middle of the kitchen. "Anyone can do better than this," he mocked in a high falsetto voice. In a lower tone he growled, "Well, it's all yourn, woman. It's all yourn." Yanking off

his soiled apron he threw it on the floor at her feet and strode out the kitchen's back door.

She stared after him as the door slammed. "Well, Lucille Martin," she told herself, "for a school teacher, you're stupid. You opened your big mouth at the wrong time again. Now you've really done it, like you know all about cooking for fifty people."

Stiff legged, Lucille turned a slow circle in the dirtiest, smelliest, most unorganized kitchen she had ever seen in all her twenty-three years.

* * * *

Red turned his back on the kitchen. He took long legged strides over to his friend Stoke's small bar in the corner of the big dining area.

"Do you think the lady can cook?" Stokes asked. He raised his hard crowned bowler hat and scratched his bald pate, before hanging the hat on a nail. Appearing completely unconcerned he polished a glass with a big towel and set it on the bar in front of Red.

"She can't do any worse than Tede. Damn, I hate bad food." He forked a pickled egg from the jar Stokes placed before him.

"Arch, you're upset over folks trying to take our valley." The big bartender was one of the few who used his given name. He reached for a bottle under the counter. "Have a brandy and relax. Maybe she'll do better than Tede."

"I can't relax. How did I know titles were issued for this land? We were told to ride in and take it. There wasn't any Land Act of 1877 then. As long as we could hold it, the land belonged to us." He grimaced at a second pickled egg but ate it, along with a handful of crackers from a big wooden bowl.

"Making Wyoming a territory could have changed that." Stokes said. "They haven't gotten their records straight at the land offices. People get careless all the time."

"I'm not giving up my town. I worked too hard for it. They can have the damn valley, as long as they don't try to leave. What the hell do we do now? We still have Ed Hutchins trial to go to court. We just

barely got Joe Texas proven innocent. I hate bein' a wanted man, but Blaine has a family. We have his case to prove yet."

"What if you talk with that white haired gent from the wagon train? He seems level headed, now that he's cooled down. Maybe he can reason with the rest of them. He might even be able to get that school teacher to quiet down."

Archie tossed off the brandy. "Until we come up with answers they may as well earn their keep. They can finish the boardwalk for starters. And we'll all hope the lady can cook." He walked to the door of the building.

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He spun about and strode over to the high plank counter by the kitchen. He leaned across toward the woman who still stood as though petrified. She looked at him, her blue eyes wide and shooting angry sparks, now that he'd come close. Damn, she had long, black eyelashes.

"I just want to check if your eyes are really as blue as I thought." He whirled away from her and pounded his heels to the outer door.

What the damn hell did he think he was doing? Attraction to a good woman, especially a concerned schoolteacher, could not be. Not until he'd turned his sorry life around, if that ever happened.

"Six o'clock, lady," he roared from the doorway, as he went out into the early afternoon sunshine.

* * * *

Six o'clock! How could she possibly find anything in this filthy place to feed forty or fifty people? The most she'd helped cook for was thirty threshers on the farm in Wisconsin. With closed eyes, she shook her head from side to side.

"Aunt Molly, I wish you were here!" She opened her eyes slowly and peeked between rigid fingers. Facing the far end of the room, with an ugly, dirty cook stove at her left, a stained feed sack curtain hung several feet ahead of her. Lord only knew what hid behind that.

"Six o'clock, lady," his big voice reminded her from the doorway.

"Oh my, oh my." Lucille turned and faced the dining room. No help could come from that direction. Not one of her wagon train friends remained in sight.

She looked back at the stove. Its grease coated top had rust around the edges. The crooked stovepipe went into a fieldstone chimney beside the same outside door the angry ex-cook had slammed. Lucille shuddered as she took in a very large wooden table with stump-like legs. The top was puddled with water and smeared with food. On the right side of the kitchen, was a long open counter. It divided the kitchen from the dining area. On that counter sat piles of dirty, half-filled heavy pottery plates. The potato kettle sat cold and blackened on the counter's scarred surface. Lard congealed in the meat skillet.

Dried mud crunched under her sturdy trail shoes as she walked to the counter and looked out into the restaurant's bare-bones table area. The Bascom prisoners were no doubt still hungry. Poor food was a minor problem, Lucille thought, after all they'd endured in the³ last few days, but to Red Gorman, food was apparently a major

concern. He seemed to want good food. What had he done before they came? She could only guess and felt sorry for the cook.

Most of the Bascom party were prisoners. What would Gorman do about those missing, like Ben Menkin, Clem Adams, the two young people and several of the drovers? They might not even be together since they had fled separately, in different directions. Would he and his men hunt them down?

Her personal disaster seemed nothing judging by that. Her throat squeaked a dry swallow as she surveyed the daunting pile of dirty dishes. She thought of what Gorman demanded, with no idea what he was capable of. He'd sent bullets flying around the previous cook. It scared her half to death; she'd never been shot at before. Why had he returned to look at her eyes? Attraction? Curiosity? Her heart hammered a drum roll on her ribs. Her own reaction scared her even more.

Another circling view of the kitchen revealed a small pile of split wood by the outside door. A barrel of water stood beside it. With a

small pail, she filled the big, battered dishpan on the cook stove, then stoked the dying fire with wood pushed through a small door in the firebox.

In a second dishpan, she assembled dirty dishes and bent spoons from the dining area. Suddenly, she saw a very large, bald-headed man standing quietly in the far corner of the outer room, at a small, well-stocked liquor bar.

"Oh," she said, "Who are you?"

"Name's Stokes." He continued polishing bar glasses. His bald pate gleamed.

"Well, I guess we'll get to share a building."

"Madam, you stay in your end and I'll stay in mine." His black eyes were cold and aloof. He reminded her of the description of old English butlers. Lines in his high forehead deepened as he glared down his large nose at her.

"Yes, sir." Lucille strode angrily to the kitchen with the load of dishes. A big, gray rat scooted across her feet. Startled, she dropped the pan onto the table. The clatter of plates echoed in the barn-like room.

Lucille looked despairingly at the rusty stove where dishwater steamed. Thick, rancid grease coated another mammoth skillet. On the table an uncovered bowl held what she thought might be biscuit⁴ starter. Its edges were crusted and dirty. Rotting onions raised a stench under the table. A rat's unblinking eyes stared from the cobwebbed corner of the room, before it skittered out of sight. The door blew open and swayed back and forth until she closed and re-latched it.

Shaved soap foamed in the steaming water as she poured it over the pan of messy dishes. She cleaned the battered tabletop and refilled a pan to heat rinse water. The dishes air dried by slanting them every which way. Three hours later she drew a deep, deep breath. At least she had clean dishes and cookware to work with. On a shelf by the grimy window sat a loudly ticking clock that read half past three

o'clock. Only two and a half hours remained in which to get a meal for everyone. The stove! She'd forgotten wood in the stove! Lucille lifted the stove lid and groaned. The fire was almost out! It seemed like only minutes ago she had put wood in the stove. Grabbing a butcher knife, she stabbed at a dry piece of wood for shavings and added them to the few red coals in the bottom of the firebox. When they refused to ignite she angrily yanked out the overflowing ash box. By scraping red coals and smoking pieces together the air finally circulated enough so the chips flamed. She added larger pieces gradually. The ash drawer could be emptied later.

Four o'clock. I'm getting desperate, talking to myself.

A knock sounded. Warily she opened the back door a slit and peeked out.

"Forie Drescher," she said with a smile of relief, recognizing a fellow prisoner. "I was afraid that ornery little cook came back."

"The big outlaw sent these potatoes, Miss Martin," said Forie.

"I don't have much time, do I?"

"I'd help if I could, but he ordered me right back to unload wagons."

Lucille peeled and peeled the potatoes until the back of her right hand ached and blisters formed on her fingers. Finally finished, she set them directly over the cook stove firebox. With two stove lids removed, it didn't take the potatoes long to release steam around the warped covers on two large kettles.

The wood was nearly gone again! She rushed out the back door and saw other wagon train women busily scrubbing and hanging laundry. She scarcely had energy to wave to them. At a woodpile²⁵ were half a dozen pieces of wood. She hurried back inside with them then she rushed outside again, split three big wood chunks into pieces with an ax and carried them inside. She hadn't done that since leaving home for teacher's training.

Exhausted, she dropped onto the one hard chair by the table. It crashed in splinters dumping her to sprawl all over the mud-caked

kitchen floor. Tears of frustration streamed down her hot cheeks as she hoisted herself to her knees. She looked up.

"Well, you gonna cook, gal, or you gonna lay there an' beller? Brag, brag, brag." The wiry cook stood, arms akimbo, his cheeks pouched out and again mocked her. "Anyone can do better than this." He leaned down, nearly suffocating her with whiskey breath. "Well, fat gal, you got your chance. An' you ain't gittin' no help from me neither." He left, stomping his heels in echoing thumps across the dining area.

Lucille grasped the edge of the heavy wooden table to pull herself up. She set her jaw and with lips thinned, smoothed her forehead frown lines away with stiff fingers.

"You don't need to hassle me, you skinny little pipsqueak!" She was furious at him and at herself for letting him bother her peace of mind.

He hastily disappeared.

A leg of ham hung against the wall inside a small burlap curtained area. Half a beef and a small pork haunch hung beside it. She pulled down the ham and within a short time had thick slices on to fry in the cleanest big skillet. Biscuits. You always had bread or biscuits. She wiped out a large blue granite bowl with the cleanest of the rags, and added biscuit starter from a crusted bowl. She scooped flour, adding some of this and some of that. Making biscuits was a habit from home. With arms aching from stirring and kneading, chopping and hauling, she fervently wished Aunt Molly were here for guidance, instead of back in Wisconsin.

"Well, where is it?"

Lucille jumped, held her breath and felt her eyes go wide in spite of herself. Quickly squinting them shut in anger she squared her shoulders and turned. "Not quite ready, Mr. Gorman."

She watched as Gorman strode to a small corner table and sat down, facing the kitchen. Conscious of him watching, she stacked plates,

set the pile of bent forks and spoons on the counter and stirred æ kettle of canned peas.

Perspiring from the heat of the stove and nervousness, Lucille rubbed a hand across her forehead. She pushed back the hair tickling about her hot face. She strained the ham slices from the hot grease and loaded them onto huge platters. She sprinkled flour to brown in the skillet, gradually added water and stirred swiftly to make a smooth gravy. She hoisted kettles of drained, boiled potato chunks onto the high counter. Her shoulders ached and her feet hurt. She heard the clatter of feet coming down the boardwalk and into the restaurant.

At her nod, Gorman, two of his men, and the waiting hungry prisoners surged forward to see what kind of meal they'd get. Wearily Lucille ladled tinned peaches into sauce dishes. She hadn't done this much physical labor since leaving the farm.

The prisoners looked exhausted. The children drooped, eyeing the outlaws warily. Martha Adams whispered, "Are you all right, Lucille?"

"I'm fine, thank you, just tired."

Martha nodded and hurried down the line of food with her two younger boys.

The food disappeared in minutes. Lucille, very carefully lowered her aching body onto the lumpy cot she'd found at the far end of the kitchen next to the meat larder behind the grimy burlap curtain.

"Where's my coffee?" Gorman roared from the dining room. Chill goose bumps bounced their way up Lucille's cheeks. She'd completely forgotten coffee. She surged upright and hurried to the counter, expecting to be shot. She could barely breathe and her knees wobbled, awaiting possible gunshots in her direction.

"The potatoes were good and the ham fried well," Martha said to the outlaw chief as she faced him. "You didn't give her much time to find things and make coffee, too."

Red glared at Mrs. Adams but she refused to look away, daring him to disagree.

In relief Lucille heard him say, "I believe you are right, ma'am. And it was better than Tede's." He turned to Lucille with a terse, "Just don't forget it again." He strode away with his men, herding the prisoners out ahead of them.

Lucille looked at the clock. She hadn't eaten. Half a potato remained. No gravy or biscuits. A half cup of cold peas. Exhausted, she ate without tasting a thing.

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CHAPTER 2

Get organized! She admonished herself for the hundredth time that morning. It could be worse. He could have shot her. Everyone was gone. Quiet pervaded the entire building. Wood first. Arm muscles protested wildly as she chopped chunks of wood into usable pieces. She rested a dozen times before the pile was big enough to keep the fire going for the next day. Her schoolteacher mind wondered what about the altitude here as she wheezed and stumbled with weariness while stacking split wood both inside and outside the kitchen door.

While soapy water heated on the big old stove, she eased down onto the creaking cot at the far end of the room. A half full barrel of flour sat at its end with a big covered lard can next to it. A mouse leaped from an open topped cracker barrel and Lucille felt too tired to do more than lift her skirt out of the way as it scooted under the big table.

She pushed a stragggle of long hair behind an ear, grimacing at its dusty feel. It was getting dark in this dingy room and she needed a

lamp. More dishes were stacked on sagging shelves, plus bowls and baking pans, even a stack of dusty pie tins. A huge cake pan leaned against the wall, dirty and dented in one corner. Tins of soda, sacks of salt and a couple cans of spices sat about.

"Find everything you need?" Gorman's deep voice shattered the quiet. On sore feet, Lucille stepped from behind the feedbag curtain between the kitchen and the cot.

"I'm still exploring," she told him, while her insides did grasshopper leaps and her traitorous mind conjured up visions of the man leaning toward her lips instead of just resting his big forearms on the high counter as he studied her. Where had that unlikely thought come from?

The way he strode toward the outer door seemed on the verge of anger. What did he have to be angry about? He wasn't being held prisoner, forced to do chores he hated.

Red suddenly turned and retraced his steps. "Lady, where did you get title to a house lot? Some fly-by-night land developer? Where did your man get these papers you talk about?"

"I'm a schoolteacher. I don't have a husband. The land office man certainly seemed legitimate. Banker Shafer looked over all the papers. My land is in my own name." She put both hands on her hips and stared at him with all the frustrated anger that filled her²⁸ system. "Wyoming passed laws allowing women to vote, own property and hold office. Or didn't you realize that? Besides, more people make a better town. Why are you so against people coming here. "Gorman" I think your sign read. Your people certainly don't act very friendly. Are you all a bunch of outlaws and this is your hideout?"

"Most people are leery of strangers, lady."

The strange, fleeting, half-guilty, half-angry look on his face made Lucille really curious. She opened her mouth to say more.

"Whoa, lady, that's more damn ... I mean dang, words than I've heard all at once in a month. I'll have to give it some thought. In the meantime I'll see about supplies. That's what I came here to discuss, not arguing with you."

He didn't really lean toward her like she had envisioned, but his gaze roamed from her lips to her hair to her eyes and back to her mouth. She wet her suddenly dry lips and he looked back with half a grin. How could he be so arrogant? Did he think every woman fell for his looks just because he'd combed his hair and beard?

"I'll see what can be done about proper supplies." Gorman stared at her for another long moment, then spun around and strode down the dining room toward the street door. He stopped at Stoke's small bar.

* * * *

Red wished he could have slammed a door or pounded a wall as he left Lucille Martin's presence. Damn woman had no business taking his mind from his chosen goal. Building a town filled with men accused of crimes they didn't commit never would be easy. He

hadn't even planned his valley that way until Stokes had shown up out of his past, running from the Pinkerton detectives. Stokes had been like a father to him when his own ne-er-do-well sire had disappeared when he was ten.

"Stokes, what do we do now? Danged woman is full of questions. Do you know anything about a Land Office in Cheyenne?"

"The government gave men, and women, the right to sign up for free land, and some could buy more land, I did hear something like that." Stokes set a glass on the bar.

Red sipped at the brandy Stokes put before him, contemplating its color for several minutes. "I never heard much about female schoolteachers either. I thought teachers were all either men, or nuns."

"I don't doubt Miss Martin could teach school. Bein' tall like she is would probably keep the older boys behavin'."

"She is tall, Stokes, for a woman."

"You'd best get your facts on her permits when the time comes for a school, of course. There's a few children here now." Stokes dusted off a bottle and replaced it on the shelf.

Red finished his brandy in one swallow, adjusted his hat and strode out the door. He didn't dare look for the woman or he'd be tempted to go argue with her some more, just to see her blue eyes brighten and shoot angry sparks.

* * * *

He finally left. Lucille sighed and looked around at various canned goods boxes, assorted barrels, jugs, and wooden crates with eggs. It was hard to see with only lamplight and the smoky glass chimney didn't help at all. Onion bags hung from the rafters. The smell of rotten potatoes assailed her nostrils as she poked among sacks and cartons on the floor. Mouse and rat droppings crunched dryly under her feet. A straw broom, never used, hung from a nail.

All the while images of the outlaw's handsome face danced around the edges of her mind. Straight dark brows above dark lashes and

those haunting green eyes. His firm lips and straight nose. Not a wart or a blemish on him. And he sure could sound angry.

While washing dishes in hot soapy water she planned the morning meal. Coffee, first of all, or he'd be very angry, again. She set her chin firmly. If the people wanted food fit to eat, they could eat on her schedule. As she finished the dishes, it came suddenly to mind that she wouldn't be taken with the rest of the prisoners to the warehouse. They had to leave her here. She hurried across and peeked out the dingy dining area windows into the half dark of evening. Gorman's men relaxed in several places between her and the warehouse. There would be no contact with her fellow prisoners, and no escape.

Back in the kitchen, the cot at the far end was better than the floor of the warehouse. She blew out the lamp and trudged behind the dirt stiffened burlap curtain. Too exhausted to think beyond sleep she eased onto the cot and pulled the smelly wool blanket up around her ears. Her last thought was that, with all that had happened to her today, she dare not think what more could go wrong tomorrow.

Luckily, a rooster's crow outside her window at dawn woke Lucille or she could have slept all day. Carefully turning her head on the⁸⁰ lumpy pillow, she moved aching neck muscles gradually. Blisters pulled loose from shredded stockings and she groaned aloud, not even remembering removing her shoes.

Early morning light revealed more of the dingy room. With difficulty, she pushed up on one elbow and immediately dropped back with an exclamation of pain. Her arms and shoulders hurt. Greasy hair straggled in her burning eyes.

Trying again, Lucille pushed upright on the squeaky cot. She had slept alongside barrels of flour and bags of sugar, too exhausted to even notice if mice ran about freely. Tugging first one shoe on and then, slowly, the other, she half laced them. Once she made it to her feet she twisted her corset in place. Putting one sore foot carefully ahead of the other she looked out the small back window. Through the dust and grime she saw a man headed toward a long, low building. Another guard? So much for thoughts of escape. Besides, where could she go? Or obtain food? She couldn't outrun anyone.

What did all those men do besides guard, eat and sleep? Why did they have to keep the Bascom people prisoners? What secrets did all those outlaws have? She'd never gotten, or was likely to *ever* get, a real answer from Red.

It grew lighter in the chilly room. First, she had to build a fire. She moved, agonizingly slow, toward the stove.

A loud thumping at the front door made her turn to peer over the counter separating the kitchen from the main room.

"Good morning," she said.

Stokes, the bartender, scowled in her direction, gave a half-hearted growl and trudged behind the bar with a heavy box. The batwings at the newly opened door swung back and forth.

"What time is it? The clock stopped."

"You have to wind it." Heavy black brows came together in a frown. His black eyes glared at her in the dim light. "You're late. It's five-thirty."

Lucille's heart thumped as she wound and set the clock, then hurried to the back door. "Oh my, oh my." Stiff muscles protested and she groaned. *How could so many places hurt so much, all at once? Privy first, no matter what.*

On her way back inside, she carried split wood and thought of the bright, sparkling clean kitchen in Wisconsin. Remembering the ruffled yellow gingham curtains at the windows and pink geraniums on the windowsills was like comparing a palace to a hog wallow. 31

By blowing on tiny red coals mixed with crumpled, age-dried newspaper in the stove, a little smoke curled. She added small wood chips and a fire ignited. With a self-congratulatory smile, she watched the flames burn brightly.

"Where is my coffee?"

Lucille dropped the stove lid and lifter with a clatter. "Mr. Gorman, I'm getting the fire going." Did he have a reason to be so surly in the morning?

"Hurry it up!" Gorman stormed out, making the batwings clatter.

Lucille rushed to the well with two big coffee pots and filled them with water. With grounds ready she placed them on the front griddles and opened the draft on the stove. She next brought down the cleaned granite bowl to mix biscuits. *Here I go, running in circles again.* A strip of rag held her hair at the back of her neck. A sigh of relief came as the second big pan of biscuits went in the oven. She pulled boiling coffee to the back of the stove with padded fingers and found a new case of eggs.

"Damn it, woman, I smell good coffee. Where are my eggs?" Red Gorman stood by the counter. Had that really been a twinkle in his eyes?

"Right away. Don't be so impatient." She emptied eggs into a smoking skillet. They spit, splattered and added painful blisters on

the back of her hand. She stirred frantically, put part of the scrambled eggs in a bowl, stacked a plate with biscuits, filled a small coffee pot and added a honey pot on the counter. Maybe that would sweeten him up.

Start how you mean things to go. Don't carry to them.

Lucille called from behind the wide counter, "Eggs, biscuits, honey and coffee are ready."

Three men, halfway to the corner table, paused, and glanced at Red.

"There's plenty for all of you," Lucille said, bracing her quaking knees on the wall holding up the counter. Outlaws were a strange, frightening new type of being. She white-knuckled the coffee pot as though clinging to life.

"I'm starved," announced a huge Scandinavian appearing giant. He switched directions. "Moving them cows took all my energy."

"Hell, Swede, you're always hungry," said Red.

The three men took plates at the counter. Lucille still waited with shaking insides, but kept an angry frown on her face. Who did these men think they were? Red Gorman followed the last man in line.

"At least the coffee is damn good," Gorman said as he sipped. "I feel better after I've had my morning coffee." He grinned and winked. He strode to a smaller table with his plate full of food. He didn't look her way once after that.

Lucille weakly trudged back to the kitchen table, her legs so wobbly her skirt fluttered. Yesterdays' exertions still quavered her muscles. Remembering yesterday noon, when Gorman had furiously fired several shots at the terrorized Tede, she felt extremely lucky. If that outlaw had killed before, and shot at his own cook, what might he do if her work did not please him?

She felt worn out and the day had barely started. The prisoners were herded through the door. The way Gorman and his men wolfed down food she worried that there weren't enough eggs and biscuits to go around. Four guards trailed after the prisoners.

Lucille stuffed wood in the glowing firebox, made more biscuits and practically threw the pans into the hot oven. The wagon train people helped themselves at the counter. Plates disappeared. She ran out of cups. Dirty dishes piled up. Food vanished. Lucille's mouth was dry as sandpaper and her hair fell in her face as she tipped up the pot for herself and found that no coffee remained. Sighing, she turned to replenish the biscuit starter. When she looked up again, guards herded the people out the door and suddenly, the room became very quiet.

At last, with one biscuit and a cup of cold water she carefully lowered her stiff, sore body onto the lumpy cot and sighed. She'd forgotten to set aside any breakfast for herself. Her muscles twitched with aches and weariness. At least the biscuits were good. The only sound came from the terrible ticking clock speeding the time away.

Her arms were coated with flour, her skirt hem dragged in filthy sags and a long run of something streaked her front. Lucille sighed heavily. Wood again.

Lucille groaned to herself as she went outside. She was out of the warehouse but what good did it do? At least she was busy instead of moping, if that was any consolation. She tightened her belt and folded the sagging skirt over it to keep from tripping. She wondered what Ben Menkin, the wagonmaster, ate these days? His dreams of starting the town of Bascom had been shattered. Had he had made it out of the valley alive? No mention had been made of anyone from the wagon train actually being shot.

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Her own dreams of a town where women had something to say about their own destiny, faded fast before the dreadful necessity of staying alive.

What about Red Gorman, the fiery haired outlaw chief who checked on her blue eyes? Did he have dreams, too, or did he have nightmares over what to do with twenty-eight prisoners and all the chaos he'd created with the people who were really entitled to the valley? She grinned to herself. It served him right. He had no business keeping people prisoners. Someone would eventually revolt. What would he do then?

Where did all the wood go that I split yesterday? Coming back from the woodpile with kindling, she tripped over her skirt front and fell amid clouds of dust and gritty sand. Crying out at the pain in her tired arms, she levered herself upright. She picked up the fallen wood pieces and looked around at a strange sound.

Tede, his scrawny frame by an old tree, stood laughing. He went to the woodpile and threw split wood into the brush. "Think yer smart, Fat Gal. Let's see how you do with no wood."

A shot rang out! Lucille dropped wood all over her feet. But the shot did not come in her direction. Tede cowered down by the big tree, hands up. A light colored gouge showed in the tree well above his head.

"The only decent biscuits we've had in six months. Don't you stop her cooking." Red Gorman spoke from the outside wall of the kitchen. Tentatively she smiled her thanks. His concern didn't extend to helping carry wood however. He disappeared around the

corner, leaving a foul-mouthed Tede shaking his head and trudging out of sight after Red.

It was a long, exhausting day, one Lucille was anxious to put behind her, if only she could rest a little while.

* * * *

Restless, agitated, feeling completely out of his element, Archie Gorman sat on his Appaloosa mare on a foothill overlooking the town. The light in the restaurant went out. Only the lights by Stoke's bar remained.

Would the blue-eyed, round-faced cook work out all right in that grimy kitchen? He felt shame that he'd allowed Tede to let the room become such an unclean shambles. The counter was scrubbed now, and the big table clean. Until the woman entered the room he hadn't concerned himself with its appearance. With so much else on his mind, he hadn't noticed the condition of the kitchen. Complaining³⁴ about the food had never done any good before. It was hard to get anyone to cook in a restaurant.

How upset was she? Could she make good food besides good biscuits? Were her eyes really that blue?

No wonder she was supposed to be the schoolteacher, thought Archie as he sat the restive mount. She likely controlled unruly boys with ease. He wondered if she would ever call him by his given name, Archie, or would it always be Red or Mr. Gorman?

He wondered how she accepted being forced into all the work of the kitchen. She wasn't really a prisoner, yet he couldn't let the Bascom people go until they reached some solution to the double land ownership. They were adamant about not giving up their land. He bet Lucy had answers. Now it was too late anyway. He couldn't let them out of the town to describe the present inhabitants, especially him and Stokes. Or any of the others in town with wanted posters on them or secrets in their past.

He rode toward town, stopping his big horse by the restaurant hitch rail, wondering what Lucille planned for dinner. He dismounted and went inside.

She automatically poured him a cup of coffee, like she was used to men appearing in her kitchen at odd hours. As he sipped, he watched.

Tomorrow he would have the white haired oldster, Clovine, the banker and the storekeeper taken to his house for a meeting and talk about land titles. Those Bascom people would have to work around what land he'd already built on. Tonight he'd rather think about the blue-eyed cook he had in his restaurant.

Damn, if she didn't have the longest black eyelashes he'd ever seen. She'd told him not to be impatient. Her defiant blue eyes snapped sparks if he tried to rush her cooking.

"We're not really outlaws like you think," he said as he held out his coffee cup for more. "Most of us just have to prove we haven't done anything wrong. The others need a chance to start new lives." He spread his hands, palms up, mentally cursing himself for giving in to a need to explain their situation, especially to this woman who

upset his equilibrium, and his plans, besides raising havoc with his nether regions.

"So you have a whole town of innocent outlaws. How do any of us know if you all are innocent?" Lucille's eyes flashed blue fire.

"This isn't right and tight little Wisconsin. What people do here isn't Gorman is the important thing."

"That's one outlaw vouching for another."

Archie snapped back, "That's right, lady. Believe what you want. You will anyway." He stomped off; surprised he'd lost his temper over such a trivial conversation. One that shouldn't have taken place at all. Who was she to question his life?

The woman's rounded arms and plump fingers made short work of all those batches of biscuits. Her round face grew red from the oven's heat. Her blue-eyed glare in his direction that morning had nearly made him choke on his second helping of eggs, and she hadn't changed during the day.

It couldn't go on like this. He footed the bill for the food in the restaurant. The prisoners paid nothing, though their supplies were used. He had to bring order out of the confusion of too many people.

The only kind of chaos he wanted to create was in the thoughts and heart of a blue-eyed cook. He must get her to believe him. Why? What should her thoughts matter to him? He knew he wasn't a killer. He'd been on the run, and away from civilized women too much. He definitely needed to leave the valley for another attempt to put his life back in order.

Chaos! Shouting and rearing horses, tumbled wagons and roiling, dark clouds around her. Lard oozed between her fingers. A horse's hooves came straight at her head.

A gunshot sounded outside the restaurant building, causing Lucille to smother a sharp cry behind her fist. A previous shot must have brought on her bad dream. Wisconsin did not have wild cowboys. The long trip had not alerted her to the boisterous ways of the young

riders on the way. What terrible foolishness to leave a green and pleasantly settled state to come to a brown and mountainous territory in the hopes of a right to vote and own property?

Being honest with herself, she'd wanted adventure. An impossible family situation had contributed as well toward her decision. Her stepsisters had made her life miserable and in spite of all her hard work, her brother had inherited the entire farm. She was lucky to have inherited from a grandmother with women's rights notions of her own, as well as having what cash her father had allowed her.

Lying on the lumpy cot she reminded herself to tell Martha Adams she'd seen her daughter high on the side hill of boulders. Whatever³⁶ else she recalled from the horror would have to wait. She needed rest. Bone-weary and aching, she tossed about. After the noise finally ended at Stoke's bar, and the streets quieted down, she dropped into a heavy slumber.

The clattering of the alarm clock roused her to face another day. Behind the grimy feed sack curtain, she tightened the loosened

lacing of her corset and buttoned on the shirtwaist she had washed in the dark the previous night. Her damp skirt band needed two roll-ups to keep it from underfoot. It wadded in thick gathers at her waist when she tied on the freshly washed and dried apron.

Finger combing her heavy hair she took a second to acknowledge its improved color and feel. It had taken two rinses to get it clean. Whipping it quickly into one long braid, she tied a rag strip at its end while hurrying to the privy beyond the woodpile.

She paused to admire the fresh blue sky and sparkling green river. Lucille breathed deeply of the cool morning air. She looked off toward the far mountains where the brightness of dawn crept up their backs, admitting the scene was beautiful without being a Wisconsin green. Remembering the missing men of the wagon train being in those mountains brought a serious turn to her thoughts. Had Charlie, her driver, made it to a safe place? How did young ones and the Shafer's son survive out there? Maybe someone would rescue them all. Clovine thought so.

"You'd never make it, fat gal." The voice grated on the morning's serenity.

Lucille quickly faced the man with the rifle. "No fatter than you," she retorted.

He grinned and continued to stare. "You got a name, lady? You sure can cook."

"You may call me Miss Martin. I'm a teacher." She refused to enter the privy while that man stood there.

He grinned some more and shook his head. He ambled off toward the long bunkhouse building with a look of good humor on his face. Lucille hurried to the privy. On her way back she gathered wood. She continued her breakfast work, puzzled by the half-friendly, half-surly attitude of the man.

With coffee boiled, pancakes piled on pans and platters, molasses on the tables and everything ready, it wasn't hard keeping a

watchful eye. For Martha, she told herself, but her eyes kept straying to Red Gorman.

"Has anyone told you Jodie is safe with..." Lucille told Martha. 37

"Shut up, Cookie, you ain't got time for jawin'," interrupted a surly looking guard. Then he suddenly grinned at her for no reason she could tell. It scared her as much as his surly growl. She didn't need outlaw admiration. But what about Red Gorman? He was an outlaw.

"Thank you," whispered Martha as she went on her way.

"I hope you're not still mad at Ben. He may need supplies smuggled to him," Clovine said softly when he came for his breakfast. "Him not stopping in South Pass City for you shouldn't count against him in a case like this."

Lucille did not look up. "I did want to see where Esther Morris worked so hard for women voting rights. But no, I'm not mad at Ben." Even Clovine had the idea she and Ben were romantically involved, which really wasn't true. It was only that their ages were

similar and people assumed things. It did seem impossible she might never see Ben or some of the others of the wagon train again. While thinking of Ben it really upset her that, instead, the outlaw chief's handsome face jumped unbidden into her thoughts. What were his views on women voting? Would the two town builders clash in a mighty battle for control?

Being cut off from the rest of the Bascom people was both good and bad. She had the only access to supplies they might need, but she had no one to talk with except when people were ushered in like cattle for their meals.

"Maybe I'm wishful thinking that he'll be back," Clovine said.

"Ben's like a horse with blinders, he sees only one path. That's him building a town and being an officer in it." Lucille visualized the wagon master's tall frame, broad shoulders, long legs and flat waist. He wasn't as big as Gorman, but with dark hair. *Where did that thought come from? I'm not comparing them, am I?*

"Move along, Clovine," Red said. Where had he come from? He moved quietly for such a big man. He frowned at the two of them. "And damn it, woman, answer me! You got a name?"

"My name is Lucille Martin, and I'm a school teacher." She looked directly into his green eyes. He stared back. Her pulse rate doubled and her mouth dried like cornhusks.

"Lucy, you go in the wagons Stokes hauled in and pick up supplies. I want food fit to eat, that clear?"

"My name is Lucille, Mr. Gorman," she repeated, "and yes, that is clear."

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The day disappeared so fast Lucille hardly had time to sit. Her feet ached, though not like the first couple of days. In the dark, she took time for a quick sponge bath.

The small north window now sparkled with cleanliness. Opening it slightly in its loose frame, she breathed in fresh air smelling of the river. A spot of red glowed against the big boulder on the slant of

the riverbank. The watchful guard stood there as usual. Shadows wavered as buckbrush and tag alders swayed slightly. Beyond the guard, a darker shadow did not sway in the breeze. She watched intently, losing sight of it, then catching it again.

Is Ben out there? Or Clem Adams? Some of Clem's men are missing, too, along with my driver. Anticipation of possible rescue filled her mind. *But what can I do?*

Poof, that dream shattered as the guard fired a shot into the wavering brush. The harsh reality was too many Gorman people guarded against all coming and going by anyone. Had his shot hit anyone? Ben, or Clem Adams? Young Tom Shafer had disappeared in the confusion, too. Several drovers who'd been with the Bascom cattle herds had disappeared.

Why were these people so anxious to keep everyone in the town? Most of them seemed like ordinary people. What crimes had they committed? Were they all the men really innocent?

"I just got back, Ben," reported the excited young cowboy. "I crept along the river in the buckbrush. There's guards all over the place. One shot in my direction so I hightailed it. It's like they made their own country in there. They won't let anyone out of town."

"Good boy, Tom." Painfully, Ben pushed himself up on the pillows rancher Brown's wife had provided. "Did you see any of our folks?"

"Did you see my mother?" asked fifteen-year-old Jodie Adams anxiously.

"Your ma and most all the women were scrubbin' dirty clothes by the river. Those outlaws got the lady schoolteacher cookin' for them. Mr. Clovine and the men are buildin' boardwalks and such. Ben, six of your horses are fenced in at the stables."

"The rest ran off then. Damn, I feel dizzy." Ben shifted his bandaged arm. "You've had a busy night, Tom. Get some rest."

"Yeah," Tom agreed. "Me an' a couple of Mr. Brown's boys are gonna try for those horses in a few days. Your studhorse looks all right."

"Don't you get Brown's men in trouble. We're lucky we found that³⁹ cave tunnel coming through the mountain so we're safe here. The horses can wait. Just wait until I'm fit to ride with you." Ben felt thoroughly disgruntled.

"They won't hold the horses that long, Ben. You really took a roll coming out of that cave before you saw where it dropped off. We know where to go so we can lead those horses out. We'll need them for our people to ride when we rescue them."

Ben jerked upright to protest but Tom had already disappeared out the bedroom door. Damnation, how could a man build a town all stove up with a broken arm and battered body stupidly gotten from tumbling over a cliff edge? Thankfully, his big stallion was with the other horses and had not been hurt. In the quiet of the night, he heard the animals shuffling about in the corral.

All was quiet in Gorman. Even the surly Stokes had gone. A few male Gorman citizens had come in then left right after an early breakfast. Lucille yawned. It would be a perfect time to sit down with a good book and a cup of hot tea, if any were available. If only her questioning mind wasn't filled with other happenings. Instead of relaxing, she listened and watched over the batwing doors across from Stoke's unoccupied bar.

From careful listening she learned the big Scandinavian named Swede and a crew were bringing in cattle that had scattered when the wagon train people had been captured.

Red stood close by, leaned against the outer building wall. She heard him but couldn't see him without peering out over the batwings. She stayed back in the shadows. A chill gust of wind under the swinging doors occasionally came to where she stood and she shivered but refused to leave her post.

"Hutchins is taking a crew up on the mountain to cut wood for next fall," Red was saying.

So, that's why they came in so early, Lucille realized. What next? Four of her Bascom friends had been brought in to eat early. There were over twice that many on the wagons that now rumbled by, loaded with men, saws and other woodcutting equipment.

"Virgil, it's too damn early for drinking. Put down that blasted whiskey and take your building crew out to put up a line cabin for watching the cattle Swede and his men are bringing in."

Lucille backed tightly against the inner wall, out of sight, as she heard Gorman pace up and down the boardwalk right outside. 40

"Tede, Frank, Butch and I are going after Shafer's bricks for his bank. I have the proper papers right here. Right now I'm going to have breakfast."

Lucille picked up her skirt front and dashed across the dining area. She already had coffee pots and a few cups in place when the men came in.

"Whew!" She drew in a deep breath. Red Gorman was a sight that nearly made her faint. His neatly trimmed red hair and beard set off the jade green of eyes bright with anticipation. His straw boater hat slanted jauntily on his head. She had a terrible time keeping her mind on the meal when her eyes kept returning to his magnificent physique.

Would bringing back the bricks be his only occupation out of the valley? His talk with Clovine, banker Shafer and storekeeper Hack must have given him ideas. He was now giving instructions to Virgil to build the framework for the bank building. Shafer must have given him dimensions.

Perspiration ran down her face as she scrambled more eggs at the hot stove. Moisture curled the hair that stuck to her neck. She hitched up her skirt over the tight belt of one of the tattered and

scorched aprons Tede had left in the kitchen. The men had wolfed down flapjacks and molasses so fast she worried whether to make more.

"Lucy, come here!" Red's voice carried into the kitchen.

She spun around so quickly she almost lost her balance. With clenched jaw, ready to do battle, she went toward him.

His big strong hands grasped her upper arms and pulled her halfway across the counter with ease. Apprehensively she stared into his green eyes and he stared back. Unexpectedly he twitched his larger nose across her small one, at the same time whispering, "Know what I would really like, my plump pigeon? You'll get your wagon and your books when Stokes gets back. I want a big, thick chocolate cake with thick chocolate frosting on top when I get back." He let her back onto her feet.

Lucille thought her legs would never support her. She half giggled in embarrassed relief. She'd been prepared for unpleasant retaliation

for her snappy remark about getting his own coffee if he wanted some.

"I might manage a cake," she choked out somehow.

Gorman joined his waiting men, grinning. They left, banging the batwings behind them. Lucille backed up and sank onto the sturdy⁴¹ chair she'd brought from the dining room. Her heart slammed against her ribs. With a mouth as dry as old newspaper and knees twitching under the brown skirt she'd worn all week Lucille drew in a gulp of air to calm herself. What did Gorman's strange behavior mean? What was she supposed to do now? She looked around. Who had seen Red's actions? Why did her heart flutter, and all the room's heat settle in her belly and down her inner thighs?

Only four guards remained that she could account for, plus three saloon girls, the Elite Saloon bartender and the men at the livery stable she supposed loitered around someplace. She did not count the man from the small general store, or the blacksmith, because

they rarely ate at the restaurant. The rest would show up to eat, that was certain, but she could cut way down on the cooking.

Since their capture, it had been quite a week. She held up her left hand in the dim light of the kitchen lamp. The knuckles of her fingers showed. She held up her right hand. Sure enough. She ran fingers along her wrist. Well, really, she reasoned, it wasn't logical her wrist bones would stick out yet, but she needed her skirt shortened to adjust to her lost weight.

Lucille thought back to when she was fifteen. She'd attracted every man and boy in her small town. Now, only eight years later, she'd escaped the taunts of her two bony stepsisters. To them she had bulges. They declared no man would be interested in a woman tall enough to look most men in the eyes while she took a man's occupation of teaching school. Nor should women be so unladylike as to want to vote, or own property. Well, darn it, come hell or high water, or Red Gorman, she was going to own property, and vote on how much tax would be on that property.

Maybe no man would be interested in her, Lucille's mind said.
Except an outlaw like Red Gorman because I can cook?

It was still very early in the morning. Lucille yawned again. She blew out the kitchen lamps as daylight brightened the dining area. The guards would bring the remaining prisoners for their breakfast soon.

Something seemed different about the male prisoners as they entered, though they tried to disguise it. Lucille noticed Clovine's pale blue eyes sparkled under his shock of white hair. Forie Drescher eyed the guards with a look of challenge.

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"Young Tom came last night," whispered Clovine as he exchanged an empty platter for one full of flapjacks. His back was to the guards. "Tell Martha that Jodie is safe at a ranch outside the valley."

"And the rest?"

"Move along, old man. Cut the palaver. Move it!" Some of the guards appeared nervous and edgy but usually not surly. Lucille thought one was the blacksmith.

Forie cleared tables, putting everything onto the counter. Without looking up, Lucille whispered to him, "Aren't the prisoners all together? Where are the women and children?"

"At the Elite Saloon and Hotel, to make sure the men don't run off. Us men are workin' on the..."

"C'mon, Drescher," yelled a guard. "Gotta git back to work."

"Aw, Foley," Drescher said in an exaggerated drawl, "I did reckon we'd all go on a picnic now the bossman is gone."

"Picnic, my ass," said the guard with a grin. "We gotta have that store ready in two weeks with shelves all full and ready for business. Your man Hack better know what he's doin', gittin' them goods arranged. I need a new shirt."

The men left, the guards watchful but with a return of good humor that hadn't been present before. They were scarcely gone when two more men brought the women and children in and the bustle of breakfast started all over again.

"Clovine says tell you Jodie is safe with some ranch people," Lucille told Martha as she picked up a platter of flapjacks for one of the tables of women.

Martha's eyes widened and she drew in a deep breath. Her full lips slightly parted and trembled. Her chin puckered. "Thank you very much." She quickly moved aside and drank her coffee, set down the cup and, with a nod to Lucille, moved toward the door with the rest of the women.

As Lucille sat with her own cup of coffee she wondered how soon Red would be back. Would he greet her with more than a twitch to her nose? She smiled to herself. What a strange man. What kind of relationship would the outlaw expect from her? If he expected anything but a business relationship, he could darn well think again.

She enjoyed their arguments, his scarce compliments, his almost-advances before he grew sober faced and backed away with no emotion on his face.

"I bet he's a good gambler," Lucille said to herself.

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CHAPTER 3

With most of Gorman's men still gone, Lucille cut cooking time in half. Early in the morning, the rumbling of well loaded wagons in the street announced the return of Hutchins and his wood cutting crew. They were back with loads of wood after only a few days.

Mid-morning she walked calmly to the restaurant door, and looked right and left on the street. One guard remained. She waved to him as nonchalantly as possible while her heart thumped hard in her chest. She hadn't ventured out into the street before. Would he think she'd try to escape? There would be only an hour for what she'd longed to do for weeks. Outside the restaurant, she hurried down to a short side street. The perpetual Wyoming winds whipped her skirts as she found the cobbler's small sign on the front of a building housing the shop. She noticed living quarters were at the back, with flowers in the window. No one followed her or stopped her. She went inside the small shop.

"You been losing lots of weight, missy, or them shoes you're wearing belong to somebody else. I noticed when I hed guard duty." Hutchins stood behind a short counter piled with leather pieces.

Lucille stared into interested brown eyes. She gnawed a lip corner before running her tongue nervously over them. "Could you sort of keep that a secret, just between us?"

"Everybody in this town has secrets," he said. "That's why we're here. I can keep one well as most. What you want done?"

"Make me shoes that fit so they don't give me blisters." Looking at the calm appearing man, she wondered what crime he had committed in the outside world. How would he prove his innocence ... if he was innocent?

"How you gonna pay for them?"

Lucille puffed out a short breath. "Mr. Hutchins, if that's your name," she said stoutly, "if Gorman can unlawfully hold me

prisoner, then I can use his flour and lard. I hope you'll accept pies or cakes in exchange for doing my shoes."

The brown eyes suddenly twinkled in his lined face. "Miss Lucy, any friend of Stokes is a friend of mine. Me and the missus sure would enjoy apple pie. My name is Ed Hutchins and your shoes will be ready quick as I can make them when we get the winter wood finished."

Lucille was happy to talk with him a few more minutes, while he⁴⁴ measured for her shoes. She didn't often get to visit. She hoped Mrs. Hutchins would appear, but she did not. When Lucille left the shop, the guard merely nodded in her direction as she walked down the street and entered the restaurant. She returned to her kitchen feeling she'd made a friend. Hutchins certainly didn't act like an outlaw. It amazed her, however, that the taciturn Stokes counted her a friend.

Just before noon rattling harness and a rumbling in the dusty street brought Lucille to the front window. Wiping soapy hands on her apron, she peered out.

Her very own wagon! With Stokes on the high seat.

Stokes and the wagon disappeared to the rear of the building and Lucille hurried to the back kitchen door. "Mr. Stokes! This is great! Are my clothes there? And my school teaching books?"

Stokes allowed half a smile, then immediately hid it behind a stiff manner.

"I've promised Mr. Gorman a chocolate cake for this."

"Very good, miss," Stokes replied. "What will you require first?"

Lucille clambered up into the wagon. Her trunk was open and upside down amid moldy chunks of bread, but there were fresh clothes only a little dusty, a real nightdress, and underclothes. She was elated and threw all she could into the trunk. Stokes hoisted it to a big shoulder and took it inside the kitchen. It had been a challenge to Lucille to get the laconic Stokes to talk. She counted it a major step forward the day the middle-aged man finally said 'Good morning' when she did, instead of a surly grunt. If she called

him Stoic Stokes to his face, she'd lose what little progress she'd made with the man. Now here he was, being exceptionally helpful, no doubt at Red's instructions.

Lucille felt a blush heating her face as she remembered her last encounter with Red, but she still had to ask, "Have you known Mr. Gorman very long, Mr. Stokes?" as he thumped her big trunk down on the kitchen floor.

"Long 'nuff."

"Since he was very young?" Lucille persisted. She'd noted some sort of invisible bond between the two men.

"Knew his Mum, too," muttered Stokes as he walked away.

That so startled Lucille she said no more. Besides, she had her trunk to occupy her, before starting dinner. She pushed kettles of beans⁴⁵ and ham bones to the front of the stove to cook while she sorted clothing from her trunk.

"Where you want these books?" Stokes was surly again.

"By the curtain, please." She stared after the dark haired, dark eyed man as he lowered the heavy wooden box with a bang. Tipping her head to one side, she considered his earlier speech. *Very good, miss. What will you require first?* It was not so much the words as the stiff and precise way he sometimes said them. And now he'd said, *"Knew his mum, too."* She'd known a newly arrived immigrant from London, England who had called his mother, "Mum." When the wagon train stopped in Cheyenne, she'd seen several black clad butlers with the Irish and English Lords immigrating to Wyoming. Was he one of those butlers?

"Stokes?"

"Gotta tend my bar." His accent changed again. He hurried away.

Lucille smiled. She'd made a little headway with the man. Happily, she flung clothing about, overjoyed that three brand new ten-dollar corsets were still safely wrapped. The one she wore was threadbare

and sagged, giving her sore welts where it rubbed. In the heat of the kitchen, she was tempted not to wear one.

Later, while biscuits baked and beans boiled, Lucille carried hot, soapy water to the dining area. "Two blessed weeks, Mr. Stokes," she said as she scrubbed the two big plate glass windows and their frames. She thought, two blessed weeks with less cooking and scrubbing pots and pans. Two weeks without Red in her dining room. Two long weeks without the exasperating big galoot grinning and winking at her, or checking on her blue eyes. Two long, long weeks. She shook herself back to the present and the question she had for Stokes. "Would you know where there are two long nails?"

"Might."

Lucille smiled when he returned with the long spikes. He even pounded them at each upper corner of the small kitchen window. She immediately draped yellow flowered material from her trunk across the nails for curtains to liven up the kitchen.

"You are very proficient, Mr. Stokes."

"Call me just Stokes, miss, as is proper." He stalked off to his corner.

At noon, the guards herded the prisoners to the restaurant as usual. Some were missing along with some of the guards. She'd heard¹⁶ they'd gone back to cutting wood up in the mountains. The remaining men were here, standing in line. Martha Adams led the Bascom women down the line. She was very sober, and especially unhappy over being separated from her two young sons. While getting a refill of bean soup Clovine told Lucille, "Ben's hurt bad, but he's alive, and Tom Shafer is with him."

"Clem Adams?"

"Don't know."

After passing what information she could to Martha and the other women, and the prisoners had gone, Lucille sat down in the dining room next to Stokes with her own bowl of soup.

"Was Red born in England, too?"

"Not him. Just Ferdie."

"But you were."

Stokes glared at her, rose and took his bowl over to his bar.

Back in the kitchen Lucille smiled all through doing dishes. Help would be coming. Ben was alive! Mr. Adams was out there somewhere, and many of the cattle drovers, including Charlie, her driver, were inside the valley. Stokes had sent several families to live in their own undamaged wagons close by, but some still ate at the restaurant now and then. Those with damaged Conestoga's, like Mrs. Adams, remained in provided rooms. The Hacks lived in the store. No one was allowed to leave the valley, however.

Ben would heal quickly, he was healthy, big and strong. It was unthinkable that his injury would cripple him. He might come into her kitchen late in the night and say it was time to leave this valley and join him ... where? Would she be eager to go with him? It was Bascom people's assumption they were romantically involved. She thought it came about because of their similar ages, not any action

on their part. They did indeed tend to argue a lot, but that was hardly romantic.

Jade green eyes and red hair intruded on her thoughts. Gorman was gone, too. Would he be in danger? Was he really the killer the Cheyenne poster claimed? Who but Red Gorman would be so bold as to rub noses with a woman in her kitchen?

* * * *

"You two go with me this trip, Butch, Frank." Even as he had given the order Red's thoughts remained on a small, soft nose between two wide, extremely surprised, very blue eyes. He sucked in his cheeks to keep from grinning.

"Red, dammit, I just asked you. Cheyenne this trip?" Frank Petters⁴⁷ sat his fidgety bay horse beside Red's appaloosa mare.

"Yeah. Yeah, Cheyenne." Red brought his mind back to the present with difficulty. Beside him rode the faithful, long-suffering Tede, and Butch Lang, as well as Frank. Earlier he hadn't explained

anything, just ordered the men to be ready to go on a two-week jaunt. He had to keep away from the brown haired cook. Giving in to the temptation of her presence would only mean disaster. Stokes had trimmed his hair and beard in the middle of the previous night without blinking an eye. He'd also readied hot water in the big bathing tub at the huge three-story house.

They walked the horses out of town to keep from raising a dust storm.

Tede yelled across to him. "Now that you've showed the lady your fancy straw cartwheel hat you better pack it or your horse will git hisself a bite outta it by mistake."

He scowled at Tede and pointed a long finger at the little man, who promptly snapped his jaw shut.

"I intend to." Without another word he exchanged the straw boater hat for a Stetson more suitable for hard riding. No one else said a word.

"You ain't gonna shoot at me agin, are you?"

"It might be better for all of us if I shot a nip from that long nose of yours, Tede. It's going to get you in real trouble some day."

Tede grinned, banged his heels into his horse and raced on ahead, yelling "Ee-hah!" as he waved his hat in the air like a schoolboy freed from lessons.

They all nudged more speed from their mounts until they were all riding together again. "Frank, you and Butch get a day and night in Cheyenne while I take care of bank business, and a poker game or two, in a different direction." He patted his upper shirt pocket. "It seems a Mr. Bertram Shafer has a paid-in-full order sheet for bricks to build a small bank in a town called Bascom. You two will take whatever wagons and teams you need to deliver those bricks to a town named Gorman. I want that bank safe out of my house and into a real bank as soon as possible."

"You betcha. We'll have us a right upstandin' town quicker than scat. You 'spose if we was to have our own law officers them

outside dogooders an' lawdogs would leave us alone?" Frank⁴⁸ nudged his horse closer to Red's mare.

"Most of you have no worry on that. Those outside aren't all lily white either, even the lawmen." Red shrugged big shoulders and kept to a steady gait with his horse.

"Especially the one after you. I heard he's got your posters as far north as Cheyenne. That's too darn close, Red." Frank shook his head.

Red felt an anvil's weight plunk inside him. Did the blue-eyed cook know about the wanted posters? The wagon train had come from that direction.

He gloomily thought of the town of Gorman. It had the required hotel, not quite finished, and a saloon with gambling. He had persuaded Virgil, a drunken carpenter no one else would hire, to direct the work getting the proper buildings prepared. They had a restaurant, cobbler, barbershop and livery stable. They still needed a doctor and a lawyer. They needed a sheriff and jail and courthouse.

He wondered if that lady schoolteacher would insist on voting for a sheriff or a judge. He'd have to think about that.

So far, Virgil had remodeled an old stage station into the restaurant and built cabins for the three women who worked in the saloon. Tede located the cobbler their last trip to Denver. His shop opened only a month ago.

"You reckon Virgil will get anything done in those rooms over the saloon while we're gone? Or have the bank building framed up for the bricks?"

"I threatened to take away his liquor supply if he doesn't do some work in the upstairs rooms at the Elite Saloon. I get this awful feeling it's not going to satisfy my father when he comes, no matter what gets done on it. He's the one paying for it."

"The Elite has the fanciest polished bar this side of Cheyenne," Tede said. "That oughta make brother Ferdie happy."

Mention of his relatives always made Red unhappy. He fingered the two big diamond rings in the watch pocket of his green brocade vest. One would get him in a big stake poker game in the city. He pulled a wad of bills from his other pocket.

"Here, Tede," he said. "When we get to South Pass you buy a team and wagon. Load it up with all the tinned goods and restaurant supplies it can carry and head back to Gorman. Get one of those big school slates for teaching youngsters. Make sure you get plenty of⁴⁹ chocolate for cake. If that Joe Texas cowhand is still looking for work have him take a second load. Better dicker for more chickens. The restaurant will need all the eggs you can get. Pop is partial to chicken stew. He'll have to do without mutton."

"Tede gonna start another restaurant, now that Miss Martin has yours?"

"Go to hell, Butch." Tede's snort startled the horses and Red grinned.

"Tede will have all he can handle guarding that damn safe and keeping Virgil sober enough to finish the rooms over the Elite and the rooms above Hack's General Store."

"You gonna let Hack run that store?" Frank asked.

"Why not? That's what he came for. He must know the business."

"He's got some right pretty daughters to help him." Butch grinned around at them all with raised brows.

"You better keep Ferdie from messin' with their women or there'll be hell to pay with them people," Tede warned.

"Ferdie won't be around unless he needs money or a place to lay low awhile." Red glumly considered the prospect of his half-brother coming to Gorman. He didn't like it. If he was lucky the man would shun the quiet little town. If he was even luckier his father would also stay in the big cities. Just thinking about his parent and Ferdie made him physically ill. Almost as ill as the prospect of being hung if Sheriff Harry Danforth should catch him.

"Hell's bells, Red," Tede said. "More'n likely you were lucky your Pa deserted you when you was young. You'd still be pickin' pockets in New Yawk 'steada ridin' high, wide and handsome with all us."

"That bulldog Danforth wouldn't be after me though. Wish me luck finding a witness this trip. Young Danforth's dying was all his own fault."

"You reckon your Pa really will show up way out here?" Butch asked.

"If he runs short of cash he will," Red said tersely, then he added, "All right, you yahoos, let's ride and get these chores over with. Get yourselves home safe." He put his mount into a mile eating lope.

* * * *

"Riders!" In Gorman the word passed from person to person like a spring flood, Lucille thought as she crossed the dining room to the big windows.

"It ain't Red. I don't see thet fancy App of his'n." A cowboy jangled his spurs as he entered and headed for the small bar. 50

Lucille listened to the spreading speculation about who entered the secluded valley. Another unlucky wagon train?

Several riders mounted handy horses and went to see who it could be. Lucille and Stokes craned their necks at the restaurant's big windows.

"If it be who I think," Stokes said to her, "the fat is in the fire. All chaos will break out. I wish Archie had returned first." A worried expression remained on his face.

"Archie?"

"Red is Archie. Archibald Gorman."

"Oh. Then, who is coming?"

"By the outriders and fancy coach I would guess it is Humphrey, Archie's father, and his half-brother, Ferdie." Gloom, not anticipation, hung on every word.

"That's not good?" Lucille felt a lump like lead settle in her stomach. If Stokes was worried it had to be bad news.

"It is very bad. It will be a little time before they enter the town. I must get rooms ready in the palace."

"In that fancy house I saw in the cottonwoods? The one that sits on my lot?" Lucille couldn't resist adding that last sentence with a dose of bitterness.

"Yes, miss." Stokes refused to be baited about who that lot belonged to. He hurried from the restaurant, leaving his bar attended by Foley, the guard Forie had joked with.

Lucille returned to her kitchen. What kind of chaos would Archie's relatives create? No matter what, coffee would be needed. Biscuits and honey would only take a few minutes.

Cooking these last days had been comparatively easy. A few townsfolk wandered in, knowing the food was good. They always dropped money on the counter. Martha Adams and Laura Hack helped clear dishes and the friendly guards merely waited without comment. Bettina paused for a word or two and told her how busy she was with mending and making a shirt for Darcy's small son.

"Who is Darcy?" Lucille asked.

"She deals cards and sings at the Elite Saloon. Her son Georgie is five."

"He should be in school. I'd sure like to start classes."

"I don't know if she'll let him come." Bettina was already at the batwings.

"Try her. There are seven children from the wagon train who need schooling. I don't think Stokes will object. I'll talk to Red when he returns. See you again soon, Bettina. I'll have more sewing for you."³¹

Archie, Lucille corrected herself as the seamstress left. Yes, the name suited him. She liked the name Archie better than calling him Red.

Gunshots sounded in the street. Red ... Archie, usually kept the town quiet. Martha and Laura looked to Lucille. They were reluctant to go to their quarters above the Elite Saloon. All three stood at the big windows looking out on the new boardwalk and the rutted street.

A bullet splintered the restaurant's door frame. Wild yelling stirred the tethered horses at the hitch rail as five riders thundered past. They circled at the end of the street by the livery stable and raced back again. Lucille herded Martha and Laura ahead of her to refuge far back in the kitchen. As the riders disappeared the women cautiously returned to the windows. They watched the men all dismount and enter the Elite Saloon.

Quiet lasted all of five minutes before the most ostentatious and unusual procession Lucille had ever seen, paraded up the street.

Four riders, two by two, rode sedately ahead. A black coach, ornamented with silver whip holder, and silver door latches, had a silver and red coat of arms decoration on the door. Its red painted wheels barely stirred the dust, as though the passengers wished to prolong view of their entourage as long as possible.

"Oh, for goodness sake," Martha declared.

The coach was pulled by four matched dapple gray horses with black and silver harness. They pranced on by the restaurant. The women stretched to look around the door and window. Four more riders followed the coach half a block, than all eight riders disappeared. Stokes hurried to open the coach door as it stopped before the sparse shrubbery in front of the huge house next door to the restaurant.

"Oh, my lord." Lucille stopped a giggle with a hand tight to her mouth.

The man was tall, almost cadaverous, very stiff in his bearing. He wore purple satin knee breeches, a brocade vest and lace trimmed shirt. Highly polished, tasseled black boots were on his feet.

"I don't believe this." Martha turned to Lucille. "Who is he?"

"You mean, what is he?" Laura said.

"I believe he is Archie's father. The other is his half-brother, Ferdie," Lucille said. "I think this is the disaster Stokes was⁵² dreading. I'm not sure yet why."

Ferdie was attired in dark green velvet with a bright something in yellow at his throat. Both men wore top hats and gloves. Each carried a walking stick. They disappeared from sight.

"Back door," said Laura. "We can see the side of the house." She ran through the kitchen with the others following right behind her. They watched and listened intently.

"Humphrey, what have you done?" Stokes' baritone sounded across the bushes dividing the restaurant yard from the palace yard.

"Call me Sir Humphrey or Sir Gorman, Stokes. Know your place, sir."

Lucille didn't catch Stokes' lengthy, and quiet, answer.

"You old fool, Stokes, the man gave me \$10,000. I'll have another \$10,000 next month." Humphrey's high pitched voice reached the women.

"For what? For hiding them in this valley, away from the law?" Stokes' outraged tones carried to the watching women. "Those are real outlaws, not accused ones. Archie won't like it at all ... Sir."

A door slammed, hard.

The ornate coach disappeared around the far side of the big house. The three women, with heads poked out the restaurant's back door,

heard the rattle of horses being unhitched at the large stables behind the house.

"I think Clovine said he helped build those stables for horses on the other side of the palace. That's what the guards call it." Martha told them.

"I'd sure like to explore this town," Lucille said. "With all the guards watching my every move and cooking for all those people doesn't give me time to see more than kitchen walls, the woodpile and the well." She didn't mention the cobbler's shop.

"Ben will be disappointed. He and Clem had their town so well planned. Now this." Martha tossed her shawl around her shoulders. Laura prepared to leave with her.

Lucille admitted Ben and Mr. Adams had planned their town well. Except for one thing. She and Ben had argued the whole trip about women's rights. She had teased him unmercifully on occasion that he could not prove men were smarter than women. Now the town was in other's hands, so no solution could be reached.

A few seconds later Laura rushed back into the building. Lucille turned and waited for what the white-faced girl had to say. 53

"There's more men out there," Laura squeaked. "The street in front of pa's store is full of them. They look more like outlaws than anyone here."

"I wish Stokes would come back. Foley disappeared, too." Lucille said.

"One of them yelled at me." Lucille saw Laura swallow convulsively. She ran around the counter just as four men pushed through the batwings at the bar end of the building. Lucille quickly indicated the gunny sack curtain that separated her bedroom from the kitchen. Laura whisked behind it.

"Hey, no bartender." The man was coarse featured and heavily armed with a big pistol and shell belts crossed over his chest.

"We'll help ourselves. Gibb, play bartender and set 'em up."

Lucille stood her ground and reached for her biggest meat cleaver.

"Hey, Cookie, where'd the good lookin' dame go?"

"Out back." Lucille white knuckled the meat cleaver.

"Hell, I'm dry as dust under the bed. Drink up. Free, ain't it?"

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Lucille demanded.

"Hell, woman, we're part of his majesty's Englandia army. Here's to Sir Humphrey Whatever-Whatever Gorman-Jones. He acts like one of them infernal foreigners who think they can run a ranch while they sit on their fat asses in Cheyenne. Guess we'll show them a thing or two."

"Hey, woman, what's burning?"

Lucille didn't wait to check who spoke. She dashed to her oven. She saved most of the pan of biscuits from turning really black.

"We'll have some of those." The coarse featured fellow leaned across the counter. "They don't smell bad as the ones we had comin' up here from..."

"Shut yer face, Dude. She don't needa know where we come from."

Lucille slammed the big pan on the counter, set out a pot of honey and some knives.

"How much?"

"Five cents, since they're scorched."

Lucille gathered all the coins as the biscuits disappeared. What would Archie say? Would Stokes raise a fuss? Did Archie supply all the food for her restaurant? The supplies the Hacks had brought in for their store wouldn't last forever, not with the crowd of riders she'd just seen enter the town.

"Miss Lucy."

Lucille spun around as Stokes entered the kitchen's back door.

"His lordship requests scones and tea, miss, delivered immediately."⁵⁴

"Scones and tea?" Lucille stared at the middle-aged man. Her brain waves went full tilt. She drew a deep breath, bit her lower lip and warily eyed the waiting Stokes. He stood like a stone statue, grim-faced and bleak-eyed. Like her version of an English butler.

"Tell his lordship there will be biscuits and honey, with coffee, over here."

"Very good, miss." Lucille thought she caught a very slight twinkle in Stoke's dark eyes as he backed out the door and closed it.

Lucille sat on her cot, thinking she didn't feel so good. In fact, she felt rotten. Like someone tossed her up in the air and forgot to tell her how to land.

Why did the surly Stokes, who bossed everyone else around, take such treatment from Sir Humphrey Gorman-Jones?

Ben Menkin didn't feel good, and as lively as watered down whiskey. His bruised arm flopped like his mother's noodles as she hung them to dry. The other arm was really broken and lay in a sling across his chest.

With worry over the chances young Tom Shafer took going back to the Bascom valley, he was glad Jace Brown had allowed his son, Steve, and another daredevil young cowhand to go along this trip, but that, too, added anxiety.

Impatient, as the sun slipped behind the western mountain range, Ben scooted up on the large pillows to watch out the window. The boys were already two days overdue. Thank goodness for the safety of Adams, and the generosity of the Brown family at this great ranch.

"They'll be in soon, Ben," Jace told him as he entered the room. "Don't fret none. My boys are resourceful even when they're wild."

They can't impress Miss Jodie if they don't get back safe to do a little braggin'."

"You've been more than generous, Jace," Ben said.

"Don't worry about it. It's to our advantage to get those rustlers out of there. They've gotten bolder in the last two weeks. It ain't just two or three cows at a time like before. Now it's fifty or sixty prime animals they make off with."

"We'll help all we can when I get my people organized. We want the lands we're entitled to."

"It's too dark to see the corral, but I hear horses raisin' a ruckus." Jace strode over to the bedroom window. "Here's your man and my two, comin' across the yard. You'll hear them clatterin' up the stairs^s soon enough."

Tom burst into the room, followed by Steve Brown and his pal. Steve's mother and Jodie joined the rest and all crowded into the small bedroom.

"Sorry we're late," Tom apologized. His brown eyes sparkled.

"Well, out with it," Ben said. "I can see you found out something in Bascom."

"Plenty. Red Gorman is chief man in the town. They call it Gorman. He and most all his men left the valley, for two weeks, Lucille Martin told Clovine. They went all different directions."

"Yeah," Jace said bitterly. "Almost two hundred head of my prime stock got moved this past couple weeks. Half of them scattered but we're missing the rest. Strange thing though. I don't think the rustlers came from Gorman's valley. They came from someplace between here and Cheyenne."

"Mr. Clovine, Forie Drescher, my dad and Mr. Hack got the warehouse fixed for Hack's store. They moved the women upstairs in the saloon to keep the men from trying to escape. They took other men in the mountains to build cabins and get wood."

"Maybe I can get out of this bed before they get back and..."

"Don't get all fired up," cautioned Mrs. Brown. "You wouldn't last longer than snow in a hot kettle."

"My crew won't be back for another week either," Jace warned Ben.

Ben settled back disconsolately. "What else is going on in my town?"

Tom said quietly, "There's a cobbler and a doctor's office in town, but no doctor. Miss Martin does the doctorin'."

"Tell him! Tell him!" Steve Brown urged.

Ben smiled at Tom's effort to report soberly. The younger man's eyes snapped with excitement and kept returning to Jodie Adams.

"We let the corral bars down and roped three of your Morgan horses. The others followed like lambs, ma saw us from a window. She called in one of the guards so he wouldn't see us while we got away." The three young men wore jubilant grins. "We got 'em right outside in the corral!"

"No wonder your eyes are shooting sparks. Thanks, fellas. That's great!" Ben didn't want to dampen their enthusiasm but a look at Jace confirmed he also worried the outlaws were being warned too soon about retaliation.

"We made it look like they trampled down a gate," offered Tom smugly, and Ben nodded, hoping for the best. 56

"It's been a long day, fellas," Jace said. "Now that the excitement is over, I'm for the bed." They all trooped out but Tom, who had a cot in Ben's room.

"One of the friendly guards told Forie Dresher that Gorman's in an almighty hurry to get buildings up. Some guy named Stokes brought wagons in so Hack can run his store. Some folks are living in their own wagons. Anything else?" Tom blew out the lamp, stripped down and settled on the cot.

"You get some rest. Seems like all I do is rest." Ben turned and faced the wall, trying to quiet his discontent. How the hell could he show his folks he was as good as his older brother if everything he

planned went wrong? He debated whether he wanted to be a mayor like his dad, or would he rather be sheriff of Bascom?

He wondered if his own wagons had been pulled into town. Were his town and valley maps safe? He thought of Lucille Martin and the pretty Hack sisters, especially young Dora. Damn, his battered body hurt. This would be another miserable night.

* * * *

Bean soup, with ham pieces, seemed the only meal Lucille could fix that would stretch far enough to feed everyone. There were groans that the men had lived on beans the last two weeks, but her feather light, unburned biscuits turned the grumbles to sighs of pleasure. The coins they dropped in the cash bowl soon piled up.

She didn't have time to check the wooden box of books Stokes hauled in, until after the evening meal. Someone had broken into it, hoping for valuables, no doubt. So much for Archie's noble outlaws. After seeing the first books she moved others with sick

apprehension. Dirt crusted the covers, corners were bent, and pages smeared from lying open on the ground. Luckily, it hadn't rained.

"Here's the book for chocolate cake." Talking to herself Lucille continued, "Here's my four first grade readers." She stacked the books in their various categories. At the bottom, dirt covered, with pages torn, was a strange journal. One page had a town map, hand drawn to scale with river and mountains, looking remarkably like Gorman.

A series of numbers at the bottom of the page made her feel like a spy. The bank combination? She looked quickly over her shoulder⁵⁷ and out the small window. She put the journal on a high shelf in a hurry, added her dictionary, the old law book her brother had given her, and her school books. She'd bring down the school books when she started a class in the back of the dining room. Survival came first.

Next morning, as the prisoner's lined up at breakfast Martha surreptitiously confided, "Tom got Ben's horses from the corral last night."

"Archie will be back in a few days. Is there time for a rescue?" Lucille's lips formed a small, silent oh-oh. Calling the outlaw 'Archie' was a bad sign. Did Martha notice? Just how much of an outlaw was he? He claimed this land and this town. To him the Bascom people were the interlopers.

"We don't know. We're all crowded together again. With Gorman's father here, what will happen?" Martha asked. "The saloon noise kept us awake most of the night. I hope aching heads pay for it." Martha and her three children lined up for breakfast.

"There isn't much peaceful about the town now, that's sure." Lucille said.

"I think a man got shot last night. I wish Mr. Gorman was back. At least he kept it safer and quieter, even though we're prisoners in our own valley."

No more excitement livened the day as Lucille went through a set routine, competent and busy. She smoothed a frown from her forehead. She slammed skillets and pans, now and then holding up hands with slim, tapered fingers. If only the rest of her body would lose weight more quickly. Then again, if Ben didn't rescue them soon all this work would have her body melted down to a puddle of skin and bones. And if Archie didn't quit giving those smoldering green stares at her she'd melt down to a puddle anyway. Which was worse?

By evening she worked herself into such a state of nerves she didn't know whether to pray for rescue or was terrified if it came. The evening's fried potatoes were a little scorched.

A scream from the dining area caused Lucille to look up from scrubbing shelves below the dividing counter. An outlaw with a jagged scar down his face had cornered Laura Hack. His big hands, black with thick hair, caressed Laura's arms and she screamed again.

A loud bang sounded as Stokes hit the bar with a long club. "None⁶⁸ of that, boys," his deep voice sounded distinctly in the sudden quiet. "Mr. Gorman won't like you messing with the women."

The men stared at Stokes' implacable obsidian glare and went back to their original positions. Laura ran to the other women.

Lucille sighed in relief. Did Gorman have such a reputation that mention of his name made hardened criminals pause and think? She returned to shelf cleaning. Her heart thumped unhappily in her chest.

In a few moments the guards herded the women out one direction and the men another. The tall, big shouldered silhouette at a warehouse window, just before the lights went out, had to be Clovine, being watchful. For what?

"Do you suppose Mr. Gorman will be back soon?" Lucille asked as she heard Stokes come to stare out the other bay window.

"I would think so, miss."

"Is Ferdie his real brother?"

"Half brother. A worthless fop, that one," Stokes said tersely. "And the father as well." He stalked back to his bar and extinguished the two lamps there, before leaving.

Puzzled, Lucille continued to stare out the window. She felt her face go warm as she thought of Archie's last visit to the kitchen. Rubbing noses? Good lord. Very weird, but kind of cute. His request for chocolate cake seemed logical enough. She could handle that. But if the green-eyed outlaw made further advances, what then?

They needed a sheriff to uphold law and order. Wyoming women already had the right to vote in elections. With a sigh she wondered how she and the other women could go about getting an election in Gorman. Would Archie fight the idea, especially of women being allowed to vote?

As she blew out the first kitchen light Ben's stern and serious gray eyes came to mind. He had been opposed to women obtaining the vote all through the wagon train trip. He probably wouldn't change.

Sparkling jade eyes next bounced into her thoughts. Archie. His thick, curling auburn hair drew the looks of even the captive Hack sisters and blonde Caroline Bricker, the daughter of the pastor who had died of a heart attack. Where did he stand on women's rights to their own land, and voting?

Explosively, Lucille blew out the last kitchen lamp.

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CHAPTER 4

Several miserable, scary days later Stokes called out across Lucille's kitchen counter, "A carriage is coming in. I saw at least three women, very obviously women of the night. They also have a lot of trunks. They'll likely want a meal."

He caught Lucille's disapproving look. He reddened slightly and looked uncomfortable. He attempted his most aloof butler manner.

Lucille shook her head and her finger at him. "Don't pull that stiff Englishman look on me, Stokes," she said. "You know very well you're as worried as I am about the character of this town. We don't need women who cause men to fight over them and possibly get someone killed."

"You're right, Miss Martin, I do not approve of this kind of activity. We do not need this, but we have it whether we like it or not."

"Who is sending them here? Archie?" Why did she care?

"I suspect it is Corey Black, or those other two Gormans."

It was obvious to Lucille that Stokes hated to speak of Archie's father and brother any more than absolutely necessary. "We'll have to make the best of it. Coffee is hot. I can have biscuits and stew heated by the time they unload all those trunks." Her first guess would be Sir Humphrey or Ferdie had invited these women, making promises of some sort to them.

"Very good, miss."

Lucille watched Stoke's departing back in puzzlement. He stalked away with stooped back and pounding heels while staring at the floor. He sounded like a butler again. He must really be upset about something. She hurried a few steps after him, stumbled on her skirt hem and almost plowed into the man.

"Stokes, were you ever a butler?" Lucille didn't look at him while she tied her apron belt tighter and bloused the waist of her dress over it.

He turned and stared at her with dark, unreadable eyes. "Almost," he snapped, and immediately turned away. Well, that didn't tell her much. He certainly was an enigma. She rolled up the overly long sleeves of her plain gray dress.

The next couple days Lucille had barely time to squeeze in a meal for herself. She noticed that the new brand of outlaws Sir Humphrey had brought into the valley eyed the slim and lovely young ladies of the Bascom wagon train way too often. If she continued to lose weight at the speed she now did, she would soon be prey for their lecherous ogling as well. And what else? One of the Elite Saloon women had come for laudanum to ease the pain of bruises and a black eye.

Something had to be done to put the town back in a better, safer¹⁶⁰ mood than it had been since the arrival of Corey Black and his outlaws. Even Stokes, who had lost his surly demeanor with the Bascom people over the last several weeks, became touchy natured and frowned a lot. The Gorman branch of the people talked considerably about wishing Red would hurry back.

Surprisingly, Lucille caught Stokes in a really good mood one day and got approval for Bettina, the dressmaker, to do some sewing. Corey Black's ladies of the night had nagged about needing mending done. Why they came to her, Lucille could not guess. She decided she would be one of Bettina's first customers.

"Stuff a little more around the hips," Lucille told the dressmaker as she twisted left to see her friend. "If we get enough more at the waist it will keep my skirts from dragging under my feet. I about broke my neck yesterday when I tripped on the skirt hem."

"Lucille, dearest girl," Bettina said plaintively, "stuffing your corset will make you look fat. Why would you want to be fat?"

"If those outlaws want a woman in their bed they will surely pick a pretty one with curves, not a fat one with bulges. Since that Corey Black started pestering Caroline Bricker and that horrible blond man with Black started ogling me up and down, I just don't trust any of them."

"With those big dark blue eyes and long black eyelashes, do you really think looking fat will keep those outlaws from being attracted to you?" Bettina said softly.

"I better do something. Swede keeps staring at me, too. Stokes looks at me strangely, like he's seen I've lost weight."

"And Archie Gorman has always been attracted to you, you know that," Bettina insisted. She shook her head and with hands on slender hips looked Lucille up and down.

"No, I don't know that. He likes my cooking."

"Think what you will. At least he's more interesting than Ben Menkin, even though he was wagon master for us all the way here."

"It will be our secret that my new gain in weight comes sewed inside my corset. Promise?" Too late Lucille wondered at her lack of immediate defense of her supposed future husband. She rationalized that it was rumor that had them betrothed, not a

proposal from Ben or an acceptance from her. Later she would worry about that. They just weren't suited, that's all.

Bettina promised. They set up her sewing machine in a small room in a corner of the warehouse that was to be Hack's General Store. The three Hack sisters were thrilled at having a seamstress readily⁶¹ available, especially Dora Hack, the youngest, who hated to sew.

* * * *

Excitement built anew as more wagons were reported. Guards hurried to the valley entrance to intercept more strangers coming in. Upon recognizing their own men the Gorman guards still made sure no one else followed them in.

An entire wagon train of lumber arrived in town and finally the brick for Shafer's bank. Lucille's ears perked up when she overheard the newly returned Tede tell Stokes, "Arch says no booze for Virgil until he gets the bank building framed up and the bricks done."

"You'll have to keep an eye on him. And Foley says he needs a break from guarding that safe in Archie's house. Did Archie find out who that Texas rancher is who could testify for him?"

"The witness he needs? Archie heard he was at Colorado City so Arch headed there. If the yahoo ain't a danged lily-livered coward maybe they'll get them charges dropped," Tede said.

"I sincerely hope so." Stokes shook his big head as though still worried.

Lucille pulled back into the darker corner of the vast kitchen. What rancher? What charges? Did those charges make Archie Gorman an outlaw? Where was he? Why hadn't he returned? With trepidation Lucille watched as Corey Black and his friend Hank, entered the dining area behind the Bascom people, but they only motioned for coffee and food. And they did pay for it. What a surprise! These men would undoubtedly rob a bank, steal cattle or take a man's life without a second thought, but they paid for meals. She glanced at the growing pile of coins. Perhaps it wouldn't amount to a fortune,

but considering all her hard work she deserved something. An extra pair of comfortable shoes would be nice. When the men departed she emptied the coins into a small sugar sack, knotted the top and put it behind the stack of sauce dishes that were seldom used. Lucille gave a relieved sigh, and continued her never-ending kitchen work.

Women and children were crowded into the upper floor of the warehouse, now a store, when Corey Black demanded the fancy ladies brought in have the space over the Elite Saloon. The Bascom women were now brought across the square with the male prisoners, and the stylishly dressed women followed.

Black sat with a blond giant of a man and Dude Edwards at Red's customary table, far enough from the noisy bar area so Lucille overheard their conversation without really trying.

"The men'll start hollerin' to divide thet money in the safe we heard¹² about," said Black around picking his oversize teeth with a sliver.

His big gold tooth shone brightly. "An' them people, we gotta figger somethin' with them."

"Shoot the men," advised Edwards. "They'll be nuthin' but trouble. We can use the women. I'd like a night with one that smells better than Clarey, that dark haired one at the Elite bar."

Brutal men had so little regard for the life of anyone but themselves. Lucille grimaced and pulled in her cheeks as cold shivers raced up and down her spine even though the kitchen was hot. She did not like Dude's coarse features, but she admitted he kept himself clean, like Black, who also considered himself quite a man with the ladies. That didn't give him the right to snuff out a life like blowing out a candle.

"Oughtta make it interesting," drawled Black with a grin. "Like a little poker game, on Saturday night. Let them win one of them women. How does that sound?"

The three men guffawed. Dude leaned forward more seriously, and spoke more quietly, so Lucille did not hear him. She knew many of

the prisoners listened, too. She stared hard at the three outlaws. She decided there were outlaws, and there were outlaws. She preferred Archie's outlaws, not Sir Humphrey's kind of killers and womanizers, no matter how much they paid Humphrey to get into the lawman-free valley. The Gorman town really needed a sheriff to keep things in order.

Suddenly Dude Edwards said loudly, with a grin across the room, "The little Frenchy dressmaker, I'd like to see her in one uh them lacy doodad gowns you can see through enough to get a fella real interested, then blow out the lamp and feel all thet silk."

"Fair curls muh toes jest listenin' to you purr on." Black's words slurred as he emptied another glass of brandy. "But tell me, Dude, why blow out the lamp?" Black grinned, too, his now bleary eyes on blonde Caroline Bricker, who stayed next to her widowed mother, as far from the outlaws as possible.

Lucille saw color rise in the blonde girl's pale face and her frightened eyes go wide. Her white hand grabbed her mother's.

Bettina's dark eyes snapped spitefully and they exchanged worried looks as Lucille set a coffee pot on the counter, along with two big yellow cakes with thick icing.

"Build yourself a cabin and maybe you'll win a gal to keep it warm," suggested the huge Blondie. He was not a jolly man like the large blond Swede who worked for Archie was Lucille's immediate⁶³ thought. She didn't like Blondie at all.

"Why not?" Black said. "We need more houses. We have Hiatt's ladies and all of these. Dude, you get those builders busy again on the rooms upstairs in the Elite. I don't like sharing a room just because they ain't done. That scrawny Tede ain't workin' those men hard enough. Before long old Humph will have the city he's braggin' about." He swung around in his chair. "Just so we get that money from the safe before the brick bank gets done. Hey, damn it, I smell cake."

"Stokes, bring another bottle!" roared Dude.

A woman screamed. One of Black's outlaws, a lop-eared outlaw named Colorado had Mabel, the oldest Hack girl, against the wall. He worked on the buttons of her dress. Black's grin widened even more when Colorado gave a wild yell and leaped away from the bite of her strong white teeth.

"Get those damn women back to the warehouse!" yelled Black. "NOW! I'm gonna have cake in peace. No samplin' the merchandise until we're ready."

In the comparative silence Dude's voice seemed exceptionally loud. "That man Swede and Ebbit Ford back yet?"

"Ain't seen 'em."

The three men sat with heads together, one entire cake at their table. Since now she couldn't hear what they were saying, Lucille went about her work. Moving from wood box to stove she tripped on her skirt hem and fell with a resounding crash of wood pieces. Pans fell and added to the clatter as her head hit the corner of the solid work

table. She'd forgotten to watch the length of her dress again. It would never stay where she wanted.

Lucille mumbled as she leaned holding her head in her hands. Bettina must hurry with her sewing and hemming or she'd break her neck. Dude Edwards led three men to all leer at her over the dividing counter.

"Hey, Cookie, you all right? Can't have you miss getting our meals now, can we?"

As she got on her feet and waved them away again, Sir Humphrey joined them, coming in as quietly as the wraith he resembled.

Black lit a wall lamp for their corner and still they talked.

Lucille began slicing tomorrow's bacon. The batwing doors at the end of the dining room flew open and heavy footsteps echoed across the dining room's wooden plank floor. Lucille peered around the corner of the counter as the big blond Swede stomped across the

dining room, followed by a much smaller Ebbit Ford. These were Gorman men, but where did they fit in now?

"Lucy, you gott kaffee?" bellowed Swede as he strode around the⁶⁴ dividing counter into the kitchen and grabbed her in a bear hug before she could even squeak. "Ve mist your goot cookin', I tell you! Next time ve take you..."

"The hell you are!" Black yelled. "Get your ass over here and quit pesterin' the cook. Where you been? Took you damn long enough. Ford, quit your goddam grinning and report."

"Hey, wait a minute," Ebbit protested. "Where's Red? Red's in charge of this valley."

"Yes, Mr. Black, my son and I are in charge of this valley," Humphrey said. He glowered across at the gold-toothed outlaw.

"Red ain't here, I'm in charge," Black said. "You got any objections we'll take them out in the street if you figure you're faster than me." His right hand hovered near his gun.

Lucille's knife paused mid-air, like being poised to cut through the tension emanating from the other room. She held her breath, and made ready to duck out of danger of flying bullets.

Ebbit glared at the black haired man a long moment, looked a second at the cowering Humphrey, then pulled up a chair beside Swede.

"We got them herds like you said, but Red ain't gonna like this," Ebbit Ford said.

"Forget Red. Any trouble?"

"Brown and a couple of his boys got pretty close before the boys at the pass drove them off," Ford reported. "He better have gotten close enough to see those cattle belong to the wagon train ranchers—well, most of them do. If we picked up a few of his, that's his bad luck."

"Yah, ve did goot," agreed Swede. He turned his attention to first Stokes and then Lucille. "I neet a drink, an' steak a mile tick. Ve drove enough of dem in I was ready to carve one off, I tell you."

"Twenty minutes," said Lucille. She angrily slammed the heavy griddle onto the stove and winced as the noise abused her wounded, aching head.

Swede and Ford moved to a table nearer the kitchen when Lucille set their food on the counter. Swede slapped down money. He gazed at her with undisguised admiration. "If I had a big apple pie I'd tink I died and found heaven."

Lucille couldn't help smiling but shook her head. "No apples, Swede." She poured coffee and trudged back to the stove. Her feet hurt and her face was hot. Tomorrow she'd mend the tear in her skirt four inches up from the bottom, or get Bettina to shorten the whole thing.

The five men talked quietly as Lucille finished her work. She didn't feel safe about trying to get some sleep. Exhaustion won out. She⁶⁵

kept her clothes on and went behind the burlap curtain. She dozed. Several times their raised voices half roused her. Once she heard extra loud and angry words, then feet stomped across the room. The batwings squeaked and the front door slammed and cut off the sound. With the quiet Lucille then fell into a deeper sleep.

* * * *

The next morning, it seemed like a continuance of the previous night as some of the same men sat at the corner table, now eating breakfast. Sir Humphrey quite often slept until noon so he wasn't there. Lucille wondered if Swede had objected to Black's plotting since he did not come in with them.

Dude strutted in, showing off his stiff new plaid shirt with string tie and new gray trousers. Black's ebony hair gleamed like polished coal.

Left over dregs of a nightmare she couldn't remember turned Lucille wary and ill-tempered. Swede and Ford entered, but did not join the

other men. Several strange young riders ogled the female prisoners as they were brought in from across the square.

"You look tired, Clovine," Lucille said to the older man as he came to the counter for his breakfast.

"Thought I'd hear from Ben by now," he murmured. "Did he come here?"

"No." Mention of Ben's name raised her hopes. She couldn't be sure Archie would chase these other outlaws away even if he could. After all, it was his father who had brought them in. The thought depressed her. They needed a town constable. She shook her head. Clovine showed every minute of his sixty-odd years as he covertly eyed the men at the corner table. He and the other prisoners looked even more worried when Dude Edwards hustled the Bascom banker, Bertram Shafer, over to their corner.

"Old Bert looks scared to death," said storekeeper Hack at Clovine's elbow. "It sure scared me when Gorman ordered a rent agreement and a complete set of account books ready, but he was never like

this." He pretended to pour coffee in an already full cup, while still keeping an eye on the men in the corner.

"We were all present with Red when they did your books," said Clovine. "This is sneaky. And it's our gold Shafer deals with."

Lucille wordlessly eyed the outlaws, too. Amazed, she saw Sir Humphrey join them at their table. His greed must have outweighed his need for sleep.

"We can talk at Hack's," Clovine said. "No use riling them. Keep your eyes and ears open, Lucille. Besides me, Shafer, Ben and Adams are the only ones who know how much gold is in that safe.⁶⁶ The combination is written someplace. I don't think they've tried to open it. Confronting Red is holding them off."

"For how long?" Watching the corner table's occupants as she wiped the counter and long tables Lucille saw Shafer's serious face gain color, too much color. From the corner of her eyes Lucille watched the guards herd the other prisoners out the door. Her heart thudded in her chest so hard she couldn't hear above the pulsing in

her ears. Her five thousand dollars was in that safe. It was her entire inheritance from a grandmother who believed in the independence of women as strongly as she did. Grandmother had had a much harder time in her day and age than Lucille now had. She valued that money even more. Somehow she had to regain it.

Shafer's face whitened to a sick gray and his trembling hand raised in fear. He shook his head vehemently, but Corey nodded at Blondie. Shafer squealed in pain as his arm was twisted up behind his back. She saw moisture glistening on his fleshy face and his double chin wobbled.

"I'll tell you! I'll tell you!" screeched Shafer. His arm hung limply at his side and his face went down on the table. With one last vestige of courage he raised his head to say, "When I find the combination I'll tell you. It is written in a journal lost among the wagons. Don't ruin my safe."

"That's better, Mr. Shafer," said Sir Humphrey with a jovial laugh. "I knew you'd see it our way. The brick layer will start your bank

tomorrow. I'm sure we can talk Archibald's gunman into releasing the safe."

Behind Humphrey's back Lucille caught Corey Black's lift of a dark eyebrow and the smirk on Dude Edward's face. She didn't trust either of them. Sir Humphrey should not either. The heavy safe sat someplace in Archie's big house, where Humphrey and Ferdie both slept in large bedrooms and spent their time whenever they weren't eating, drinking or gambling. She'd heard that Tede, or one of Archie's other reliable men, slept in the room with the safe. There would be hell to pay, one way or the other.

From the kitchen shadows Lucille watched pain turn to tentative hope on Shafer's round face. She gave him credit for trying to gain time before the safe would be opened. He wiped away perspiration with a soiled white handkerchief, nodded his head, his chin wobbled, then he gave a fearful half-smile. His look darted everywhere and nowhere. Finally, he nodded, stood, nodded several times to the group of men and backed away. Dude rose and escorted him out the door.

I wonder how long that agreement will hold if Black loses patience, Lucille thought.

She dared not get the journal from the top shelf now, but if the combination was in it, it was imperative something be done soon or all their money would be lost. She was the only one who had the freedom of movement to do anything. The thought was very daunting.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," announced Black loudly enough to reach the far corners of the kitchen. "We'll have a big night. Ferdie, where you been? Are you in on the gambling tomorrow night?"

Before Ferdie could answer a clatter of horses sounded outside and a handsome young cowboy burst through the door, interrupting any conversation.

"Here's Joe now," Swede's voice boomed in the room. "Got 'em settled?"

"Eating their heads off," replied the cowboy. "Speaking of eating, I brought in a big cow elk that oughtta taste mighty good, if Tede don't burn it or boil it dry."

"Hell, Joe," boomed Swede, "ve got us a lady cook that make you tink you don't need no odder heaven."

"Take the elk around to the kitchen door," instructed Black, then he shouted, "Hey, Cookie, you ever fix elk?" Without waiting for her answer he said, "Joe, you and the boys stick around for a big card game tomorrow night. Poker. Winner gets one of the ladies for a little pleasuring."

Lucille saw the young cowboy's face go very still. "I'll tell the boys," he said quietly and went out the door.

Frowning, Lucille returned to her work without answering Black about cooking elk. At a knock on the back door she admitted the young man.

"Name's Joe Texas, ma'am," he announced in a soft drawl as he removed his hat. "I brought the elk, all gutted and skinned, ma'am. You got a meat saw I'll quarter it or cut steaks or whatever you want."

Lucille directed him to the waist high wood chunks used for outside butchering. She now remembered that he and Tede had botched up a crude hen house back of the restaurant. The crates the hens came in were tipped sideways so the hens could use them as nesting boxes and lay their eggs in. With all that extra work she needed Laura more than ever to gather eggs and see that the chickens were locked safely in at night away from fox and coyotes.

"Ma'am?" Joe hadn't moved. He turned his big hat nervously in rope-callused hands and lowered his voice. "Would you ... would you have some real clean white rags. Don't say nuthin' to nobody,⁶⁸ huh?" His face lit with sudden inspiration. "One of my pals over in the saloon had a kind of accident-like."

Lucille eyed him curiously, sure there was more behind his brief request than his words said. She opened her mouth to ask a question but Black's voice cut in with, "Got any coffee left?"

Lucille nodded to Joe and he left. She handed the small coffee pot to Black. As he returned to the corner table he motioned for Stokes to join them. Stokes didn't look happy at all.

"Where you want this back quarter?" Joe's voice from the doorway interrupted her thoughts regarding Stokes' reaction to Black and his men. As Joe dropped the meat on the sturdy table he lowered his tone, "Those bandages...?"

"I'll have them ready. My name is Lucille, Joe."

Where is Archie? Why isn't he here to control these criminals? Thoughts of green eyes battled with Ben's remembered gray ones the rest of the day. Lucille grew irritable and sick with apprehension, smiled foolishly at a remembered kindness one moment, and worried at a caressing tone, the next. She thrilled at the recalled hardness of a strong arm under her fingers as she had

been helped into a buggy for a ride with Laura. That the elk steaks turned out to taste wonderful was due more to force of habit than concentration on their timing.

"A very good meal as usual, Lucille," Martha told her quietly as she took a piece of cake. "Those guards of Black's keep leering at the girls. There's a rumor they plan to divide the women. Is it true?"

"I think they plan a poker game, with only one winner, which is better than all at once. I think Stokes did his best to gain that advantage."

Martha's white and worried face turned to her pretty daughter, Clara. "At least he is safe," she murmured as she moved away.

Lucille fidgeted until Clovine came to the counter when she had a chance to ask, "Did you notice any wounded cowboy in that bunch that rode in?"

"Didn't see any. Why?" Clovine said as he looked around.

"Why would another cowboy want a pile of white bandages then?" Lucille looked intently at the man. Would they keep including her in the Bascom group or would they be leery of where her loyalties might lie now that she worked for Red?

"Can't be Ben or Tom. They're at a ranch. Besides, that Joe Texas fella is with the Gorman outlaws." Clovine started to move away from her as guards looked their way suspiciously.

"Yes, that's right, he's an outlaw," agreed Lucille. Doubt hung in her voice. "The cattle they brought in belong to you, Adams and Menkin." She'd talked with Joe off and on much of the day while he butchered. She found him a likable young man, more concerned over the condition of cattle than the profits from robbing banks and stealing horses, or cows. She looked across the room at him now as he polished off a second steak as "hunter's privilege". His eyes constantly turned to the auburn haired Laura Hack as he slowly chewed. As though she felt his gaze, Laura looked over at him, then quickly away. Lucille saw the pink in Laura's cheeks.

The very air in the room became highly charged, like heat lightning danced around the edges. Black made no bones about his intention to win the blonde Caroline for his own. Flattering and unflattering remarks were tossed out like skittering and darting moths at first, then became bolder and more lewd as Stokes' brandy took effect. Blushes, borderline tears and near panic appeared on the women's faces. Several male prisoners protested but after a shot hit barely inches from Mr. Hack's foot they sullenly subsided.

Lucille noted several straining Levi's buttons as young outlaws converged on the counter for cake. "Can't hev them lady sweets till termorrer, we'll git these cake sweets tonight," said one. She thankfully saw the last of them a few minutes later. Only Stokes remained, polishing his glasses and rearranging liquor bottles.

"You look worried, Stokes," Lucille said as she perched on a stool at the edge of the bar. "Where is Archie? He should be here. Sir Humphrey and Ferdie have turned this valley into a hideout for real outlaws."

A glass dropped from Stokes' agitated fingers. He closed his eyes and hung his head over supporting arms on the bar. "Archie won't want this to happen. He only wants to help innocent men."

Lucille didn't mention that the Bascom people thought the Gorman people were all outlaws. She waited.

"Archie planned to build a town for his father. When he was younger he needed a father. Sir Humphrey always favored Ferdie and Archie wouldn't accept that. He thought he didn't do enough to get his attention."

"He wanted to win his father's favor?" Lucille asked.

"When he first started the town and got the Elite Saloon and Hotel built, that was from selling Sir Humphrey's jewelry. Sir Humphrey owns the big saloon."

"I'm surprised Sir H. sold any jewelry. He wears enough of it.⁷⁰ Where did he get it all?" Lucille couldn't control her curiosity. That she had finally gotten Stokes to say even this much surprised her.

Stokes stared at her. His suddenly grim features almost frightened her.

"It is the family jewels from England. Only Humphrey wasn't legitimate family." Stokes stooped and picked up the fallen glass, and searched it for a chipped edge by running a finger carefully around its rim as he held it to the light. He then polished it and returned it to the shelf.

Lucille quickly surmised there was more to the story than just bringing jewelry from England.

"Sir H, as you call him, didn't sell it," Stokes continued, as though getting a load off his chest. "He gave it to Archie to bring west. The Pinkertons were after him and Ferdie, and the Pinkertons were after me because I brought the shipment in from England. Archie never saw England so Humphrey and Ferdie reasoned he wouldn't be accused. Besides, if they caught Archie it would save their necks."

"Then Archie sold it? How did you join him?"

"I sold it." Stokes slammed a heavy bottle onto a shelf. "Sir H wanted a damn fancy gaming hall. He could just as damn well pay for it. I joined Archie out here after his mum died."

Lucille had never seen the imperturbable Stokes so upset.

"Why do...?" She started to ask another question but Stokes shook his head.

"I'll say no more. I hope you'll do the same."

Realizing Stokes retreated into his own heavy thoughts, Lucille returned to her kitchen and the never-ending work there.

So Humphrey wasn't really an English Lord. She'd almost believed he could be because of all the talk in Cheyenne of the English nobility buying up ranch land in the area.

Where did Archie's mother come from? It was very evident in his voice that Stokes had cared about her and Archie.

The big Saturday night came. Huge kettles of elk stew disappeared in moments, along with dozens of biscuits. The money bowl piled high. Lucille felt guilty when she saw the amount that came in. At this rate she needed to run the restaurant like the business it had fast become. Lucille put the money out of sight to be divided later between her leather sack and one she would keep for Archie.

By her constant rushing about it became obvious she could not handle all the work herself. She'd pay any of the help, like Laura, Martha and Clara Adams from her portion.

Laura, Martha and Clara washed the piles of dishes in the kitchen. Forie and Martha kept clean dishes available as new groups of¹ outlaws and drovers appeared.

Lucille nodded to Joe Texas. He grinned back but his eyes were on Laura as she removed dirty dishes from the counter. Lucille scrubbed moisture from her face with a cotton cloth, wondering what Joe had done with the cotton rags she'd given him.

Everyone quieted as Stokes recited gaming rules that meant nothing at all to Lucille. The prisoners were returned to Hack's Store.

Totally exhausted, Lucille went back to her bedroom corner, sighed in relief as she loosened her uncomfortable corset and let air in around the feather padding. She longed to slip into her big, old cotton nightgown but someone might call for something from the kitchen. The gambling went on in earnest by the sounds reaching her corner.

Was Ben Menkin alive? How long could they hold out until Ben or Clem Adams rescued them? Clovine heard about Ben but no one had heard anything of Adams. Her own driver, Charlie Ash, hadn't tried to contact her. Where was he? What would the prisoners do if no one came? Would they try to do something on their own? Could they do anything on their own? She knew there were smuggled guns but how many? Would Hack with his store, and the men planning on ranches want to leave the valley? Or would they fight for their property and store?

What can I do to prevent the Black outlaws from carrying out their crimes against the Bascom women? How can I save the Bascom bank money? Does it all have to load on my shoulders?

Lucille wasn't sure how long she'd slept when a voice shouted in at the door, "There's somebody running loose out here! I saw him cross the street. C'mon, you yahoos, gimme some help."

"Get lost. I got a winning hand. You find 'em."

Lucille swung her bare feet to the cold wood floor and told herself she needed a rug by her cot. She went to the small window. Orange slashed the darkness by the newly erected log cabin between her back door and the river. Gun flame exploded at the back corner of the Elite Saloon and tin cans rattled. Someone stumbled against the kitchen door, the knob was tried and turned readily. *Ben?* Lucille stood quietly to one side of it in her voluminous skirts and loosened blouse. Someone slipped inside, bumping her arm. She heard swearing outside and running steps around the corner.

Watch out, Lucille, someone is in the kitchen.

A breath drew in sharply. "Miss Martin?"

"Lucille," she squeaked out breathlessly, the thunder in her head² increasing. She could feel the warmth of a high shoulder next to her.

"It's Ben, Lucille. Are you all right? What are they doing in there?"

"I'm fine." His large warm hand rested a moment where her shoulder met her neck, just under one ear. "They are gambling for one of the girls."

A snort of disgust sounded in the darkness and in a few minutes Ben opened the door a crack. "Thanks, Lucille. I think whoever spotted me is gone. I need to find Tom." He disappeared into the blackness outside.

Why did she feel disappointment that he expressed no concern for the gambled women, only his own safety? She was foolish to think

he could really do anything. What would Archie have done in a like situation? What would he do when he finally returned to the valley?

With her ear at the crack of the door Lucille listened for what seemed a very long time before she heard footsteps gradually fade to the front of the building. Her heart pounding, worried for their safety, she thought how brief the encounter had been. What did Ben plan to do here? She appreciated the darkness. He had asked if she was all right in such a calm, unloverly fashion. He'd bumped into her arm unexpectedly and her lack of romantic reaction dismayed her. She'd thought only of rescue for the Bascom people. What had he felt? No more than she had?

Calming down, wondering if a rescue was planned, and apprehensive as to its outcome, Lucille turned to the counter. No one could see her in the shadows around the corner of the wall.

The women they now brought over from the warehouse had their hair already down for comfort in sleeping, the golds and browns falling over their shoulders and wrinkled dresses. They sat at tables

near the kitchen or in chairs at the edge of the dining area. Fear filled the air like clouds roiling in a storm. One pushed heavy dark hair behind her ear and sat quietly, though her eyes were busy. With a pale hand Caroline Bricker pushed back fine blonde hair as it curled over rounded shoulders and upper arms. By the way Black cast hot looks in her direction it would mean trouble for the girl, thought Lucille.

Would Archie put a stop to this travesty if he were here?

Tables farthest from her kitchen and down into the dining area were filled with card players. The calls of "full house", "two pair" and "three aces" meant very little to Lucille. Mrs. Adams gazed anxiously at her pretty daughter, Clara. Lucille realized Black, an experienced, successful gambler, had the most to do with the gaming arrangements. Stokes had only been able to lessen their impact the best he could, by limiting the prize to one a night. She knew it galled the surly bartender that Sir H was collecting entry fees from all the players.

Lucille leaned against the wall end of the counter and looked around as someone yelled, "Corey, you still want that blonde?"

The three Hack sisters clung together. Mabel rubbed her upper arms as if they were cold. Lucille guessed she remembered the rough hands tearing at the buttons down her dress not long ago.

Lucille wagged her fingers at her friend Bettina, while keeping out of sight of the gambling men. She visualized Bettina's mind calculating the distance to the outside door. Lucille pointed and mouthed silently to Bettina, "I'll open the back door."

Where had Archie gone? Would he condone this behavior? His father and brother certainly did; they got a cut of the entrance fees. Grave doubts assailed her about the entire Gorman family.

Calls went back and forth, with jesting and ribald jokes. Lucille blessed her forethought in looking too plump to interest those men, or was it fear of Red Gorman that kept them from including her in this fiasco? Bettina made angry motions when her nickname 'Frenchy' came up in conversation. Mrs. Adams sat alertly nearby,

looking ready to spring in defense of her daughter. Lucille caught the shape of an object in the hand Martha concealed in her pocket.

After punching down bread dough Lucille cracked the back door off the latch but could think of nothing further to do. Feeling slightly unwell she moved slowly past the pile of clothing she'd brought in from the clothesline. She lay down on the lumpy cot.

Black's outlaws more often frequented the Elite Saloon down the street, so the unusual amount of noise in her dining room upset her rest as she dozed in and out of disturbing dreams. A cramping stomach pain interrupted her restless sleep. She pushed upright on the cot, appreciating the sudden absence of noise from the gamblers. It must be over. With a long cape thrown over her loose gown and slippers on her feet she trudged outside toward the privy.

To her left stood the hastily thrown together log cabin Black had had built. Muffled screams and pleading tones came from it. Black had won the game.

Lucille stopped, not sure what to do. She didn't want to hear more. She rushed toward the privy; she grew angrier and sicker by the minute. She didn't quite reach the privy before the stew she'd bolted down during the rush of meal preparation came surging up. She gagged and lurched against the privy corner. Finally, her stomach emptied, trembling and weak, she turned back on the path. She must do something.

At Caroline's squeal Lucille picked up the ax from the woodpile and headed for the small cabin. She brought the ax down hard on the flimsy door latch.

Three shots sounded ... at her? In the scant moonlight she saw splinters jut from the thin board door right by her head. Lucille dropped the ax and rushed from the danger area. Her body was in a turmoil of continued upset stomach and her mind in a sickness of despair for the helpless girl. She ran for the back kitchen door and almost fell inside. Maybe Stokes would help.

The next gunshot shattering the sudden stillness magnified her feeling of dread. Running feet outside, followed by loud voices, convinced her to remain inside, though she kept watch from her small rear window. When the tall form of the gambler made a moving silhouette across the lantern lights outside she closed her eyes in grief that she couldn't have done more to save Caroline's virtue.

A cup of hot soda water helped her stomach but now she couldn't sleep. What had happened in the cabin? She pulled a fresh though faded, yellow flowered dress over her head. While draping the skirt's excess length over the belt, she stifled a yawn, her stomach queasy and her heart sickened by Black and his men.

She opened the kitchen's back door, intending to go to Caroline. It should be safe now since Black had left the area.

Stokes stopped her before she'd gone many steps. He shook his head. "I'll see to Miss Bricker's burial in the morning. There's nothing to be done tonight. Go back to bed."

"He shot at me," Lucille said dismally. "I couldn't help her." She stifled the first sob but the next escaped.

Stokes awkwardly patted her shoulder. She leaned her forehead on his heavy shoulder and sobbed at the futility of the whole situation in Gorman.

The sky already lightened in the east as she trudged to the still warm kitchen stove. It seemed like a person should get over being so stiff and sore, she thought. She again pulled the blousing dress top over the belt. Quiet continued as she worked. The rooms echoed with each pan she clattered. Stokes didn't come in. A man called Petters manned the small bar. The awful premonition about the burial that⁵ would be taking place gave an almost eerie foretelling of doom. Things had looked bad the instant Humphrey and Ferdie brought in the crowd of killers. It was like living on the edge of a volcano that could erupt any day, any hour. And keep on erupting whenever the urge hit.

Bitterly she resented the loss of her inheritance to Gorman's and Black's outlaws. Yet, somehow, the little restaurant offered her a chance to prove she could make it on her own. She vowed it would only be until a school was built so she could teach. As coffee boiled she helped herself to a cup.

Stokes came in late. He handled burials. At breakfast several women wiped their eyes. Mrs. Bricker and her young son did not come. The guards were edgy and extra watchful, yelling at everyone. Black did not appear.

At ten o'clock she turned the big elk roasts in the oven. Forie entered the kitchen with more wood for the woodbox. "Caroline shot herself," he said quietly. "Black claims she grabbed his gun from where he hung it on the bed post." Shaking his head, Forie went back for more wood.

Lucille realized nothing could be said. If only, did no good. Black had shot at her without the least qualm. Thank goodness tonight's

gambling would finish it until the next weekend. She wondered who the next victim would be and what she could do about it.

Stokes' big shoulders slumped when he did come to his bar.

Lucille drew her lips in a tight, down turned line. *Where is Archie? Stokes needs him here.*

Lucille brought her mind back to meal preparation. By nightfall she would be exhausted. Compared to the long, lazy days she used to spend eating chocolates and reading she guessed this continual rush was at least more productive and rewarding. No complaints came from the wagon train people. Gorman's town people and crew, in spite of their rough characters, made much of her cooking. She'd even seen a couple of their wives, until Black's motley outlaws arrived. Most of them were the small shop owners of the town, plus cattle drovers who appeared now and then.

Black's outlaws were too self-centered, crude and rude to say much but they all paid into her cash bowl. She wondered if Archie would claim all the money or let her keep the share she had set aside.

If Ben didn't rescue them soon, she might be imprisoned in this town the rest of her life. Feeling guilty at her own vacillation Lucille thought of Archie. He laughed a lot. He winked at her and threw her calm cooking life into an experience of trying to please⁷⁶ him. Men weren't supposed to affect her that way. Men were only necessary evils who stood in the way of obtaining her property. She had tried not to please him, then tried to just stay prepared for whatever happened next.

Lucille flatly denied her one thought. Trying to please him only consisted of keeping herself from being shot. Or shot at. Tede's tolerant reaction to Archie still puzzled her, like he was a friend of long standing who wouldn't seriously intend to hurt him. He and Stokes often had their heads together at the small bar. What a strange relationship.

And what a strange town! Rumor said the blacksmith had killed a man with his bare hands. Stokes had smuggled stolen goods from England for Humphrey. The cobbler had been accused of stealing leather goods some time in his past.

When Tede and Joe Texas trudged in with the window shaped crate she wondered where another plate glass window would be put. They opened the wooden framework and dragged out a huge schoolroom slate.

Lucille nearly fainted with delight! She gleefully wrung her hands and tried out the chalk. "Archie ordered this? I can't believe it! This is great! I can start teaching."

Archie was the greatest puzzle of all. What exactly had he done that no one could be allowed out of his town to tell of his presence? Or the presence of some of his other men? What prompted him to think of a slate for school classes? When would she get a school building?

Tede didn't have answers. Did Archie want her to cook or teach? Or both? So long as it was nothing more than that, she could handle it.

Maybe Archie wouldn't shoot her. Maybe he was such a good shot Tede hadn't really been in as much danger as she thought. Why else did Tede and Stokes anxiously scan the rutted entrance road into the valley, if not for Archie's safe return?

Lucille listened. She put down the breakfast pan she was scrubbing and wiped her hands on her apron before going to the big front window.

"You have good hearing." Stokes strode up beside her a moment later.

"It's Red's bay mare with the star!" Tede dropped the spyglass on a boardwalk chair and raced for his saddled horse. "Red ain't on her!"

Roused from the lethargy of doing nothing several men mounted and joined Tede in the run to the slow moving mare.

Lucille's heart pounded in dread. Where was the jolly, nose-rubbing outlaw? The man who admired her blue eyes and sent her a magnificent slate? She moved out onto the boardwalk and shaded her eyes from the morning sun. At her elbow Stokes grabbed up the dropped spyglass and fumbled it into focus.

"Gawd," Stokes breathed out. "The mare is dragging Archie. He ain't moving. Tede got her stopped." Stokes called to Hack as the

storekeeper stepped from his doorway. "Get your wagon ready with horses. I'll get a bed mattress. You there! Help me load a mattress. Lucy, get hot water and bandages ready." The big bartender hurried down the boardwalk and disappeared from Lucille's sight. She ran inside to the kitchen box of clean rags and tied a bundle together to put in the wagon Hack pulled up before the palace boardwalk.

Irrelevantly she thought she'd one day sneak a look at that so-called palace. The next second her anxious thoughts turned to the fallen giant laid out on the rutted road that entered town from the high pass.

A rider galloped back into town as she shaded her eyes. Stokes turned the team of horses from the palace walk. He met the rider in front of the restaurant where Lucille was joined by Mrs. Adams, Clara and Laura.

"He's near dead, Stokes," yelled the rider. "Tied hisself to the stirrup an' let the mare drag him in. Looks like he's come a fur piece. Don't reckon he'll make it."

"He'll make it." Stokes slapped the reins on the team pulling the wagon. They bounded up the rutted road away from the standing women.

Lucille didn't analyze her intense feelings of dismay. The man had only winked at her several times, rubbed nose-to-nose with her and demanded chocolate cake. She hadn't felt this much trembling anxiety when Ben had been reported wounded. Why?

Of course, she reasoned, she'd known Ben was in good hands at a ranch, likely under a real doctor's care.

"I better get back to the store," Laura told her. "If you need help, Lucille, Dora and Mabel can help Dad and I'll come over."

Lucille nodded. She returned Martha's speculating look only a second before shading her eyes to watch the slow moving procession coming toward town. Reluctantly she returned to her kitchen. After putting laudanum and healing powders, rag strips and disinfectant into a small traveling case on the counter she did breakfast dishes. A huge kettle of water heated in readiness.

Lucille sighed. While Archie ruled the town it had been a strange combination of prisoners and guards with no real violence and a sort of waiting game of minds not quite knowing what to do about the double ownership situation they found themselves in. Now what would happen?

"Archie's father certainly threw everything into turmoil," Martha said as she reentered the restaurant.

Lucille put a stack of plates on the counter and added the box of eating utensils. "You'd think he'd feel some concern for his meal ticket. He may be sleeping off a drunk at the Elite with one of the girls."

Martha carried clean cups to the counter.

"Any word of your husband, Martha?" Lucille glanced out the big window. The procession of riders had covered half the distance. Her heart thudded dismally in her chest. What if Archie died?

"No word of Clem. He wasn't with Ben and Rob. One of Black's outlaws fired at a man in the hills last week but they couldn't find him."

Lucille immediately thought of Joe Texas and his need for clean rags, but cast it from her mind. Joe was an outlaw. He wouldn't help a Bascom man, would he?

"Black's outlaws and Archie's outlaws are two different kinds," Lucille said. "I think Archie's reputation kept Black from doing all he wanted. It looks like Black's men will really take over now that Archie is hurt."

"Heaven help us," Martha said. "For goodness sake, stop running back and forth to the windows. Just get your things to take to the palace. Clara and I will handle things here. Laura can help when she's needed."

Lucille picked up her medical equipment. "I'm sure what medical teachings they gave us for children in school won't help much if he's shot." Lucille felt the pucker in her chin and quickly bit her lower

lip. She drew in a shaky breath. *What is the matter with me? The man surely robs banks and steals cattle when his father's jewelry can't be sold to cover expenses.*

"Sir H lost over \$1,000 to Hank Doaks just a couple nights ago," Martha said. "Archie's expenses must be extremely high. Old Mr. H may have to earn his own living if anything happens to Archie."

"It already happened," Lucille said. "Black has never been sure what Archie is capable of. Stokes says that fact had a little control over what his gang does. With Archie helpless I really fear what will happen."

"If only he could prevent those wretched poker games," Martha said. "But you go now. Stokes and Tede will need your medical supplies."

Lucille hurried out the kitchen's back door with water, cloths and the medical bag. She prayed it wasn't already too late, for all of them.

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CHAPTER 5

In order to carry her medical supplies across the narrow alley to Archie's big house, Lucille had to slip out her back kitchen door, cross her yard, then go through the brush between restaurant property and palace property. Tede met her at the door of the big house. Corey Black pushed past Tede, looking a little too self-satisfied as he left the house and circled around to the main street. She looked at Tede.

Tede was so furious he trembled with rage. "Thet dad burned idjit! Thet sonofabitch! With Archie helpless there ain't no tellin' what thet black hearted b ... pardon me, ma'am." As he ranted on he pulled Lucille into the room at the same time. She had only seconds to worry about Black before concern for Archie took over. He was their only hope of controlling Black and his men.

Archie lay in the huge four poster bed like he was ready for the undertaker. Lucille clenched her jaws to keep from crying out. She set the medical supplies on a small table with a wing-backed chair

beside it. The sodden mess of Archie's gray suit jacket and green silk shirt lay in a pile on the floor. She met Stokes' worried look.

"We have to get these wounds washed good," Stokes said. "No telling how long he's been this way."

She asked no questions as she joined Stokes in washing away trail dirt, dried blood and the dirt in the scrapes on Archie's body, from being dragged. Lucille fastened her gaze on the sparse red bristle on the backs of his big hands. Archie never moved.

Stokes covered Archie modestly with a sheet which Tede held while the bald bartender gently tugged off the unconscious man's boots, socks, blood soaked Levis and under drawers.

"He been shot sure enough," Tede said. "He been bleedin' like a gut shot deer too long." The scrawny man's voice broke and Lucille cast a quick look his direction, surprised at the little man's emotion. The wounded man had shot at him, for heaven's sake. She spent scant seconds on the thought as she sponged clean the powerful muscles of Archie's left arm and shoulder.

Stokes stooped quickly, holding up a hand to quiet them so he could hear Archie breathing. Lucille snatched an ornate silver backed mirror from a big dresser and held it to Archie's lips and nose. She held her breath.

"It clouded!" Stokes grinned across at her, then proceeded with his persistent probing for cloth and the bullet in the wound.

"Bullet's under his shoulder blade. Tede, help Lucy hold him on his side. If I get it out ... before he comes to..." Stokes worked while he talked. The knife turned the boiled water in the pan red and slick.

Lucille held Archie's head and shoulders against her as she knelt at the side of the bed. His beard tickled her chin. She thought her heart beat threatened to bob his head; it pounded so hard in her ears. Her mouth dried like an old paper bag and her throat squeaked when she swallowed. A tickle on her nose came at the wrong time.

"You all right, Miss Lucy?" Stokes asked without a pause in his probing.

"I'm fine." She would feel much finer when Archie showed signs of life.

"Got it!" Lucille heard the clink in the enamelware pan.

Tede sighed aloud in relief. Stokes let fresh blood flow to cleanse the hole, poured on whiskey, slapped a thick square pad coated with salve on it and nodded to Lucille.

She slowly released Archie's shoulders. Her fingers slid across his white cheek above his beard as she moved toward the pile of cotton pads beyond his head. She added another pad carefully over the cleaned entrance wound. A long pad went over a bullet-scraped rib under his arm. Together she and Tede bound his big chest and shoulder tightly. He still didn't move.

"Is he...?" Lucille gave a worried look across at Stokes.

Stokes tried the mirror again." He's breathin'." He said with relief as he arched his tired back. Tede flung aside the soiled and water

soaked sheet from Archie's lower body. Stokes frowned at him but said nothing, just flipped a clean sheet over him.

Lucille gasped and closed her eyes. When she opened them a second later only Archie's long, red-furred bloody leg and foot showed. She quickly washed his foot, ankle and calf while Stokes worked in a bloody groove across his thigh.

"This shot came from behind," Stokes told them.

Lucille's thoughts galloped as quickly as her hands moved as she sponged the dried blood. The remembered sight of his furred lower body made her hands tremble. In bed Archie's long leg would fit beside her own long legs very comfortably. She could easily run her toes over and under his. His manhood lay large even in limp condition. Aroused, it would be awesome. She hastily glanced at Stokes and Tede to see if her errant thoughts showed. Thankfully they had other things on their minds. She moistened dry lips and hurried with the washing.

"Anybody look after his horse and saddlebags?" Stokes asked. He rinsed out the rag he used on the injured thigh.

"Butch got his horse. Petters brought in his saddlebags. There's letters in his saddlebags."

Healed scars on Archie's body could only mean they'd been through this before. No wonder the two men could work so calmly. Her own breathing would not return to normal. One moment fear paralyzed her mind, the next minute her mind jumped to erotic thoughts like crickets into forbidden places. Mentally chastising herself she slid the sheet back from Archie's other foot and lower leg. Bruises had formed around the knee but there were no more bloody bullet tracks in the strong muscled, hairy leg. Her Wisconsin farm life had not prepared her for tending shot up men in a harsh, dismal countryside like Wyoming. Only the beauty of the mountains or the green of spring could bring her to tolerate such harsh lands and possibly admire the scenery.

"My good lord, what is this? Why is Archibald in my bed?" The three could not mistake the stilted accent of the fake lordship, Sir Humphrey, as he entered the room.

"Yer son done got hisself shot, Humph, and besides thet, this be his own bed." Tede made no bones about his dislike for the foppish man. He faced the taller man without fear, his sinewy arms akimbo.

"I'm sure Mr. Stokes will make you another comfortable place to sleep, Mr. Humphrey," Lucille told him. She dried her hands on her apron.

"Perhaps Sir Humphrey would enjoy a hot cup of coffee in the restaurant, Miss Martin," Stokes suggested in his best butler voice. He did not stop in his careful binding of Archie's leg.

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"I go for an early walk and I come home to this," Humphrey complained. "It will not do. Why was he shot? Have we been followed?"

"We don't know." Lucille looked him evenly in the eyes, took the man's thin arm and urged him toward the door. He was insufferably self-centered. He had not even asked if his son would recover; he only worried about his own bed. His early walk must have been nearly noon. She'd finished breakfast dishes mid-morning when they had first sighted Archie's horse coming into the valley.

She led Humphrey out the door and through the opening in the bushes between house and restaurant. If going in the back door upset the wretched snob, so be it. She poured a cup of coffee, handed it to him and escorted him into the dining area to a table.

The thought of food set her stomach churning. Luckily, Martha, Clara and Laura were busily clearing noonday dishes from the counter. Martha came to Lucille wringing her hands in worry. "Black is going to start the gambling right after tonight's meal. What can we do?"

"Of course they shall gamble. One must have income," Sir Humphrey spoke up loftily. "Archibald would have it no other way.

Besides, I have a rather large wager that Mr. Doaks will be the winner. I shall retreat to the Elite Saloon immediately to collect entrance fees." He gulped the last of his coffee.

The four women gaped after the cadaverous, satin-clad man as he set down his coffee cup and left the building.

"Well, I never!" Martha glared at the batwings as they flipped back and forth at the doorway. "That man has no more feeling than a clay brick."

"It's all his greedy fault those killers came to the valley." Laura stomped across the kitchen. "Clara, what will we do if the winner picks one of us?"

"I'll run. My dad is out there someplace. Maybe I can find him and get help. If it's you, Laura, you do the same."

Lucille remained at the restaurant only long enough to set up a menu for the evening meal. Elk stew, again, with plenty of

vegetables, would have to do. There would be many extra men to feed because of the gambling.

"I'll take Tede the small pot of coffee and the left over potatoes and³³ ham. I see Stokes is at his bar again. I only wish he could keep Black in line. Can you manage for a while yet?"

"You go ahead. We'll keep things going." Laura began working immediately with a pile of vegetables.

* * * *

Even though she'd seen Archie made as comfortable as possible Lucille worried about infection and fever. Why did she worry over a captor who held them all prisoners in their own valley? It didn't make sense. Since Black's arrival with Dude Edwards, Hank Doaks and some of his other outlaws, she rationalized that Archie's outlaws were different from Black's outlaws, and maybe she shouldn't do that. Archie's saddle bags were proof of that. Who had he robbed, or maybe even killed, to get the loot lying in those bags? And what did the letters mean? Whose were they?

Tede agreed to stay with Archie. His cot was nearby, in the room with the bank safe. Ferdie poked his head around the corner of the bedroom as Lucille gathered up plates, empty kettle and coffee pot from their meal. She didn't hurry to leave the room.

"I say, old chap. Tede, is it?" Ferdie stepped inside the room. "Did Arch perhaps bring a supply of funds in those saddle bags?" He entered the room and reached for the leather bags. Lucille saw bank bags inside as he flipped one saddlebag open.

"Touch them an' you'll be short a dealin' hand," Tede said. His gun seemed too big for his thin arm but it never wavered in his hand.

"I say, really." Ferdie hastily stumbled backward. "No need for temper. I'm drastically short of funds, old chap. I'm sure Arch would have no objection to a small loan, just to tide me over, you know."

"Don't you old chap me, you bloodsuckin' varmint. What's in them bags is Arch's an' nobody else touches 'em. Got that?"

"If he's not long for this world, poor chap, surely an advance on inheritance would not be out of order."

BANG!

Lucille nearly popped out of her skin, padded corset and all. A small hole in the floor showed only inches from Ferdie's boot toe.

He fled!

Tede chuckled. The man on the bed groaned and both Lucille and Tede rushed to Archie's bedside.

Archie's eyes opened. Lucille saw their hazy green only a second as⁸⁴ he stared up at her and muttered, "I made it, Lucy." His eyes closed at once and he slept. Hot and cold played tag across her whole body. She clenched her jaws tight to control her ragged breathing. The outlaw's first thought was of her? He sounded like getting back to her had been his goal throughout the terrible ordeal of being shot, then dragged into his valley.

"Now thet's a damn big relief." Tede tucked a blanket around Archie's big shoulders. "I reckon you kin go now. I'll be watchin' him real keerful."

Lucille wondered if the little man was being considerate, or jealous.

* * * *

When Lucille reached the back door of the restaurant kitchen the only evidence of a meal was the small stack of dirty plates next to a dishpan of cold gray water. The women must have been interrupted in their chores and sent back to the warehouse upper floor. She cautiously moved toward the dividing counter and listened.

Stokes put Joe Texas to work as bartender, since he had already lost out in the game. Stokes came to where Lucille stood in the shadows.

"I didn't even get a chance to thank him for the slate board, Stokes. Do you think he will be all right?" Lucille said.

"Barring fever, he'll be right as rain in a drought." Stokes fumbled in his pocket. "This won't do you much good, Miss Lucy," Stokes said, "but it might give you a little running time." He handed her a narrow belt with a short leather scabbard holding a small knife.

"No one will choose me," Lucille said, "but thank you." The warm glow of his admiration lasted only a moment. She would remember it later and do something nice for him. And she'd do something special for Archie, because now she could teach the children using the marvelous big slate board.

"You may have need of it nonetheless," Stokes insisted.

"I thank you." Lucille put on the belt and tucked the little toad stabber under her apron band as the big bartender returned to his bar.

The winners of each poker game were into a final game, according to Stokes' report. The games moved very quickly tonight. The five players called for just the young single women to be brought from⁸⁵ the warehouse. Lucille gave a small sigh of relief; they would not

class her as young, even with Stokes' worry about her. She watched seventeen-year-old Clara Adams sit straight and still in one of the chairs, clutching her jacket around her. She and Bettina leaned close together for courage. The three Hack sisters sat white-faced and trembling, their own jackets ready in case they fled into the chill mountain air.

Lucille again left her outside door unlocked. The way the girls looked, Lucille knew Caroline's death occupied their thoughts. Perhaps they wondered, as she did, whether Caroline shot herself, or was murdered in a rage at her rejection of Corey Black's advances. Lucille wished mightily for a sheriff for the town, an honest one who would investigate unlawful happenings that were becoming more and more frequent.

Cautiously Lucille moved along the kitchen side of the long counter and across the dark end of the dining room, directly behind the young women.

"Don't turn around," she warned. She crouched in the shadows. The sweated padding in her corset felt dumpy and uncomfortable as she knelt back of their chairs. The men appeared too engrossed in the outcome of the game to look their direction.

"The kitchen door will be open." She could feel and almost see the stir of hope in the girls. Their heads lifted alertly. With audible indrawn breaths they turned a little sideways for better movement in the direction of the kitchen.

"The rest of us can trip them," whispered Mabel Hack.

A wild shouting went up. The game drew to a close and the girls tensed.

"Deal 'em out!"

Lucille reached her kitchen unnoticed. She ran a broom handle between the legs of an old, rickety chair. The handle touched the floor but the slant upward would trip anyone running through the kitchen. Carefully she left it where it could be pushed out in tripping

position quickly. Near the door she set a pail of water and a mop. Cautiously and quietly, she moved where she had a partial view of the gambling room.

A black haired giant of a man angrily threw down his cards and stomped from the saloon. A great cheer went up for a flashily⁸⁶ dressed gunman Lucille remembered as Hank Doaks. He swaggered toward the frightened women.

The women stood up, pushing their chairs in front of themselves. Clinging to each other, faces pale, they faced the crowd of waiting gamblers and curious onlookers.

"Only one chance, old chap, so don't pick until you're sure," warned Ferdie. He had evidently lost halfway through the evening.

"Thet one with light brown hair," said Hank. "The one on the end by Frenchy."

Clara Adams gasped, but didn't move. The gunman reached out a hand.

"Run!" screamed Bettina, giving Clara a push. "The kitchen! Run!"

Clara turned and fled.

In the kitchen Lucille heard the women's screaming and chairs being shoved around. She threw open the back door. As Clara sped out she pushed the water pail in front of it, and shoved the broom handle across the path, then stepped back into the shadows of the darkened kitchen.

Two men got past the battling women in the dining room, ran into the kitchen and tripped over the broom handle. They, in turn, tripped a third and all three upset the pail of water. Stumbling to their feet, cursing and shouting drunkenly, they ran on out, while a fourth and fifth man missed the broken broom. They slid on the slippery wet floor and landed on bony butts.

Lucille covered her mouth to keep her laughter silent. The cot squeaked and creaked as she shook with mirth, while she peeked out from behind the sack curtain.

"Grab them others!" yelled a voice. Women screamed and Lucille grew still with worry. Silently she reached for the meat cleaver.

Stokes' roar filled the room. "One chance! He got it! That's all!"

Sounds of footsteps came from all directions. Giving the girl a chance and extra minutes helped, but Lucille wondered where anyone could hide in a town of only a dozen or so buildings. Clara was on her own now. Lucille resignedly mopped up the water mess and put the pail away. She shut and barred the back door and fully clothed, lay down on her lumpy cot. Would Clara reach a place of safety? Or even find where her father might be? Exhaustion battled tooth and nail with keyed up apprehension. Exhaustion finally won.⁸⁷

* * * *

Clara ran blindly and without plan, other than to get away. She heard the crash of the water bucket and men, the splintering of wood. Then all she heard was the thud of her own footsteps and the wild pounding of her heart. A tin can rattled away from her foot. She stumbled and fell to her knees. Cloth ripped as she stepped on

her riding skirt hem. She struggled up and ran again, staggering to catch her balance.

Dimly she saw a shack a few feet to her right and sagged against its dark outside wall. Her breathing came ragged with sobs. Terror took her strength and breath away. A noise inside the cabin brought her erect. She moved fearfully away, edging along the cabin wall, breathing deeply and slowly, in an effort to calm herself.

The sound of galloping horses came nearer and she ran again, toward the darker shadows of buck brush along the river marshland. Rough branches caught her clothing and tore at her hair. Hitting a low tree limb at a run knocked her backwards, quickly making a sore spot on her forehead. She struggled onward. Her boots squished in watery mud of the swampy land.

As two men rode by, one swinging a lantern, she crouched close to a bush and tried to think. She remembered the row of shacks east of town where the river ran from north to southwest. She would need water soon. Her throat was already dry. With the shacks behind her,

she could either head northwest to get to the main river, or continue east and reach a stream that fed into the upper river. Since east led away from the outlaws she decided on that route. Remembering her father's map of the valley, she estimated being about six miles from the stream that crossed what should be their own rangeland. It fed into the river after it entered the valley from the northeast.

The half moon hung low in the sky. It would soon be very dark. Dawn would follow too quickly. Clara thankfully appreciated the serviceable boots and split riding skirt she wore. Frightened, but determined, she trudged along in the half dark. Noises of the rolling prairie were familiar from the safety of a wagon box or the back of⁸⁸ a horse, but not when strange creatures darted from under her feet. She listened intently to the far off sound of riders. Closer to town firefly lights of lanterns appeared and disappeared among the buildings, especially near the stables. She spat an unlady-like oath for not thinking of the horses there.

She kept the Big Dipper that shone in the night sky, on her left. She lay flat in a little gully when men on horses went by, their voices growling drunkenly. She trembled with weariness but trudged on.

Dawn paled the sky with mauve and rose in the quietness as it crept up the far side of the mountains. From down among the brush and trees she only caught a glimpse of the landmarks Tom Shafer had told Clovine to watch for. Clovine, in turn, had given them all directions to the cave that led out of the valley to the other side of the mountain, and the safety of Jace Brown's ranch.

The odor of wet green plants told her of water nearby. A long row of willows stretched in silhouette. The searchers must have returned to town, for she heard no more riders. She pushed aside the draping branches and kept going. Clara reached the edge of the rustling water and dropped to the ground to drink greedily where the spring bubbled from among the rocks. After quenching her thirst, she sat on a log among trailing willow branches near the water's edge to remove her boots and stockings. The shocking cold made her shudder as she gradually eased her feet into the water. With boots in

one hand and upheld riding skirt in the other she inched along in the stream, being extra careful in the dimness below overhanging willows.

Upstream Clara left the water and obliterated any tracks carefully as far as the pines. Trees were sparse here and old and new grass mingled soft and deep. Clara lay down where brush concealed her. If riders entered the brush grown area she would hear them. Over-tired and filled with anxiety she finally slept from exhaustion.

Unpleasant voices aroused Clara. Her muscles jumped awake. The sun shone halfway up a cloudless blue sky. She moved from the grass to slide under pine branches that scraped the ground. She⁸⁹ pulled her torn brown skirt close about her and prayed. Scarcely breathing she watched as a horse and rider passed less than ten feet away, then disappeared from sight.

Clara waited several tense moments before daring to move. As sounds of the rider finally faded she slipped cautiously from her hiding place. She listened intently for any other rider, then moved

carefully over thick beds of pine needles. She headed in the opposite direction, going higher on the mountain before she stopped to rest.

She waited a long time before daring to move again. Her stomach growled. She would give much for one of Lucille's big breakfasts. Finally she moved from tree to tree. Further along she came upon a tumbledown shack that stored only broken trapping equipment. There remained nothing else, not even wood for a fire.

In utter dejection she turned away in defeat. How could she possibly survive? No berries were ripe this early in the year. As the sun started down the western sky Clara headed back downstream, listening intently for searchers. Even from the numerous hillocks she saw no sign of a place her father could be hidden. How could he be surviving out here? Only horse, cow and deer tracks showed in the gritty soil. Antelope bounded away and an occasional big eared deer stared at her from the sagebrush.

She would have to turn back. Her only chance meant a return to town to appeal to Lucille for food. No one else could help her. Hopefully, if she reached Lucille while the gunmen and other outlaws were drinking and playing cards she might get in, and out again, safely.

Sick with dread and fear she trudged downstream along the rushing river. Just thinking of the leering face of Hank Doaks made her tremble anew. It seemed to take forever to get anywhere near the town. She felt sure there would be guards out. Beyond the trees, east of the shacks, Clara knew there were areas requiring strong running. And this time she would certainly grab a horse on her way back out, if at all possible.

Twice, riders by-passed her. A pair of them stopped to rest their horses beside where she crouched in a thicket. Clara thanked the Lord their horses did not nicker and give away her presence. She^{ed} hardly dared breathe and prayed the brown of her clothing blended in with the thicket.

"Hell, I'm done lookin'," muttered one rider to the other. "Let Doaks hunt for his own woman. If'n they're so scared she'll bring in the law, let them find her. Ain't no law after me. Let's go feed our faces."

Clara sighed in relief, then cautiously moved from hiding. The sun still lit the western sky when she reached the buck brush at the edge of town. Carefully she peered out, keeping her eyes focused on the moving, dot-sized figures as they moved between the buildings on the boardwalks of the town.

She waited tensely as three riders loped up the road from the south, raising the dust. They circled the town, came in at the livery stable, then headed toward the Elite Saloon.

To her right scrub trees jutted closer to the town. There, too, sat the shack where Caroline had died. Clara shuddered. Carefully she moved forward. Small branches snapped. Some scraped her arms and face. As the air grew chill she donned the jacket she'd tied around her waist, and tied her neckerchief on her head.

Once she thought the brush rustled behind her. She waited, holding very still. Hunger constantly gnawed and her dry throat ached. Hunched down out of sight, she waited again. Guiltily she wondered what might happen to Lucille for helping her, if they guessed. Black had cruel men in his gang who presented more danger than Red Gorman's townsfolk. Hopefully the outlaws would appreciate Lucille's good cooking more than having her punished.

Clara crept closer to town. The shacks of the two prostitutes and the outlaw crew's bunkhouse could be dimly seen on her left. Further south she knew were two more shacks. Reluctantly she started to leave the protective cover of the scrubby brush.

She was grabbed from behind! A big callused hand stifled the scream rising in her throat. Her arms were pinned to her sides. She kicked wildly, hitting a shin and hearing her captor grunt. Her heart pounded in her ears. She was doomed to a fate worse than hunger, worse than death .

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CHAPTER 6

The days got warmer and Lucille became more uncomfortable in her thick disguise. She debated whether or not Bettina should add an inch of thickness in one of the new corsets from her large traveling trunk. Stokes had brought it in from her wagon for her. Should she forget gaining weight? With the days getting so warm she would certainly consider it.

She wore a new blue gingham dress and tied her braid with a blue ribbon. It pleased her very much that Martha's sons, Kenny and Michael Adams, spent an hour at her new slate board doing addition of the figures she put there. Bright-eyed Becky Harolds, age seven, had done hers earlier. Maybe there was hope for this town after all.

Lucille pushed back tendrils of hair sticking about her face and neck. The heat of the kitchen, plus running back and forth to check on Archie, the patient, told on her red face. Her forehead and cheeks glistened with dampness. Perspiration dotted her upper lip and drizzled down her neck clear to the crease between her breasts.

"Archie, you are not a good patient, in spite of the chocolate cake I made you. I hoped it would temporarily resign you to being confined to your bed," Lucille told him. "If Tede and I hadn't caught you after your tumble from the bed, you'd be in worse shape than ever."

Archie had cursed a blue streak and started bleeding again. His left shoulder and right thigh gave him little choice in mobility, when both sides hurt at the same time. Lucille just shook her head.

"You must have everything imaginable in those upper rooms," Lucille said one day, to get his mind off being incapacitated.

Tede gave her a hostile look, then suddenly grinned a gap-toothed smile. "I don't reckon you'll see any lawdogs to tell them old Stokes brought everything from England for Humph. Got hisself in a peck of trouble he did. Old billy goat ain't worth it."

Lucille said nothing. Her nosey-bone worked overtime. Where did all this English wealth of furnishings and jewelry come from? She

knew Archie had been born in this country twenty-eight years ago. Who was in trouble, Stokes or Humphrey? Or both?

"I'm getting up today," Archie announced. "Pa's gout crutches will work fine."

"You'd be wiser to wait a day," Lucille told him. "I wish there was a real doctor here to keep you in line." Tede nodded in agreement. 92

"With all this good food you bring me," Archie replied as he winked one green eye, "I'll be shipshape in no time, or else I'll be too larded up to move. Getting up makes more sense."

Lucille ignored his statement of getting up, hoping he'd change his mind.

"I thank you very much for the beautiful slate for the schoolroom," Lucille told him. "The children are using it already. If you feel you absolutely must walk, come see them at work in the morning."

Archie laughed. "Trying to put me off until morning, are you?"

Lucille shrugged her shoulders. "It was a try." She caught a quick little breath as a corset stay stabbed, then she smiled. "You'll be fat as a toad if you keep insisting on four eggs and all those muffins with honey. I suppose a very short walk might be a start." She wondered if Archie considered that she was fat ... as a toad. She'd dug herself into a hole on that and the dirt was falling in. How could she appear slim to one man and not to all those outlaws crowding the town? Unobtrusively she nudged the corset stay to a more comfortable position as Archie swished his light blanket to cool his heated body.

With the weather warming up so much and most people not even noticing her, the thought again crossed Lucille's mind that she could begin showing a loss of weight. Unobtrusively, of course. It would certainly help her mobility, especially getting through doorways.

"Not if I get out and about," Archie was saying. "I may venture over to the restaurant come noon today. Stokes says you're doing real well with the meals."

"Come ahead then." Lucille took the serving tray and extra utensils, then moved toward the door. "I have half of the money from the restaurant income set aside in a box for you. I'd feel better if you took it out of there. I don't plan to put up with your father's grumbling about that money he thinks he has a right to. I'm sure either he or Ferdie squawked to you about it."

Archie grinned at her. "Stokes tells me you are very careful about dividing it. I wondered when you'd get around to telling me."

"Things have been more hectic than usual, you know that," Lucille said. "I didn't plan to deceive you."

"Never a doubt in my mind," Archie said. "Tede can bring the rest⁹³ of the dishes across," Archie told her. "I'll get the money sometime. Virgil needs to be paid for his carpenter work."

Lucille paused by the bedroom door. In the far corner sat Archie's saddle bags, full of bank money. She pulled in her lips and frowned. Who ever heard of a charming bank robber? She nipped worriedly at a lip corner. A deep sigh escaped as she left the house and entered

the restaurant's back door. Letting herself be attracted to this man would only lead to heartache. She didn't much like the thought of visiting a man in prison.

As Lucille entered the restaurant, Black and one of his men escorted Martha and Laura out the front door. They and all the rest of the women would go crazy stuck back in the living quarters in the upper floor of Hack's General Store, she thought, but there was nothing she could do about it. Lucille frowned anew but still hoped that no one would find Clara. According to what Martha overheard, Hank Doaks and the big outlaw called Blondie had gone searching again.

Lucille knew of no place Clara could find for food, unless her father hid out there with a means of killing game. Any shot fired would draw unwanted attention. She considered asking Stokes, or Archie, about the use of a buggy and horse to give her a change of scenery in an outing away from the town. That would give her a chance to smuggle the girl some food. Such a move would be immediately suspected as going to the aid of the runaway. No doubt they'd either

follow her or search the buggy, or both. She'd even be thankful for a team and wagon to remove the noisy, rat-infested pile of tin cans and meat bones. With guards on all sides of town where did they figure she could get away? She would have to be smarter than the outlaws.

Lucille readied the noon meal on her own. Though the wind blew constantly in Wyoming Territory, the hot stove took away any advantage of the breeze coming through the restaurant's front door.

Several of Black's outlaws lined up at the counter. Two more brought the women from Hack's so they could eat. Lucille watched carefully. Black's men paid into the cash bucket. The women could not. The male prisoners left in town were brought in. Their guards paid but the prisoners could not. Someone lost money on that.⁹⁴ Archie? Or did he consider their labors well worth any meals he provided them?

Archie's father came next in line. He edged past the money bucket. He'd tried that before. Lucille prepared herself. It would not happen again.

"Mr. Humphrey, you did not pay." Lucille stared into his black eyes.

"As sovereign king of this valley I cannot be expected to pay like a commoner. Put it on my tab."

Lucille slammed down her little dagger point onto Humphrey's coat sleeve and pinned it to the counter so fast the man could not move. "You have no tab. You are a royal nincompoop, not a sovereign king. You will pay. Now." Lucille looked up with apprehension as Archie clumsily came across the big dining room on his newly acquired crutches.

"Pa, you aren't royalty and we aren't commoners. Pay up. Furthermore, this is the United States of America, Territory of Wyoming, not England. You will treat Miss Martin with the respect

she deserves as part owner of this establishment." Archie's gaze did not waver from his father's furious look.

Lucille gaped, then snapped shut her fallen jaw and withdrew her knife from the counter top.

Humphrey jerked his sleeve free of the small blade, fumbled in his pocket and threw a coin in the bowl. He looked neither right nor left, and proceeded to a long table where Black made room for him on the bench.

Lucille saw Black lean to speak to Humphrey. For a second she felt suspicion mount but then Archie was grinning and quirking an eyebrow at her and the suspicion fled. He had a 'see, I can do it' look on his face.

"How's my favorite cook?" he asked.

"Your only cook, and your waitress and one of your nurses," Lucille said. "Women's rights of equality flew out the window. Only temporarily, Mr. Gorman, only temporarily."

He leaned closer across the counter. "I can't be waitress or cook, but I'll be glad to tuck you into bed and rub your back or massage your poor tired feet."

"Archibald Gorman!" Lucille's pulse rate jumped precariously. When he tossed a coin in the pot she took a full plate to his table as soon as he dropped into a chair, but kept a good distance between them, not trusting his long reach.

"If your tongue can run that loose, Mr. Gorman, perhaps your feet will soon manage on their own," she said quietly then, from the safety of distance. She gave him a saucy look over her shoulder as she hurried to the kitchen.

Her work piled up. Archie left by the street side door and disappeared from her range of vision. Her mind trotted around Archie's actions like a young filly in a new pen.

Mid-afternoon Tede came for his belated meal. "Arch done hisself in, comin' over at noon," Tede said. He frowned like it was her fault. "He be asleep after practicin' with his gun a bit."

"He doesn't trust Black and his crowd, does he?"

"Nope. Ole Humph ain't got his other ten thousand dollars outta Black neither. Ferdie's frettin' over the money bags Arch brung in, an' him and Humph both want thet bank safe opened. Don't look good. Don't look good a-tall."

"Did anyone find out who shot Archie?" Lucille asked.

"We got our suspicions. Arch kinda suspicions Doaks or Dude Edwards. They was both comin' and goin' all the time. Bad thing is, Arch figgered he hed a doctor all lined up to come here. He ain't never showed up. Arch worries he got himself kilt tryin' to get here."

As the little man walked away Lucille wondered what secret crime Tede had committed. The fact that he'd never liked her and gabbed on that way to her, of all people, measured the depth of the little gunman's worry. Her own worry increased when Doaks, Blondie and Ford rode in, alone. The black moods they were in meant trouble. Ford separated from the other two and joined Tede.

"Didn't find her again, damn it all!" Doaks threw his riding gloves on the bar by Stokes.

"Hell, Doaks, you might as well give up. There be other fillies in the pasture. Why worry about her?" Ebbit Ford said as he accepted a shot of whiskey from Stokes. He signaled for another and laid a coin on the bar.

"Ford, you couldn't win a damn card game if you tried," Doaks ground out between set teeth. "Don't be tellin' me what to do."

"Well, whatever you're doin' ain't right, more ways than one," Ford snapped out his words. He talked lower and Lucille could not hear him.

Stokes' voice carried over the rest. "I think postponing any more card contest would be very appropriate, considering how the first two turned out."

"You mind your own blasted bar business, old man," Black roared. ⁹⁶

Another lower voice chimed in and Lucille couldn't hear what was said, again.

The tension and unusual spring heat got to them all. Loud voices were raised several times by Stokes' bar. Lucille found no respite from potato peeling, dirty dishes and biscuit making to take time to talk with Stokes until after the evening meal. It stayed hot in the cubby room behind the kitchen. Her cot offered no cool comfort even out of the heavily padded corset. The noise from the small bar disturbed her rest. When Black and two of his men gave up arguing with Stokes and stormed out of the building she sat up in frustration, pushed her hair from around her face and retied the band holding her braided hair.

Lucille wiped dampness from her face. She gave in to the temptation to question the brooding Stokes about the argument between him and the outlaws. Black and his key men disagreed on how to run their operation almost continually of late. Their quarrel tonight had come close to violence. The hulking bartender would

probably not give her an answer, but figuring she could not immediately get back to sleep she resolved to try.

She threw on her light cotton robe and hoped Stokes would not have left before she got there. She slid into sloppy, quilted slippers and sluff-sluffed around the dividing counter and into the dining room. She was still tying the robe's narrow belt when she asked, "Stokes, what on earth is going on? All that noise woke me up."

Stokes' obsidian eyes stared back at her so long she thought he didn't plan to answer. He sighed deeply and said, "I'm that worried, Miss Lucy. Archie is losing control of the town and he doesn't see it. If Black and his cronies would just leave I'd be thankful, but that won't happen."

"I noticed Black and Doaks hang together an awful lot."

"They want to leave here soon, divide what money they know is here, and move on. Archie's pa and Ferdie want their share of Shafer's bank money and any money Archie has. Archie wants to stay and complete the town like he started, then buy a ranch."

Bitterly Stokes added, "His lordship wants the money, not Archie, or even the Elite Saloon Archie had built for him so he'd have a living. It ain't good enough for him."

"His own father?"

"Yes, miss." Stokes polished the glass for the third time. "Red⁷ would rather be a happy-go-lucky feller with just a little place of his own, a drink now and then and quit playing cards. His lordship wants power, and he's greedy for money, so he and Ferdie can have all the best of everything. They've already run through a fortune. They'll break Archie's heart, I know they will, and leave him with nothing at all."

Stokes must really be upset, thought Lucille. He called his friend Red, then he called him Archie.

"But that's not fair!" Lucille said. She, too, was upset. "Why don't they work for their own goals, if they have any?"

"The gentry, back in England, don't soil their fingers with work, or trade, as they call it. Some I know are good, honest landowners who treat their tenants fair and they all gain by it. Then there are others, like Gorman-Jones, who bleed their tenants dry, punish unfairly, go wenching in the villages and gamble all their funds."

"Wenching?" Lucille saw red creep up Stokes' thick neck, and was sorry she asked. She guessed the answer before the big man spoke.

"Wenching is how Humphrey came to be. He's the son of a village girl and the old Lord Gorman-Jones. When the lordship wouldn't acknowledge Humphrey as his son, Humphrey made off with a lot of the family goods. The money lenders were about to take possession of them anyway. Now Humph figures Archie owes him all the grand living he feels entitled to, just because Archie's mum was a commoner in this country. He likes to forget his own mum was also a commoner back in England. Died of a broken heart, they say."

"But that is terrible! Can't Archie stand up to him?"

"He's beginning to. His lordship pounded it into him since he was a small boy, needling and cadging, and into his mum, too. Archie's getting over it since building this town." Stokes grinned a large toothed smile. "I was proud he made Humphrey pay for his meal. Now, miss, that's all I'll say on the subject, and I've said too much as it is. I trust you'll keep the confidence."

"Of course, Stokes," Lucille agreed readily. She realized Stokes had had to talk to someone and unburden his soul. "It certainly raises a lot more questions though."

Stokes shrugged his heavy shoulders, shook his bald head, clapped⁹⁸ on his heavy derby hat and put on his coat to leave for the night.

Knowing she would learn nothing more, Lucille slowly sluff-sluffed her loose slippers back to her own quarters.

Whiskey smell assailed her even before she rounded the counter. Hank Doaks and the outlaw named Blondie had entered by the back door of her kitchen.

"The kitchen is closed, Mr. Doaks."

Without a word Doaks swung his left fist right in her face, then slapped her hard with his right hand.

Lucille fell heavily backward onto the floor, one hand to her battered face. Blood oozed from a cut lip and one eye stung. She couldn't even scream.

"Damn bitch!" Blondie yelled again and again as he kicked at her flailing legs and slammed pots and pans around the kitchen like a wild man.

Through watery eyes she saw Doaks looking on; probably being smarter than Blondie, already guessing there would be trouble with Archie over the abuse of his cook. The big blond outlaw dragged her upright again. She'd seen his cruel face as he led the outlaws in their first ride into town behind Sir Humphrey's fancy coach. He would show her no mercy.

"Where'd she go, you fat hunk of slob?" Doaks asked in a low voiced monotone as Blondie shook her.

"I don't know," whimpered Lucille. "I don't know."

"You set them pails in the way!" Blondie yelled. "We trailed an' searched all day, damn you, and she escaped."

Lucille jerked away and got beyond one corner of the heavy square table. Still trembling, she gathered her anger, fiercely ashamed they had made her whimper in fright. "That was mop water! You have no right to come in my kitchen!" She grabbed a rolling pin. "You get out! You get out right now!"

"C'mon, fatty, make us." Down went another stack of pie tins and two dishpans. Blondie twisted the rolling pin from her hand as she brought it down at him. He jerked her forward and shook her again. Her heavy braid flopped wildly against her back.

"Blondie, let's git outta here," Doaks said. "We ain't gittin' nuthin' found out here."

Blondie shook a heavy fist in her face. "You pull that crap again and I'll cut..."

Through humming ears Lucille heard thudding footsteps and Stokes' yell "Blondie!" from the dining area. Where had Stokes been when she needed him, she wondered hazily as he shouted, "Stop that! Get out!"

"C'mon, Blondie," urged Doaks again. "Better not git too rough with fatty. Red might have somethin' to say."

"You're damn right he'll have something to say!" Stokes stood with a short club in his big right hand. "And so do I!"

"Fat slob!" Blondie yelled as he went out behind Doaks.

As Lucille sagged heavily across the counter, Doaks turned back into the room and said to Stokes, "I'd be careful what I told Red. That's a warning. Blondie got a little carried away, but he'd as soon run a knife in your back as look at you. He don't like you no way, no how."

"You're coverin' your butt, Doaks, like always. And that goes both ways with Blondie. I don't like him either."

Stokes turned to Lucille. "You all right, Miss Lucy?" His tough, surly nature would not allow him more concern than that, Lucille realized. Typically, he didn't explain where he'd been or why he came back.

"I'll be all right." She patted a cold cloth where her teeth had cut her lip.

"Get a hunk of beef on that eye." He paused a moment. "I'd rather not upset Archie the shape he's in, Miss Lucy." He left through the kitchen door.

With difficulty, Lucille carved a slice off the chilled beef half in the storeroom, held it over one eye and dabbed at her bleeding lip. For half an hour she sat, deep in thought. They could not get away with treating her so. What should she do? If Stokes would not report this to Archie then it was up to her to make sure it didn't happen again. She thought and thought until an idea came. She trembled inwardly

at the gamble she planned, then told herself the old quote, "In for a penny, in for a pound" and went on with her plotting.

Exhausted now, but hurting, Lucille took some medicinal powders and a glass of water. She wished she'd kept her corset on when going to talk to Stokes. It might have saved her some injured ribs. It was no surprise that neither Doaks nor Blondie noticed her difference in size. They saw what they were accustomed to seeing. Toward dawn she got a little sleep.

Her first thought on awakening and slipping into her padded corset was to marvel that Blondie had still thought of her as fat even while he shook her. She hadn't been padded at the time. His slow, cruel mind had worked in her favor, she hoped. After the three awful years of being called "fat" by her petite stepsisters in Wisconsin it seemed insane to be relieved and happy that the outlaw thought of her as fat.

* * * *

In the afternoon, at five thirty, Lucille watched from the big window as Doaks, Black and Blondie again returned to town, then headed at once toward the Elite Saloon. She waited, knowing she'd recognize their walk if they came her way. Their footsteps finally pounded the boardwalk outside the restaurant. She found herself dry mouthed and with no more starch in her knees than soupy pudding. Too late, she worried that her revenge could be answered with retaliation against the prisoners.

The prisoners were brought in at six o'clock. They sat, waiting, dread on some faces, anger and grim defiance on others. The men were alert for action. Clovine had a ready hand on the chair beside him. Rancher Ken Harold had sparkling, excited eyes. All waited to see the outcome of her gamble. Lucille surmised the news had spread fast by nose rather than by word of mouth.

Doaks wasn't about to wait for anyone at the food counter. He grabbed a plate and looked first at the food and then at Lucille. "What the hell you think yer pullin', woman?" his voice hissed

across at her. He raised his hand in anger, but turned suddenly and let his arm fall at his side as he moved away from the counter.

Archie appeared much stronger as he clomped into view on the boardwalk, using only one crutch. Upon entering the restaurant he strode as far as Stokes' bar before he noticed the strained tenseness. He looked around at the waiting people. His gaze turned to the wordless Stokes, who shrugged big shoulders but said nothing. Lucille stared directly toward him from her shadowed kitchen.

"Well, Stokes?" Archie said.

"Little ruckus last night."

"The kitchen on fire?"

"You might say that. Ask Miss Lucy."

"Miss Lucy, is it now, Stokes?" Archie hobbled over to the food counter as Lucille stared at him with all the defiance she could muster. On the counter between them sat large bowls heaped with

burned fried potatoes. A huge skillet sat with scorched fried ham slices and the bread crusts were shades of brown to black.

Lucille stepped forward into a better light, closer to the counter, glaring straight into his green eyes from her one open blue eye.

Archie's mouth dropped open. "Gawddam it to hell! What happened to you?"

"Mr. Gorman, if ever one of your goons does this to me again, your meals will get even worse. I will not cook when my life is in danger, or I am abused and misused," Lucille stated. Her heart beat like the frantic dartings of an imprisoned animal. Her mouth dried to cotton and her knees plopped together under her voluminous skirt. She struggled to keep her anger over her fear. He had shot at the last cook.

Stokes came up beside Archie. "Blondie worked her over. Him and Doaks came, mad because that girl Doaks won in the card game got away through Lucy's kitchen."

Archie stared at Lucille. "So I eat burnt spuds? Blondie isn't my man. Neither is Doaks." He stabbed the big spoon into the pile of potatoes, and slapped the same spoon down on the hard, blackened slices of ham. Lucille held up the swollen hand Blondie had twisted. She knew other bruises were purpling her battered face. She stared from her one good eye, right into the strange, greenish eyes. They were darkened to deep brown.

"Where's Blondie? Where's Doaks?" Gorman strode from the room, hitching his gun into place as he went, hardly using the one crutch now. Black followed and Ebbit Ford trailed behind.

Lucille motioned the rest of the people to come eat. She scraped back the top, burned layer of offerings, down to nicely cooked food. They fell to with a will, their relief almost tangible in the air. Stokes roared at them if they talked too much and he kept a strict eye on them all. The three remaining guards, who were Gorman town businessmen, minded their own business and ate with grinning relish.

Fifteen minutes later the sound of a flurry of shots halted all movement for several seconds, like a hard freeze clapped in from nowhere. Filled forks were halfway to several mouths and held there, motionless. They looked from one to the other a long moment before continuing their meal.

Archie did not return to the restaurant. Guards from both his men and Black's men moved the edgy prisoners across to the warehouse. Some guards came back to drink at Stokes' bar. Lucille could feel the curiosity eating at them as she peered out across the counter⁰² catching their terse conversation. What had she done? Was Archie all right? Dread raced cold fingers down her spine. She'd only meant to teach a lesson, not create a disaster.

"Damn woman. Who she think she is?" That was a pal of Doaks. Lucille didn't know his name.

"Best damn cook this side of St. Louie and she knows it." Ebbitt Ford put in his comment.

"Hell," said the other man.

They drank some more as Stokes silently set out bottles and glasses and took their coins, without saying a word.

"Hell," said one again. He chuckled. "Damn if she don't beat all. Got old Red right around her fat pinky." They chuckled some more.

"Ain't her pinky ... it's his belly. Can't be nuthin' below the belt, that's fer damn sure."

"You let Archie hear that talk and you'll end up like Blondie." Lucille heard Stokes warn them. "Dead. Tede just stuck his head in the back door and told me. Arch more than gave him his chance."

The chuckling stopped and they soon left.

Lucille crouched on her cot, full of misery. She should never have come to this strange and dangerous territory. No one behaved like they should. There wasn't an ounce of law and order about the place.

She glanced over toward the counter, anxious for something to do, anything to get this horror out of her mind. The swill pails under it were full of burned meat and potatoes. It took pain-filled scrubbing to clean the skillets and pans with her aching hand. Deep in regretful thought about the death of anyone, she held more cold meat to her eye. It was obvious one cheek stuck out further than the other.

As she limped haltingly across to Stokes she said, "Thank you, Stokes. I really appreciate your help. It could have been worse if you hadn't been here."

Stokes turned red. "Humph. Get sick of them birds playin' big shit all the time. You owe me." He turned his back on her and placed bottles carefully in line on the shelf.

Lucille tried an amused little smile at his surliness but it hurt too much and had to be quite lopsided anyway. Stokes just wasn't about to admit any human feelings. Since Stokes wouldn't talk, Lucille returned to her quarters.

Back in the kitchen she wondered just how bad she did look. It seemed months since she'd used a mirror. Brushing her hair straight¹⁰³ back every day from a middle part and into one braid required no mirror. She set the lamp on a small bracket next her trunk. Inside the trunk lid was a square mirror.

Holding the lamp close she peered at her reflection, turning her head from side to side. Her swallow squeaked. Her face shone a lopsided round, her right cheek and forehead had welts, and one eye squeezed almost shut.

Oh, my God! I have a neck! She could see her neck! It was there plain as day. She turned from side to side again. Tears slid from both eyes. The double chin was gone. Her heart sang in elation.

Then it sank to her heels. How could she disguise this additional weight loss? She would be conceited if she thought anyone would notice her. What did it matter? What should she do? She didn't have time to think further as heavy, limping footsteps crossed the dining area.

"Lucy! Where you at?"

"Coming. Coming." Lucille slammed the trunk lid down, carefully wiped her wet, sore cheeks and carried the lamp from behind the curtain. She clutched her blouse up close under her chin. Archie met her halfway across the kitchen.

He stared at her, not saying a word. Lucille tilted her head and stared back. She felt heat rise in the cool side of her face.

"You'll be all right?"

"Yes, Archie."

"Blondie didn't break any bones, did he? Cracked rib or anything?"

He stared a moment more while her pulse rate climbed and more heat pooled in her belly. She shook her head no. He suddenly scowled fiercely, turned his crutch and stomped from the kitchen, across the dining area and out the far door, without looking back.

Deflating like a spent hot air balloon, Lucille slumped onto a chair. Was all this pain and agony worth it? Would Clara really escape or would she be brought in by some of Black's outlaws?

* * * *

"Easy, Clara. Quit kicking. Ouch. Wait! It's Clyde," hissed the man's voice in her ear.

Finally it penetrated the girl's terror-stricken senses. She ceased fighting.

"How'd you get away?" He removed his callused hand from her mouth and slowly released her, being careful that she had her balance.

"I ran." Clara briefly told him about Black's outlaws taking over the town and setting up the poker games.

"Where you headed?" Clyde asked.

"To get food from Lucille Martin. They make her do the cooking in^{mp4} the restaurant. She's the only one who can get supplies."

"We'll need coffee, food supplies and bandages. Do you think you can get them if I take care of the guards?"

Clara nodded. "Who is 'we'? Is my father out there?"

"I haven't seen him. It's just us, you and me. Let's get this done while we can."

The lights went out in Lucille's kitchen at the same time they went out for one of the guards patrolling the area. Clara stumbled out in a half crouch and hurried to the back door of the restaurant. She tried the knob. Locked. She tapped lightly. Waited. Her frayed nerves made her knees weak. She tapped again, just a little louder. No answer. Frantic, she edged along the building and tapped lightly on the small window.

Thankfully she heard the creak of the cot inside. It took forever before the door opened just a crack.

"Who's there?"

"Lucille, it's Clara. Please, let me in." She slipped in through the narrow slot opened for her. The warm air felt good after the chill outside.

"Bless you, Lucille," Clara said. She was close to tears. "Could I get some food? Clyde Boros is with me. He needs clean bandages."

Lucille moved quietly, but haltingly. Clara watched as a loaf of bread was added to a bulging sugar sack. A couple spoons were dropped in.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you. Is everyone all right? My family?" Clara sipped at the cup of coffee offered her.

"Scared for you. Edgy, but they're all right."

Fifteen tortuous minutes dragged by. Clara became more frightened and knew Lucille was anxious for her to leave.

"Where is the guard?" Lucille asked. "You'll have to leave soon."

"To the north someplace. Clyde got rid of the other two."

"I'll take a coffee pot and cup to get the guard's attention. Then you run. Be ready." Lucille picked up a cup and the small granite coffee pot.

Clara watched as Lucille limped out the door, her slim form silhouetted against the moonlight. It didn't surprise Clara, she just hoped the guard didn't notice Lucille's change in size. Clara picked up the sack of food and grabbed two cups. Through the crack of the door she saw Lucille clearly as the guard moved out from the trees. Lucille changed course to meet him. In a minute she walked past him, forcing him to turn toward her as she poured coffee and¹⁵ handed him the cup.

Clara ran!

* * * *

Archie ran the Appaloosa stud horse over the hard packed wagon road. His damaged thigh muscles burned and quivered in weariness. His left shoulder ached. Neither compared to the bleak, despairing lump in his chest.

He'd killed a man! Again.

When his fury-filled voice had cussed out Doaks and Blondie for their treatment of a defenseless woman Blondie had triumphantly drawn a gun.

It wasn't his fault Blondie couldn't hit a barn wall from the inside. Now Stokes had the job of burying the man. It seemed the cemetery grew faster than the town.

At the sound of the App's labored breathing Archie slowed him down gradually, ending in walking the horse back toward town.

If he was going to react to Lucille and her safety in this manner he had better consider the fact he could hurt her far more than Blondie

and Doaks had. If she cared. If she didn't care anything about him, then it didn't matter.

Archie halted next to a scrub cedar, facing downhill toward the town. The Appaloosa chomped at a bit of new grass struggling among the dry grasses of winter.

Maybe he'd do something nice for Lucille. To take her mind off the beating, of course. Maybe a lower table and bench for her younger, smaller pupils to study at. Maybe that would make her happy.

She'd be happier of course if he had never entered her life. This was not her neat little village with neat families, neat children in her school and law and order keeping everyone safe.

Lucille would know he'd shot Blondie. She may have even seen the Wanted poster out on him in Cheyenne, for shooting Sheriff Harry Danforth's no good, glory-seeking son, Jimmy. Or the old posters on Hutchins and Tede, Stokes, Ebbit Ford and the blacksmith.

This far from town the buildings were small squares and the horses and people mere dots. As he watched another small dot moved far out on the flat, down from the high and rocky entrance to the valley. Night fell quickly and obscured most movement. He did catch a shadow at the side of the restaurant. Could that be one of the guards by the restaurant, sneaking in to see Lucille, or could it be someone else? Jealousy streaked through him like a tornado on the plains.

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CHAPTER 7

Beyond the bulk of the large guard Lucille saw the Adams girl leave the shadow of the restaurant and run into the moonlight. She crossed the open space just at the end of the long building Lucille had learned was the bunkhouse. From there she no longer caught sight of any movement. She took the emptied cup from the guard, who happened to be the giant Scandinavian called Swede. She didn't really want him to get in trouble.

"You get better lookin' every day, Lucy, yah. You stay?"

"I can't. I need rest. I hurt all over." She nodded to him and took her time getting back to the kitchen. She favored one leg very much by the time she reached the door. Once inside she sank gratefully onto the solid, straight-backed kitchen chair.

Only three men remained at the bar by Stokes. Lucille tiredly arose from the chair and peered around the corner at them as she sipped cooled tea. Her exhausted early sleep had been interrupted and now

she'd have trouble getting any rest from the pain. She thought about Archie and his wild ride on the big Appaloosa. She and Stokes had stood together on the boardwalk watching the flying figure out on the flat north of town.

Stokes' grim face had turned gray below his deeply furrowed high forehead when Archie disappeared in the livery stable, then came out favoring his injured thigh. If Archie had explained to Stokes how and where he'd gotten shot Lucille had never heard. Robbing a bank could be very dangerous. Her courage did not quite extend to confronting Archie with her suspicions of his dishonesty. Not yet, but soon. Her immediate problem with Archie Gorman returned to mind as she shoved the bank robbery theory away.

Archie couldn't be attracted to her! Still, being a big man himself, maybe he would be attracted to a taller, larger woman. Maybe losing weight showed too much in her face and made her look different to him. And Swede? Would he put some meaning into her trip with the coffee for him? She hoped not. She had enough problems without that.

She wondered if Ben would be as much concerned as Archie if he saw her injured. Did it matter to her? Her brief conversation with Dora Hack just the other day put a new light on her own relationship with Ben.

Lucille admitted she liked to argue with him. Simple as that. He was so straitlaced she liked to ruffle his feathers. She hadn't realized that before. It had nothing to do with romantic feelings at all. She sighed in relief. It had been obvious that the younger woman showed jealousy of her supposed relationship with Ben when she said spitefully, "I don't see how someone your size can ride a horse out of here. I know Ben will rescue me. Ben can do anything he sets his mind to."

"I don't think the Bascom people should leave at all. They need to make a stand and vote our own people into the offices running the town," Lucille argued.

"Vote! Vote! All you talk about is women voting." Del Hack joined in the conversation.

"It will take all the Bascom men and all the women to count up enough people to match the Gorman population. If Black's outlaws vote we may not stand a chance unless we get the Gorman shop keepers on our side. What kind of sheriff would one of Black's outlaws be?"

"Well," Dora said, "I do think Ben needs someone to make him happy, not argue with him. Someone to adore him and make him feel good about himself instead of perturbed all the time."

"I didn't perturb him," Lucille said, with a flip of her hand. "He's like a horse with blinders. He just can't see beyond his own viewpoint."

"I like his viewpoint," Dora stated stoutly, then she grinned, "Especially when he's viewing me."

"Miss Martin, we hired you to teach the children reading, writing and their numbers, not about voting rights for women," Mr. Hack said. "You should teach Dora about manners and ladylike

deportment, not all those rights you think she should have. Voting is not feminine."

"Pa," Laura said, "you're fifty years behind. Women are just as smart as men."

"Who does all your bookwork, Pa? Me, that's who," Mabel chimed in. "Do you think I can't work a budget, or make a profit, or vote as well as any man? Besides, Wyoming Territory voted to approve women's vote in sixty-nine. Why not here in Gorman? Dora doesn't have to vote if she doesn't want a say in anything."

"It will take all of us to vote or those outlaws will really control everything," Laura said. "Lucille says men ought to see getting the vote will bring more families to the territory and we'd get to be a state sooner. Just think, State of Wyoming."

"I give up. I give up." Hack threw up his hands in surrender. "You dang women been tellin' me what to do for twenty five years, starting with your dear departed mother. I reckon it would get my⁰⁸

vote or I'd never have no peace. If we ever get something to vote on."

The four Hack family members argued their way back to their store. Lucille simply smiled, watching them from her doorway before returning to the kitchen.

"Any coffee?" Stokes stood at the opening from the dining room, silhouetted against the light from the bar. Startled from her reverie Lucille stared at him. She couldn't see his features with the sunlight behind him. She poured the coffee.

Stokes cleared his throat. "What if ... what if I called in that favor you owe me?" he asked hesitantly, keeping his eyes on the poured coffee.

"That depends on whether it is something I can do."

At a call from the bar area, Lucille watched as the heavy set man shook his head and lumbered back to the men. Stokes must be in his fifties, she guessed, a taciturn man, a loner, mostly, grouchily

morose more often than not. What problems bothered him from the past? Were the Pinkerton detectives still looking for him? What favor could he possibly want?

People were strange. Stokes, Archie, Tede, most of them. They could be friendly one time and grouchy the next. Archie especially was a more complex man than she ever dreamed. He and Stokes seemed closer than any of the other outlaws. Yet they rarely spoke to one another, unless they made up for it in the big house at night. Archie had such a strange way of shifting personalities on her. One time he used proper English and another time he used the coarsest and crudest language she'd ever heard. He had bank bags in his house. Did he rob banks to buy lumber to put up his buildings? What was the man? Where had he come from?

Archie had defended her without question. She could not get the death of the blond outlaw from her mind easily, nor it seemed, could Archie. She had not anticipated a killing, nor, evidently, had Archie. He had been morose, and except for the concern for her

well-being, he had been moody and quiet since the gunfight. Until his wild ride.

Lucille was certain Hank Doaks passed all the blame onto Blondie. Stokes seemed content to leave it that way. Guarding their own backsides, she thought, but still Stokes, too, had been concerned for her. How puzzling. Why did Archie care if she was beaten? She could still cook. He surely didn't care what happened to her. Maybe her gamble with the burned food made him consider what it would be like without her good cooking. She grinned wryly. She wondered, too, as she went behind her curtain, whether Clara made it safely away. She'd heard no outcry, yet, but it may not have gotten back to her ears.

Some time ago, out of desperation for someone to talk to, she had started saying 'Good morning' to Stokes. Maybe that had paid off. Maybe he was as lonely as she. They had worked together bandaging Archie. Conversation between her and the prisoners drew sharp warnings from Black and Dude, not usually Stokes, especially of late. With Clara's escape the outlaws' watchfulness increased.

She could have gone with Clara if the night had been darker, but would she really want to? Who really controlled the town now, Black or Archie?

What was there outside of this restaurant for her? Here she had food, if she got time to eat. She now had plenty of clothes from her trunk and there was nothing more any place else. Restrictions were eased so Bettina could remodel any of her dresses, as well as sew for anyone else. Bettina also made a living here.

If she worked things right maybe there would eventually be a school for her to teach. Cooking did not satisfy her need for creativity, and to be an influence in the community for the good of everyone. She slipped out of her work shoes and unbuttoned her shirtwaist. Sliding her slim fingers close to her scalp loosened the hair from the heavy braid. What if Archie did that? She swung her loosened hair from side to side, feeling conceited as she admired its length and color. Back home her petite stepsisters had made her feel huge and very unfeminine, especially because she wanted to teach. Not here. Archie towered over even her height; it made her feel dainty and

womanly beside him. They used her height as an advantage in her teaching. Even Ben was taller than she, but not many others were.

Where was Ben tonight? Would he have defended her? Clovine said he would return to get them all out. Archie had given them the chance to turn back in the very beginning but none had been willing to give up their claim to lands in the valley. Those claims had cost them all a lot of money. Now what would they do? She sighed heavily.

Lucille laid her slim body back on the creaky cot with a sigh of relief. No hot corset. No hot padding. No steel or bone corset stays poking in the wrong places. Best of all it was cool, cool, cool. 110

What if Archie could see her now? She leaned forward and fluffed the pillow at her back. He'd likely just grin and wink one of those jade green eyes. Other than his raging, immediate defense of her in the gunfight with Blondie, Archie's quick temper never affected her or anything she did. He hadn't confronted her over the burned potatoes.

How much longer could she stand this awful padding during the day? How much longer would she have to? Ben and Clem Adams took too long to reclaim the town and the valley. Would Archie be able to do it when he got over his wounds? Could she talk him into a vote for a sheriff to obtain the law and order they so desperately needed?

She used to daydream about Ben. He was the only man near her age in the Bascom contingent. Would Ben bother to dream of her? Her own thoughts turned more to Archie. Archie, the outlaw. Archie, the bank robber. A magnified awareness of his big body close to hers as they talked in the kitchen made her grow hot and cold all over.

Fat Slob! That's what Blondie called her. At least her disguise had worked. She wiped a tear and moaned as she brushed her sore face. All the hard work chopping wood and not being able to eat properly certainly accomplished something. She knew her clothes hung on her thinner frame. She had re-hemmed skirts several times but did that make her beautiful? With another tired sigh Lucille pulled the blankets up around her. During spring's changing weather she

needed a sweater or cape when going outside, but a sweater was too warm in the kitchen. Her long cape kept the chill Wyoming winds off when she ventured down the street for a change from the four walls of the restaurant.

Moaning once or twice in a half turn Lucille finally slept. And she did dream of Archie, an Archie who came toward her but never quite reached her. Ben stood even hazier in the background.

* * * *

Ben peered carefully over a ridge. Something had happened down in the valley. Why else were so many outlaws out riding? Four of them rode past, below him. He turned and made his way backward, down from the high lookout post.

It was Saturday. Traditionally Big Red's gang should be coming in from the far ranges to celebrate. In some ways it would not be a very good night to raid the town and in another way a crowd of strangers could be good cover for their invasion. Likewise, the longer they waited, the worse things became for the prisoners. Just

before daybreak Sunday morning would be the best time. With the outlaws' senses dulled from heavy drinking Ben and his men could get in and out safely. Ben joined young Shafer among the hot, gray rocks.

"We may have to call off our raid if the prisoners aren't all in one place," he told Tom. "It might be a good idea to talk with Clovine and find out what's going on. There are more outlaws than ever down there. Where did they all come from? Do my people want to pick a site in the valley and fight for possession or do they just want to get out to safety?"

"Just a minute. I hear a horse moving real slow," said Tom, his young face serious, and his eyes worried. The May sun beat hot and dry on their backs as they crouched among the multi-colored rocks.

"That rider will see our horses in a minute," Ben warned. "I'll circle and jump him from behind. You stay here and come up in front of him."

Ben quietly rounded a huge boulder, and crept up a bank beyond, just in time to see the horse and rider pass and stop below him. The rider made no move, but sat hunched over, as though looking for trail sign. Then he ever so slowly tilted and slid down the side of the horse and hit the ground.

"It's Clem Adams!" Tom yelled from in front of the man.

Watchful for a trap, Ben ran out to join Tom by the unconscious man. Clem's blue shirt was clean but torn halfway down. His jacket was crusted and stiff with dried blood. A neatly fashioned bandage showed white from under it. Gaunt and feverish against Ben's arm, Clem struggled until the canteen of water touched his parched lips.

"No raid tonight," Ben muttered. His mind reluctantly refocused on this new problem. "It'll take both of us to get him to Brown's. He's in a bad way. Odd how clean his shirt and the bandages are, compared to his jacket."

"Can we move him so far?"

"Doubt he'd last," Ben replied. He made a wet pack from his neckerchief and laid it on Clem's feverish forehead. "There's that trapper cabin we saw a mile north of here. Lift him up to me. Just as well he's still unconscious; it won't be a comfortable ride over this rough trail."

Tom scouted the nearby countryside, leading Adam's mount. The going was slow. The sun edged down the sky as Ben pulled up at the ramshackle cabin. They slid the wounded man carefully down^{m2} onto Ben's shoulder and he carried him in, feeling sticky moisture on his sleeve. They laid him gently as possible on the bunk where a blanket lay neatly folded at one end. It was almost dark inside the room.

They were pleasantly surprised that the rusty stove pipe still stood upright. Mildly suspicious, Ben saw no stove lifter so he started to pick up the lid with his fingers. "Damn!" he yelped in surprise. "It's hot!" Hand on his gun he went to the door, peered outside, carefully scrutinizing every inch of brush.

"Hold it!" A man stepped from the outside corner of the shack.
"Ben!"

"Boros?"

"Who you got in there?"

"Clem Adams. Don't look like he'll make it. Can't figure how he lived this long without help of some kind."

"Clara's with me." Clyde Boros motioned toward the brush and Clara rushed forward immediately and ran to her father.

"We need water to get your dad's fever down," Ben told her. "He looks like he's been fed and cared for. Look at this shirt. It's torn but clean, and this is a fresh bandage. He's even healing good, just tore loose lately, and brought on a fever. I wonder where he's been."

The wounded man struggled, until they assured him his daughter was here and his wife was all right, but still back in the town.

"How did you manage to get your wounds taken care of? We thought you were a goner," Ben said.

"So did the outlaws," Clem said with a weak grin. "Never paid me no mind at all. When Charlie Ash, Miss Martin's driver, and I got to the brush behind the town somebody shot me. Charlie got away somehow. When Jeff Dayton's horse came out of the brush, too, I just hung on the stirrup 'til he got into the rocks, out of sight. Could I have some water?"

Ben sat by him, keeping cold cloths on his head while Clara started a meal and Clyde checked in every few minutes. Tom scouted the area a different direction and brought in a rabbit from Clyde's trap.

"Friendly cowboy found me in the rocks and saved my life. Joe Texas, he called himself. Said he was a drover, not an outlaw. He kept me at his line camp until a couple riders headed for the cabin. I lit out. His boss must be that big, red-haired galoot on the appaloosa. I watched them bring my critters in. Joe says he, a carpenter, and some strangers built that cabin he was using. It's right

on my land, dadburn it, I know it is." Exhausted from talking his³ eyes drooped. As Clara came to hold his hand he fell asleep.

Ben motioned Tom and Clyde outside. "We'll rest here tonight and see what the area looks like tomorrow."

It was crowded in the small cabin. Adams lay on the one bunk. The wind whistled through the cracks. As Ben found a large stump to sit on he pondered how they could get Lucille Martin from the restaurant at the same time they got the prisoners from Hack's store across the street. Had that opinionated woman gotten the outlaws to let her vote? A chuckle escaped him briefly. He sobered completely upon realizing they might have to change their rescue strategy entirely. Clara brought him a cup of hot coffee while he considered what could be done.

* * * *

"Any coffee?" Archie asked from halfway across the dining room.

"On the stove," Lucille replied at once, pleased to hear no quaver in her voice. Archie seemed to have forgotten the fiasco with the burned food. The wild ride on the appaloosa must have helped him come to terms with his feelings after the gunfight with Blondie. Today was all business, brusque and impatient. His limp had almost vanished. She hurried with breakfast preparation.

"Lord, it's a job figuring all the angles," complained the big redhead as he poured the strong black coffee.

Lucille slipped easily into shoes, though one fit tighter on the foot that had swollen from Blondie's kick.

"You're a good looking gel," Archie said. "These clods want gels with all the curves. Me, I'm satisfied you can cook. I like to eat."

"I'm supposed to be a schoolteacher, not a cook." She wondered at the way he pronounced "gal" ... English?

He drained the cup, and poured another. "A strange rider was sighted in the mountains last night. Know anything about that? I

hate keeping your people prisoner but if a U. S. Marshall gets in here my people will be lumped together with Black's killers, you know that. We have to get those outlaws out of here first."

Lucille's heart did a double-time jig. Archie confided in her more each time they were together. The man had killed for her. How should she judge that?

"We're going to check out who that might be in the mountains."

Lucille reasoned it couldn't be Clara they had seen because she'd come after dark, walking. It could be one of their own gang, or Black's, judging by the intelligence of some of Black's men. Or it could be Ben Menkin out there.

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Stiffly Lucille moved about the kitchen after Archie left. At six-thirty the prisoners were brought in. Martha, looking like she hadn't slept well, came to the counter with Laura Hack.

"Thank you so much," Martha whispered, facing away from Black's guards. "Are you all right? Hurting you was terrible! Mr. Hack saw

the gunfight from his store window. He said Blondie drew first while Gorman caught his balance. But Gorman shot straighter."

"I hope they don't have any more of those wretched poker games," Laura said.

"Get done with yer damn eatin'," yelled one of Black's outlaws.

The guards rushed the people through the meal, came back and hurried with their own, anxious to be gone. Lucille heard nothing that enlightened her as to reasons for the rush. Her upper arms were purple and green with bruises under her sleeves this morning and she ached all over. Her nerves tightened like fiddle strings, taut and twanging with hurt and worry.

Midmorning, strange men unloaded a buckboard full of kitchen supplies inside her door. The only one she recognized was Tede, who directed them to fill every inch of kitchen space, even under her bed.

"Three loads went to Hack's Store," Stokes reported. He impatiently turned his back and unloaded his own new supplies of liquor. Abruptly he turned and came back. "Know anything about two guards bein' tied and gagged? Lucky they weren't found until after Black left. Of course you didn't see tracks when you went out." He didn't wait for an answer, just turned and walked away.

Was that a hint she should make sure tracks were obliterated? Lucille was glad her reactions of surprise were behind Stokes' broad back. Maybe he meant to prepare her for the questioning she would soon receive. Apprehensively she put away kitchen supplies. She waited in dread all day. What if the outlaws caught Clara and Ben? Black would surely retaliate if he found out she had helped the escaped girl a second time. She wished she had gone, too, if Clara was with other Bascom people in the mountains. Swede, the guard Lucille had taken coffee to, might become suspicious. She must use that time away from the kitchen as her own safeguard. It could be to her advantage, or disadvantage, depending on how Archie viewed the situation. He might be jealous of Swede.

Lucille made thick potato and ham soup for lunch, watching that⁵ and the activity outside equally. Loads of lumber and windows arrived. She supposed the shopkeepers outside the valley were so glad of the big market for goods they never questioned the purchaser's honesty, or really cared. One of the last loads was a complete surprise to her, one she did not really welcome. It meant more work.

Crates of squawking chickens, rolls of fencing and fence posts were unloaded behind the kitchen. Men were set to building a hen house and yard between her restaurant and Darcy's cabin, where a little boy played outside, and watched the carpenters. Lucille and Stokes also watched the progress.

"About the favor you wanted, Stokes, what is it?"

Stokes reddened, then with steady calm he drawled out, as though completely unconcerned with her answer, "Thought since you plan to teach the children you might teach me to write my name. In

private, of course." The apprehensive gleam in his eyes belied the indifference in his voice.

Very seriously Lucille replied, "I would be delighted to."

No more was said and Stokes, as if ashamed of his inability to write, or more likely, Lucille thought, ashamed he even felt it was important, stalked off behind his bar to polish bottles he'd just polished.

Late in the afternoon strange riders started arriving in twos and threes. Lucille anxiously watched from the windows, worried that they, too, must be fed. It was much later when Archie returned. He and Ford rode in ahead of Black and Dude.

Lucille learned the scrawny Tede had carried tales to Archie about the guards being tied and gagged in the trees. It didn't take long for him to appear at the kitchen, get his meal with his men and see that the Bascom people were removed in a hurry.

Archie came over to Lucille. "I've already talked with Swede. The lady must have sneaked in while you fed Swede coffee."

"Two cups are missing," Lucille reported, and could have bitten her tongue. She was so terrified of saying the wrong thing she admitted more than she needed to. She was grateful Swede had spoken up for her.

"Two?" Archie turned in surprise. "Only one got away? What else is missing?"

"Coffee, bacon, bread." Lucille was terribly conscious of Black lurking in the background. It seemed to her Archie was also aware of the man.

"I say we oughtta watch this fat cook," Black came up and put in his opinion. "She's sure gonna help 'em if she can. Where else can they¹⁶ get anything? Likely that Menkin yahoo them folks brag on so much is out there with that girl. If they bring in a U. S. Marshal we can all wave this valley goodbye, you included, Gorman."

"How come Lucy ain't with the rest on poker nights?" asked Swede, with a wink at Lucille. "We ain't all after puny, skinny gals."

Archie glared at the big man. "Anybody bothers Lucille answers to me. You know that." His deep voice rumbled, "She's the only good cook we got, and I like eating regular, with no burnt stuff."

"That the only reason?" Black asked, with one black eyebrow raised in derision. "Hear she took extra good care of you when you was shot."

Archie spun around swiftly for so large a man. His big fist knocked Corey Black flat on his back. Black's gun slid out of its holster. Archie stared at him from green eyes a moment while Lucille hastily moved back down the counter. She saw Black's malevolent glare up at Archie.

"Sorry, bucko. Gettin' pretty edgy plannin' this town," Archie held out a big hand to the man on the floor.

Corey accepted the hand up but his black eyes were unforgiving as he turned and retrieved the fallen gun. He stared balefully at Lucille as he stalked out. Right then she could almost feel his unspoken threat that Archie would pay for that blow very dearly. Black had long chafed at taking orders from the big red haired leader. She thought Humphrey's nagging for more protection money probably irritated him further. Lucille had seen it many times on his face when Archie had not been looking. Should she warn Archie or just let things go their way? Surely Stokes made him aware of Black's animosity. With Black present Archie had not condemned the gambling for women either. That bothered her. Nor did he say anything in that regard after Black walked away.

Archie turned and surveyed her as she worked in the kitchen, a new awareness in his eyes. "Seems to me like you ain't as fat as you were. Swede makes no bones about your size. You been seein' him behind my back?"

Lucille saw the way he now looked at her. Warmth flooded her face, then her skin prickled as the heat went out of her cheeks. "I'll ... quit cooking if you..."

She was flour clear to her elbows when Archie came to the counter. She walked over to stand behind it with knees turned to noodles. He reached across the wide counter and pulled her toward him with his⁷ big hands at her elbows.

His green eyes stared down into hers. A pulse in her throat beat so hard she feared she'd choke.

Archie was going to kiss her!

He didn't. He just stared as though memorizing the color of her eyes.

She stared back. "I thought ... redheads had freckles. You don't," she finally managed to say.

"I thought a plump little partridge would have a double chin. You don't. Someday I hope to find out why."

He knew! He didn't know, did he? Now Archie would kiss her.

He didn't. His glance slipped to her lips a mere second. He turned and stalked away. "Hell, I aint got time to bother no females," Archie said with exaggeratedly poor English. He added, with a small grin, "Not for a couple weeks anyways."

"Well, I have," said Swede.

"You leave her alone, hear?"

"Yah. Yah, I hear," replied Swede good-naturedly. Then he winked at Lucille as he, too, went from the room.

Archie stalked out without another word.

Lucille snatched her lower lip between her teeth. Through tear-blurred eyes she watched Stokes come her way.

"He has big, big problems, Miss Lucy," Stokes said softly. "He figures he needs to solve them first." Stokes turned and walked with slumped shoulders back to his bar to polish the constant appearing of dust on the bottles.

Lucille swiped away the moisture in her eyes with an apron corner. She rounded the end of the wide counter and had almost caught up with Stokes to ask him about Archie's problem when she heard the side door at the end of his bar open. She didn't see who was in the doorway. She only heard Stokes say "Mr. Jonathan Archibald will be in Colorado City."

The outside door slammed and Lucille spun around and returned to her kitchen, more confused than ever. She pinched her lips together in thought. She'd need to visit Bettina for another padding. Or were people seeing the thinness in her face and not the rest of her? Lord, she'd be glad when the Bascom folks made up their minds to drive out all the outlaws so she could be her natural self.

She noticed Stokes at the big front window. Was he watching as Archie rode away from the valley, or was he watching something else?

Lucille worried about Archie's wild ride up the valley. Then another moving dot caught her attention, from a different direction.

"May I borrow your field glasses, Mr. Stokes?" Lucille took them^m as Stokes handed them over at once, then followed her to look through the plate glass window.

"A man in a buggy," Lucille said. She handed the glasses to Stokes. "I thought I saw something moving out there quite a while ago."

The gentleman in the black buggy had been coming slowly toward town for an hour. Lucille knew it was an hour because she'd timed him from when she'd first sighted him. With people as busy as they'd been this afternoon he hadn't been seen right away. Now he was here.

He came alone and had no badge. The townspeople who noticed him now relaxed, but they still watched. Strangers were few and far between, scarce as hair on a frog.

Lucille stepped back from the big restaurant window, carried her broom to the kitchen and waited.

"Who is the handsome stranger getting out of that fancy black buggy?" Laura asked.

"We've been watching him come down the valley for an hour," Lucille told them. She wondered how he'd gotten past Black's outlaw guards or if one of Archie's men had let him through, and into the valley.

"He's pulling in right at the restaurant," Laura said. "He seems to know exactly where to go."

Lucille laughed and tapped Laura's shoulder. "Of course he knows. He's probably hungry. It is getting late. Is there pork roast left?"

The man came hesitantly across the restaurant, gave one look at Lucille and headed directly to her. Lucille thought she might be prejudiced that he wasn't quite as handsome as her Archie. Where did that thought come from? Archie belonged to no one, least of all her. Nonetheless this new man presented a genteel, handsome face. The wire-rimmed spectacles gave him an educated look. He removed his high fashion straw boater hat and his thick, light brown hair fell back with every strand carefully in place.

"This is to introduce me to a Miss Lucille Martin." He held out a square envelope. "Are you Miss Martin?"

"Yes, I am." Lucille took the envelope and pulled out a single, folded sheet of heavy paper. She smiled immediately. There could be no mistaking Archie's flamboyant penmanship and blunt phrases. She glanced quickly at the signature, then read to herself. "Lucille: This is to introduce Dillinkham Franklin Stedman III. His high society parents named him. My first suggestion is to call the man other than Dillinkham. He's had his confidence badly shattered.

However, he is a brilliant physician, and our town does need a good doctor.

No reflection on you, love, but perhaps his stitchery will be an improvement. I do not suggest he use your bedside manner. We almost tumbled to the floor when I tried catching you, remember?

"The man needs a strong dose of self-confidence, Lucy, as only you can give. I would appreciate your help. Love, Archie."

Lucille looked up at the young man twisting his hat nervously. Dillinkham? Undoubtedly some relative's surname was being used. She thought fast. What could she call him instead?

"So you are to be our new doctor," she said. "What a relief for me! I'm thrilled to meet you. I am so happy to have you here I could almost kiss you. My medical knowledge comes from pages 147 to 201 of the 1877 copy of Moore's Universal Assistant. I'm sure you have better training than that."

"Yes, ma'am," Dillinkham said. "Extensive training doesn't always help." He continued nervously twisting his straw boater hat until Lucille wanted to reach out to save it from being shredded. She tried to pay attention to the man and also concentrate on what Archie had written. Pride in Archie and his continued efforts in building his town almost side tracked her like the loaded boxcar of a train. With difficulty she considered the young man.

"First, there are medical rooms prepared upstairs at Hack's General Store," Lucille said. "Secondly, I believe we have a bedroom we can fix for you upstairs in the Palace and third, my sincerest welcome. I am so glad you're here." As she talked Lucille's mind skittered here and there trying to find the best way to give this scared young man more confidence.

"We have a gentleman named Virgil who will be glad to carve a shingle for you." Lucille bit her lip in sudden shyness herself, over what she was about to say. "Won't Link Stedman, MD look grand over your very own office door?" She held her breath, awaiting his reaction to her change of his name.

"Link?"

"It sounds so manly. These tough old cowboys like a manly sounding doctor to come to, and one with a short name. They'll likely all just call you Doc anyway."

"Link?" Lucille watched the questioning in his expressive face turn to a half smile. The half smile turned to a full grin. "Yes, I'd like being called Link or Doc."

"You'll find the stables for your horse and buggy at the end of the street, then come here for dinner. We'll manage to put together a meal for you even if it is late."

"Yes, ma'am." He clapped the boater on his head and walked away. Lucille thought his stride away from her had a lot more confidence than when he came in.

* * * *

Three days had passed since Clara had gotten supplies and again escaped Hank Doaks. Lucille finally had a chance to whisper to Martha that her daughter was with Clyde Boros, their ranch foreman.

Surprise played across Martha's face and her eyes grew moist. "Has she food?"

Lucille nodded briefly and Martha moved away to a dining room table. Lax guards, evidently Archie's people, let the Bascom people trickle into the dining area and Lucille continued her usual routine.

Much later, when she'd finished most of her kitchen work, Lucille crossed the dining area to the large plate glass windows. She already missed Archie's presence. From her position at the window Archie's town of Gorman resembled a thriving, bustling little town, on the surface. But danger, like tornado funnel clouds, hovered around the edges. Who would revolt first, the virtual prisoners, with help being rescued, or men from within Archie's own structure?

There were the men who did not agree with his plans for the future. Sir Humphrey and Ferdie had created a monster.

"Black's protection money returned to his own pockets in a hurry," Stokes said from his corner of the room. "Humphrey and Ferdie lost heavy last night. When they started nagging Blackie for the balance of the money promised he just laughed."

"No wonder they keep trying to cheat me out of meal money," Lucille said.

"It didn't do them any good to nag Arch for funds either. He spent his last winnings on that lumber that came in."

"I can feel the tension in the air, Stokes. What will happen next?" Part of her mind held to the conversation. Part of her mind hoped Archie got money gambling, not robbing banks. The bank bags in his house bothered her.

"Can't answer that, Miss Lucy. Wish I could."

Lucille walked out the door into the spring sunshine. What took Ben and young Shafer so long to do something? Or tell them something? Were they more gravely wounded than Clovine expected?

The unpredictable May weather let down a sprinkle or two and Lucille took refuge beneath the porch overhang. She knew the outlaws were busily preparing for a long, hot summer safe from any²¹ other civilization ... and dry, if they didn't keep bringing in supplies of their favorite liquors. A wagon load of boxes pulled in at the Elite Saloon.

She scanned the mountains to the east. What did those boulders and rocks and pines hide? What could they tell her if they could speak?

* * * *

Ben and young Shafer held the struggling cowboy in firm hands. He'd gotten too close to the ramshackle cabin so they hauled him forcefully inside.

The tall cowboy stopped struggling and grinned at the wounded man on the cot. "Tell these two yahoos to quit manhandling me, sir. Tell them I ain't gonna report you if'n they turn me loose. I worried about you, sir."

"This here's Joe Texas, the young fellow who saved my life!" Clem Adams announced. "He kept me in a line shack, taking care of me. He got bandages and medicine from Schoolteacher Martin. When one of his bosses showed up, I had to leave. The trouble is, I didn't know where to go."

"I'm not an outlaw. I'm just a cowhand," Joe Texas said.

"Where do we go from here?" Tom Shafer asked Ben as he reluctantly let Joe's arm drop.

Clara returned, only slightly surprised at the added population in the cabin, and very thankful to the young cowboy.

"I won't be tellin' nobody ya'll are here. If I could git out of the valley I would, but I got reasons I ain't about to leave." He turned a deep red.

"Like Laura Hack?" Clara said. "We've seen you two looking at each other."

Again Joe's face took on color. "I gotta git into town for the card games. I reckon you know about the poker games. If anybody but me wins Laura I'll have to kill him, that's all there is to it. I'm not lettin' anybody else get her."

"You know Clem is the only reason we trust you. We can't keep you here and feed you, that's certain."

"I'll bring in what grub I got left," said Joe. He emptied his saddlebags of food for them. They watched as he lost no time getting to his horse and out of the area. Their safety rested on those tall shoulders, and then again, thought Ben, it wouldn't hurt to be extra cautious.

"Make a circuit to be sure nobody else is out there," Ben said. "We'll meet back here. Down in these bushes and trees there isn't much chance anyone can see our smoke but if the wind goes right they can smell it. Be watchful. We still can't move Clem."

Ben worried. To save the lands they had title to they might have to set up a fort inside the valley to retain possession. He knew that was the desire of Clem Adams.

The biggest worry, thought Ben, was whether Black or Gorman would kill any Bascom people left in town if they didn't get them out all at once. To his mind one man was as bad as the other.

The weather would be a deciding factor in whatever they did. He watched a small snow squall come and then dissipate up higher on the mountain. He watched as a solitary rider appeared briefly. Ben leaned against the warped logs of the cabin as Clyde trudged up the steep slope from where they pastured their horses.

"Learned all I could, Ben," Clyde reported. "Talked with Clovine last night. There's seven of everything. Seven men, seven women

and seven young ones. Some of those are half grown, so they'll be no problem."

"We'll need wagons. We can't put them all on horses, even if we had them."

"They got piles of firewood all down the main street."

"To keep whichever girl gets picked in the card games from running away," Clara volunteered from the doorway. Ben saw the shiver that shook her body at the thought of another victim.

"We can't get wagons through the cave. Besides, Clem wants to make a stand in the valley. Are there wagons in town?"

"A rickety one by the stables. Hack will have one ready for us, but he won't leave his store. Gorman's got a buggy back of his place that the cook and Laura ride out in once a week. There's a fancy carriage there, too, but it would take those four fancy horses in Gorman's stable to pull that anyplace."

"Tom, your dad will need to ride in a wagon. He can drive one."

"I'll get more supplies from Browns," Tom offered as they ate.

"Clovine says there's two gangs, Gorman's and Black's," Clyde said. "Are we taking them to Brown's or are we going to make a fight for the valley?"

"I darn well hate to let them have my herd," said Clem. "Those outlaws don't know it but they are already on part of my range. Joe says they built that log building only as a line camp but we can use it even if it is real small."

"Hack has a big investment in his store. He won't leave. Miss Martin may decide to stay in that restaurant." Ben paced beneath the pines. What kind of payment did Gorman exact from Lucille by keeping her under his protection? He wondered, too, about pretty Dora Hack. She'd made no bones about being attracted to him. She²³ was certainly more amenable than the opinionated Lucille with her outrageous talk of women voting and owning property.

Things were not going well for Archie, Lucille decided. Twice in the last few days she watched Archie's men arguing with Black's outlaws. She swished her full blue gingham skirt as she turned and regarded Stokes standing silently behind his bar, studiously tracing his name on a bit of paper. She walked over and leaned past his heavy arm to look.

"Excellent!"

"Not so hard once you get the hang of it."

"Did you hear Mr. Hutchins and Dude quarrel yesterday?"

"Black wants to hang a sheriff's badge on Dude. Archie's in a real bind. I worry about him when he's away. We sure could use him back here."

"You and Archie go back a long ways."

"Twenty years. His old man is a real coo-coo. Fanatic, he is, like I told you, Pushing and demanding Archie give him all he wants. Him an' Ferdie are itchin' for that bank safe money. They figure Archie is an outlaw like them."

"I got that impression. His father must be the driving force behind what Archie is trying to do here, in all the wrong ways."

"His pa couldn't wait to do things honest-like. He's a sly one, working on Archie ever since he was born. Always got him to do what he's too lazy to do, him and that no-good half brother. But he'll lord it over Archie and the whole town, he gets a chance. His money built the Elite Saloon but he wants a part of all Archie's income here, too."

Lucille could not miss the fury in the bartender's statements. She fiddled with her braid, watching its dark auburn ends flop across her other hand. "How does Archie propose to civilize the town and still go along with the crime being committed by Black and his gang?"

"Keeps Arch awake nights, too. He has himself a ride on a longhorn bull and can't get off without getting gored."

"Nice talking with you, Stokes. It's time to make coffee." Lucille put on a light sweater and went to the pump for water. The wind off the hills remained cool each day. She shaded her eyes and squinted up toward the mountains, seeing the wavering of a small snow squall high up toward the peaks.

Help must be up there. It had to be. With the dread of a major battle between Black and Archie she had to have faith Ben and Clovine would find a way to balance the situation before that happened.

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CHAPTER 8

Archie paced the palace's big parlor. He knew he had a range bull by the horns and couldn't let go. The gunfight with Blondie preyed on his mind in odd moments. This was one of them. How did Lucy regard what had happened? He'd hunted up Blondie and Doaks, for what? Whatever it began with, it had gotten out of hand. Blondie was dead. Would she—Should she—be repulsed at having a killer who couldn't stay away from her?

Ferdie came yawning from his bedroom down the hall. It was the first they'd actually surveyed each other since Archie had gotten on his feet again.

"My gawd, little brother, how grossly large you've become," Ferdie said as he waved a thin hand up and down before Archie's body.

In Archie's childhood his older brother's sharp criticisms had hurt. He now caught a not-quite-hidden touch of fear and envy in Ferdie's voice. Archie grinned across the room at him. "My gawd, much

older brother, how you've aged. The dissipation of hard living tells on you."

"Insolence to your betters? Pop won't like that."

"Pop hasn't liked anything but money and gambling for so long I doubt he'd notice either of us passing on."

Ferdie shrugged and headed for the door. He ran a long fingered hand over thinning dark hair, then turned back. "When will any of us see what's in those saddle bags Tede guards so jealously?"

"Most of it has already gone to pay Virgil for his work on Hack's Store."

"Virgil! You pay these serfs? Those prisoners?"

"The Bascom people aren't prisoners. Virgil is a carpenter. Hack pays me rent on his building. Anything else you want to know?"

"There certainly is. What about that bank safe you stole from the wagon train? Black and Hank and the rest of us want that money. Pop and I are entitled to our share of the loot since Pop's jewelry financed all this." Ferdie waved his long fingered hands, encompassing all the rooms and toward the town buildings.

"Pop only financed the Elite Saloon. He gets his rent every month."

"Who built all these other buildings? You?"

"I'm a much better gambler than you are. Remember?"

"Where's my share of the rent then?"

"Get yours from Pop, or work to earn it. Maybe Fancher will hire you as a dealer in the Elite Saloon. He leases from Pop and hires the help."

"Brother, half-brother, you have changed. Where's your respect for²⁵ royal bloodlines?"

"What royalty?" Archie purposely stretched an eyebrow high on his forehead.

Ferdie slammed the door behind him when he left.

"Durned pipsqueak," Tede muttered at Archie's elbow. "Wondered how long before you got him from around your neck. You can't carry the world, Red."

"He'll get even, Tede. He always did. Or try to." Archie grinned down at the smaller man. He had bigger worries than Ferdie.

"More'n likely he'll git ole Blackie or one of his cronies to work you over or somethin' like thet. You watch your back."

"I can't straddle the fence, Tede. You, me and Stokes need to rethink this whole episode. We'll need help from our businessmen, and the Bascom people, to get rid of Black and his gang of killers."

"Don't use them dictionary words on me, Red. What we need is packed saddlebags, fast horses and skedaddle to a new range."

"And leave all these people at Black's mercy? What about our blacksmith and cobbler? What about those ranchers and storekeepers and banker ... and Lucille Martin at the restaurant?"

"I figgered thet Ben feller they brag on so much would be here by now. When they retake the town we can leave. Don't make me no nevermind if ole Humph's jools paid for the Elite building." Tede looked up at him. "What about the woman?"

Archie abruptly turned and looked out the parlor's big plate glass window. The sun glinted different colors off the leaded pane design at the top. Blue suited him, he thought despondently. But he liked a different blue, like Lucy's eyes. What about the woman? His thoughts darted to Lucille so often, yet what could he offer a woman like her? She stood for law and order, no mistake about that. And voting! She already had half the restaurant, which she'd well earned. Her friend Ben would slap a price on the heads of Tede, Stokes and him quicker than bird crap on a shingle roof as soon as the Bascom people reclaimed their valley. They'd have the U. S. Marshall in sure as snow came in winter.

"Blackie is hintin' at appointin' Dude and Hank as sheriff and deputy ever since the deal with Blondie," Tede said.

"We should have an election if that's the case."

"He wants you arrested, and hung."

"Hell's bells, I was crippled and Blondie got his shot off first."

"See what Stokes says. The restaurant woman is eddicated. She^{#226} preaches voting alla time. What's she know about elections?"

Coming from Tede the information about Lucille surprised Archie, and pleased him. It gave him a reason to see her, and just maybe Tede did have a little respect for her. At any rate, he'd seen the books on the high shelf in her kitchen. One of them was a law book, and one of them a dictionary.

"Ole Blackie will find a way to open thet safe, you kin bet on that. I think he plans to git one of his men elected sheriff, then order the safe opened for some reason or another. Maybe Shafer will do it an'

mebbe he won't. I'm bettin' he will. Or that nimble fingered Ferdie will have a go at it. I've seen him lickin' his chops ever time he goes by it, even when I be settin' right aside it."

* * * *

Election!

The very word threw Lucille into an excited frenzy of thoughts, goals and ideas. A dream come true! Now she could vote at last!

"Dude and Hank are running for sheriff and deputy," Stokes said as he lined the three lone bar stools evenly in front of the bar, even though most men just stood.

"Oh, no! We can't let them win. Who can run against them?"

"Archie?"

The bank bags in Archie's saddlebags had preyed on Lucille's mind so long she blurted, "We can't have a bank robber for sheriff."

"I won't be around long enough to play sheriff," Archie said from close behind her. Ice would have warmed his tone.

Lucille spun around, her hand to her mouth. Dismay curdled her insides into little sour lumps of regret. Archie's eyes were almost black, instead of green. His face set into lines so hard and stern she feared it would crack. She gulped in a breath and stared back at him.

"What? No sassy remarks? Are you afraid I may taint your precious farce of an election?"

"Oh, no. It's just..."

"I suppose you'll run for Justice of the Peace like Esther Morris."

"I'd do better than Corey Black. How do you know about Esther Morris?"

"Well, that's what you said about your cooking, you could do better. You were right on that. Maybe you're also right about the election."

As he stalked from the room he said over his shoulder, "I mucked out her stable one time."

"Stokes, he ... oh, hell!" Lucille stomped off to her kitchen. She almost never cussed like that. She pinched her lips together. She sat on the hard chair at the table, elbows on the spotless surface and her face hidden by a hand at each side of her eyes. Her heart thumped dismally in her chest. How could an outlaw make her hurt so? Who decided he was an outlaw? Everything he'd done had detained the Bascom people but had he personally ever harmed one of them?

Tears stung her eyelids. What about the stolen bank money? How did all the building lumber get paid for? Making the Bascom people work was better than keeping them cooped up in bare rooms, staring at the walls, wasn't it? Or did she rationalize his behavior because she wanted to think better of him?

Lucille charged up off the chair and across the kitchen. Her blue skirts swirled as she swung around the counter and hurried down the dining room to Stokes.

"Who is printing the ballots?"

Stokes looked at her in surprise. "Haven't heard. I just heard Hank and Dude brag about ordering that safe open or putting Shafer in jail. They got Virgil finishing carpenter work on the jail right now, when he's supposed to be doing a doctor's office. He didn't have any choice when they have the big guns."

"Did I hear my name spoke?" Dude Edwards strutted across from the batwings.

"Who is printing the ballots and who is on them?" Lucille faced him, hands on the shelf of her padded hips. "Who is qualified to run for any office?"

"Hell, woman, what do you care? You can't vote."

"Women in Wyoming have voted over ten years. Where have you been? I know several women here who mean to vote." She hoped that was true.

"Thet don't mean this valley will. What do women know about voting anyway? I heard tell they plan to fight it again in the territorial offices anyway. Fool law."

"We know more than you do, that's a fact. Who's the President of the United States? The Vice President? Who got the vote passed in this territory? Do you know?"

"Hell no. And I don't care neither. All's we need is sheriff and deputy. That's me an' Hank."

"What about a judge and jury? You need a judge with legal knowledge."

"Bahhh! Ain't gonna be no other votin'. What you dumb settlers do when we're outta here makes me no never mind. An' ain't gonna no women vote neither."

"That's no election!" Lucille yelled after Dude's departing body.

"Oh, Stokes, can you believe that?" Lucille stormed.

"Yes'm. Folks ain't used to women having a vote. Most women got plenty to say at home. Guess men figure that's enough."

"What does Archie think?"

"Ask him, Miss Lucy."

"I most certainly shall." Lucille strode back to her kitchen. She brought a pencil tablet down from her school supplies. She stared into space. Right under her nose changes had taken place and she'd had her face in the biscuit flour and her mind in the puddings. Progress for the Bascom people had come so gradually she hadn't realized it.

Storekeeper Hack and his daughters had their store. He paid rent to Archie because Archie had built the big building. Bettina had her dressmaking shop now and she paid rent. The town had grown a lot.

Ken Harolds had disappeared with his two little girls. They rode in to classes from someplace. What had Archie done with them? Forie Drescher brought her three quarters of an elk. He said he'd kept the

other quarter for himself. Where had he gone? Hutchins, the shoemaker and Blaine's small gift shop and store had been down that side street when the Bascom people were dragged into town by Archie's outlaws. But were they Archie's outlaws or were they citizens protecting what they considered their own property? What kinds of secrets did they have in their pasts?

Humphrey and Ferdie had brought in the real outlaws to gain protection money. The first thing Humphrey wanted was to get the safe ordered opened so they could divide the money and head for brighter lights and bigger gambling.

Lucille threw up her hands in despair. She had so much she absolutely had to do before there was an election day, and those probable orders from Dude Edwards to open the Bascom bank safe. She wondered what law they intended to use to make that look legal. They probably didn't care.

Much agitated, Lucille decided there was so little time and so little opportunity she must strike while Archie was gone. Stokes told her

Archie had packed his saddlebags for a ride out into the valley. Surprisingly, Tede had gone with him instead of remaining by those saddlebags. Maybe they were already emptied.

Lucille climbed a rickety wooden ladder to reach the top shelf in the kitchen where she stored her extra school books and supplies. And the damaged journal that belonged to either Clem Adams or Ben Menkin. Perched on the ladder she searched the journal pages while also keeping an eye out for any intruders. She found the bank safe combination numbers and memorized them. She repeated and repeated them as she carefully replaced the books and came down from the ladder.

After full dark, her hands trembling with anticipation and guilt, she shed her padded corsets and put on a brown dress she'd cut shorter but had not yet hemmed. Wearing her voluminous dark cloak, with the hood pulled forward to hide her white face, she peered carefully all around before she dashed across the alley between the restaurant and Archie's house. She waited, alert, while sheltered in the bushes. An owl hooted above her head, in the cottonwood tree, nearly

making her drop her valise and lantern. Again she waited long moments, trying to control her agitated breathing, beside the trunk of that same large cottonwood tree. A small animal scampered away. She knew Humphrey and Ferdie were in the Elite Saloon gambling and drinking as they usually did every night. Stokes was at his bar and Tede had gone with Archie. But for how long?

Breathing heavily from fright, she prayed anyone seeing her would think it her usual trip to check on the house or do something for Archie. Her lantern, turned very low, was almost entirely hidden under her cloak.

After another good look around Lucille cautiously pushed open the door to Archie's big dining room. His big chair sat at the head of the long table and her heart did somersaults. Someone could be sitting right there in the shadows where she couldn't see them because of the high back on the ornate chair.

Silently closing the door she gasped a quick breath when a board creaked as she stepped toward the safe. She checked the closed drapes on one window and shut those on the second tall window.

With a hand to her wildly beating heart she hoped the thundering pulse sound in her ears wouldn't prevent hearing any sounds of danger. She set the lantern next the safe and tentatively tried the handle. Her five thousand dollars was in there. She turned the dial carefully. Still locked. More slowly she dialed again, half expecting Doaks, or Black and his new Mexican friend, Mendoza, to walk in on her. What if Stokes came over to check on the safe, or couldn't find her in the kitchen?

Icy rivulets dampened her collar. Her fingers were stiff. When the safe door finally swung open, faintness seized her. With breath catapulting in and out she brushed the back of her hand across a wet forehead. All moisture had gone to her clammy skin, leaving her mouth dry as bread flour.

The bags of money lay like surfeited piglets at a sow, all fat and round and still. Placing several heavy sacks into her burlap tote bag and into her emptied medical satchel, Lucille gently partially closed the safe door.

Almost blacking out from exertion and terror Lucille struggled to her kitchen door and cautiously slipped inside, with only her medical bag. She'd left the heavy burlap sack hidden beneath the split wood at the far back corner of the building, outside the kitchen's door.

Feeling braver the next trip, but urging herself not to get careless, Lucille continued until all the gold had been moved from the safe. She felt lucky to have fallen only once on the lantern-less trips across the alley.

Excitement kept her from sleeping. Would she be accused of bank robbing? She was no better than Archie if someone caught her. Her pulse rate calmed down, but her mind busily searched out safer

hiding places. She paced the kitchen. A solution finally came to her just after midnight.

Wearily Lucille moved toward her bed. As of this afternoon it had gained a feather mattress from Hack's store. Clean sheets and a nice feather pillow added to her comfort. She slipped into a light cotton nightgown and unbraided her thick hair, planning to rest comfortably even if she couldn't sleep.

Strange, she thought, Archie and Ben were both after the same thing, more or less. Each planned a town. Each planned developing the valley and each wanted to make money and a name for himself. She wondered if Ben still planned to reclaim the valley and build Bascom. Clovine had faith in his return. Did she? Did she care?

The minute Archie and Tede returned to town she must talk to Archie. Thinking of seeing him again was enough to send her pulse rate to the clouds. She'd need to apologize for jumping to conclusions, first. What would he do about the election? If no one ran for sheriff except Dude Edwards she wished there wouldn't be

an election. It would be giving up her dearest dream, but living in the town with Dude as sheriff and Hank as deputy would be a bleak¹³¹ nightmare. The thought of confronting the complex, giant redheaded, town builder sent flutters through her entire body.

If just thinking about the man shook her up this much, how could she make him see her viewpoint on elections without stumbling over her own tongue? How could she convince him to control the election so the women could vote? Were any of the women interested enough in voting to bother to do so? Before Archie returned she would talk to every woman in the town. If he didn't return too soon. The prospective delay in confronting Archie calmed her nerves enough so she slept a couple hours.

To Lucille's dismayed surprise, Archie was the first customer when she and Laura stacked plates on the long counter and set out the heavy stoneware coffee cups next morning, beside a ready coffee pot.

"Good morning." Archie didn't look at her but picked up a filled cup. "The usual eggs and ham this morning, Miss Martin."

Her skin goose bumped up and down her arms under her long sleeves. Her face froze as though cast in ice. He sounded cold enough to freeze boiling water on a hot stove. She had not said he'd taint the election. She ran a trembling hand across her forehead and pushed her hair more tightly into the braid. She automatically scooped up orders as Laura gave them and set them on the counter. Her padded stomach and hips felt more in the way than ever this morning.

The progression from a crowd deluging them all at once to the few at a time paying customers had been gradual. More of Archie's doings? There were no more guards, as such, but Corey Black's men posed a constant threat around the area and no one could leave town without being followed. What else had Archie done lately?

When the breakfast crowd thinned out Lucille marched resolutely over to Archie's table where he dawdled over another cup of coffee.

"Archie, where did Ken Harolds and Forie Drescher go? What about Mrs. Bricker and her son? What happened to them? You surely didn't get rid of them. Did Black do something? Mr. Shafer is still in town and Bettina has her store. What is going on?"

Archie stared back at her at first. His green gaze sparkled. The skin around his eyes crinkled. He laughed, his deep chuckles echoing in the room. He shook his handsome head, and kept on grinning at her³²

Furious, Lucille stomped back to her kitchen. He wasn't going to bother to answer her at all. She slammed a small skillet on the stove and grabbed the leg of a huge ham.

"Who but Lucille Martin would dare question what goes on in this valley?" He rose from his chair and started across the dining room, toward the door.

* * * *

Archie stopped in his tracks just inside the batwing doors at Stoke's end of the room, turned and looked over to the kitchen. He needed his breakfast.

"Archibald Gorman, you still have questions to answer." Lucille leaned across the food counter, her elbows and forearms supporting her upper body. Did she realize how beautiful she looked? Her blue eyes were wide with long, dark fringes of lashes. Her dark brows arched in her earnest appeal for answers.

His feet had minds of their own. He strode across the room and leaned his own forearms close on each side of hers. Temporarily forgotten were the bank robber accusations. She just looked so earnest, so sweet and beautiful. She'd forgotten the open neckline of the dress she usually kept buttoned high. Too warm in the kitchen he guessed. He sucked in his cheeks to keep from grinning at sight of the small rise and fall of her rounded breasts. Maybe she fooled some of Black's outlaws, but his own intense observations had told him long ago she wasn't what she pretended.

Dang, he felt horny just wondering exactly what she really did look like. He hid his arousal against the hard wood of the underside of the counter.

Eye to eye, green eyes staring into blue, Archie said, "What questions?" He reached and ran the back of his fingers down her collar. Big mistake! He hurt.

With delight he saw her tremble, and color sped up her rounded cheeks from her slim neck above the dress buttons. She didn't back away though. She wet her lips with a pink tongue tip, still staring at him.

Archie put a hand to each of her upper arms and pulled her toward him. Her rosy lips parted in surprise and her eyes widened. But she didn't protest. He didn't plan on a simple old nose rub, like eons ago.

His lips came down on her soft ones. Shock waves hit him clear to his big feet. In recoil he let her slide back, but immediately brought her to him again for a longer kiss. Hell's bells, what if they were body to body? What if she trusted his honesty without proof?

Without question. But she didn't. Disappointment hit him. She thought he was a bank robber. Why? He almost dropped her, he released her so fast.

"What questions?" Ice stiffened his lips. He stood across the counter, his arousal gone soft as pudding.

"Where ... where are Ken Harolds and Forie Drescher?" She sounded like she had momentarily forgotten her questions.

"Harolds is out at his ranch. He took your beau Forie as his foreman. Mrs. Bricker is housekeeper and she takes care of her son and the two little Harolds girls. Answer enough?"

"What about Corey Black and his men? How do we get rid of them?"

"Now you're asking questions I have no answer for." He slapped his hat on his head and headed for Stokes' bar.

Stokes already had a brandy poured. Archie downed it in one gulp and strode out the door, never remembering his scorching breakfast.

Lucille rounded the high counter. Automatically she stooped and picked up a button off the floor. She hurried toward Stokes. Tede came in through the batwings. They squeaked and banged behind him. But Archie did not return.

"I had another question for Archie," Lucille told the two men. Her face prickled from receding warmth. She grew cold all over. But she had to know.

"What, Miss Lucy?"

"The bank bags in his saddlebags. What about them?" In the back of her mind lingered the question of who was worse, she or Archie? Both had stolen bank funds.

"What about them? He's riding out today to return them. He just stopped in to say goodbye when you hit with all those questions."

Stokes rinsed and wiped the brandy glass Archie had used, but didn't look at her. His disapproval hung like a gray shroud.

"Return them? To the bank?"

"Gawdamighty, woman," Tede shouted at her, "It's Archie's own damn bank. Why'n hell wouldn't he return the dang things? Stokes, give me a brandy and I'll go join Arch. Foley can guard Shafer's safe."

Archie owned a bank outside the valley?

* * * *

Lucille felt no higher than a slimy green garden worm. The joke, a very bad joke, was on her. What if something happened to Archie before she could tell him she loved him? He'd gotten shot on his last trip out.

Loved him? Ohmilord. Should she tell him now? Would he believe her when her love had had no trust in it? She didn't think so. Now

she could never tell him. He'd have an even lower opinion of her. She stared at Tede's departing back. Her one good thought was that Foley guarded an empty safe. Her very worst thought was that she was the bank robber and not Archie.

How could so many changes take place right under her nose? Archie gave the Bascom people permission to claim their property out in the valley. He had made them a part of the town. He'd given her a half interest in the restaurant, so long as she ran it. She rolled the button between her agitated fingers. Her entire body burned like fire when she realized it had popped from Archie's pants front. Heat pooled in her belly and down her inner thighs in singeing ribbons.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Hiram Clovine entered the restaurant with blood oozing from a cut on his head and Bertram Shafer cowered away from two burly guards belonging to Corey Black's gang. She guessed maybe some of the Bascom people were still under the thumbs of outlaws, a different set of outlaws.

"It doesn't pay to argue with the likes of Black," Clovine said as Lucille treated the wound on his head. "He saw Archie ride out of the valley with a bedroll and full saddlebags. I'm afraid we're in for a lot of trouble."

When Black announced that the gambling games would take place that weekend Lucille knew their ordeal was not over. This was a terrible time for Archie, or if he was now Jonathon Archibald, to leave. He must be a different person in the outside world and the gambling dens, wherever he went.

Humphrey and Ferdie started collecting the entry fees for the games. Lucille saw them give Black a share of the money.

What would they do next? It seemed like Lucille's medical satchel glowed in the dark, fairly screaming it was full of Bascom money and the outlaws should come take it. How would she hide it until she could get it to the rightful owners? Had she waited too long? If Black controlled the whereabouts of Clovine and Shafer, what about Hack and Bettina? Martha Adams and her two young boys were still

in the upper rooms of Hack's store. Clara had escaped but the three Hack sisters were still in town.

Why wasn't the mighty Menkin coming to rescue them?

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CHAPTER 9

Ben Menkin constantly worried about the weather. Winter didn't want to loosen its hold high in the mountains. The cold air crept in between the logs of the cabin clinging high on the slanted ledge, even though they stuffed mud and dried grass in the cracks. The cold air seeped down onto the green tinged foothills as well. He and Clyde Boros turned impatient faces to a small snow squall high above them as it passed from view. They then retired inside the small cabin where they warmed their hands at the small fire, then hunched their shoulders inside their coats as they tried to catch what rest they could. They were confident Clara would wake them should anything unusual happen.

Well past midnight Tom returned from visiting Jace Brown's ranch outside the valley. Six young and eager cowboys, ready for adventure, rode in with him. Ben surmised impressing the pretty fifteen-year-old Jodie Adams, back at the Brown ranch, played a part in their eagerness to prove themselves.

"Ben, you remember Steve Brown," Tom whispered as the cowboys unrolled slickers and bedrolls. "Jace sure wants those rustlers caught. Did Eden Charles find you all right after he got through the cave?"

"He's right there, sleeping, impatient to get to his partner. Orvie Lukas is hiding out someplace in the valley near their cattle. Eden's a good man, anxious to catch up with whoever shot him in the arm. Get some rest, you'll need it."

Ben looked across the small cabin in the flickering light from the stove's open door. Men lay like cordwood across the small cabin. A couple of them twisted and rolled over, no doubt keyed up over the coming events. Clyde patrolled when Clara returned to climb to the tiny loft for needed rest.

"Thank you so much for our supplies, Tom. We were getting low," Clara said. "The medicine for Dad will make a lot of difference in his recovery." She climbed the narrow ladder to the small loft.

Tom lay down, too, before the stove near Ben, with his blanket bunched around his shoulders. Ben didn't think he could sleep, he was too uptight. He stretched out, leaning against the cabin wall near the iron stove. Through the cabin's cracks he heard a horse move a few feet with his hobbles. He mentally reviewed the items of his plan until he finally dozed.

Morning was a scramble of shifting bodies. They got ready for eating and preparing for the raid. Ben waited until all had eaten and¹⁶ assembled outside the cabin. With a sharp stick he drew a map in the dirt as Clara again patrolled for them.

"The hazy fog down there in the valley will keep our movements up here from being seen," said Ben. "Be sure your gear is in good shape for hard riding and check your ammunition. Fill your canteens at the springs. When you come out of town go to Clem's ranch cabin, which is here." He pointed with his stick and drew a line from town to that cabin, making the line twist and turn around circles in the sand that were hills and snaking lines that showed creeks. "We're taking over that cabin for our new headquarters. The

outlaw living in it will likely be in town." Ben put a big X on the crude map and drew in the route going there from the town.

"Keep your damn heads down," Clem shouted from inside the cabin. "Clara and I will meet you at my ranch."

Ben smiled without humor, feeling the tension in the air.

"Get rid of any jangling spurs or fancy trappings that will shine in the dark," he warned them. He wandered among them, checking gear, their mounts and canteens.

By noon, when Clara returned, Tom and Clyde had fed them all again.

"Tom, you'll take two men with you. Ten minutes later two more men go with Clyde. After another fifteen minutes the last two men will go with me. You all will lead extra horses for our people."

"The men down there shoot for keeps," warned Ben. "One of the cowhands those dirty yahoos took out to cut logs tried to escape and

someone shot him. Anybody wants out, this is your last chance, and no hard feelings, boys. This is dangerous."

At his designated time, riding his black gelding, Ben led two of his men out, going fast where he knew the trail, more carefully where it wound through new paths down to the fog-filled valley. Once down on the grassy prairie they were still three miles from town. He'd used the field glasses on the area often enough he remembered how the land rolled out before them though they could see but a few yards ahead. Some of this was the small amount of range land he had title to himself for his Morgan horses. He was pleased with the caliber of men trying this rescue with him, but he worried they might not all return. Brown grass, mixed thinly now with green spring grass, swished damply as they galloped along. Clouds rolled in the heavens.

He halted his men in a deep, dry draw half a mile south of the small settlement where Clyde and his two men should be waiting. Two of the six men were selected to stay with the riding horses for the wagon train people when they came. With two men he circled west

of the livery stables, every minute alert. The last man Ben posted halfway between, to guide the escapees on their way to the horses. Timewise, he knew Tom and his two men should be sneaking up from the west side of town to locate two wagons and Gorman's buggy, then hitch up horses as quietly as they could. In the sandy soil south of the stables a walking horse made very little noise.

* * * *

As one outlaw guard disappeared around the corner of Hack's Store Ben hurried to the small side window, thankful Clovine was alert at his knock.

"Clovine, are you ready in there? Who all can get through this window?"

A young Adams boy was thrust through the opening, head first. Ben lowered him to the ground quietly. Next came the other, younger Adams boy.

"Mike and Kenny, keep down now," ordered Clovine as he thrust his head through the window. "Are you ready for the next ones, Ben?"

Ben dragged tiny, eighteen-year-old Dora through the window. Her soft curves came down the length of his body. She clung overly long as he set her on her feet. She squeezed a hug around his neck. He whooshed in a sharp breath as his body went on instant reaction while she clung to him.

Only five of the captured Bascom settlers were out of the warehouse when suddenly a bright flare of orange firelight lit up the scene. Hastily instructing the two boys and Dora where to run, Ben and a young cowboy crouched in the shadows of the stable fence watching as the three disappeared in the darkness. Ben hunched down even further, in dismay seeing a short, fat cowboy with a huge black hat tilted against the light of the fires all down the street's center. He sauntered unconcernedly along the new boardwalk.

"That's Jack," hissed Eden Charles at Ben's elbow. "Taking chances, damn fool. He'll get himself killed!"

Flickering lanterns also lit the street but the light never reached Jack's features as he paused now and then.

"What's he doing now?" Ben asked Eden.

"Getting us all killed, most like." Eden stared around a corral gate.

The heavy set cowboy flipped a set of reins from the crowded hitchpost rail, bounded up onto a wagon seat, gave a friendly wave down the boardwalk at some invisible person, and backed the team and wagon into the street. Slowly he drove past Ben and into the shadows at the far end of the street, beyond the livery.

"Jack will see that the girl and the two Adams boys are safe," said Eden at Ben's elbow. Ben relaxed, but only slightly.

"Did the two drovers know where to go for more horses?" Ben asked.

"Sure, out back of the livery stable. They'll head for the Adams ranch and meet us there. If they let the horses loose they can't be charged with horse stealing."

"Let's hit those guards and get out of here," ordered Ben. "If Clara is right those fires likely mean the card games are about over. If you see a woman running for her life, head her in the right direction."

* * * *

Lucille watched as a brief rain tinkled against her small kitchen window. After their long postponement, the card game contest had resumed much to the dismay of the Bascom people. The outlaws probably thought it was safe because Archie had gone out of town on urgent business, according to Stokes.

She'd seen Black's men bring in a small herd of cattle belonging to Clem Adams and some that belonged to Orvie Lukas. She'd read the brands as they were pushed through town earlier in the day. At Stokes' insistence a couple had been butchered for use in the

restaurant. Black's men undoubtedly drove the others to market someplace and kept the money.

The crowd at the poker games jammed the building. Men were three deep at Stokes' bar. The constant uproar surged into the kitchen in waves of unwelcome sound.

After toiling all day with cooking and baking she found no protest was raised by any of the guards when both Martha and Laura helped wash dishes. Mountains of roast beef, potatoes and lots of stewed tomatoes disappeared. It was obvious which men were Black's and which were Gorman town people. Black's crude men gave no thought to anyone but themselves, but they did pay the twenty cents she charged.

She saw Stokes watching morosely from behind his bar, his face like a thundercloud. She realized he had little control of these animals who filled their bellies, and departed, probably to the livelier Elite Saloon where the fancy women were. They would be

back when the contest started. She sincerely hoped the drovers left³⁹ for the ranches early.

"Thank you very much," Lucille told the two women as she paid the wages she insisted they take. They sat at the kitchen table for their own meal. "I could never have done it alone."

"I noticed Mr. Hutchins, the cobbler, never joined the games," Martha mentioned. "I think he has a wife although I've rarely caught more than a glimpse of her."

"She and the blacksmith's wife come in the store once in a while," Laura said.

"I guess I'm stuck back in the kitchen and don't see them. Do they have children for my school?" Lucille asked.

"I don't think so. They've never been at the store if there are. They probably fear those outlaws as much as we do."

"Except Joe Texas," Laura said, and immediately she turned bright red.

The women watched in apprehension as Black and Doaks strode along the counter.

"Out you go, people," said Black. "Come on you women in the kitchen, Mrs. Adams and our lovely Laura, off you go to Hack's store. We'll let you know when we want you back here."

Lucille saw the look of contempt Laura threw at the big outlaw as they went out with the rest of the Bascom people. From her big front window Lucille saw each one disappear inside as she picked up a stack of dishes from late eaters. How would any rescue party get them out of a locked building guarded by Black's men? While Archie remained in town there were no longer any guards, as such, but Black and his men didn't trust anyone not to try to escape the valley and bring in the law, or try to hide the women.

"You! Joe Texas!" Black shouted. "Somebody cut a hole in the livery stable fence. Repair it. Ain't nobody escaping with our horses, you hear?"

Joe Texas had been a guard until the crowds started coming in. Lucille suspected he spent more time talking with Laura than guarding the street.

"Why me, dammit?" Joe protested. Lucille saw him look to where Laura had disappeared from sight. "I want to be in these card games as well as the next man."

"Get the hell over there and be quick. You can play when you get back." Black and two of his men headed toward Joe. Lucille saw Joe throw up his open hands in surrender and the young man went out the door.

Cards were already being dealt when Joe burst back into the room. Lucille worried that Joe would not get back in time. Even though^{no} the livery was only down the block, finding wire and staples took time. Besides that he had to locate the break in the fence. She felt

sure Joe had special feelings for Laura and would protect her all he could. Laura must have felt it, too. Lucille caught her eyeing the clock every time she checked the time herself.

Joe jammed his leather gloves in his belt and went to a table where Swede and the other drovers made room. Lucille continued wiping down the plank tables.

The women were not brought back to the gaming area ahead of time. Lucille saw Joe craning his head as he played. Obviously, he looked for Laura, not being sure when Black would order the women brought over from the store.

Lucille realized Joe and Laura had struck up a friendship in spite of guards and outlaws, while he had been helping in the kitchen with the butchering.

"Hey, Stokes, can I have Lucy if I win?" yelled Swede, already half drunk.

Startled, Lucille stopped in the kitchen doorway, not daring to breathe and miss Stokes' reply. What would she do if Swede won?

"If you boys wanta eat when you're in town, you leave the cook alone. She's out. She belongs to Archie," declared Stokes, his tone definite and cold. Black and Doaks didn't bother to argue.

* * * *

Playing began in earnest. Joe Texas knew his opinion against gambling for a woman meant less than nothing to Black. It wasn't right to treat people this way, especially the women. His concern centered around Laura in particular though and he played his hands carefully. He had to be sure to save her somehow, if she was chosen by anyone but him. He gulped a brandy and knew he shouldn't have.

Soon, seized with the urgency to win, he played recklessly but couldn't help himself. Ben and his helpers should hurry and get these people out of here. He'd done what he could to save Mr. Adams and wished mightily he could get out of all this without

being shot or hanged. He had no idea what he would do if someone else won Laura. He hitched his gun into position near his right hand.

The fifty dollars start-up money each man was allowed soon changed hands. Ford was a poor player and Joe watched him leave the game. Beside him, Swede had a nice stack. It pleased Joe as he slowly gained it away. He casually eyed Dude Edwards, who sat at the back table, slowly drinking a bottle of whiskey. With him sat Black, a previous winner and ineligible. Ford and a couple others took tables apart from Black and Dude. Joe reasoned that if he didn't win Laura himself and someone else did, danger could also come from Black. Why wasn't Menkin out there getting the women to safety?

It got harder and harder for Joe to concentrate on his cards. Winners from other tables replaced original players. With his table now the last one active the curious surrounded them. His vision of the pile of cash before him faded and clouded over. He stuffed his pockets so he wouldn't lose it. A tremendous whooshing sigh of relief burst from his lips when the game was over.

"Joe Texas won!" announced Stokes.

"Bring the women so he can pick one," ordered Doak's voice from somewhere far behind Joe. His senses were reeling enough that he didn't try to look at the man.

"Just one," Joe said. "Laura Hack." He tried rolling a cigarette as nonchalantly as he could. Tobacco flakes spilled down his shirt before he managed a half-filled cigarette paper. Someone lit it. A path cleared for him. He strode out the door, stiffened his wobbly knees, and led the crowd across to the warehouse. Chilly damp air helped. He blamed the flitting shadows disappearing around the corner of the building on his hazy senses. The others weren't in any better shape than he was, he reasoned.

Would Ben make his move tonight in spite of the rain beginning to fall quite steadily against his fevered face? The hissing huge bonfires along the street made the entire area bright as some of the gold pieces weighting down his pockets. What if Laura was gone? He didn't want anyone else. He lurched a little as the lantern

wriggled light-fingers ahead of them to the guard now unlocking the door at the front of Hack's store.

He tossed aside his cigarette stub and tried to calm his breathing. He'd never had time for a woman before. He scrubbed big sweaty palms down his thighs.

"Impatient, Joe?" said a big outlaw guard with a laugh. Others joined in with crude remarks and lots of advice that created a buzzing in his ears.

Joe heard only Laura, and her father begging them not to do this. He'd been quite calm during the final gambling but now the liquor was really taking hold and there seemed a nest of hornets buzzed in his head. He wanted to tell Mr. Hack his daughter was safe with him, but the words would probably come out all wrong. He said nothing.

Laura appeared in the doorway, clutching her coat that someone thrust at her. The guard with a gun dragged her out. Joe saw her trembling violently, not sure if his vision saw she tried hard not to

cry. He wanted to reassure her, but could not find the words. The guard jerked her over to Joe's side.

"Don't let this one get away," warned a big outlaw, as he appeared out of the flickering darkness on Laura's other side.

Joe took Laura's arm firmly and walked her toward the waiting vacant cabin. His addled mind hummed with what he must tell her, to reassure her. Laura dazedly stumbled along at his side, putting her arms into her coat automatically as the rain hit.

A tin can bounced away from her foot and Laura tripped herself. As his grasp on her arm loosened the girl went to her knees, then leaped to her feet and ran. Only a couple steps behind her he reached out with both arms. They went down in a pile. Through the ringing in his ears he heard cheers from the onlookers. Damn, couldn't she understand he'd never hurt her. Her fist pounded his unprotected head as he clung around her waist. He hardly knew it. It sounded like frying ham going on in his head.

"Need help, Joe?" jeered one, as the crowd rushed toward them, circling. "Be glad to help out..."

Joe desperately caught the girl's flailing arms, lurched to his feet, hoisted her over one shoulder and strode jerkily to the small dark cabin, hoping he wouldn't fall. With his free hand he drew his gun. "Back off, bozos. She's mine!" To Laura he hissed, "Damn it, you want them all in on this?"

Laura must have nearly fainted for she grew very still on his shoulder. He stopped before the cabin door. "See those fires? You'd never get past them. That's why they're there, so no one escapes. You think those drunk yahoos would bring you back to me?" He pushed open the door and caught himself before he fell in.

"I didn't think you were like this! I thought you were my friend."

Laura renewed her pounding on his back as he slammed the rough door and shoved the stout bar in place. He bent over and dumped her onto the hard mattress of the rusty iron bed. After two tries he got a match lit to get a lamp going. It glowed dimly through a

smoky glass chimney. He turned just as she reached the bar to the door. With a long stride across the small room he stumbled and knocked the heavy bar in place, holding on to keep his balance.

"I just couldn't ... see lettin' them brutes like Gus or Mendoza have a pretty girl like you." He blinked blurry eyes, trying to focus on her face.

"Are you any better? I thought you were my friend."

Something ignited in his already burning brain. He put one hand on each side of her billowing red hair and swayed closer. "Maybe I'm not. Now, lady, I'm tired. I'm drunk and I can't see ... worth a damn."

"No! Please, please," Laura begged. He thought his blurred vision saw tears brim in brown eyes that were sometimes two and sometimes four. She repeated, "I thought you were my friend."

"I am. I ain't gonna hurt you. Now it's either a peaceful night's sleep, with me, or—or it's them. Would you go with one of them other fellers?"

Laura shuddered under his hold. "No, they are dirty, terrible men."

He swayed on his feet. "Dammit, woman ... gotta tell you. Clem an' Clara Adams. They're safe. Gotta tell you. Menkin is ... dammit, woman, stan' still."

"Clara? Clem? You saw them? I am standing still. I know Ben came."

"Yeah. Now git in bed." He pushed her to the creaking, sag-centered bed, threw a blanket at her, then shoved her over against the log wall and fell in beside her. Fuzzily he decided he better hang onto this girl so she didn't get out with those mean-eyed outlaws. He threw a heavy arm and a leg across her, pinning her between him and the scratchy bark on the log wall.

* * * *

At the restaurant's big plate glass window Lucille lifted the front of her skirt to knee level and stepped up on a sturdy chair in order to see out over the crowd of drunken men outside. As Stokes came up beside her she caught the odd look on his face.

Ohmigoodness! Too late she realized he'd undoubtedly seen her slim leg below her bulky appearing body. Would he tell? How much longer did she need to wear the cumbersome padding? Could she keep on dodging Swede's attentions? Had Archie guessed? How much longer could she stand the heat of the thick padding? What would Archie say when it was discarded? What kind of look would she receive from those green eyes?

A roar from the crowd outside drew her attention to the mob's center where Joe Texas hoisted Laura up and across one broad but wobbly shoulder. His two arms clung to her legs like grim death¹⁹⁴ while she screamed and pummeled his back. The crowd cackled with laughter like a flock of old hens.

Suddenly Laura quit pounding and they disappeared inside the ramshackle cabin. As the door slammed shut, Lucille came down from the chair. She kept her eyes on the crowd of drunken men, then sneaked a glance at Stokes. His impassive countenance told her nothing at all as he returned to his client-less bar.

* * * *

Ben's men stopped in their tracks. A rush of men from the restaurant, headed for Hack's store front. Ben hadn't believed his eyes when he saw the tall Joe Texas lead the way, followed by a drunken, jeering mob.

There was only time for Ben to hide and wait. Another delay put them all in a bind. Rain fell steadily. The spring wind became bitter cold. He dared not move. It seemed forever before the noise of the crowd faded. Peering out, Ben saw the drunken men leave the store front and cross the street to a brightly lit saloon. Glaring firelight illuminated the street. He could not see past the cluster of shouting men. Joe Texas was nowhere in sight.

Full view of the store shone in the light from the fires, in sight of anyone looking that way. Only the smallest of the settlers had been able to come out through the tiny side window. Heavy-set Banker Shafer and broader shouldered men would have to have the lock broken on the door where one guard had been.

Ben and Eden hurried, but the firelight reached the small window.

"What do we do now?" whispered Eden. "If Jack has one wagon, where's Tom's friend Steve with the other?"

"I saw him pull out of the livery stable a few minutes after Jack drove down the street," Ben said. "He should be back of this building, close to where the horses are held. We need to get Clovine out the other direction to drive the buggy Tom should have ready for Lucille Martin. I hope the timing is right so we meet up with the wagons. We need to hurry into the mountains where we can lead them across the foothills to Clem's ranch."

"If they don't plan to fight for their property I can get them out to Brown's ranch," Eden offered. "But I'll be back."

"I wonder if that really was Joe Texas going away from the warehouse and why he did that?" Ben said. "What can be going on with the prisoners?"

* * * *

From what Laura had whispered to her a few days ago, Lucille⁴⁵ knew Clovine had heard from Ben. Someone would try to get all the Bascom prisoners away from the outlaws. It would be too late for Laura now, unless Joe released her at the right time. He had seemed much too drunk to think of that.

Thoroughly exhausted, Lucille absently wiped at a smudge on the steamy glass of the big front window. In the kitchen she had her portmanteau packed and ready with her medical satchel. It was hard convincing herself if she really wanted to go or not. The only bright spot would be the shedding of her uncomfortable padding once she was free of the outlaws. If she left, someday she'd return to teach school, instead of cook.

Outside, the row of fires brightly lit the street down its center. The livery stable and warehouse fronts stood out bold where skipping flames of the street fires threw dancing light and hissed in the rain.

Laura was probably luckier with Joe, who was obviously smitten with her, than with one of the crude and cruel outlaws. Lucille had no doubt the strong-willed Laura could control the cowboy when he sobered up, but what about while he was drunk?

The crowd, smelling of smoke and whiskey, had surged behind the cowboy then followed each other over to the Elite Saloon. She couldn't see past the swaggering and staggering men. Some of the group disappeared from her sight toward the row of shacks at the edge of town. The first one was vacant after Darcy and her son moved to a bigger one. The old one was where Joe and Laura were. Goldie and Josie, women from the Elite Saloon, occupied the second cabin, since Black's newest prostitutes used the upper rooms at the Elite Hotel.

Stokes calmly polished glasses as she turned to look back into the room. He yawned quietly while replacing bottles on the narrow shelves, but did not look her way.

Lucille again peered out the window. Would Ben come for her, too? Would she want to go? Here she had plenty to eat, a lot of work, and a roof over her head. Some of her pupils in the makeshift school would be gone though. She'd only have Darcy's and Mrs. Bricker's sons and Ken Harolds' daughters to teach. Out in that world she'd be nobody, if there was no place to have a school. She'd lose her precious slate board. Here, Archie appreciated her cooking, if nothing else. Or should she gamble that it might be something¹⁴⁶ more? With an outlaw?

What about Ben? She missed the lively discussions they had had on the trail, but he thought her too forward for a woman. He didn't turn up her pulse rate like Archie did. Was that because Archie's character was questionable and therefore an attraction? Or was Ben just not appealing to her?

On one occasion he'd said, "I suppose you're one of those harping, carping females after the vote."

"I suppose," she had retorted, "you prefer a meek little mealy-mouthed blonde with feathery curls outside her head and inside as well."

It seemed to her, at the time, his surprise at such a statement surpassed even hers. No more had been said.

Maybe it was too late for everything, including Ben's desire to build a prosperous town. The competition in building a town was clearly leaving Ben the loser. Archie didn't do too well either since Black and Humphrey arrived with their demands on the labor force and the carpenter.

She turned from the window, glancing at Archie's empty table as though hoping he still sat there. His obsessions, in his efforts to build a proper town, became more surprising daily and both worried and frightened her.

Lucille's attention returned to the noise in the street. Upstairs in Hack's Store she saw the new doctor standing in the window of his office. Knots of men loitered against the background of burning fires. Some still held bottles and drank now and then. Much arm waving and loud talking went on, but she could not distinguish words. Three or four men leaned against the front of Hack's Store by the new plate glass windows. How could anyone escape with all that firelight in the street?

Lucille watched another cluster of men farther down the store's sidewall, leaning and talking there. The locked side door was in that area. The darker shadow of two small windows halfway up the wall reflected quivering firelight.

One man waved an arm and another paced back and forth, holding a bottle aloft. Lucille stared in amazement as the fluttering, lighter color of something moved along beside the pacing man. With waving arms and more pacing figures, the group slowly moved past the far back corner of the building. When the group turned, the blurred movement behind their legs was missing. They again

gathered near the side door and by straining her eyes she watched a darker slit widen at the doorway. She chuckled to herself. The prisoners were being surreptitiously spirited away right under the noses of the drunken outlaws. But where were Black's guards? Lucille chuckled softly again, guessing they were tied and gagged so they couldn't give an alarm to the other outlaws.

Up and down the street the big fires slowly dwindled, hissing as heavier rain fell. Lucille returned to her kitchen area and paced the floor anxiously. When a soft knock sounded at the back door she, with her thundering heart threatening her throat, moved quickly to open it a crack. Clovine was outside.

"Grab what you gotta have," said the old man. "I got Gorman's buggy in the brush by the river. Ben's waiting east of town."

The words 'Ben's waiting' decided her. She had to sort out her feelings for the man, one way or the other. This was as good a time as any. She'd never have peace of mind until she knew her own feelings for him. She grabbed her small, packed portmanteau and

the heavy medical satchel, then followed Clovine out the door. Her long dark cape concealed her dress and sturdy new trail boots were on her feet. The heaviness of the journals, and several bank bags in her satchel, banged against her leg. She leaned toward Clovine to tell him about the hidden moneybags belonging to the some of the Bascom people.

With horror she heard a shout go up, "Prisoners escaping!"

The bedlam of gunfire, and shouting men, reminded her of the first terror-filled attack on the wagon train. She clambered into the buggy. Where was Archie? Had he returned to the valley? Wouldn't he help fight off Black's outlaws? Or didn't he care? Why had he left at a time like this?

"Damn, we been sighted," said Clovine. "Can you use a revolver?"

"I can try."

Clovine careened the black buggy behind the bunkhouse, while she clung desperately to the seat. He fired into a group of Black's outlaws racing their horses alongside.

"You can't take Lucy!" Archie's voice shouted from far behind them. Her ears throbbed from a new din of shots, but her heart sang! Archie had returned! He would rescue them from Black's outlaws! The medical bag filled with her and Clovine's money lay at her feet. She clung to the seat and the wobbling revolver, praying Archie would reach them before Black's men did.

Clovine fell heavily across her feet and Black's man, Mendoza¹⁴⁸ grabbed the horse's head strap.

"Clovine, are you all right?" cried Lucille, too worried to think about using the extra revolver in her hand.

He didn't answer. She dropped the gun and pulled the reins from his left hand. The sticky warmth of his blood running down into her shoe made her heart thud in painful dismay. Relief hit her as the

spotted rear of an Appaloosa horse came alongside the running team.

"Help me take him back, please, Archie," she begged as he slowed down the horses and came beside her. She wasn't entirely sure which side he would be on.

In the dimness Archie stared back at her a long moment. She could have sworn disappointment showed on his face in the light of the lantern he carried. He growled, "Tede, help her take the man back." He and two other men rode off, herding Mendoza ahead of them.

While Tede guided the buggy horses back toward town Lucille threw back her hood so she could see how badly Clovine was hurt. Ben appeared on a big black horse, quickly knocked Tede unconscious and came to the buggy side.

"How bad is he?" Ben's deep voice came across the open space even as she carefully felt for Clovine's wounds.

"Bad. I'll stay with him, Ben. We can't let him lose more blood. I'm soaked with it already."

"Will Gorman hurt you?"

"No. Are the rest of you all right? Go, please go. Save the rest from Black's men. Go!"

"Be careful." He gazed at her a questioning moment, then disappeared in the darkness. In the light of the lantern Archie had left Lucille saw dark stains on Ben's sleeve as he turned to follow his people out of town.

Alone on the darkened path Lucille guided the buggy team past the inert body of Tede and around the back of the Elite Saloon, then slowly down the smoother main street of the town, being careful not to joggle the wounded man.

Firing was everywhere, especially by the stables. Archie and Swede led a large group of men straight at her and went on past. More half-clothed outlaws came from the direction of the bunkhouse and the

outside stairs of the Elite. Lucille pulled the team far to one side of the street.

A flicker of white drew her attention to the Elite Hotel's upper balcony. Two men fired down at the mob in the street.

"Oh, no," Lucille cried out, half rising in the buggy. She couldn't believe the horror of what she saw.

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CHAPTER 10

Lucille shuddered. Archie was down! Her horses, terrorized from all the shooting, carried the buggy swiftly past where the big outlaw lay sprawled in the street. How many times could his body stand all this violence? Oh, God, she'd never given him even an inkling that she cared for him. She barely admitted it to herself. In spite of the murder charge hanging over his head, she believed in his innocence and she loved him! The revelation so startled her she dropped the whip onto the buggy floor. The horses ran until she pulled hard on the reins by the restaurant.

A moan from Clovine brought her aghast attention back to the wounded man at her feet. Leaping from the buggy, she flipped one rein around the hitch rail and screamed for Stokes. Pulling her skirts up to her knees, she ran frantically through the restaurant and inside her kitchen, still shouting to Stokes that Archie and Clovine were shot. She gathered clean rags and headed back to the buggy where the rest of her medical supplies were in the satchel on the seat.

She led the horse and buggy to the side door of Gorman's house. There was no place else to go, enemy or not, that had bed facilities for the wounded men. She tied the lead strap firmly to the porch post. With the smell of blood making the fidgety horses even more nervous she clambered onto the buggy side.

"Mr. Clovine!" Her efforts to rouse him brought a small groan. "Please, Clovine, please, help me move you. Please."

"Who you got there?" Stokes said right at her elbow. Gratefully she turned to him and pointed to the injured man.

"Help me get Clovine inside, please," said Lucille firmly, realizing Stokes couldn't see well in the darkness. "Stokes, Archie has been shot in the street. You must see to him immediately and send Doc Link."

"Damn, he's heavy." Stokes tugged at Clovine's inert body, got hands under his arms and dragged him from the buggy and across the porch.

Shuddering at what damage moving Clovine might be doing Lucille guided Stokes through the doorway and across to a bedroom. She almost knocked over the bedside lamp while reaching for matches in the dark. As the flame brightened in the chimney, she realized whose room they were in. Ferdie would be out of luck. Too bad! He'd have to sleep elsewhere. He probably cowered in one of the upstairs rooms at the Elite Hotel, after hearing all the shooting in the street.

She wiped blood from Clovine's head where a bullet had creased above one eye, and quickly bound it. Head wounds scared her so much she trembled, but quickly changed that padding for fresh. As she tore away his shirt she found the pad she put on in the dark had soaked through immediately. The muscle of his big left arm showed holes front and back.

"And dirty, too," groaned Lucille in fearful sympathy. "I hate probing for dirty cloth in a wound."

"I'm here." Young Doctor Link Stedman nudged Lucille's elbow.

"Good. You need to get his shirt shreds out of that wound." Lucille's relief was short-lived.

"Here's Archie, Miss Lucy. He's alive." Stokes grunted as he helped move Archie in from the hallway. He threw back the covers on Archie's big bed. Lucille saw Swede, and surprisingly, the scrawny Tede, struggle into the big bedroom with Archie's unconscious body. She almost fainted in relief that he lived. Swede said nothing as he hurried outside again.

"The rag bundle is here," she called to Dr. Stedman as he still worked on the worst of Clovine's wounds. Stokes worked over Archie. At last the bleeding slowed down. Lucille absentmindedly dabbed at her own wrist where the bullet had skimmed a burning furrow before hitting Clovine's arm. She handed Tede a rag square to blot the lump on his own head.

"Doctor Link, how long will you be yet with Clovine?" Lucille returned to Clovine, where the doctor had almost finished. Lucille darted back to Archie's room.

"How is Archie?" She looked at Stokes as he worked on his big redheaded boss.

"I got him bound up but it's soaking through."

"Keep him warm. It's chilly in here. Dr. Stedman will be here in a few minutes."

"It's rainin' pretty hard out there now, that's why there's a chill." Stokes changed bandages. "I'll keep an eye on him, Miss Lucy. Tede, please build a fire."

She assured herself Archie lived. With trembling hands, she helped Stokes change bandages and winced when Stokes poured whiskey in the wounds. Archie never moved. Lucille's eyes brimmed with tears she hastily brushed away. She set her jaw and nodded. Archie was in good hands. Not hers, but trustworthy Stokes would watch over him until the doctor came from working on Clovine.

Lucille nervously returned to Clovine's room. She peeked out between the heavy velvet drapes. Rain came down steadily. She had

no time to consider how much came down or how deep the mud got. In the past, with no doctor in the valley she and Stokes had done the best they could. It was a real relief to have a good doctor³¹ here now. Her first concern had been getting Archie and Clovine out of sight of Black's outlaws before they returned from chasing the escapees. She didn't know whom to trust anymore. She let the drapes fall closed.

Wearily leaning back in the big chair by Clovine's bed, she smiled grimly to herself. Black and Doaks would not think to look in Gorman's own house for an escaped Bascom man, at least she hoped not. They would avoid Archie as much as possible, too, not knowing whether they'd been seen shooting him in the crowd.

In the next room Stokes changed bandages on Archie as she again watched through the doorway. Tede no longer hovered nearby, but disappeared out the door, leaving muddy tracks on the worn carpet when he carried in wood.

When she had informed Stokes that Archie lay in the street wounded, she couldn't recall telling him Black and Doaks had done the shooting. Actually, things moved so fast she wasn't sure of anything right at the moment, except the urgency to keep Archie alive, and the worry that Clovine would be all right.

Lucille pushed the rocker back and forth in agitation beside Clovine's bed, checked the pad on his injuries, and wiped away several specks of blood on his pale face and limp hands.

"How is Archie doing?" she called out to Stokes.

"Still bleeding like a stuck hawg. Can't seem to stop it." Panic edged the heavy man's voice. "They got him in the back and it come out the front. His head wound is pouring out blood. The doc is working on him."

Lucille rushed in and gazed down at the barrel-chested big outlaw. Her reluctant outlaw. His hair lay matted above one ear. The red curling hair on his chest was blood soaked.

"I've cleaned it good, Miss Lucy. He's been shot before." Dr. Stedman worked steadily. "We'll bind it a little tighter and see if that helps." After doing that, he checked a second bandage on Archie's arm.

Lucille adjusted the heavy velvet drapes at all the windows. She felt sure no light could leak out around them for any passerby to see. Very softly she said, "Stokes, what are we going to do?"

"Don't know, Miss Lucy. Gawd, I didn't think they'd turn on him so soon, but I saw the break coming. The town is split, no two ways about it."

"We'll need to guard them both. How do we do that? Clovine gave me an extra gun in the buggy. I'm no expert but I could scare someone plenty."

"We can't do it alone. You might not like old Tede, but he can be⁶² trusted. You locate him as soon as he gets back so he can help in case Doaks and Black try to finish off Archie to get to the bank safe. Tede hates Doaks."

"Do you think Tede saw the same as I did? That Black and Doaks both shot Archie from behind while they were up on the balcony?"

Stokes lips pursed a big "Oh." He nodded, saying only, "You best get to the restaurant and see how many return and if they brought any Bascom people back."

Lucille watched as Dr. Stedman checked Archie's and Clovine's bandages one more time. She threw Clovine's denim jacket over her head and around her shoulders, so her long cloak could be left on his still form on the bed. Quickly letting herself through the smallest slit of the door she could, she realized the completely darkened street must be uninhabited. The fires down the main street had long since burned out or been rained out.

Gray streaked the sky to the east and some of the street lanterns were out of fuel. Head down and holding the big coat shut around her, she trudged along the boardwalk to the front door of the restaurant, where the street mud did not reach.

She wiped steam from the big front window and peered out. At the hitch rail, a lone horse tried desperately to turn its tail into the fierce wind. No one had removed the hapless dead man from its back. Rain formed blowing undulating waves, like a rolling ocean, all down the street. No light shone from Hack's Store and the livery stable lantern flickered, only dimly visible between waves of swirling rain.

In the kitchen stove she nudged red coals into life, added fine wood chips from her chip box and got a small flame started. Her warm breath blew clouds in the unusually cold, poorly lit room and her fingers were chilled as she lit the lamp. She wondered how long the miserable spring rain would last.

The fire glowed red as she opened the stove door and added bigger pieces of wood. She set the already filled coffee pots to the front griddles and pulled the biggest of the skillets next to it. Life would have to revert to the usual. In warm water, she washed the bloody mess from her hands, then changed her soiled clothing. She donned

the padded garments so she'd look like she always had to anyone coming to eat.

"Miss Lucy!"

"Stokes, what's wrong?"

Stokes stumbled in the back kitchen door, bringing blowing wind and clumps of mud from his boots. "Just thought. Don't you ever admit you saw Doaks and Black shoot Archie. Best let them think⁵³ they didn't get seen pulling their dirty trick. We best talk. I gotta get back. We gotta talk first, hear?"

Lucille stared at the closing door. Clots of mud dirtied the kitchen floor. They lay there like mute, upside-down exclamation marks, a long toe and small, round heel clot, just inside her door. She was touched by Stokes' concern but the sound of a horseman at the street door drew her attention before she fully digested what he told her. Across the back of a led horse flopped a man, head down. Water dripped off his back.

In the early dawn the scrawny gunman, Tede, a clumsy bandage around his head, stepped into the light. His rain soaked horse stood with head down at the hitch rail, beside the first body-laden horse.

Lucille blurted, "Tede, Stokes may need help with Archie, at the house. The doctor has several other patients after last night's shootings."

Without a word, Tede disappeared from sight around the corner of the door, past the big front window, with no apparent thought to the second body he'd left on a horse. She gave a fleeting thought to how adversity changed everyone.

Coatless, Lucille ran out to the slung over body, saw he had long and stringy yellow hair, said, with a skyward look, "Thank you, God, it's not one of ours," and raced back inside. Crossing the dining area she blessed the feather padding she wore under her corset to continue the charade of "Fat Gal". It kept her warm in the blustery wind, but she knew it would get soggy and heavy if she

stayed in the rain too long. She'd likely smell of wet feathers should that happen.

More sounds of returning horsemen came, though the thick mud muffled the hoof beats. The jangle of bits and voices of the men were all that alerted her to hurry preparation for a morning meal. Ebbitt Ford entered the restaurant and immediately headed for the coffee and poured himself a cup from the smaller pot.

"Ready in a few minutes," she told them. Bacon sizzled in the pan. With her hand she checked the oven temperature for the noon roast she needed to put in, now that she hadn't escaped. "You'll get flapjacks and bacon this morning and that's it. I haven't time for more."

"How's Archie?" asked Ford quietly.

Lucille looked intently at the man but could discern nothing from his expression. Whose side was he on? Should she let them know the murder attempt had failed? "Unconscious," she said as she

turned away, hoping her intuition was right about Ford's loyalty to Archie.

"Where's Stokes?" yelled Black, banging a bottle on the bar.

Lucille's heart threatened a rib. She swallowed hard and hoped she didn't look as faint as she felt. How much should she say? Stokes' warning blared in her ears.

"Well, where is he?"

"He's at the house," she finally said.

Black and Doaks studiously ignored each other, she was quick to note. Every man in the gradually filling room grew quiet, all eyes on her. Lucille turned away from their staring and stirred batter automatically. How many of them knew what had happened? Could any one of them be trusted? She continued stirring.

"He hurt bad?" Ebbitt asked quietly.

They knew he was hurt. How much more did they know? She shrugged her shoulders without replying. She put batter on the iron griddle with a shaking hand. Her knees threatened to rattle the oven door and she jerked in a deep, steadying breath.

Surprisingly, Dude Edwards moved around into the kitchen, grabbed a potholder, and poured coffee into cups on the counter.

"Might early here," he said cheerfully. "Coffee will hold you galoots till Lucy gets the rest ready."

Lucille drew a trembling sigh of relief as the men settled at tables. Edwards took his own cup and went to sit by Ford, their heads close together. She wondered how much they knew about Archie, and if they, too, made plans for one side or the other. Or did one persuade the other?

Lucille realized most of these outlaws probably didn't even know she had been about to escape, too. Mendoza, who had stopped their buggy, was not present. Being such a fixture they wouldn't think

about her. They only cared about their stomachs, and she was in the restaurant as always. Nothing had changed.

Black and Doaks must have known the buggy left town. Mendoza must have said something out there in the rain. In the dark, perhaps they couldn't see that the buggy and horses still stood by Archie's house. No one took time to move it to the buggy shed or put the poor animals in their stalls. Humphrey and Ferdie were likely hiding out in the upper rooms of the Elite with the saloon women.

"We got some of them. They likely hauled the bodies with them." Black paced before Stokes' bar and kicked a bar stool.

"Damn, who figgered on a cave? You reckon Bugger and Duff will be enough guard up there?" Doaks asked.

"Sure. 'Til we git back with dynamite to blow it shut." Black added a string of curses, as he continued his pacing.

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"What if it leads out the other side?"

"If we blow it shut they can't get back with no posse or nuthin' else," Black said. "Goldamn it, what bothers me is where the rest of them went. They're someplace in this valley and I don't like it. We gotta watch for a posse from the outside and those damn yahoos from the inside."

"Fat gal, reckon yer caught right here," jeered Doaks, with raised voice.

"Cook here. Cook there." Anger kept Lucille's voice steady. Every other part of her body quivered like cold bacon on her hot skillet, she was so furious. She piled plates with flapjacks and bacon and set out jugs of molasses.

Her stomach wanted to rebel at the wet wool and horse smells so strong in the room. Joe Texas hovered on the edges of the crowd. Lucille wondered if Laura remained in the cabin next door or if she had gotten away with the other Bascom people. Black and Doaks ignored Joe but told the rest what to do and where to search for any escapees who might have been cut off from reaching the cave.

Joe's true colors would show now. Lucille held her breath. Would he tell Black where he could find Clem Adams or let Doaks know where Clara could be found?

Joe casually strolled toward the kitchen. Lucille waited. He leaned an elbow on the high counter. When no one seemed to be looking their way he said, "Everything will be all right, Lucille. I'll look after Laura. She'll be over when things calm down." He took a pile of flapjacks on a plate and went to sit at one of the tables where Hutchins and Aaron Danby, the blacksmith sat.

"If they're in that cave the dynamite will end it right there," Black said casually, as though discussing the weather. The only thing Lucille ever noticed to shake up this cold, ruthless outlaw had been the death of Caroline Bricker. She knew he carried a tiny plait of her fine, silver blonde hair in his wallet.

Swede had a heavy bandage around one arm and two other men bound up each other's minor wounds. They stayed apart from Black and Doaks. Lucille wondered at the four-way division that showed

itself in the way these men reacted to one another. There were Gorman townspeople, Gorman gang members and Black gang members. No one from the Bascom crowd appeared at all, although Lucille surmised Del Hack and one of his daughters remained with his store and Bettina hid in her little shop.

"...big guy on a black horse. Hell, he'll never make it. Shot to rabbit^{ts} shit. Horse got hit, too. Couldn't see where he went. He's likely in that cave."

Lucille turned quickly at the sound of that voice and smothered a squeak of dismay. Were the rest of them marooned here? Had any of the escaped Bascom people stayed in the valley?

Finished with his breakfast, Joe reached behind Stokes' bar, brought out a shovel and started moving mud off the boardwalk. He called to the bartender from the Elite who Lucille guessed also shoveled his portion of the boardwalk. A ghostly sun came out for half a minute and disappeared in the clouds again. The rain had stopped for a time. Things had calmed down for the moment.

Laura appeared at the kitchen's back door, just as Joe came in from scraping mud. Her face reddened as she met Lucille's eyes but all she said was "Are any of Black's men here? Is it safe to come in?"

"Slip back in the corner," Lucille said. "Fill your breakfast plate right off the griddle. When they leave, can you wash dishes?"

Laura nodded assent. Excitement tinged her face as she whispered, "Lucille, did Joe tell you Mr. Adams is alive? And Clara and Clyde Boros. Joe saved Clem Adam's life. He took care of him right from the start." Admiration for Joe colored every word.

Lucille watched as Joe turned six shades of uncomfortable red. "So that's why you needed bandages, Joe. I really wondered about that so-called friend," said Lucille. "Are they safely out of the valley?"

"Clem won't budge. He plans to claim his land. He's got care and shelter. I'm not sure exactly where he plans to make a stand, but I'm betting it's the cabin on his own land that we built for a line camp."

"Good. Now I need to check on Clovine and Archie. Link, I mean Dr. Stedman, is busy with other patients, too," Lucille said. "There should be enough water on the stove for doing the dishes, Laura. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Joe leaned on the counter at the wall end. "I'll watch out for Laura. Are Gorman's wounds serious? He's not a bad sort of fella, you know."

At her nod, he added, "A couple of these birds won't be happy if he makes it, so warn Archie's friends to be watchful."

"I know." Lucille gathered up a stack of white cloths and prepared to leave. Out the back door, she gazed far up the mountainside. She had to force herself not to look at the woodpile where she'd hidden some of the Bascom bank money she hadn't given to its owners yet. If there was any paper money in those bundles, they could get wet.⁵⁷ Exactly where was that cave they talked about? Was it as easily found as Clovine had described? Had Black's men dynamited it closed? She hadn't heard an explosion yet, but it could be too far

away. Someone had finally unhitched the horses she'd driven back here. She stopped by the buggy parked at the back end of the house and retrieved her medical satchel of money and medicines. Dr. Stedman had his own, much better, medical supplies.

Sometime today she would smuggle the woodpile money bags with Mr. Hack's name on them over to his store, since he had elected to remain in the valley. They would then be his worry. Bettina's small hoard could go at the same time since no one had gotten to her at the small store she now rented. Clovine's money was in her medical bag, along with her own. She'd put that someplace in the bed the big old man lay on.

Those Bascom people who had escaped to the other side of the mountain would just have to wait for their money until they brought in help from the outside to retake their property ... if she could keep those money bags hidden that long.

* * * *

Out the other side of the mountain from the cave entrance, in the gray light of dawn, wagons provided by rancher Brown soon filled with the rescued prisoners. Through a cloudy haze, Ben saw Orvie Lukas nursing a wounded shoulder. Michael and Kenny Adams had protested not going to their dad with their mother, but he and Tom over-ruled them. They would be with their sister. They were in the first wagon.

Ben knew he bled profusely as they eased him onto one of the wagon beds alongside Orvie. Tom counted noses loudly as the teams slowly pulled the wagons down the winding track to the lower level on Brown's land.

"Who isn't here?" asked Ben, as his head wobbled back and forth with the jounce of the wagon. He felt soggy wetness in the blanket below his shoulders.

"Liden didn't make it," reported Tom. "Clovine, Laura and Mabel Hack, Lucille Martin, and Martha Adams aren't here. Eden took

Mrs. Adams to the ranch cabin where Clem will be. Del Hack stayed with his store."

The small caravan moved toward the Brown ranch. Tom hovered between Ben and his father, but with the motion of the wagons and the dim light Ben couldn't tell if any of the other wounded men were alive or not. He let himself drift into darkness even as he wondered what that red-haired outlaw chief would do. And Clovine? Was the hardy old man still alive?

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Clovine and Archie lay in their respective rooms with Tede watching over them and the safe in the big dining room. Lucille gratefully took time from her stint at their bedsides. Back at the restaurant, she would take a small bath and oversee Laura's work. Most of her pupils were gone, except for Darcy's son, Georgie. It wasn't safe for the Harolds' girls and Eddie Bricker to come to town right now. The bare slate board Archie had ordered hauled in for her, would hang blankly on the restaurant wall. Unbidden, a tear

gathered in one eye. How could anyone think him a cold-blooded killer?

Archie stared wordlessly at her through the open door of his room as Lucille returned an hour later.

"Doctor Link, how are they doing?" Lucille asked.

Link stared at her over the top of his wire-rimmed spectacles. "I just checked Mr. Clovine." Archie said nothing as the doctor examined his wounds, while Lucille stood in the doorway. His eyes betrayed him. By turns they expressed hurt, then anger and finally the blank stare of the seasoned gambler, showing nothing at all of his feelings.

Her heart ached. How could she atone for her suspicions of Archie as a bank robber? All the evidence had pointed that direction. He'd behaved like an outlaw. Why wouldn't she consider him an outlaw and robber? How could she have placed him in the same category as Corey Black and his murdering men? Or the greedy, self-centered Humphrey and Ferdie? All the gloom in the world centered on her

shoulders. The upheaval in the town, the danger from Black's men, Archie's wounds again, and Clovine's condition.

Other people seemed to be returning to their normal lives. Even Laura. Stokes stood at his bar. Hack ran his store.

A wagon train of supplies drawn by struggling horses entered down from the north. Snow enshrouded the wagon tops. Lucille heard the high shouts of the driver explaining how they had come through a howling spring blizzard in the high pass.

In spite of her exhausting schedule all that day Lucille fretted in her sleep most of the night. She worried about the escapees. She knew some were wounded. Did a dynamite blast trap them inside the cave? How soon would Archie be well? What would happen now? The empty bank safe was still in Archie's house alongside Tede's cot.

Laura and Joe took over more and more of the restaurant work so Lucille sewed in the evenings while she watched over Clovine and Archie, taking turns with Stokes and the little gunman, Tede,⁵⁹

between visits from the doctor. When the men were awake she listened as they talked politics and weather, ranching and teaching. Archie revealed very little about his personal life after the age of twenty two. She surmised something terrible had happened then that he would not talk about, though she was sure Stokes and Tede knew of it.

With the established routine of wood chopping, meals, dishwashing, and baking, she experienced a feeling of accomplishment, but not the creativity of teaching pupils. She gladly relinquished the heavier work to Joe. Her real regret was not having pupils to teach. She worried about the friction-charged atmosphere, like impending disaster, since the prisoners had escaped. Where were they? As rumored, were they truly at an established ranch?

She rose at five o'clock each morning. With a schedule and organized effort, she found a few minutes here and there to consider the strangeness of Archie's house where she cared for Clovine and Archie. It sat approximately on the lot recorded in her name at the Assessor's Office. The house was fancier than any others in the

town, and painted gray with white trim. Exploration revealed the unfinished upper floor with lumber stacked inside the rooms, waiting to be used. Doc Stedman no longer used the cot set up in one of the rooms; he preferred using a cot in the back room of his office upstairs at Hack's Store.

She carried meals to Archie's big, bare dining room. Stokes and Tede fed the wounded men and cared for their needs. The heavy bank safe sat back in a corner of the room, haunting her with its presence, scaring her spitless that it would be found empty, and she would be tortured into telling where the money was.

On her return from a trip to see the wounded men Lucille gathered her full green gingham skirts about her and watched carefully in all directions. She pulled the bank bags belonging to Del Hack from between the stacked wood. With the woodpile dwindling fast she could no longer hide the bags with ease. Her heart threatened her windpipe when she slid the bags into the shopping basket she'd carried meals in. She covered the bags with the dishtowel she used to wrap her purchases from Hack's General Store.

She had trouble disguising the fact that the weight of the basket dragged on her arm. She sauntered down the street, smiled at a little woman she took to be the elusive Mrs. Hutchins and entered Hack's store. The cool dark interior hit her in the face after the bright spring sunshine outside. Mendoza stood at the counter. He stared at her with dark, malevolent eyes and Lucille nearly swallowed her tonsils.

"Good mornin, Lucille," Mr. Hack greeted her. "What can I do for you?"

She could see his relieved expression as Mendoza walked slowly down the aisle away from them. "I need cinnamon and a little baking soda." She turned to watch Mendoza go out the door and across the boardwalk.

She leaned close and spoke softly, "Mr. Hack, I have your bags of money from the bank safe. I'm sure Black and his men are anxious to get that big safe opened and depart with the money."

"My lord, how did you manage that? Did Shafer open the vault for you?" He immediately relieved her of the heavy bags in her basket, opened his own small safe under the counter and put them safely away.

"The journal where the combination was kept got mixed in with my school books," Lucille explained. "When I heard Black and his men talk about clearing out the safe and leaving, I thought I'd better remove the money while I could and get it to its rightful owners."

"If I can help in any way, let me know. Doaks came and took away all my guns and ammunition so I can't help that way, but anything else, let me know."

"I have Bettina's one sack. I put it in my medical bag so I can go to her with that."

"Good girl! Have you heard whether my Dora is safe?"

"I haven't heard anything other than some were badly wounded. I'm sorry."

"Here's your cinnamon and soda. No charge today. I'm very grateful to have my money. I'll soon need more supplies shipped in, if those outlaws will allow it."

"Good day, Mr. Hack." Lucille headed toward the restaurant feeling a huge relief that she no longer had quite so much bank money to worry about. It hit her full force, a low blow that made her reel in her tracks. She was more of a bank robber than she accused Archie of being! The quicker she got the rest of the funds to their owners the better she would feel. She trudged on to the restaurant with her basket.

The healthy outlaws grumbled and swore at the cold meat they were given to slap between slices of her bread for their noon meals but Lucille was adamant.

"I simply don't have time to fuss with big meals at noon and at night, she told them. "I'll make a good thick soup with plenty of biscuits that will fill you up, but no fancy steaks."

Black struck her across the face for being so stubborn. Lucille⁴⁶¹ avoided any contact with the man and hid the bruise from Archie and Clovine. Stokes threatened instant reprisal and now carried a handgun. Lucille belted on her scabbard with the small knife. No one dared bother her when the massive Swede stepped in as well.

When Archie's one wound became infected, she was more than ever in his presence until it healed. Dr. Stedman had disappeared out of town. She guessed someone had smuggled him out to doctor those Bascom people remaining in the valley.

Opportunity smashed a fist at her door. As soon as Archie's health again improved, she gathered her courage. She marched into his sickroom where he sat up much more strongly than he had for a while.

"Archie, we cannot possibly allow Dude Edwards and Hank Doaks to be sheriff and deputy. We need an honest election with all the people having the right to vote for the persons they want."

He stared at her.

"What?" Lucille kneaded her apron and wiped her damp palms. "What are you thinking?" Apprehensively she stared back at him.

His blank expression changed to one of glee, beginning with a sparkle in the green eyes and spreading all over his handsome face.

He laughed uproariously and held his damaged sides. His eyes followed where she suddenly looked at the filled water pitcher on the small table beside his bed.

"Oh, no, lady; you'd just have to clean up the mess."

He grabbed her hand as she came closer and did not let go. "We'll see about that election. Stokes will help."

"Now you're laughing at me and agreeable. Why did you argue with me before?"

"I liked seeing those blue eyes of yours shooting sparks when you're really excited about something, like voting, owning land and women's rights."

"Archibald Gorman, how could you?"

"Besides, I'm a bank robber, you know. And what would your friend, Mr. Menkin, say to that? I have an idea he wants to be someone important in the town, like being sheriff. He doesn't have a blemish on his character, does he?" Bitterness coated his words, so at odds with his former laughter.

"You'll never forgive me for calling you a bank robber, will you?" Lucille said. She paced the floor at the foot of the bed. "You make me feel as low as a crawling bug." She paused, staring at him. Could he be jealous of Ben? Dared she admit she was the real bank robber?

"I don't know Mr. Menkin's feelings on the subject of being sheriff." Feeling defeated, she quietly left and crossed the hall to Clovine's² room. The less Archie knew about Ben's opposition to women voting, the better. Yet guilt nudged its way into her mind. She had her own stolen moneybags on her conscience. She was more of a

bank robber than Archie. Should she tell him? She started to return to Archie's room.

Ebbit Ford and Dude Edwards strode into Archie's room, interrupting them. "Boss." reported Ford, "I made a trip out of the valley. The Bascom people made it. Two of 'em are near dead. Thet damn Menkin is shot to rabbit shit, but he's alive. If he makes it, we're in trouble. He'll have the law in here."

"I thought Black dynamited the cave shut," Archie said. "How can they get back in? Ebbit, you'll have to face up to a trial someday anyway so you can prove you're innocent."

"There are other ways over the mountains if they want to get back here bad enough." Dude fumbled nervously with the cuffs on his latest new shirt. "Me, Black and Doaks say we should divide the gold in that safe and hightail it out of here. You can have your share, Archie, fair enough?"

Archie pounded his chair arm, raging in a powerful voice. "It will mean an invasion by the law, sooner or later. We want our own law

in this valley, not some outside marshal nosing around. If you and Doaks plan on beating it out of here, how can you plan to be sheriff and deputy, answer me that?" He continued ranting and raving about his town and his valley. Lucille took heart on her hopes for an election. Evidently, Ford and Dude didn't really agree, for she heard the door close quietly as they left without argument.

So, she thought, Ben wants to be sheriff. Comparing Archie and Ben became a habit she could not break. Though not ugly, Ben still could not match Archie's rugged good looks. Archie's green eyes were his most arresting feature, while Ben's gray eyes were very serious. Ben's nose was straight, while Archie's was large and rather aristocratic. She experienced the pull of her attraction to the unusual outlaw chief. There had been stolen kisses in her younger years, before she was overshadowed in the family by two petite stepsisters. But she had never reacted to any kiss like she had to his. Only Archie's presence had the power to steal her breath away, cause her to quiver with excitement and to put a warmth deep inside that threatened her composure. Her face became even more heated and

she clenched her fingers together. Would he ever kiss her again? He⁴⁶³ avoided talking with her lately.

She broke off the wandering thoughts. With a worried heart, she again rinsed the cloth from Clovine's head in cool water and replaced it on his fevered brow. At times he tossed recklessly and it took all Lucille's efforts to keep him from tearing open his wounds or falling from the bed.

During his delirious spells, Ben's name was mentioned time and again. He was disappointed in Ben. Why? When finally Lucille got him quieted she heard loud voices in the living room. Dude must have brought reinforcements to his arguments with Archie. She saw Black enter with Dude but Ebbitt Ford did not appear. Over to one side Tede and his big guns guarded the safe.

"...gotta git it while the gittin' is good. Damn it, Red, this gravy won't last forever. We gotta collect it an' git out. We're about done here, you know that. Those escaped prisoners will get the law in here. We want the gold in that safe divided now. Trouble with you,

you're gittin' soft ... like settlin' down." Lucille recognized Black's strident voice. "Sheriff Danforth finds you and we're all in hot water."

"You fool, you stupid fool!" roared Archie. "You're the one bringing attention in here. You rile the ranchers by taking their cattle and they'll be in here faster than a cat on a hot stove. Let the Bascom people raise their own herds and live like normal. As long as we control people like Lucille and Clovine and Hack they won't do anything. What do they care if a sheriff is after me? Just leave their cattle alone, hear?"

"The boys wanna make one big drive an' then head for Arizona Territory."

"Then go! Get out! There isn't going to be any gold divided. Your gang had nothing to do with taking that gold."

"You callin' me a liar? Humphrey and Ferdie both promised there was gold here for the taking. I mean to have my share."

"Black, you make me so damn mad." Lucille heard Archie's agitated breathing. She stepped into the room, fearful he would damage his healing wounds. His huge grin surprised her as he faced Black. "You couldn't beat me to a draw even if I did call you a liar. If Humph and Ferdie told you there was gold for you here, they lied, not me."

Infuriated, Black let out a stream of curses, his eye on the guns held by Tede. He ended with "Don't be so double-damn sure," as he stormed out the door.

Lucille saw Archie wipe the sweat from his brow and let out a gusty breath as he tried to relax. Tede very slowly put away his guns¹⁶⁴ Thoughtfully she gazed a few moments in the direction Black had gone. Didn't Archie realize Black was a back shooter?

She moved quietly beside Archie, feeling his forehead for fever with the back of her hand.

"You smell good, Lucy, comin' close like that," said Archie softly. As though sorry he spoke of it he quickly asked, "Are you making good money at our restaurant?"

Lucille stared at him in surprise. His transition from anger, to tender, to cool amazed her. She gave what she thought was a deep, comical curtsy and said, "Thank you, kind sir. And yes, sir, we are doing well. They are a captive clientele with only one restaurant in town."

He laughed and shook his head. Just as suddenly he switched to a frown as he nodded his curly red head once more, then stared in deep thought at the floor in front of his chair.

Puzzled, Lucille waited a moment, then shrugged and returned to Clovine's bedside to check his fever. He had fallen into a deep sleep, his fever abated and Lucille presently dozed in a big old rocker by his side.

Sunlight streamed in the window when Archie shouted her awake. "There's about forty men wanting breakfast. Tede will see that the old man is all right."

Seeing that Clovine did indeed rest quietly, Lucille hurried across the alley to the restaurant. Laura had coffee made while Joe fired up the big old stove. Since Joe won her in the poker game the outlaws left the girl alone, Lucille noticed. The two who spoke out of turn had found themselves flat on their backs in the slushy mud, right outside her dining room door, with Joe standing over them, fists raised.

Throwing together flapjack batter Lucille soon had breakfast ready. The customers were a mixture of outlaws, cowhands, gamblers, businessmen and just plain people. The cobbler who had made her shoes came in with the blacksmith for coffee.

Lucille's arms tired as she stirred and flipped the hot cakes. That this was now her income made a difference in how she viewed the work, but she'd rather be teaching. Teaching gave her more

influence on a girl's or a woman's outlook on life, as well as guiding boys in the right direction to make them good men.

After eight o'clock Lucille made a thin broth for Clovine and a plate of flapjacks for Archie. Stokes clinked bottles together as he dusted them at his bar. She left while Laura did dishes.

Archie said very little when she put his breakfast on a side table. He seemed almost grim this morning. Tede went to eat while Archie^{#65} was awake and didn't return to the house. Lucille realized Archie could hear anyone who came near the safe and he kept his guns handy. She left the room as he started to eat.

She crossed the hall to the small bedroom. "Could you drink a little broth this morning, Clovine?"

"Howdy, Lucille." His once strong voice was barely audible.

Lucille supported his shoulders and held the cup. "Clovine," Lucille whispered, "I have to tell you. I'm so afraid Black and his cronies will want to open that safe in Archie's dining room."

"I got ten thousand in there," Clovine said weakly. He fell asleep before she could tell him about the empty safe, and that his own money was now attached to the rope springs under his bed. She checked bandages and plumped the pillow before hurrying back to the restaurant.

Stokes ate at one of the tables, then she saw him cross the alley behind the restaurant, presumably to care for Clovine's and Archie's more personal needs.

"All this hurry, hurry is tiresome," Lucille said. "Laura, I think you and I should take time for a ride in Archie's buggy. Stokes cleaned it after Clovine got shot in it, and I'm sure we can hitch a team to it for a ride in the country."

"Hey, you!" Black shouted. "Where you think you're goin'?"

"We need to get away from four walls for a while, Mr. Black," Lucille said. Her mouth went dry and she held her arms close to her body to keep the packets of coffee beans in her sleeves from rattling.

"Doaks, search that buggy. They ain't takin' nothin' out to whoever made it into the hills where we can't find them."

It was too warm for jackets on this spring day so they didn't search their clothes but the two outlaws searched the buggy thoroughly. Doaks reached along the buggy seat and pressed the bulk of her skirt against her thigh.

"Get your filthy hands off my leg!" Lucille brought the whip stock down on Doak's hand. She flicked the whip over the horse's head and they drove out of town.

* * * *

The second week of their buggy trips Lucille hid well-wrapped bacon in her leg of mutton sleeves and Laura carried a small cloth sack of beans atop her head inside her bonnet.

"They may not even be in the hills," said Lucille to Laura, "but I know someone took Martha a different direction than Clovine and I were to go, and Clara is out here someplace with Clyde Boros."

They paused to rest the buggy horses by a clump of tag alders and scrub willows.

"Lucille! Lucille, it's Clyde Boros." He slipped from the cover of the brush and over to the buggy. "We've used up our supplies. There's eight of us at the Adam's ranch for now. Mr. and Mrs. Adams, Clara, and me. Toby from the Brown's ranch is there and the fellow who was in the cabin watching cattle is on our side. Eden Charles comes and goes between his cattle and the cabin. Orvie was wounded but doin' all right."

"Who else got away? We heard they blasted the cave shut."

"I don't know. Clem is weak after we hauled him down from the mountains. You got any meat? We can't shoot and we're sick of trappin' those big eared rabbits." Clyde put a hand on the buggy frame and looked up at them, in-between keeping an eye out all around them.

Laura took the beans from under her bonnet and Lucille handed over the bacon. "We'll try to bring more but they watch us very closely and search the buggy." Lucille said.

"I'll watch for you. That's all I can do until Ben gets enough men in here to retake our property. We got in touch with Ken Harolds and Forie Drescher is with him. Your man, Charlie Ash and that woman, Cora, are way up in the north part of the valley someplace. He heads over the north pass when they need supplies."

"It may take awhile. Ben has been wounded, and they blasted the cave shut at this end," Laura told Clyde. "Joe can try to get some things out to you."

"I overheard Archie tell Clovine the Bascom people can have their land. He just wants his town buildings to rent out, and his own ranch," Lucille said. "It's Black's gang who does all the killing and rustling."

Both Laura and Clyde gave her a knowing look for her defense of Archie Gorman, but Lucille didn't care. Too many people misjudged him.

"We best get back," said Lucille. She turned the team and set them to a nice trot back toward town.

"If there are eight at that cabin," said Laura, "how many more are on our side against Black's killers? I counted fifteen of Black's men, and a few more that only show up once in a while."

"I don't think there's any danger from the ten saloon women. I feel sorry for Darcy and her son, Georgie, but if they stay in their shack they'll be all right." Lucille looked over at Laura and smiled. "I saw the sign Joe put on your cabin door, about your marriage and the date. Until we get a real preacher in here, that's as married as can be. Folks will respect that."

"I think we can count on Mr. Hutchins and Aaron Danby, the⁴⁶⁷ blacksmith, to be on our side."

"You know, that's the first I've heard what the blacksmith's name is. So many just call him Smithy. I don't think Black's men will frighten him much."

"We don't know that for sure," said Laura. "Doaks and Mendoza have frightened some of them into staying out of taking sides. Did you hear that Mr. Hutchins got a letter from a lawyer who said he has been cleared of all charges against him, whatever they were?"

Lucille slapped the reins on the horses and hurried them back to town where Tede took over parking the buggy and putting up the horses.

When she made sure she was alone Lucille again brought down the two journals mistakenly added to her school supplies. She noticed from the maps inside where the various ranch lands were. She also found the list of monies that had been held in Shafer's bank safe. The total scared her so much her hands trembled violently. What a horrible responsibility she had taken! Since the bags were labeled with the owner's names she didn't worry about that part. Worrying

about getting them to those owners made her quake like the aspen leaves now covering the trees in the foothills. Thankfully, some of the bags were already delivered. Until all were with the owners she could be charged with robbing a bank. Looking at the maps again, Lucille noted where Archie had selected his ranch site.

Laura came over from her cabin to help peel potatoes. "I wouldn't count on Ebbit Ford or Swede too much," Laura said quietly. "Joe says he's not sure where they stand." She looked over at Lucille and smiled. "You know, your hands are as slim as mine. How long do you think you can fool people by pretending to be heavy? I don't think they'll have any more poker contests, do you?"

"I surely hope not." Lucille changed the subject. "Black brought more strangers into town. I think they stole a lot of cattle. Anyway, we'll need more potatoes and meat for tonight."

"I heard one of them mention it was a good cattle drive."

Joe came inside during the last of their conversation. "You better make all the money you can off these rustlers. They'll head on out

again, going north to sell the stolen cattle. I've been helping Eden Charles move his cattle back in the hills where they won't be picked up along the way when the big herd goes through."

"Have you seen Clem and Martha?" asked Laura.

"They settled in good. There's good water and they added on to the cabin that was already on their land. I took them a quarter of that last elk I brought in here. You need any help?"

They all busied with getting the evening meal out of the way. Laura and Joe took care of cleaning up. Lucille packed her basket with food for the invalids.

"Archie is up and about enough but Clovine is taking longer to get well. They talk all day. I can't imagine what they have in common."

A light rain had fallen as she picked her way across the muddy ground between the restaurant and Gorman's house, carrying the basket of food. She knocked on the door in case Archie was up but not dressed. No answer. She knocked again. Had he forgotten? He

acted queer, especially since Ford had returned from outside the valley with a pile of mail from the Benson train depot. Mr. Hutchins had received good news. Had Archie gotten bad news?

Lucille decided that was enough warning of her presence. Archie's roast beef and Clovine's good thick soup would be cold.

"Mr. Gorman!" She pushed open the outside door and entered the dining room.

"C'min, c'min." A door she had been so curious about, on the far side of the room, opened, and the big outlaw's silhouette stood out against a well-lighted room beyond. Wood smoke hazed the room from a recently started fireplace. Lucille noted the silhouette seemed most unusual but kept her eyes on the food basket as she carried it in. He shut the door behind her.

Looking around, Lucille gasped in amazement.

"Put ... put it here." Archie looked bleary-eyed drunk. She stared, a little frightened.

He wore tight buckskin knee britches and a white ruffled shirt gapped over his bandaged chest. A wide, clumsily knotted cravat had a glaringly huge diamond stickpin off center. That looked fine on his virile form. Completing his costume was a yellow striped vest with a green velvet jacket so tight he could barely move. A seam ripped loose. That made her really wonder about him. What terrible news had the mail brought that reduced this arrogant man to a despondent drunk?

He bowed low. "Dear Lady, I find that I'm no better than the rest of my family. In trouble with the law. Lord Archibald Albert Alfred Whit-Whitwheel Gorman-Jones, at your service, my lady." He tried to click his heels and almost fell.

"Oh, my god, what brought this on?" Lucille said. "The only English Lords I know of are miles away in Cheyenne."

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CHAPTER 11

Lucille stared at the ungainly figure before her. Not that he wasn't grandly dressed, even with all his bandages. From his straw boater hat with its bright band to his polished black, low shoes, he resembled her imagined version of an English fop, ready for a night of heavy gambling. He smelled strongly of brandy and even more of heavy perfumes he must have spilled in his inebriated state. Never having seen him drunk before, she felt she had stepped into a giant-sized crazy dream, or more likely a nightmare.

"I might as well be my father's son," Archie muttered as he stumbled and almost fell on his way to the table. "Join ... join me."

Lucille gazed about this room; setting the position of the door in her mind should she need to escape. Heavy burgundy velvet drapes covered the windows completely so no light got out and no one could see in. Oil paintings of men and women of the 1700s hung on the long walls of the room. A large tapestry covered another wall, depicting several queerly shaped horses and riders in red jackets

with dogs circling about. The long glass in an ornate, dark wood frame really caught her attention. She saw her reflection full length and almost full width in the long, narrow mirror.

"Lord ... Lord..." Gorman waved the ring-covered fingers of one hand. Lucille noted several sparkling rings on his other hand as well. He fell into his chair, stared at the food she set out, then slowly started to eat.

"Are the paintings ancestors from England?" Lucille asked.

"Yeah." He now ate with gusto, but that appeared the only resemblance to the Archie Lucille was used to.

"Lord Archibald Albert Alfred Whitwheel Gorman-Jones." He waved a fork in the air. "My father said so. He was here again last night after the gold. My father thinks I'll present his lordship with that safe full of gold. If I'm being called a robber, I may as well be a robber." What despair could have brought him to this state.

Lucille winced, feeling guilty for calling him a bank robber, when in reality he owned a bank. At the thought of the safe supposedly full of money Lucille couldn't tell if her skin goose pimples came from her neck or down from her head. She trembled all over. Her mind blanked and her senses whirled. What if he blew the safe open and found it empty? She looked at the expensive, though badly worn, carpet under her feet, at the velvet sofa and the brocade covered chairs. How on earth had he gotten these strange furnishings here? Heavy side tables, heavy chairs, and the fancy freestanding mirror. All these things must have come from England.

Eating helped this strange Gorman regain a little sobriety. "We'll have that election you want. There will be a town mayor and a magistrate to uphold the law and I will have a s—steward to oversee all my properties. Father wants balls and operas and ... hell, I've never even seen an opera."

"Oh, my goodness, I must feed Clovine. His soup will be cold. You finish eating and I'll be right back." Lucille fled, trying to get her tangled thoughts in order.

Archie had pushed aside his plate when she reluctantly returned. She feared what she would find. She wondered if Clovine knew this side of Archie, but he'd said nothing when she'd gone to see if he had enough to eat and was comfortable. Deciding it would be better if fewer people knew Archie was drunk, she said nothing.

"One of your paintings shows a huge castle, Archie," Lucille said when she rejoined him. "Was it your father's home in England?"

"Grandmother cooked in that place. Grandfather was the Lord Gorman-Jones. Pa should have been the next lord, but they called him a bastard and deported him, Ferdie's mum, the parlor maid, and Ferdie. Ferdie's mum died on the ship. In Boston Pop met my mother. I've never seen England." He struggled from his chair, wobbled unsteadily and took her hand and placed it on his arm as he led her to another painting.

"That's him, the old goat. Pa went back to England when he was twenty-eight years old. He shot his half-brother, who had become the Lord Gorman-Jones. Pa made off with all the family jewels

Granddad hadn't gambled away. He stole these paintings and some of the furniture from the last castle they owned. Stokes brought it all here from Boston."

Archie grabbed up a bottle of wine and drank deeply. "I heard they sent the Bow Street Runner fellas over here to get them back. Pa¹ and Ferdie stay on the run ahead of them. It's Danforth who'll catch me and hang me."

Lucille watched in dismay as he drank again.

"Here I am and here you are, Miss Lucy." He shook his big head in confusion. "Having trouble getting things organized. Lucy, you think I should ... well, no, shan't bother a lady's pretty head. If a damned ... damned witness gets killed again I got no chance. Even Frank Gerber can't save me. My own Pa just told me so. Says we gotta keep this valley for ourselves. Ferdie will tell ... oh, hell, what's the use?"

Lucille couldn't think what to say. Who was Frank Gerber? His lawyer?

"Lucy, it's your blue eyes that get me in trouble. I could just be an old ... young ... old outlaw and hide here forever." Archie swayed toward her, staring into her widened blue eyes. "Look at those eyes! Blue as the sky, throw sparks they do when you're excited. They make promises I can't ignore. I gotta prove I'm innocent so I can look at those blue eyes every day of my life without you bein' ashamed of me."

"Archie, I'm not ashamed. I'm proud of your town and what you've done here. It's Black and his men who have ruined everything."

Leaning heavily on her arm now, they circled the room several times, very slowly. Each time they passed the table Gorman helped himself to another pull on the wine bottle. Lucille said very little. Her astonishment kept her from thinking clearly. How could she get out of here? How much wine did it take to knock him out?

What are you trying to do? Who is Danforth? Or Frank Gerber? What have you done that a letter in the mail throws you into such drunken despair?

"I better get back to my kitchen." Her kitchen was a safe haven from danger, from queer happenings and it was a place to gather her wits.

He waved her away imperiously as he toppled onto a heavy gold brocade covered chair. She heard a gentle snore as she hastily left the room.

* * * *

The carved wood of the chair cut the back of his neck. Thunder pounded in his skull. He grimaced at the foul taste in his mouth. The empty wine bottle glared back at him from the ornate, marble-topped pedestal table.

"Never could handle wine." Archie looked down at the stained front of a dingy yellow and green satin vest. The buttons strained the buttonholes and one button was missing. Sight of a grayish white froth of limp lace at his wrists made him groan. Green velvet jacket sleeves pulled at his arms. One huge flex of his shoulders and chest

sent buttons flying, seams ripped and his head wanted to split several different ways. He groaned aloud.

Not in ten years had he indulged in wine. Not in five years had he been drunk out of his senses. Furiously he tore off the rags of someone's old splendor. Not his. Never his. No matter how Pa talked. He stood in his plain old under drawers and britches.

What had caused his lapse?

Frank Gerber's letter!

He dropped back into the ornate chair, almost upsetting it. Harry Danforth, Sheriff Harry Danforth, had located the small bank Archie owned. According to Attorney Frank Gerber, Danforth had staked out two men there, waiting for Archie's next visit. Frank had located one more witness in Archie's favor but the man was a weakling, therefore, not too reliable. His strongest witness had been killed, the weakling remained.

Archie pulled a green silk shirt from a drawer and put it on. Wishing mightily for some of Lucille's good coffee he wadded the green and yellow rags together under one arm and limped his way into the dining room and locked the door to the opulent room. He stomped on his boots in his house's unused kitchen, then gathered two days of ancient newspapers and some matches.

His head pounded like native drums. His stomach lurched in all directions. Outside in the fresh air his hands shook as he crumpled the papers, added the shredded green velvet jacket and yellow vest and set the whole thing afire.

His most despairing thoughts of all included his inability to prove he'd killed the glory-seeking son of Sheriff Harry Danforth in self-defense.

Lucille would never believe him, nor love him. The last he remembered, Lucille had hurried out the door to get away from him.

* * * *

Lucille quickly gathered up dishes and coffee pot. She let herself out, closing the door to the strange room firmly. She stopped and stared into the corner of the house's dining room, where the safe sat³ covered with a purple velvet drape. Once she found the room's outer doorknob in the dark, she rushed across to her kitchen.

"Whew!" Lucille sat on the plain wood chair at the kitchen table, glad Laura and Joe had gone. *I can't believe it! I wonder if Stokes knows all this. Of course he does. Does anyone else know? Archie won't even remember I was there. At least I hope not. Why would someone need to save him? From what?*

When Archie nursed his aching head and cursed himself for drinking too much, what would she say to him? What dark secret did he hide? What crimes had he committed? She would rather believe Ferdie and Humphrey were the guilty parties. Had they gotten Archie in trouble? When did Humphrey sneak across to visit Archie? He'd never seemed fatherly. He occupied one of the fancy bedrooms in Archie's house only when he didn't sleep off a gambling and drinking bout at the Elite Saloon and Hotel.

How much did Clovine know? Or Stokes? Sunlight streamed through the west windows and began to dip behind the mountains but Lucille still hadn't talked to Stokes. He avoided any hint she might want to get him alone. Nevertheless, she caught his strange looks in her direction.

Laura arrived early the next morning to help Lucille with the cooking. She'd learned fast and her help was appreciated, and paid for from the restaurant income.

Lucille went to the well to fill the big coffee pots.

"What is that strange smell?" Laura asked from the doorway.

"I think Archie is burning old rags," Lucille replied. She didn't tell Laura those rags were yellow striped and green velvet. What Laura couldn't see she couldn't talk about. Lucille carried the two filled coffee pots to the back door and came inside the kitchen.

Hearing a commotion outside the restaurant's front doorway Lucille and Laura rushed to the big front window. Joe appeared on the

boardwalk, his sleeve bloodied and his hat pushed back over his long hair. "Lucille, we'll need you. The Doc must be out on a call," he said.

Lucille watched as Laura flew to him, not letting him finish and nearly knocking him over as he helped carry a man into the dining room. Lucille's heart quieted in relief as she realized the wounded⁴ man was not one of the Bascom people.

"I ain't hurt, Laura," insisted Joe. "It's this other feller got blood all over me. Get a table ready so we can lay him out." He heaved a gusty sigh as he and a man Lucille didn't recognize knocked aside a bench seat and stretched the man out on a long dining table.

Joe and Laura's embrace turned to tender kisses as Lucille turned back to the kitchen for her rag box and the packets of healing powders. Stokes appeared and helped two men straighten the man's body. He groaned as Lucille bent over him and Joe now removed his bloodied, fleece-lined jacket. Lucille peeled away his torn shirt and long underwear sleeve.

"I'll help," insisted Joe. "You fellers can join the rest of the gang at the bar."

Across the wounded cowboy, Lucille stared at Stokes. Stokes' unreadable black eyes stared back a long moment before he turned to tend his bar. The cowboy's wound showed partial healing. A slight medicinal smell came to Lucille's nose as she sponged away seeping blood.

"Ain't nuthin' to see, boys," said Joe, as Lucille quickly sponged over the wound. Joe herded the curious onlookers away as Stokes returned with a half-full bottle of whiskey.

"Owww!" yelled the cowboy as Stokes let a stream of his potent stock run onto the open part of the wound.

Lucille slapped a pad on the bleeding groove and bound it firmly as Stokes returned to serve those at his bar. Lucille wondered if he would report this to Archie. She knew his enigmatic gaze rested on her as she and Joe helped the injured man sit up on the edge of the table.

"He can take the empty cabin behind the restaurant for a couple days," suggested Joe on a hurried breath.

Hank Doaks sauntered into the room, followed by Black. They went to the bar.

"Swede is over at Archie's, Lucille," said Stokes tersely. "He's in bad shape. Black, you got some explainin' to do."

Lucille heard no more as she gathered her medical supplies. She turned and said, "Laura, would you keep things going here? Joe, I may need your help."

"Yes'm," came his meek reply as he followed her across the alley to Archie's house. "I'll help this fella into the bed in the empty cabin^s and be right with you."

"What is going on, Joe?" Lucille asked at once when he closed the cabin door where the wounded man now rested on the bed. "That wound is almost healed. It is not a new one."

Joe grinned at her. "Lannie's a friend of mine. Sure surprised me to see him. I almost gave the whole show away. I'll tell you and Laura the story later. If it works, it's sure a good plan of Ben's. Do you need me to help with Swede?"

"Tede may need help undressing him. And you can keep an eye out for Dr. Stedman when he returns."

Lucille's insides quivered at the chances they were taking. She hurried into the house but avoided looking at the locked, but empty safe, in the corner of Archie's dining room.

In a small bedroom, Tede mopped at a gaping hole in Swede's huge, hairy barrel chest. At the same time, Joe tried to stop a head wound from spilling blood all over the wool blankets. Lucille hurried to help get the big man bandaged and as comfortable as possible.

"Dr. Stedman just drove his buggy in," Joe said. He ran out the door, motioning the doctor to come to the big house. Lucille gladly turned over the medical work to Link Stedman.

Once she returned to her kitchen Lucille demanded, "Out with it, Joe." She pressed a couple dollars from the restaurant cash drawer into Darcy's hand for helping Laura while she tended Swede's wounds. Darcy and her little boy, Georgie, left by going out the far backwing doors of the restaurant.

Joe glanced around where Stokes washed glasses at his bar. "You want it short and sweet? Here goes," said Joe quietly. "Keep an eye out for anyone coming this way."

"I think Stokes already guessed something isn't quite right about the cowboy's wound," warned Lucille. "I would be very careful to keep your friend out of sight awhile. He is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"Well, sort of, in a way," admitted Joe. "Dude Edwards sent me to watch up at the pass, you understand. About two o'clock I got damn sleepy and dozed off a little. All of a sudden I heard gunshots. Three men are riding hell bent for election toward the pass. I brought up my field glasses and recognized Corey Black. I know Colorado¹⁷⁶ went out with him and Swede and Doaks."

"Where is Colorado?"

"Got himself killed robbing a bank in Cheyenne," Joe replied. "A posse chased Black, Swede and Doaks. I had to throw a line over their saddle horns, and get my pony to help them broomtails up the muddy trail, they was that tuckered. They was mud from asshole to appetite and bleedin' somethin' fierce. Is Swede gonna make it, Lucille?"

"It doesn't look good, Joe. He's very badly hurt. You could clean up your language as well as the mud still all over my dining room."

"Sorry. Swede shoulda stuck to cattle drivin' for Red, steada tryin' to rob a bank."

"And where does your friend come in?" Lucille asked.

"We laid a cover fire. My friend left his horse and come on up the muddy trail. So we brung Swede and Lannie in and here we are." Joe grinned a huge grin, very obviously savoring his moment of

suspense while Lucille and Laura stared at him expectantly, knowing there was more.

"Lannie is here with a message for Ben Menkin!" Joe tucked his thumbs in his gun belt and his chest puffed out.

"But Ben isn't here," Lucille said. "He can't get into the valley because the cave has been dynamited shut."

"He will be! Don't know exactly when, but soon. He don't need to come through the cave."

"This is really great news," said Laura. "But will there be gun fighting all over again? I can do without that kind of excitement."

"Somehow we need to keep both hospital and restaurant going, in spite of all the promised action. I'll get Darcy back to spend more time helping out in the kitchen. She's been dropping hints she would like to continue working here if she can."

Since Joe's report of a message for Ben Lucille couldn't keep from watching the restaurant entrance, and back door. What message? When would he come? What would she say to him?

How could she tell him her feelings had changed? Since Dora Hack left the valley with the Bascom people she must be with Ben. That could mean there was no need to worry over her own change of feelings in the half-hearted relationship with the wagon master. She'd wish them both well should the occasion suggest it. How sure had she become that Archie meant more to her than Ben? Would seeing Ben again make a difference?

Several times over the next few days Lucille caught Black's suspicious gaze on Joe whenever he and Lannie appeared. Her restaurant became a battleground. Black had another terrific shouting match with Archie over the bank robbery he, Doaks and Swede had pulled off. Black refused to discuss how much they'd gotten or any division of it.

"If you can keep from dividin' the money in that safe in your house, Red, then I don't divide what me and the boys got. I'm payin' your Pa safety money as it is."

"What you and Doaks got, you mean. Colorado is dead and Swede as good as dead. I don't want your dirty money. I don't want any part of your blasted schemes. Keep them out of my valley. We were all safe here until you came in."

Archie came over for a piece of Lucille's dried apple pie while Black swaggered out the door. "Those fellers are a greedy, murderous lot, Lucy," said Archie mournfully, as he slowly ate. "I wish we were done with them. Hell of it is, could I ever really be free of them or will they keep getting even for whatever reason?"

Lucille could only listen and keep to herself that those men wouldn't be here if it wasn't for his greedy father.

"Black's outlaws watch the pass constantly. They patrol the town even while my Gorman people and your remaining Bascom people continue their regular routines the best they can. It's got the

blacksmith so nervous he quarreled with his best friend, Hutchins. Your friend Bettina is scared to go anyplace except to visit Mrs. Hutchins because they live close by."

Lucille tried talking election several times but even Mr. Hack suggested she wait until Ben returned with enough men to help drive out Black's outlaws.

"I'd put my money on Archie Gorman over Black anytime," Hack told her. "I visit Clovine now and again. He claims Archie isn't the bad one here. He says he wants to try his hand at learnin' to run a ranch and live a peaceful life for a change."

"Really? I hadn't heard that." Lucille left Hack's store with a lighter heart. The brief elation didn't last.

The outlaws played cards at night, groused around town and in general created havoc much of the time. After a few days, when that became boring, some of them spent their days exploring the surrounding countryside. A couple even went fishing and brought Lucille their catch of whitefish to be fried.

Women did not go on the street without a male escort. Lucille worried excessively whether they watched for Ben and help from the outside, as she and the Bascom people did. What if they had seen the Adams' ranch where riders were coming and going?

While being busy baking for the restaurant, moisture gathered on her heated brow. If only she could get rid of the uncomfortable, warm padding. The outlaws made nasty remarks about her person, though they never criticized her cooking. She glanced out to the cooler dining room and wished she could take time for a tall glass of cold lemonade.

In the restaurant entrance, a big man stood about six foot three, with broad shoulders almost touching each side of the doorway. He stood almost as tall as Archie, Lucille thought. It had to be Ben! His heavy sheepskin jacket had pulled apart at the sleeve seam. A wind burned face above a thick, very black beard, showed amid the rabbit fur of a heavy hooded, short cape. He looked overly warm as he slung off the cape. All eyes watched as he moved toward the restaurant kitchen.

Smelling strongly of wet wool and bacon grease, he dragged a bundle of pelts, whose rank green odor wafted into her kitchen. Lucille stared up from arranging cups on the shelf just below the counter top. She peeped over its edge. The surprise of Ben's actual presence crashed against her over-wrought senses. She came slowly upright and looked into steady smoke-gray eyes under dark brows. The small identifying scar at the corner of his left eye caused more heart thunder. Here at last could be the resolution of the town's problems!

She turned quickly, blindly reaching for the big coffee pot and a cup, almost knocking one to the floor. "You're a ... stranger," she finally managed, her voice sounding miles down a tunnel. "Did you come from the north?"

"Whatever happened to the three little coons you told the youngsters about?" His voice was barely above a whisper. She'd told that story⁷⁹ to the wagon train youngsters while they were traveling to this valley. Wasn't Ben sure she'd recognized him? "I'd appreciate that coffee."

Lucille turned away, pretending to wipe a spot from the counter because she knew all eyes in the room were on them. She kept her voice even as she set a cup for coffee on the counter. "We've been expecting you." She set an opened tin of canned milk beside the coffee.

Ben Menkin partially turned his back to her, with an elbow hooked back on the counter edge. He said loudly enough for a few others to hear, "I come down the pass to the north. Takin' a few pelts." His deep voice developed a creak. Every outlaw in the place went silent. "Ain't hardly used muh voice all winter. Kinda rusty." He drank coffee. "No sign out. What place is this?"

"Could be Gorman," said Lucille. "Or some say it should be Bascom."

"No matter. You got ham 'n' eggs?"

With a nod, Lucille hurried to the kitchen table, her voluminous gray skirts flopping. Her trembling hands sliced ham. Ben Menkin was here! All hell could break loose now!

"How long have you been in the valley?" Archie limped over and started questioning the trapper while she set his breakfast on the counter. She accepted his money and put it in the cash drawer.

"Oh," drawled the trapper easily. "'Bout a day 'n a half. Ain't been down this side of the mountains since sixty-six. Changed a heap, it has."

Lucille became conscious of Ben's gray eyes upon her, then Archie. Luckily, Archie finally looked the other way. She fled to the safety of the far end of her kitchen lest she somehow betray Ben. She sat on her cot, behind the curtain, unable to think clearly.

Knowing she could not hide, she returned to wipe off an already clean table and to wash a few dishes, but it did not ease the awareness of Archie's presence beside Ben. She blotted her moist forehead. The high ruffled collar of her blue blouse and the goose down matting of her padded corset were suddenly much too warm. How would the two men get along? Archie had changed a lot but would his suspicions be aroused by Ben's presence? Where would

he stand should there be a battle? She was certain his loyalties lay¹⁸⁰ with his own Gorman people. Were most of them innocent like Mr. Hutchins had proven to be? Would Ben and the outside world still class them as outlaws?

"Coffee, Lucy, darlin'?" Archie said, this time with a thick Irish brogue, as though staking his claim on her.

Lucille brought coffee and a cup, while her face heated to scarlet. She didn't look at Ben. With another wipe of the spotless work counter she returned to her work. The tilted out metal flour bin stayed open nicely so she could measure out flour for baking. Of late though, one hinge had come loose and the whole bin slid sideways. It slid now, revealing the blank square of rotting floor beneath. Impatiently she pushed it back in place. With trembling hands, she measured other dry ingredients into the flour for the noon biscuits before hurrying across the alley to what she called her infirmary.

"Ben is here, Clovine," Lucille said as she checked the older man's bandages. He sat in a chair by his bed. "I'm glad you'll soon be on your feet again."

"I sure hope no fight comes up between Archie's people and Ben's men."

Lucille looked at him in amazement. Had she heard right?

A groan from a room further down the hall sent her hurrying in that direction with Clovine dragging more slowly behind. Swede's bandages were soaked with blood.

With Clovine's one-handed help, Lucille did her best with the badly wounded outlaw. She had a soft spot in her heart for the big man because of his partiality for her. Archie usually glared jealously whenever she went in with medicines and bandages so trips were made as much as possible when he left the house. Right now he was occupied with Ben in the restaurant.

Being the center of male attention renewed feelings from a past long buried. She wasn't sure she enjoyed it as much at age twenty-three. Back then she'd known what a look from her deep blue eyes did to men since she'd turned fifteen. She hadn't been quite so tall, or quite so heavy then. She half grinned, remembering how jealous her plain looking stepsisters had been.

"Don't none of his cronies visit the fellow," said Clovine, and Lucille's thoughts came back to where she was and what she was doing.

"All we can do is try to make him comfortable. I'm giving him æ¹ little laudanum to help him rest and not feel so much pain."

"I fed him the broth Tede brought over earlier, but he didn't take much."

"He's already asleep again." Lucille packed her small satchel and prepared to leave.

"Clovine, what will we do now? I can feel such a foreboding in the air, like a tornado is coming and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

"With a sheriff and posse waiting outside the pass, and Sheriff Danforth after Archie, something is bound to explode soon. Black went too far with that bank robbery. We both know Humphrey and Ferdie will desert like rats from a sinking ship. The town's business people will hold onto what's theirs as much as they can."

"And Mr. Adams is holding onto his ranch. Can we count on getting word to Ken Harolds and Forie Drescher for any help?" Lucille asked.

"Archie sent a couple hands out to help Harolds hold onto his own cattle. Orvie Lukas and Eden Charles are out there. Nobody can pay anyone though, with no money. It's all in that bank in Archie's dining room."

"No, Clovine." Lucille moved close up beside the aging rancher. "I took all the money out of that bank. Yours is fastened on the

underside of your bed. Mr. Hack has his and Bettina's in his small safe. Joe took the Adams money out to them. The rest is hidden. I worry constantly that someone will find it."

"You amaze me, Lucille! I'll do what I can, now that I'm getting on my feet again. I could sneak out of here on one of those fancy horses Humphrey brought in along with his carriage team. You best get back to your restaurant." The old man's blue eyes suddenly took on a twinkling shine. "We can't have Archie suspecting you're spending all your time with an old man."

Lucille left the house with her head spinning? All those things Clovine knew! How much more did he know or guess? Did he and Archie discuss all these things? Then how much did Archie know, or guess?

What did the outlaw, Black, know or guess? He had fifteen or twenty men ready and able to create more disturbance than anyone in the valley wanted. They were a very real danger to them all.

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CHAPTER 12

It seemed like the wind blew constantly in this valley. Lucille guessed she'd have to get used to it. There certainly was no chance to go elsewhere. There were days when the kitchen with its cooking odors and the cramped area behind the burlap curtain nearly drove her crazy. She and Laura could hardly wait for a slack day when they could take a horse and buggy out into the country.

Guards at all the outer limits of town restricted most travel. Being thoroughly searched if they wanted to go for a buggy ride often became too embarrassing an ordeal. Being caged inside a town with one dusty main street and only a couple short side streets, but with so many outlaws was also daunting.

This weekday, with its howling wind and blowing dust, seemed a good one to stay inside. Most of the outlaws were either in the Elite Saloon or the restaurant and she kept busy fixing coffee and serving pie or cake. Laura and Darcy handled the basic meals. Joe carried in wood and hauled water, then disappeared.

The presence of Ben Menkin in town made little change in Lucille's outlook on life but perversely she wondered whether he noticed she had lost two chins and now the bones in her hands actually stood out. She chided herself that there was no reason for him to notice, since while traveling in the wagon train, she had kept occupied teaching the children and telling them stories. Dora Hack took up much of his time. It amused Lucille that the girl seemed to know exactly when to appear at his side. Surprisingly some Bascom people still considered her and Ben a couple, possibly because Dora was so much younger. She'd even overheard debates going on about whether she or Dora would win the man. She assumed that during the boring travel they had nothing much to think about. Indulging in a contest had no appeal when she didn't really want the prize.

Today Lucille wore the blue dress that matched her blue eyes, with a collar not so high on her neck as usual. The full sleeves were tightened at her small wrists. Contrarily her apron snugged in at her waist like a rope around a potato sack. Her voluminous skirt swished as she hurried back and forth in the kitchen. The heat of the³

kitchen put her thoughts on removing one layer of padding from her corset, or all the padding.

Would Archie notice? With both Archie and Ben available she should be safe from outlaw attention. Besides, the poker games had been discontinued. Black and his gang were much too involved in plotting other activities. What that outcome might be was a constant source of worry.

"Cold day," said the young cowboy, Lannie, as he appeared at her counter. "Don't spring never come in this country?"

"The wind is terrible," agreed Lucille as she set coffee before him. She dropped his money in a drawer she had had Virgil build under her counter. It would soon be time to put aside Archie's half of the income.

The overpowering wet-wool, horse, whiskey and man smell was nauseating in the confines of this not overly large building. Cigar and cigarette smoke blued the air. In self-defense she'd have to open all windows and doors to clear the air.

In the press of men the trapper shoved in beside Lannie. At his signal Lucille set a cup of coffee on the counter before him. Only she caught the trapper's low "Make yourself scarce, Lannie. They're on to you. Black is just half a block behind me."

Lannie looked desperately around while the trapper turned his back. There were no tables available so, with an elbow braced on the counter behind him, Trapper Ben faced the door and sipped his coffee.

Archie came and stood beside the trapper. Shaking like a leaf Lucille rattled coffee into a cup and accepted his money with icy fingers.

"Trapper," whispered Archie, "you and I can cause a disturbance. Lucy, get your young friend out of here." Archie grinned a gleeful smile at her astonishment, his jade eyes searching hers. Questioningly she returned his look, and had to smile as he winked his audacious wink. What was he up to? How much did he know?

Confusion raised havoc with her senses. She saw Ben's puzzled look.

Archie gave Ben a not very gentle shove. A little dinner spilled on the counter from the next man down the line so he picked up his plate and went to stand by a table. In the crowded room that did it⁸⁴ Ben stood innocently by her kitchen counter, still puzzled, but participating. He shoved Archie back. The next victim did not realize who tripped him, forcing him to plow into the next man and thus start a general melee. Boredom departed instantly.

Inside the front door Black and Edwards were met by a wall of swaying, arm swinging bodies and slung dinners as they entered from the windy day. Behind them came Carlos Mendoza. Peering out over the crowd Lucille knew Black could see Ben and Archie, but not the smaller man behind them.

As Ben picked up a chair to fend off the pack of gleefully howling men, Lannie bent low. Lucille pulled him around, behind the

counter, inside the kitchen. She saw Archie give Ben another shove and Ben swung a fist.

"Under my cot for now," Lucille urged the young cowboy. "We'll find a better place quick. Black doesn't like me."

"If I put you in danger, I'll go out the door."

"Someone is probably waiting out there. Joe says you're a friend of his. Scoot under like I tell you." Lucille pushed him in the direction of her curtained-off sleeping area. Once he disappeared from her sight she took long steps to be by her stove if anyone looked in.

Using Lannie's hint, Lucille opened the back door that was only a couple feet from her stove. A blast of dusty wind off the chicken yard took her breath away. She slammed it shut. Halfway back across the kitchen, almost to her work table, she met Black.

"Who came in my door?" demanded Lucille. "I fight dust and dirt enough without some fool tromping through my kitchen."

"Somebody went out that door, fat gal, now who was it?"

"I was behind my curtain. I thought someone came in."

"Ain't no tracks on your floor, lady," argued Mendoza. Lucille knew he wanted to say more but the presence of Archie close by must have shut him up.

"So someone went out," agreed Lucille readily, "and let in a blast of air dirty enough to ruin the biscuit dough." Sputtering to herself Lucille opened a stove lid and thrust in a good sized stick of wood. The soup kettle steamed on the back of the stove. She hoped she appeared as normal as usual.

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"Okay, fellas, what's up?" Lucille turned to face a furious Archie, with his chest bandages still showing at the neck of his green plaid shirt. Behind him, to one side, she knew Ben stood alertly, but she dared not look his way.

"Thet sneaky little Lannie feller is a spy!" announced Black. "We just beat the truth outta Joe Texas and his woman. I figgered Joe

recognized him the day thet damn posse chased the yahoo up the pass, an' now I'm sure of it."

"Come over to my place, Black, an' let's get this straight," Archie said. "Mendoza, head for the south pass. Somebody take the north side of town an' see he don't get by you on the way." Archie's deep voice lifted. "The rest of you spread out. Fifty dollars reward. Find this Lannie an' bring him to my place."

Seemingly Black didn't mind Archie ordering the men about, for now. Or did Archie's attitude puzzle him? It certainly puzzled her. He talked peace in the valley. He even talked an election. But now he was helping Black find Lannie.

With much grumbling and not much hurrying, several men reluctantly buttoned denim jackets, grabbed hands full of Lucille's cookies without paying for them, and trudged out into the blustery spring wind.

When Lucille added water to the soup she noticed Ben had disappeared. Giving way to frantic thoughts Lucille made a frenzied

search for a safer place for the young cowboy. They'd be sure to search the bare attic, when the square door in the ceiling was so accessible right over her table.

She wiped steam from her north window and peered out. A large form tramped through the dust and the mud holes behind the building. She smiled. Any boot prints, or lack of boot prints, in the area, Ben would have totally confused and obliterated by the time anyone thought to track the runaway.

The wind howled around the back door so she pushed the rag rug back in place. In reaching for the large crock for mixing biscuits she glanced at the flour bin. The bin tilted off balance, the hinge pulled loose in the rotten wood. Swung out into the room the metal bin revealed a decayed square of floor and an empty space behind it where it fit into the deep work counter.

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"Lannie," hissed Lucille. "Come quick!"

Following some rustling and scraping the slim cowboy stepped up beside her.

"Can you get behind this flour bin?"

"I don't think so. My legs are too long."

"If we could just find a place for your big feet," quipped Lucille, but she frowned with worry. Lannie punched a heel down on the square of floor. "This edge is rotted." He kept beating on the wood.

"I take it Black doesn't trust you. He's sure to be back." Lannie swung a stick of stove wood against the floor. He pried up with the stove lifter Lucille handed him. A rusty nail grated loose. Lucille watched for Stokes, who stood in the breezy street outside the restaurant's front door, talking to Tede. Did Archie ever keep secrets from Stokes? Did the big bartender plan to warn her of someone coming? They could come in at any time.

Within minutes, the cowboy had boards pried up and broken off. Lucille put them in the stove to burn. Voices sounded out front, Stokes' voice the loudest of all.

"In I go," Lannie said and suited action to words by sliding in feet first.

Lucille heard a muffled "Ouch", as she swung the flour bin back in place. Black's voice sounded from the restaurant. She grabbed the nearest spoon and stirred the soup. Her full biscuit batter bowl sat on the table, covered by a clean towel.

"Lucy ain't hidin' nobody," Archie said calmly as he entered the dining area behind Black. "Lucy?"

"Yes, Mr. Gorman."

"Yes, Mr. Gorman," mimicked Black. "Hell, she knows she's got you right around her fat little pinkie."

"She doesn't have fat fingers," Archie said. "You just figure every female has to fall all over you. Lucy, tell this clunkhead you didn't see that Lannie cowboy run out your door."

"Watch who you go callin' names, Gorman." Disgustedly Black looked around. He poked a broom handle at the small square attic door in the ceiling. A shower of dust fell onto the table. He climbed on a chair and then onto the table. Cautiously he pushed up the little door. Nothing happened.

"Hand me a light."

With a shrug of his big shoulders and enigmatic smile for Lucille,⁸⁷ Archie lit her lamp and handed it up.

Guiltily Lucille looked away. She dare not turn the cowboy over to them, but still the big red-haired outlaw's actions totally confused her. How much did he know about Ben, Lannie and Clovine?

Black stepped down to the floor and glared at her, his hands on his hips above his gun belt. "I still think she knows where he is."

"You are welcome to search," Lucille replied tartly. "And don't get my kitchen dirty." She wiped his footprints off her table.

"Corey's just mad 'cause he can't find the kid." Archie was in his outlaw mode of speech. His big arm circled her shoulders, giving her a squeeze. Behind Black's hunched shoulders he whispered against her hair, "Sweep up that flour." More loudly he said, "C'mon, Black, we better search my place, or thet Clovine's room. Maybe he's in bed with Clovine." He winked at Lucille as they left.

Lucille watched them leave with relief. Then she nearly choked on a gasp as she thought of Clovine's bank bags snugged up tight to the rope springs in his bed. What if Black felt or looked up on the underside of the bed and saw them? Would Clovine have strength enough to hold a gun and drive Black out? Would Archie "Red" Gorman side with Black or Clovine?

A loud thump brought her wild thoughts back to the kitchen. She knew Lannie's feet must be about broken. The cupboard had only a narrow, cramped space.

* * * *

The relieved look on Lucille's face stayed with Archie as he and Black crossed the back yard of the restaurant. The cabin Black had ordered built for himself and the deceased Caroline stood blank windowed and cold in a swirl of dust.

Black kicked at a rolling tin can and swore as he stepped around several hardy chickens pecking in the few sprouts of green where dishwater was thrown out.

"We damn well better find him before somebody else tricks their way in the valley and brings in the law," Black said.

"How many wanted posters are out on your men? Who else wants you, besides the ranchers being after you and your rustlers?"

"None of yer damn business. That old man of yours would turn in his own mother for a paper dollar."

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"Leave Humphrey out of this. Wipe your feet at the door. Stokes has enough work without cleaning up after you."

Archie leaned a shoulder on the inside doorframe as Black proceeded to search pantries, closets and under beds.

"What's back here?" Black asked as he studied a locked door off the dining room.

Archie unlocked the door to the opulently furnished room with all the paintings, a room like no one ever had seen in the entire territory.

"Whoa, boy, you have real secrets here. I admire your taste. Too much baggage to haul in my business. A little extravagant for a town like Gorman, ain't it?"

"Ask Humphrey. Those things belong to him."

"It ain't here nor there; I'd only want the money for them and ain't nobody around here that could buy them." Black searched the room. "Somebody hid that damn bastard someplace. We see him he's a dead man." He stalked outside and off toward the boardwalk in front of Archie's house.

Archie drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Where had Lucille hidden the cowboy, Lannie?* Black's stubborn decision to find Lannie made him apprehensive for both Lucille and Lannie. He re-locked the door to the fancy room, went out the door to his house, then rested his game leg while sitting on a fur padded rocker on his side porch.

* * * *

Lucille stared this way and that out her back door as she threw out the dishwater. She could barely see Archie seated on the rocker. She hurried inside and shoved a blanket and a burlap potato bag behind the flour bin to Lannie.

Two outlaws entered her front door with Stokes, talking in drunken loudness. As she quickly swept flour dust and wood chips from the floor in the kitchen she left the flour bin tilted out as much as she dared, to let a little heat in. The stormy air was chilly at this elevation.

The restaurant gradually filled again and Lucille filled soup bowls, baked biscuits and put out coffee for two hours. She missed Laura and Joe's help, besides worrying about how badly they were beaten. If it didn't arouse suspicion perhaps a visit to the small cabin could be squeezed in between doing dishes and readying the next morning's breakfast fixings.

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By eight o'clock the noise shifted to the saloon half of the building. She counted her cash, set aside Archie's share and blew out the dining area lamps.

A muffled rustling came from the cupboard and, after a cautious look around, Lucille moved the flour bin.

"My feet are broken right off." Lannie groaned as he ducked his head and slid into the kitchen.

"Don't try to stand," Lucille said. "Just scoot over and sit still on your blanket by the stove." She handed a cup of hot coffee down to him and fixed him a bowl of soup. "Keep in the shadows. I'll watch."

"Any chance for a hot meal?" A voice sounded from behind her. Lucille jumped, almost dropping the bowl of soup she had just poured for herself. Ben stood in the light of the one remaining lamp. "Take this soup." She set it on the counter. "You scared me."

"Sorry." Trapper Ben sat at the nearest table, loosening his denim jacket. He no longer wore the rabbit fur cape. "The cowboy?" he asked quietly.

"Getting warm by the stove." Lucille brought another bowl of soup and a loaf of bread to the table, then sat opposite him. A giggle of nervousness almost overwhelmed her when she noted the thick dark strands of his longish hair as he removed his hat. It seemed eons ago that she had wondered if he were bald because she had never seen him without a hat. Did Dora run her fingers through his hair? It didn't bother her near as much as she thought it might. Because of Archie?

She knew Ben's look followed her movements as she deftly cut bread. He passed the butter. They ate in friendly silence and turned

together as Archie peered over from the saloon's front door to stare at them. Lucille immediately returned to the kitchen, coming back with coffee and a cup for him. Gorman turned away from her as someone called to him. He went by Stokes, carrying the cup.

Ben said softly, "The moon is bright as daylight out and Black's got guards hidden any place around town that's out of the wind."

"Lannie will be all right awhile, but it's windy where he's hiding." Lucille returned to the kitchen.

Ben stayed in the restaurant area but slouched against the counter, close enough to talk to Lannie, but to outsiders it looked like he talked with Lucille. Lucille couldn't help but overhear what he said to the young cowboy.

"Lannie, you already told me Jace Brown is ready as soon as we signal from the ridge. Adams and his family have moved from the mountain cabin down to the building on his ranch. They'll make a stand if they get driven from helping in town. Go there when we get

you out of here. Your friend, Toby, is already there. Did you hear me? I don't dare talk very loud."

"I heard you. When?"

Lucille added wood to the stove, reaching over Lannie's head. At the table she mixed dry ingredients for the next morning's biscuits. Beside her she heard Lannie struggle with getting his long legs back in the cubby hole, this time wrapped in a blanket.

"Laura and I go for buggy rides," Lucille said to Ben. "We always tell Clyde which way we'll go the next time to take supplies out for him and the Adams family. How could we get Lannie to the buggy outside of town someplace?"

"Do they search the buggy?"

"Yes. If you can get him hidden along the road someplace we'll try to get him out of here. Were Laura and Joe hurt much?"

"Joe has a black eye, cracked rib. They tore Laura's dress a little and scared her pretty bad, nothing else. She's fine. Joe had to tell them he'd known Sam Lanners before, when they worked on a ranch together."

"Do they suspect you, Ben?"

"They suspect everybody. They're jumpy as two cats with one mouse. My coming from the north may throw them off a little but things will have to move along fast. I saw Clovine yesterday. Gorman watched me come from there. I'm not sure what he thought."

"Maybe I could keep his mind off you awhile. He is rather fond of me, believe it or not."

"Why shouldn't he be?" Ben said brusquely. He swung away, casually settling his hat on his head. "How do, Gorman. Any luck finding your man?" The last was said loudly enough for any onlookers to hear.

Archie made a disgusted noise and looked from Lucille to the trapper. Ben pushed by him and sauntered to Stokes' bar. Archie followed and Lucille watched as he had one quick drink, keeping to the end of the short bar. His frown grew formidable.

Lucille carried empty bowls to the dishpan. "Scoot, Lannie, wrap your feet in that blanket." Lucille tipped the flour bin back in place when she heard heavy footsteps coming toward the kitchen.

"What did he want?" Archie asked.

"The trapper? He came in late for supper. You should tell him I close at eight. There's cake in the pan."

Archie didn't sit down immediately. His big hands went to her upper arms, drawing her close. "Damn, I wish I could yell out loud that you belong to me."

Her heart did a wild dance in her chest. But why did he make it sound like a groan instead of a declaration?

"Archie, someone might see." She was extremely conscious of Lannie hidden only a few feet from them. "There's cake on the table." Even to her ears it came out a squeak as he tilted her face up and searched it inch by inch. She couldn't look away. Her lips parted and she ran the tip of her tongue along a dry spot. She couldn't stop him lowering his sensual mouth to hers. She didn't want to. She wanted ... what?

It was gentle. It became fierce. It came soft. It was possessive. It turned desperate ... and ended abruptly.

Archie released her and slumped into the chair at her big kitchen table. She poured coffee with a shaking hand and set out a plate and fork for the cake. In moments he'd eaten half a piece of cake, but left the rest. He surged to his feet and left the building.

Lucille ran trembling fingers down her padded sides. She shook from head to toe. Her breathing took its time returning to normal.

A noise in the cupboard startled her back to awareness of danger, danger of another kind than the assault to her senses.

Lucille pulled the flour bin out to one side. Dust and cold air blew into the kitchen. Lannie shivered as he struggled from the narrow hole. Lucille brought an old jacket and a heavy knit sweater from back in her curtained off bedroom. "Use these to keep warm. I'll leave the bin out until morning. You be ready to get out of sight in a hurry or we'll all be in trouble." She returned to her end of the room.

Lucille settled on her cot. What blessed relief to shed the cumbersome padded corset. She selected a clean one with less padding for the next day.

What in heaven's name goes on here? Totally confused, she unlaced her shoes. Her mind returned again and again to Archie's kisses ... and his hasty departure. What kind of man can be an outlaw and a bank owner? Sweet and gentle, tough and temperamental? A kiss one time and a cold shoulder the next?

* * * *

Next day Archie sat in one of the ornate dining room chairs in his house. He glared across at the back door to the restaurant. Lucille

half grinned as she said, from beside him, "Trapper is just being helpful, Archie. Now that Laura is feeling better we are driving out on our usual fresh air ride. We'll dump off the barrels of tin cans in one of the deep gullies outside of town. They are a mess by the restaurant, and besides, they draw rats and other animals."

"I thought you were over there in the kitchen. How'd you get in so quiet?"

"I just brought lunch for Clovine and Swede. Swede isn't doing too well, but perhaps beef broth will give him strength."

Usually a good Sunday dinner left Archie feeling satisfied and sleepy. He'd left her in such haste yesterday. Today he sounded ornery. He was forty miles from looking like he wanted to kiss her. She hoped he wouldn't be so ornery he'd try to stop her from going on the outing she, Laura and Ben had arranged.

"That damn trapper has been eyeing you again. Don't think I don't know he's been chopping wood for you. I saw him. And last Friday he sat around the damn dining room when nobody else was around.

I don't like it." Archie strode to his curtainless rear window. "Well, dammit all to hell! You'd think those cans were heavy the way he's struggling to get them onto the back of the buckboard."

Lucille's heart slammed against her ribs. What if Archie guessed? It seemed there were three sides in this valley. Maybe he was on their side and maybe he wasn't. One time he helped getting Lannie hidden and the next he groused around about the Bascom people in the valley. It took every effort to just say, "I'm leaving before you come up with any more *damns*. I have to get over there with Laura^{æ3} so we can get the cans dumped and be back in time to get supper finished."

"He isn't going with you," Archie stated belligerently.

"Of course not. See, he's going in Stokes' back door. I'll return in a little while. Just quit being so bossy. It sounds terrible." She hurried away from him, refusing to analyze whether it pleased her he became jealous, or was she annoyed at his possessive attitude?

She drove away in the buckboard, with Laura at her side. Laura laughed aloud as Lucille related how Ben had loaded the barrel aboard their wagon with the young cowboy crouched inside and Archie's superior attitude about hefting the barrels.

"I really worried you'd get in trouble by hiding Lannie, if Black found him," Laura said. "We had no place to put him."

"We'll get close to the Adams property. I think Lannie will get to the buildings all right even though he doesn't have a horse."

"Joe says he and Ben saw Mr. and Mrs. Adams. Clara and their foreman, Clyde, are already there. He says Clem plans to defend his property, now that he's on it."

Lucille kept the wagon team moving along at a good pace. She and Laura watched all around but no one came to search. Anything on the wagon was in plain sight, or so they would think by looking at it.

"Another man out there will be to their advantage," Lucille said. "Lannie, we'll dump you off here, by this dry gully. Don't forget some of those tin cans are full and you take those with you."

"We must go back soon." Laura sounded worried. "Joe wasn't feeling very good yet. They really hit him hard."

Lannie's muffled apologies for his friend's hurts were broken off as Lucille stopped the team of horses next to a dry wash where brush grew over wagon high along its rim. Empty tin cans rolled in all directions as he climbed stiffly from the big barrel as Lucille and Laura watched all around. After emptying the other barrels of their tin cans and reloading the empty barrels Lucille headed immediately back toward town. She and Laura watched briefly as Lannie headed for the foothills toward the Adams ranch.

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CHAPTER 13

Archie felt immense relief. Sure enough, the trapper had not joined Lucille and Laura outside of town. He'd stayed by Stokes most of the time. Archie finally saw the team returning at a fast clip along the river road. With that relief he could now concentrate on the numbers of new little calves, notice the green grass and the new cottonwood leaves. And he could especially appreciate the arrival of a couple prize Appaloosa colts. The valley had come to life after a long, chilly spring.

The river rushed from his side vision, from where he sat his Appaloosa gelding on a promontory a ways up from where the river joined a small lake. The sun shone brightly, the little bay folks called a lake had a small dot moving across the placid part of its surface, out toward the big rock in its center. He concentrated his gaze on it. A small figure stood with waving arms on the shoreline. A sudden turbulence bounced that small dot farther toward the river current.

From a distance, the terrified cries of a child screaming for help carried up the hill to him. He turned startled eyes, shading them against the sunlight now getting far down the western sky.

On the river road, Lucille halted her team of horses and jumped from the wagon, Laura right behind her. They ran toward the lake, and the woman standing on the shore of the lake, waving her arms.

Oh, God, I'm too far away to save him. Archie ran his horse down the hill.

From the hillside he saw Lucille's plump figure run with unexpected speed down the hill. Her skirts were held high and blew out in ripples behind. As he rode he heard Darcy, the frantic mother, screaming hysterically. He'd never make it.

Down the hill Lucille paused on the bank. He heard her call something to the child as she slid the billowing dress down her body and ripped off a petticoat.

If you can swim, you fool woman, dive in!

Lucille still fumbled with her clothes, but what? Off flew a heavy garment that bounced on the ground. Out stepped the slim body of a woman clad only in white drawers and chemise. Her low slippers were thrown on the bank.

She ran. She made a long neat dive into the roughening waves. As her head surfaced she called out again to the child clinging to the big rock near the center of the lake. The small raft that had capsized with him drifted out of sight as Archie reached the riverbank and circled to the lower side, where he dismounted.

Darcy grabbed at him frantically. "Help them, please. Oh, God, help them. He's all I got. He just wanted to try his new raft and see the fish."

"Looks like she's doing fine," Archie said, feeling admiration clear to his toes. He slid off his boots and waded toward the pair in the water. Lucy reached the child on the rock and held him against her, talking to him. Archie could not hear the words; he just kept wading out to meet them.

With the child clinging to her shoulders Lucille swam at an angle away from where the river current pulled at the lake's far edge. Archie met them thirty feet out and took the boy from her.

"You're fine now, Georgie," Lucille said with her teeth chattering.

The boy coughed and choked a little but otherwise looked unhurt, just wide-eyed and scared half to death. On shore, his mother grabbed him in her arms and Archie turned to help Lucille.

Darcy's voice came from behind him. "Thank you. Thank you, Lucille. Thank you!" She wrapped a picnic blanket tightly around her son.

"Keep him warm," Archie told Darcy, but he had eyes only for Lucille.

She waded the rest of the way from the lake with her icy hand in his. Her white drawers covered, but did not conceal. Her long slim legs streamed with cold water. Her chemise clung to full, rounded breasts and showed pink-dark puckered nubbins through the thin

cloth. She had a small waist he longed to try for size with his big hands, and hips strung with green waterweeds entwined about them. She shivered.

"I guess you need this," he said as they reached shore. "At least it will keep you warm." He picked up the fallen, heavily padded undergarment Lucille had been wearing and put it about her cold shoulders while he worked with the fastenings on his saddle bedroll.

Lucille looked up at him. Apprehension, embarrassment and shyness chased across her face in quick succession.

"You knew," she said, still not taking her blue eyes from his, even while she shook all over from the cold water.

"How could I not know? Everything about you is important to me. You were safer for awhile from Black's men, most of them. To me it didn't make any difference what size you are."

"I'll keep your secret, if you want," Darcy declared, "but ma'am, you sure do look lovely."

Laura ran down beside them, speechless but not looking surprised at Lucille's small size any more than Archie was.

"Yes, ma'am," Archie agreed enthusiastically. He couldn't keep the grin from building across his face and hoped it didn't look like he leered at her. "Here's your dress. Get it on, while I wrap my bedroll blanket around you." He took away the padded corset. "Phew, woman, are you sure you want to wear this river smelling thing again? People will think a chicken house got a leaky roof in a rainstorm." He considered the emotions flying across her face. "I think this can go in the drink, don't you?" He gave a full-armed toss of the padded garment and picked her up in his arms, blankets, the wad of dress and all.

"I have her shoes," said Laura. She ran ahead and got the reins in her hands. Darcy and Georgie got onto the wagon in the back.

Archie lifted a shivering Lucille onto the seat and squeezed on beside her. His warm arms held her close. Lucille's head rested on

his shoulder while he warmed her the best he could for the short drive to the restaurant.

Behind the restaurant Archie jumped down from the wagon, tumbled a disheveled Lucille into his arms and ran with her to his own house.

A startled Tede opened the door and Archie deposited her in his own oversized bed, pulled her already wet dress from around her and threw it and the soaked blanket aside. He swiftly drew off her sodden stockings, then covered her with a thick quilt.

"Tede, cool down the horses and take them back," Archie said.

Lucille stared up at him. Her beautiful blue eyes widened in amazement. "Archie, I'm all right. Really." She struggled to sit up and the quilt fell forward. A shiver racked her entire body and her teeth chattered.

"Really?" Her wet chemise clung to her full breasts; the pink nipples budded hard from the cold. She trembled violently.

Archie yanked off his wet socks, and removed his soaked pants. His shirt had stayed above the water and was dry. He dropped his gun belt to the floor and flipped open the quilt. He crawled in beside her. His arms pulled her tight against his warm body. He kissed her cold cheek and gently spread her sable colored hair to dry on the pillow. She seemed barely conscious as he claimed her chilled lips with his own.

* * * *

She had been shivering uncontrollably and warmth gradually⁹⁷ penetrated her senses. Comfort cocooned her in wondrous softness after the nightmare of the screaming child, icy water and especially the chilling wind.

Strong arms held her. Softness surrounded her. She had heard the pop of buttons, the slither of cloth. Hard warm skin enclosed her chilled shoulders. Hair tickled her nose as warm arms pulled her close amid soft, soft pillowing covers. A muscle hard chest, strong arms, and the blessed body heat of long bare legs covering her own

chilled ones gradually warmed her piece by piece. Warm skin spread heat against her chilled breast through the thin cotton of her chemise. The chemise dried with the warmth of him.

Archie!

Lucille struggled.

"Hush, now, sweetheart, you're chilled to the bone. Just stay still and I'll get you warm in no time."

Warm? The sudden realization that Archie's feather mattress, Archie's down quilt and Archie's warm body surrounded her would soon have her overheated. The warm comfort after the chill was too much for her overwrought senses. Lucille dozed. Vague impressions of thick curly chest hair tickling her nose, of her wet hair, of long limbs paralleling hers and a hard, hot lump along her thigh brought her to the consciousness of safety and a lovely weariness.

Chill air momentarily aroused her as the quilt was lifted. Comfort surrounded her again as it was replaced, then noise. Lucille gradually awoke.

Voices. She sat up in the bed, clutching the quilt to her body.

Laura was toweling her damp hair. Archie stood, fully clothed, beside the bed. Stokes held out a steaming cup.

Ben stood in the doorway. "What were you thinking, Lucille, that you went into such dangerous water?"

"She saved a child's life, Ben," Laura told him. Lucille had never heard the pleasant Laura speak so sharply.

"Gorman could have saved him."

"I was too far away, Menkin, now let's get out of here so Laura can finish drying her wet hair and help her into dry clothes."

Lucille looked from one man to the other. Archie hadn't even hesitated in calling the trapper by his name. The three men left the room. Lucille sipped from the cup of hot coffee, feeling the blessed warmth travel down her throat to her stomach.

In the scurry of getting into dry clothes, even though they fit loosely, Lucille decided later she would ponder the sensations of Archie's body heat, the wonderful feeling of belonging in his arms. Had she really put her arms around his neck? Had his firm lips really warmed hers and then wandered over chilled cheeks and cold ears?

"I brought your heavy sweater to wear until you're warmed up." Laura held out the bulky garment. "Bettina had a dress you can wear without tripping over it, or getting lost in it. I think she's been anticipating your smaller size and is prepared."

"I'll be fine. Thank you, Laura." The memories that kept popping in her head would have her body temperature at dangerously high levels if she didn't put them away and get back to rational thinking.

"We have a restaurant to run, Laura. We best get back to it." She wiped trembling hands down the sudden moisture on her face and used the sheet to blot her upper lip.

Down the hall and in the dining room she and Laura heard angry voices.

"What the goddam hell was going on back there?" Ben demanded.

Tede yelled, "Hold it right there, trapper!"

"She almost froze to death rescuing a child in the lake," Archie told Ben calmly.

"The child of a whore," Ben said. "No wife of mine is going to shed all her clothes in public even if it was a brave thing. You could have saved him, Gorman."

Lucille and Laura moved into the room.

Archie stared from Lucille to Ben and bolted out the door.

Lucille held out her hands beseechingly toward Archie, but he was gone, with Ben following a moment later when Lucille only stared at him.

"Are you really going to marry Ben?" Laura asked in amazement.

"Of course not. The egotistical stuffed shirt. I can't believe he would condemn anyone for saving a child."

"He was overwrought. Where on earth did you learn to swim like that?"

"In the Rock River back home." Lucille answered automatically. She was still angry with Ben. "Ben was his usual stiff-necked, prudish, straitlaced self. I've been realizing that for quite some time." Her eyes met Laura's and she felt heat in her face. What might have happened if there had been no interruption in Archie's bedroom? Now she would never know.

Lucille saw that Tede had taken the team and wagon to the livery. She crossed the hard packed yard to the restaurant. Laura ran ahead

to check to see how Joe got along with his sore ribs while doing kitchen work.

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Lucille stared in surprise, positive the pile of split wood outside the kitchen door had not been that big when she and Laura left for their drive. It had happened just now, while she changed into dry clothes and redid her wet hair.

The answer was simple. Out at the farther woodpile Archie appeared to be working off frustration of some kind with a speed that amazed her. The rippling muscles fascinated her so she couldn't resist returning again and again to peek furtively out the small back window of her kitchen. Muscles bulged as he raised the ax and brought it forcefully down on a particularly hard chunk of wood no one had dented even when they tried. It split immediately. Her eyes were mesmerized by the slight bulge of bare hip above the belt holding his Levi's. The way his back muscles tapered to a lean waist made her blush at thought of how the muscles of his chest must also taper equally. That magnificent body had warmed her almost to an overheated stage. With effort she returned to her kitchen duties, not

daring to meet Laura or Joe's eyes as she did so. The splitting and clumping sounds must have quit sometime during the crowded time in the restaurant because Archie had disappeared when next she looked.

* * * *

"Gorman, I think your man wants you," Clovine was saying as Lucille entered Archie's house with broth for Swede and roast pork for the older man. Archie sat by the safe, glowering at the dining room floor.

"How is Swede, Archie? Any better?" asked Lucille. Her face heated as she passed Archie's big bedroom and continued down the hall.

"He's not doing well," Archie said. He joined her as she entered the bedroom where the big rustler lay.

"Swede, how are you feeling?" Archie leaned to take the wounded man's hand.

"Ain't goot, Red. You ... bain treatin' me right, Red. More'n thet Black fella. Ve shoul'da never trusted Black. Him wantin' us to rob da bank vas a big mistake. Red, you vatch out. Black's got plans. He wants the gold from the safe, too. Black, Doaks, Colorado..."

"Colorado is dead, Swede."

"Yah, I forgit." Swede lay pale and weak, trying hard to say more. Lucille got him to take a couple spoons of rich broth, but he shook his head. "Dey make the big drive ... all dem banks, too. Den dey plan to disappear." The big man lapsed once more into unconsciousness.

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"Don't tell anyone he came to, Clovine, hear?" ordered Archie. "Nor you, Lucille." He returned to his table near the big fireplace, out of earshot, swinging his big head from side to side, looking sorrowful.

"I can see he's worried," said Lucille to Clovine. She wanted very much to be able to comfort Archie as he had done for her, but there were too many people around. She couldn't even take time to correct his misconceptions of her relationship with Ben.

"He's worried about tomorrow and the next day and the next," Clovine agreed. "Stokes says his father wanted a town with his name on it. Just because all those Irish lords and what the Cheyenne paper calls lordlings are investing money here Humphrey thinks he needs a cut in the profits. According to Stokes old Humphrey is more interested in the rental money so he can pretend he's an important English lord in Cheyenne and gamble with it. He'll just lose it all."

"I certainly believe that. I think Stokes is the only one Archie can trust," said Lucille. Knowing the big, friendly Clovine, Lucille expressed no surprise that he and Stokes had gotten along during Archie's recuperation. Clearly, according to Clovine, Stokes was devoted to Archie, but at the same time sharply disagreed with what went on because of Archie's father and stepbrother.

"Aw, dammit to hell!" Archie lunged from his chair. He slammed through the outer door. Lucille watched as he stomped the short distance across the alley and disappeared onto the boardwalk.

Lucille took some moments to come up with a reason for part of Archie's anger. Ben had said 'his wife' in talking about her and Archie must have believed him.

"Did you say you got Clem Adam's money from the safe?" Clovine asked.

"What?" Lucille had difficulty getting her thoughts to the present. Clovine repeated the question for her.

"Joe Texas has already taken it out to him," Lucille told him.

"I don't like the atmosphere lately. Black is losing patience. Let's walk back to the kitchen. I need more coffee." Clovine looked in at Swede once more then joined Lucille in Archie's kitchen. "Those outlaws want to be long gone and they want that bank money."

"I know. Archie can only control the town people and a few ranch hands. They look to him for leadership. Why does he keep us all here? Is he afraid we'll tell he has the land illegally? Many Bascom¹ people have claimed their land already, like Adams and Harolds."

"It's more serious than that," Clovine said. "The law outside the valley wants him and Stokes. I sorta figgered that much out from talkin' with Stokes. They keep watchin' the mail Hutchins brings in from the railroad at Benton. He's due in sometime today. I think Archie gets mail from his lawyer that way."

Absentmindedly Lucille said, "I know. Hutchins has taken a couple letters out for me, to send to my family. They aren't much for writing back though."

Lucille couldn't let the subject of Archie's problems die. She needed to feel secure in Archie's character. "But he's not wanted for bank robbery."

"You already know that. He won the bank in a poker game. The bank was going belly up and he brought it around since he got a better man running it for him, and he piled a bunch of money into it himself." Clovine opened the door for her and they crossed the side porch of the big house.

"What about Shafer's bank? With him gone will it ever open?"

"Just have patience, Lucille. What worries me is Ferdie. He sneaks in every chance he gets when Tede is out and tries to work out the safe combination."

They walked across the alleyway and entered the restaurant kitchen. They breathed in the scrumptious smell of baked bread, looked at each other and smiled. Fresh loaves all in a row tempted their palates.

"How about coffee and a fresh bread slice? I love the crust with butter and honey," Lucille said.

"Was that Hutchins who just left through the batwings?" Clovine said as Lucille handed him a bread slice. "I think Stokes and Archie have letters and newspapers in their hands."

"It must be; I see him on the board walk," Lucille said. She spooned honey on the bread heel in her hand. "If it's news, good or bad, we'll soon know. Archie's attitude will show it."

"He's a good man, Lucille," Clovine said. "He and Stokes both."

"They have their heads together over one of the letters," Lucille said. "I wonder what is so important. I hope it is good news for them."

"Wahoo!" Archie shouted. He swung his beer mug high, slopping beer over on the bar. He and Stokes clapped each others shoulders.

"That is not like Stokes at all," Lucille said to Clovine. "He rarely²⁰² shows any emotion. The news must be very good. Laura and Joe have gone home so I'm being a nosy-rosy I know, but let's move over where we can hear better."

"You aren't the only one. Hutchins must have passed some word about the mail. There's more people comin' in," Clovine said. "Black's men are even here, lookin' for mail or more likely the newspapers."

Lucille poured Clovine more coffee. She added a little to her own cup and edged over to the end of the counter and leaned forward on it.

"There's old Humph at Stokes' bar now. Talkin' to Archie. That don't happen often. He must want something." Clovine moved toward the dining room, but stayed out of sight of any of Black's men so his presence didn't rile them.

Lucille caught the tag end of a sentence. "...My mother died years ago from overwork keeping your debts paid," Archie snapped at Humphrey, ignoring everyone else in the room.

"Oh, yes, I forgot." Humphrey, a little on the tipsy side, fingered the cravat at his throat, and didn't look at his younger son.

"You forgot! You forgot the only good part of your misbegotten life!" Archie's roar rattled the windows of the restaurant. He picked Humphrey up by his jacket front and shook the tall thin man like a toy in his big hands. Deadly quiet then, so Lucille hardly heard even with the quiet of the paralyzed audience, Archie said, "You miserable worm. You used my mother. You used me. You blackmail Stokes, who has been more father than you've ever been.

Now you try to blackmail me with threats to warn Danforth I'm here. I don't think so.

"Danforth is dead. Killed by his own deputy who couldn't stand the power-mad son of a bitch. The reward posters on me are either pulled in or are worthless. And nobody is after Stokes. Your own old man died in a drunken stupor, according to word we got from London. He gambled his family into destitution."

Archie shoved Humphrey into the arms of his son, Ferdie, "Take this miserable wretch out of my sight. He may own property here, but that doesn't make him a useful citizen." Archie strode out the door through the path hastily made for him in the crowd.

Lucille flew over to the pale-faced Stokes where he stood behind his bar.

"Stokes, is it true? What will he do?"

Stokes, after his former elation became more perturbed than she'd seen him in a long time, replied in a shaken voice that everyone

strained to hear. "It's true. Word came with the mail Hutchins brought. I would guess he'll saddle his horse and ride a spell."

"EEE-HAH!" Tede's stentorian shout filled the room. The tough little gunman grabbed a bottle off Stokes' bar and held it high. "Drinks on me! Belly up. Drink to Archie's freedom!"

Lucille quietly returned to Clovine. "What do we do now, Clovine? Will this bring it all to a head?"

"I'm afraid so. And I ain't sure we're ready."

* * * *

Next day Ben watched Lucille and Laura drive away from the town. His visual search had shown no sign that anyone followed the two women. Gorman was still a rustler, and he'd killed a man here in town, even if he'd been cleared of the Danforth murder. But Ben didn't feel Gorman would ever hurt Lucille or Laura. He didn't feel he needed to worry about that angle of the situation.

It was his own feelings toward Lucille that had him in a quandary. He didn't like giving up what he considered to be his. Had Lucille ever really been his? Theirs had never been a romantic relationship.

Watching Lucille and Mrs. Laura Hack Texas disappear in the distance reminded him of Laura's sister, Dora. Dora waited at Jace Brown's ranch.

In spite of Clovine's and Hack's former expectations that he and Lucille would marry, Ben realized his thoughts had often wandered to Dora. She didn't keep him on tenterhooks as Lucille did. Dora was young, adored him and was more amenable than the schoolteacher. Not as educated but maybe that would be better. At least she didn't seek voting rights like Lucille. Most women just weren't equipped to handle such responsibility.

And Dora didn't go swimming in her underclothes. She would have screamed until male help came. The boy had been safe on the rock, hadn't he? A pang of jealousy hit him. A sleek, slim Lucille in her underclothes must have been quite a sight. Why hadn't she confided

in him about her padded figure? That infernal Red Gorman knew, and he was just a town-building outlaw.

Casually Ben looked around. Lucille had made it out of town with that load of "tin cans" that included Lannie, so Lannie was safe and available on the side of the Bascom people. How many trips had she made with information and supplies? How ready were they if Black⁴ forced a fight over the Bascom safe?

Most inhabitants of Gorman knew him simply as Trapper, reasoned Ben. But the man he called "Red" Gorman had known his name. What did that mean for the safety of the Bascom people he'd brought in with the wagon train? He couldn't wait to change the name of the town to Bascom. Red himself must be eyeing him continually because of Lucille. He had impulsively announced no wife of his would go swimming in her underclothes. Had that given him away? After all, Red had never seen him before. According to the blacksmith Red had recently killed a blond outlaw for roughing up Lucille. Since he was recognized as a skilled gunman that meant he was guilty of murder.

He didn't feel that murder had really been necessary. The town needed a sheriff, law and order, and a jail. Once the Bascom people reclaimed the lands they had title to, and the town, there would be no room for killers in their midst. He had to admire the man though, for his plan of the town buildings and getting in the needed merchants. In his mind, what the Bascom people could not tolerate would be a murderer in their valley. A man who could kill again. Gorman, Black and the other outlaws would have to be driven out or jailed. Humphrey and Ferdie Gorman weren't exactly model citizens and would have to be dealt with, too, the sooner the better. The odds looked good that they would soon leave.

Since "Sir" Humphrey pretended to be royalty like those foreign investors in Cheyenne, let the two of them go to Cheyenne, out of this valley.

Ben wandered up the street, wondering where Gorman had ridden off to. Back inside the restaurant he rapped on Stokes' bar and sipped thoughtfully at his beer when it came. He kept an eye out for any of Black's close friends or informants.

With the weather turning so nice there weren't many patrons. Most everyone went out riding to see the new little calves, the fresh flowers or simply soak up the sun in tilted chairs along the cleanly swept boardwalk.

Ben watched Lannie's friend, Joe Texas, come in, his face now a greenish hue from his healing bruises. Ben turned away when he knew the young man had sighted Red on his return from one of his rides. Many outside in the sun greeted Red and also the few inside the bar. He heard coins dropped on the bar, and the dull scrape of a bottle, then the thud of the closing batwings behind Red when he left. Ben felt a twinge of envy. Everyone liked Red Gorman. Everyone except Black.

Taking his drink across the room to a table near the big window, Ben saw the buckboard carrying the two women far out in the valley. You'd think Lucille would have sense enough to have someone else take her on those rides after the fiasco of the last trip, and her cold swim.

By four o'clock when Lucille and Laura drove back into town there were knots of men standing about the street and on the walkway. The saloon girls were scattered here and there. Ben tried to locate the source of loud arguing and saw a fistfight draw a circle of men. Lucille drove out around them to avoid running anyone down.

The two women unhitched the horses themselves because the livery stable hand had joined the crowd, yelling encouragement to the combatants.

Ben started down the street to meet and escort the two women just as Red came from the saloon, his bull voice roaring out at the fighting men to stop. A sharp cry went up from the crowd and they split apart. The two fighters hunched low, hands hovering over their guns.

Lucille and Laura were walking now, almost in the danger area. Archie's long legs carried him forward swiftly. *Damn the man,*

thought Ben. *He always beats me in acting instead of looking. He's terrified Lucille will get hurt.*

"Archie!" screamed Lucille. "Look out!" She gathered her skirts and ran toward him just as Ben reached Gorman.

Shots rang out. The two fist fighters never fired their guns but Archie Gorman lay bleeding in the street. Ben stared around. His own arm was pouring out blood.

Lucille reached Gorman just as Ben did. "Not again," stormed Lucille. "I didn't see who it was, did you? I just saw the guns out the window."

"Come on, give a hand here," Ben ordered a cowhand.

Two men helped him take Archie down the street into his own house. They put him on his big bed. Dr. Stedman followed them in.

"Damn it, Doc," Archie said. "I'm not hurt that bad, just a bloody scrape."

"Clear everyone out," Stedman ordered. When they had all gone except Lucille, Tede and Ben, he added, "Perhaps pretending you are more badly hurt would be a good idea. Besides, you look feverish to me. You're hurt more than you want to admit." 206

"I agree," Archie said. "Black is getting entirely uncontrollable. We need to organize and something needs to be done."

Across the bleeding outlaw's big body Ben clutched his arm and exchanged a look with Lucille. Many of those men outside had known this was planned. With one glance, he knew Lucille agreed with that assumption. Tede slit his sleeve and proceeded to bind Ben's minor wound. Stedman worked on Red Gorman while Lucille helped.

What Ben didn't expect was Lucille's reaction to the wounded man. Her anxious gaze clung to him. Her shaking fingers caressed him even as she and Stedman realized the bleeding didn't amount to much. Stokes came running in.

By damn, the woman loved the big outlaw!

Amazement. A brief stab of jealousy. Lucille was supposed to be his friend. Then relief. It gave him freedom from any commitment public opinion had put on him in regard to the tall woman. Ben strode from Red Gorman's house.

* * * *

This past week everything had changed. Lucille wiped flour from her hands and covered the bread dough. People were told Archie did not respond well to all the care she, Dr. Stedman, Stokes and Clovine lavished on him. His wound had been messy but not as bad as it could have been. Archie wanted it to appear life threatening.

"This damn tension is more than I can stand," Archie told them in private. "Let's get this action over with, whatever it is. Something scary is in the air. Doaks and Black were too willing to step in and take over. They have to be stopped."

"I certainly agree they must be stopped," Lucille said. "Darcy says the Elite is buzzing with talk. Everyone in town is worried. Gunsmith Blaine, the livery man, Ed Hutchins and Danby, the

blacksmith, got together with Del Hack in the corner of the restaurant. They talked until almost dark."

"You go back to the restaurant. Keep Laura with you," Archie said. "Joe is doing a little scout work for me although Black doesn't entirely trust him. Ben, will you be around to keep an eye on the restaurant with Stokes?"

"I'll go over to the bar as soon as Miss Martin changes this bandage on my scratch," Ben said.

"While you are both here, how can we handle this deplorable lawless situation we have in town?" Lucille said. She stood firmly planted in the house hallway. Ben stood at her elbow while she retied his bandage. Archie lay on his large bed in the big bedroom. ²⁰⁷

"When I get out of here I'll get the men together at Adam's ranch to decide how to handle it," Ben said. "Stokes will look after you women."

"We need someone in town," Lucille declared. "Either a constable or a sheriff."

"Stokes can be a constable any time you want," Archie told her.

"He's one of your wanted outlaws, until official word comes in," said Ben. "We need everyone involved."

"We need an election then," Lucille said.

"Elections are men's business," Archie said. "Go back to your cooking."

"I will not. The women of this valley have as much right as men. You are both hopeless, and helpless. You'll never get anything done when we need it."

"Now, Lucy, your beau here is partly right. We need to get the businessmen involved as well as the Bascom people out at the Adams' ranch," Archie said.

"He's not my beau!" Lucille didn't register the fact that Archie knew all about the people at the Adams' ranch at once.

"I'm glad to hear it, even if you are just angry with him right now."

She'd long ago become disillusioned with Ben as a life partner. Why couldn't people see that, especially Archie?

"We need an election." Lucille refused to move from her stand in the hall between Archie and Ben.

"Lucille," Archie said. His impatience came strongly in the one word, before he added, "How can women possibly know how to vote? They can't even write their own names."

"How many of those men out there can write?"

"They still know when a man is a man, able to be sheriff." Archie raised a dark eyebrow and stared at her with his green eyes sparkling. Lucille wasn't sure if he was baiting her or if he still remained serious about the subject, as he had started out.

"So do the women. They know who will protect them."

Archie's laughter suddenly roared. "Who will protect the women from the sheriff? Depending on who he is, of course?"

"More likely, who will protect the sheriff from Lucille," snapped Ben.

"It's not funny," Lucille said. "We need to do something."

"Don't bother your pretty head about such things," said Ben. "I'll take care of it."

"What if Mr. Shafer, Mr. Hack, Mr. Hutchins, the blacksmith, Bettina Belon and I got together and appointed someone? We're all business people."

"You just won't leave it alone, will you?" Ben said. "There's nothing^{os} more deplorable than a stubborn woman."

Chuckles came from Archie's room. "But admit it, they get things done, pal."

"I'm not your pal, Gorman. I'm just an unwilling participant in this fiasco. I'm still going to take this valley away from you."

"I told you before, you can have your damn valley, but my buildings are my buildings. And my ranch is my ranch. I paid for them."

"They're on lots owned by Shafer, Hack and the rest of us."

"Hell, Menkin, you're like a train car that can only go down one set of tracks." Archie sounded extremely impatient. Lucille thought he'd start roaring angrily again.

"At least I'm an honest man."

"Ben Menkin," Lucille said, "that is not fair. Archie has proven he was innocent in that man's death."

"There's other charges." Ben refused to say more. He stalked out the door and slammed it behind him.

Archie shrugged his big shoulders and pounded his pillows. Lucille glared at him and strode down the hall, across the dining room and out the door.

* * * *

Lucille took out her frustrations in scrubbing Archie's bloodied Levis. While Laura finished clearing up in the kitchen Lucille gave the pants a good rinse. Instinctively she checked pockets. A metal snap ring held two keys. Archie's house. Archie's secret room?

Being in and out of Archie's house, with all that space, tantalized her. She longed for a home of her own.

Lucille knew Ben came often to Archie's house now, in spite of their altercation, whenever he could sneak past Black's men. He, Archie and Clovine talked and argued a great deal. Everything changed so much, recognizing which side a person might be on was

extremely difficult. She imagined the tension of a gold miner carrying a load of nitroglycerine compared to their situation. Any second it might explode.

She knew that was why, late in the darkness of night, a selected four men rode out and about, all riding dark colored horses so as not to be seen. They were checking the attitudes of the people in the valley, contacting men they could trust and hoping to bring to a head the friction between valley inhabitants. Any reports of Black's men being posted around the valley were sent to Archie. Stokes kept his ears open while tending his bar and reported whatever information might help the situation.

That long mirror in Archie's secret, dark room tempted Lucille²⁰⁹, especially when she knew the men were away. In her mind's eye it beckoned and teased. In that mirror she could see what she really looked like now. In all honesty she knew that for a time back home she had attracted a great many beaus.

She pursed her lips in a sour pickle pucker. Once she had more beaux than her spindly step-sisters. The sour pickle pucker reminded her of her petite step-mother's frequent expression. Lucille put a grim and rueful smile in its place. How had her step-mother talked her father into insisting the older girls must be married first? Hiding Lucille in the kitchen with all Aunt Molly's tempting pies and cookies had been a disaster for a fifteen-year-old who steadily grew taller and heavier so that she towered over most of the beaux who came calling.

Since then she had gotten plump, she admitted that with regret. She had only exaggerated that image because of her fear of ending up like the dead Caroline, or running like the frightened Clara, if one of the gamblers chose her. She needed to see now how she looked without that feather filled padding she again wore in her corset any time she appeared in public. She resisted temptation until the middle of the week, when business became light and the men were gone. Laura and Darcy could handle the kitchen work for a time on their own.

She worried that Archie would miss the keys. He'd just have to think he'd lost them for a little while longer, then she'd drop them someplace in his bedroom.

Inside the secret room she closed the door quietly, lit the lamp on the table next to the mirror and hastily divested herself of her long, knitted sweater. Next, off came the new half boots she'd had made at the cobblers. Her toes curled into the flowered carpet. It was rather worn in spots but must have been beautiful once upon a time, she thought. And it had survived an ocean voyage to get here.

Hurriedly dropping her clothes onto a chair Lucille shivered as the chill air of the shaded room brought goose bumps to her skin where the feather padded corset lining had protected her, and kept her overly warm.

Thrusting out a slim foot, she wiggled an ankle back and forth, admiring the bones and veins now clearly visible. Her wrists were likewise slim, but she knew they were strong. The tiny bullet scar¹⁰ showing across one had been hidden by her sleeve.

Next she ran long, slim fingers sensuously down and over the almost-present ridges of her ribcage, turning this way and that. Lamplight cast shadows of interesting hollows and curves. What if, maybe someday, Archie saw all this beneath a sheer nightgown? In the mirror she saw color creep across her face. Archie had already seen her in very little clothing, quite some time ago, though he had never since mentioned the fact.

She clutched the firmness of opposite upper arms, covering the chilled tautness of rosy nipples. The agonies of her early wood chopping exercises were now forgotten. To her the wonderful results were worth it.

A small frown puckered her high forehead as fingers met the shelf of hips that jutted past her viewpoint in the narrow glass. Lucille turned sideways and with a small private smile noted the almost flat planes of stomach and thighs. At least the natural flesh-bustle of her butt was down to a pleasing curve, if only the small stomach bump in front would go down a little more. She quickly flipped her blouse

sleeve across her smaller, matching crown of glory, identical to the dark sable brown ripples of hair flowing over her bare shoulders.

Through a blur she watched her reflected chin tilt proudly, with no second chin to follow. Everyone said her blue eyes were her best features, so maybe Archie would concentrate on them.

EYES!

Jade eyes reflected over her shoulder in the long mirror as Archie lounged his big frame against the doorway.

"OHMIGOD!"

"Let me check out that mirror." Archie's amused voice paralyzed her.

Stunned, Lucille couldn't move. Then she stretched her blouse to reach over her breasts as well as her hips where the long sleeve hung centered down her body.

"I got back a little too early for you." Archie started toward her, grinning, his green eyes sparkling.

"Don't you move! Don't come any closer." Even in her embarrassment Lucille saw he was hugely affected as she turned to face him. Consternation filled her when she knew her bare backside was now reflected in the mirror.

He held out both hands, palms up, his eyes almost black, and very serious. "You can't even begin to guess how much I would like to go further with this." He reached to shut the door.

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CHAPTER 14

A loud crescendo of sound from another part of the house startled them. Lucille snatched up camisole and drawers and flung into them. The down-filled, two-inch thick corset was thrown about her body. Her shaking fingers made clumsy work of part of the camisole buttons, the rest she left gapping open.

"Hell and damnation!" Archie swore as doors down the hall opened. He stepped through the half open door and into the hall, then closed the door so she had privacy.

Tying the corset lacings haphazardly, Lucille struggled into her petticoat as a louder shout sounded, even through the massive door. She prayed Archie would stay out of sight.

"I'm coming," Lucille called, as she opened the door. "I'll be right there."

Impatiently struggling into her voluminous skirt and catching an arm on the blouse sleeve, she only half buttoned it as she hurried down the hall, barefoot, to see what the commotion was about.

"Joe Texas done killed Hank Doaks! We got wounded in the kitchen," yelled voices on the house porch. "Doc is busy with Dude Edwards. I don't think he'll make it."

Lucille didn't recognize the voice yelling out the chilling announcement. She slid into her shoes barefoot and hurried across the alley, back to her own domain, doing buttons on the way.

"Joe an' Del Hack done fer the Dude. Trapper got in a couple shots afore he went down." Tede almost danced up and down in his excitement.

With all the commotion and shouting, Lucille didn't know which way to turn. She hastily finished fastening her garments together and readied the bandage box with dread in her heart. She checked the laudanum bottle and Russia salve supply.

Joe Texas helped a limping Mr. Hack across her kitchen. She pulled white strips from her bandage box. "I'll soon be out of laudanum," she told them. "Mr. Hack, at this rate we need to order powdered opium, guaiacum, camphor and ammonia so I can make up a batch of pain killer. Do you want a bit of laudanum for pain?"

"None for me," Hack told her. "Mine's just a scratch. It's Ben who's hurt bad. I'll order up those things for you. I got a big order to get out for Doc Stedman, too."

"Mendoza rode out to find Black," Joe told her. "They know who Trapper is. Can you hide him like you did Lannie?"

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"Of course. Bring him in here." Lucille's thoughts spun like a child's top.

Hutchins and the blacksmith hauled the injured Ben into her kitchen, and sprawled him across her big table. Hack and Joe stood guard at the counter. Clovine came in the back door.

"The crowd disappeared in a hurry when the shooting started," said Hack.

"It was my fault," Joe said. "Somebody trailed me to where I met Ben and Clovine so we could build our signal fire."

"Joe, are you sure you're all right?" Laura asked.

"I'm fine, sweetie. You stay with Lucille. It ain't safe for me here. I have to hightail it to the hills. Get word to me at the Adams ranch if you need me."

Lucille caught a glimpse of their passionate kiss as she worked to clean Ben's upper arm wound. By the time she had a bandage in place Joe had gone.

"They got too danged many killers with Black," Hack said. "We ain't got a chance without the bunch at Clem Adams' or if word can be got to Harolds and Lukas out in the hills."

Stokes came into their midst. "I suggest you get your plans in order before Mendoza gets to Black and the biggest part of his gang. They are about due back in the valley from wherever they went. They may have a posse behind them. Tell them Archie is still too badly hurt to get out of bed."

"Where is Archie now?" Lucille asked. She worried that he would get caught out of bed and out riding. She hardly had time to assimilate the facts of change in the town. Supposed outlaws, like Stokes and Hutchins, were suddenly on the same thought process as the Bascom people. Gorman outlaws weren't really outlaws, Black's men were.

"I just talked with Archie after the bar emptied out." Stokes looked around at the several men. Evidently reassured by who was there, just as Lucille was, he continued. "Archie is in bed for the time being. Tede is fixing a hiding place in the big house for Ben. Until it's ready..."

"I'll hide him here," finished Lucille. "Just let me get this hole in his leg bandaged. I'll give him a little laudanum."

"After my part in the shoot-out I better make myself scarce so I don't start any ruckus here, Lucille. Otherwise, I'd stay," Hack told her. "Somebody probably saw me shooting. I think I hit one of the^{en3} damn varmints."

"I'll be here," Stokes said.

"And I'll stick close by," Clovine added.

"Is it night, or just me in this blackness?" Ben struggled and ground out the words with difficulty.

"You took a couple bad ones, Ben," Clovine said. "You'll be all right. We have to get you out of sight. We'll have Doc here shortly."

"Can you stand?" Lucille's hand under his good right arm was strong, but he was a big man. The table creaked and moaned. Both Lucille and Clovine helped to get him off it and onto his good leg.

The loudness of a large group of riders out front alerted them all. They hastily shoved Ben feet first behind Lucille's big flour bin. Hack and Clovine disappeared out the back door while Stokes sauntered in apparent unconcern over to his bar.

Lucille hastily swept all her medicines and rags into her satchel. She set the satchel between a bag of potatoes and a box of tinned goods under the table. With a swoosh of a wet dishcloth she cleansed the table of any sign of Ben's injury.

Lucille caught Laura's brown-eyed look of apprehension as she came over and clung to her hand. Mendoza had found Black and the large contingent of killers, rustlers and bank robbers that rode with him, much sooner than they expected.

"We have to delay them, Lucille. Joe needs more time to get away." Laura was almost in tears, her pixie face dead white as Lucille looked down at her.

"Well, where are they?" Black demanded as he strode past the dining area and over to Lucille's kitchen.

"Who?" Lucille stood her ground, her hand on the small knife at her belt.

"Them damn murderin' sonsabitches what done fer Hank and Dude, thet's who." Black stuck his face right into hers.

Mendoza stood close beside a man Lucille didn't recognize. Mendoza must have told him and all the rest what had happened, slanting it to his viewpoint, she felt sure.

"Search the place." Black ordered.

Lucille thought again how lucky it was she and Laura had enlarged the long narrow hole behind the huge tilt out, metal lined flour bin. No one noticed the broken hinge at the bottom and Lucille carefully avoided looking that direction. The bin easily held a hundred pounds of flour and mice could not climb its tin sides. She hoped Ben did not move and scrape against the metal. It was rusty toward the lower edge and whenever she angled the top out to get flour she had to inch it back in place at the bottom. She prayed none of the outlaws had seen her do that.

Lucille sighed in exhaustion. Only a couple hours remained until dawn. In her voluminous gingham skirt, she stood at the edge of the dining room with Laura. Black and his men searched the restaurant and among the barrels in the kitchen as well as under the cot. They again searched the attic crawl space where they had once looked for the young cowboy, Lannie. They paid no attention to the medical satchel under the table.

They banged pots and threw pans about in anger. They upended the potato bin Lucille had built. They got in each other's way and kicked aside spilled tinned goods.

She and Laura did not move. Stokes hovered between his bar and the kitchen, a gun tucked in his pants front.

Dr. Stedman strode into the kitchen. A bright spot of color shone on each cheek. Lucille guessed he wasn't used to this kind of environment and excitement. "I've arranged for the two men to be buried," he said. "Now, who else needs patching up?"

"Mr. Hack just had a scratch," Lucille said quietly. "I took care of it and he went home. Why don't you have a cup of coffee and relax a little, Doctor."

Dr. Link Stedman stared at her a moment. She thought he got the unspoken message to wait around a little while.

As though mesmerized, Lucille's eyes turned to the spot by Stokes' bar where Edwards had died immediately and Doaks lived only long enough to give the bartender the name of a wife no one knew he had. She didn't dare answer the doctor about anyone else being hurt. Black's face was thundercloud furious. He and Mendoza rampaged and roared around. Several of his men paced and poked around the kitchen, not accomplishing anything.

"That fool trapper gits outta the valley he'll warn every sheriff around," stormed a third outlaw. "Damn good thing we messed up their signal fire when Doaks told us. Who the hell were they gonna signal?"

No one answered him. They stomped out the back door of the kitchen. Lucille watched from her small back window as they headed for Archie's house. In the distance, she heard a running⁵ horse. She guessed it was Joe on his way to the Adams ranch.

Laura wearily returned to the narrow bedroll she'd used in the past in Lucille's kitchen whenever Joe was gone. She sank down cross-legged, plucking nervously at her flannel robe. Lucille sat down on the cot.

In all the turmoil since the commotion of hiding the wounded Ben, Lucille had not had time to inspect her feelings at being discovered by Archie in front of his mirror. Hot and cold chased themselves over her skin. He had almost closed the door to give them privacy. A tingling band ran down the back of each hip. Her inner thighs ached clear to her knees. His black-green eyes had held her speechless. Would he have locked that door? What would have happened if there had not been the shooting and the shouting about the dead men?

She brought her thoughts back to the present problems with difficulty. There could be no looking in at Ben for fear someone watched through the windows. She couldn't see him without a light and that, too, might be seen and draw attention. The danger she felt all around her, brought an unwilling resentment. A thought crossed her mind that Dora should be here caring for her precious knight in shining armor.

"Doctor Stedman, I bandaged Ben Menkin the best I could," Lucille said. "I gave him what laudanum I had. Is there more to be done? The laudanum should keep him quiet awhile." Lucille wondered, with a smug pleasure, what any of them would say if they knew what lay on the dirt ledge just under the heavy floor beam back of the flour bin cubbyhole. And who lay there. She dared not check on Ben yet.

"Call me Link. I sort of like the name now, Lucille. I think you've done all that's necessary. No need for me to disturb him, so I'll go back to my office."

"I sure hope Ben doesn't moan or yell," whispered Laura from her pallet. "I hope Joe got away all right. Will he get to the Adams ranch, do you think?"

"I think Joe got away all right, Laura. I heard a horse moving fast in the brush along the river," Lucille assured the girl.

* * * *

Late in the morning, Ben grasped Lucille's offered arm and laboriously pulled himself up to a slant for easier drinking and eating. She knelt down by the flour bin with broth for him to drink.²¹⁶

"Can't seem to get enough water," Ben said.

Lucille helped him, and then laid the back of her hand gently on his forehead. There was some fever. Worriedly she held the bowl as he ate a little bread and took some broth.

"I'm sure glad you lined this hole with quilts and a pillow," Ben said.

And a large-sized tin can for pee and a hole to dump it, thought Lucille with amusement, but Ben was not the type of man where you'd mention such necessities aloud, even though he used them. He was basically a city born man used to the latest in facilities when inside, however he conducted himself out in the woods. She'd been born on a Wisconsin farm, with fieldwork to be done far from the buildings.

"If you're careful you can get out of here after dark tonight." Lucille told him.

"Can I get out of town?" Ben asked.

"I wouldn't try it yet. They'll watch the livery stables and they're still searching. Archie has a place for you at his house. They've already searched there. Link will be there to check on you."

"What if they search again?"

"I don't know."

"You're great, Lucille, you know. A strong woman who needs only herself." Ben said, with a shake of his head, as though dismissing the thought she might need him.

How wrong Ben was, thought Lucille. What she needed was Archie's strong shoulder, but Archie had forgotten he claimed her as his. He'd turned cold again. His feelings jumped around like a jackrabbit in the sagebrush. Because of Ben?

* * * *

At full dark, Lucille again visited the wounded Ben. He slowly pulled himself up and out of the cubbyhole and she helped him across the darkened kitchen. He had just limped to the doorway when footsteps sounded in the dimly lit restaurant and he hurriedly slipped outside.

"Hey, fat gal, coffee!" called Tede loudly. Black and Ebbit Ford entered right behind him. Ford moved closer to Tede and Tede winked at her, out of sight of Black, as he came across the dining area.

"Why, Tede where have you been?" said Lucille as she realized he yelled to give her a warning, short as it was. Thankfully, all evidence of Ben's presence was hidden. She poured coffee from the small pot she kept in reserve. "I didn't know they lifted rocks this time of year."

Tede glared sourly, then sucked in his thin cheeks to keep from grinning back at her.

"Tede, if it wasn't for me you'd still be in here cooking." She said it loud enough for Black to hear. She'd figure out later what Tede's game was in all this confusing discussion.

"The hell I would. Wasn't for me you wouldn't be so thick with the boss neither, nor would that Clovine fella be at the big house, alive and kickin'."

As Black turned aside to go to Stokes' bar Lucille leaned across her counter and said softly, "I'm teasing, Tede. We really do appreciate your help with Clovine and Archie." Surprised when the taciturn little gunman blushed, Lucille ignored it. Poor man probably didn't

get many compliments. She added in a low voice, "You mean Mr. Gorman as boss, right?"

"Course I mean Red. Ain't nobody else boss, is there? Leastwise, not to me. I ain't real positive but mebbeso Ford feels the same. Jest be keerful what you say."

"Well, now you mention it, Black took over very quickly now that he thinks Archie is laid up."

"Thet dadburned idjit will git us all killed, but I gotta go along with his shenanigans so I can tell Red, but I don't like it. Did you git the trapper out of here?"

When Lucille nodded Tede slammed a coin on the counter and stomped out. Ford trailed him through the batwings and past the light shining from her front window.

Laura tested a chocolate cake with a clean broom straw as Lucille returned her attention to the kitchen. Laura pushed the oven door shut again.

"How come you females are up so late?" Black asked.

With a squeal, Laura spun around. Lucille drew in a breath. Black and the hulking Mendoza stood at the counter.

"The cake isn't quite done," said Lucille. Then she snapped, "You know we work late to be ready for tomorrow."

"Takes time to wait on Gorman, don't it? Thet old man can do it, or you got other reasons for hangin' around there?"

Lucille just looked at him.

"Takes a powerful lot of soup, don't it." Black grinned, showing his big white teeth with the shiny gold one gleaming. The two men turned and strode over to the bar.

Laura worriedly watched their departure. "They're gone part way."

"He's wise to something, playing with us like a big old gold-toothed cat with a chipmunk. He's hoping Joe will show up. Where is Ben?"²¹⁸

Frantically fearful Black had caught the wounded, unarmed man Lucille cracked open the back door carefully, planning to go search. Ben fell into the kitchen, landing on his knees. A huge groan escaped as his wounded leg hit the floor.

Lucille caught him under his good arm as he toppled forward, upsetting them both across the kitchen floor. With Laura's help, she pulled her legs from under his sprawled body. They tugged him onto a kitchen rug runner and slid him behind the heavy curtains around Lucille's cot and Laura's pallet. His wounded leg oozed bright red again.

A loud moan left the half-conscious man's lips and Lucille hastily covered them with her fingers. Laura brought her water and cloths, then hurried to bar the back door.

Burning chocolate stung their noses and blue smoke swirled as Laura slammed the cake from the oven.

"What's going on back here?" In dismay, Lucille heard Black's strident tones.

"Nothing. Nothing, Mr. Black," cried Laura in alarm. She groaned to disguise any noise Ben had made. "I ... I just burned..."

A low moan started from Ben as he arched a shoulder, grimacing in pain. Kneeling beside him, Lucille held her face against his fevered lips to still him, hanging on with both wet hands to stop his thrashing about.

"Hush ... sh," she murmured against his bearded cheek, "Please be still."

"Mmmmm," his voice came softly, his eyes opened in the dimness.

"Sh..." whispered Lucille. She could still hear Laura with Black, protesting something. Then sound of the batwings banging open and shut came to her. "I'll get a cold cloth."

Suddenly alert to another furtive noise, Lucille reached for her knife sheath hung at the head of the cot.

"Joe!" Lucille heard running feet and low murmurs from by the kitchen door. No more was heard from Black but Laura's relieved chatter with Joe covered the creaking of the cot as Ben twisted about, only half-conscious of what he did. After the rugged fight she and Clovine had had with Archie at his first wounding, Lucille wondered if she could handle Ben alone.

He murmured Dora's name once, however, then lapsed into a restless, but less violent sleep. Lucille replaced a cool cloth on his head, gathered a blanket about her and sat on the folded rug next the cot.

* * * *

Lucille awoke gradually. A large hand rested on her shoulder as she stirred.

"Mornin'."

Lucille swung to her knees and Ben's hand fell to his side. Her hand went to his forehead. "Fever's gone already."

"I'm pretty tough, even if I ain't Red Gorman. Just tried going too far last night. I wanted to find my horse."

"We could have done that," protested Lucille.

"Lucille?" Laura's call came from where she noisily shook down the ashes in the big black cook stove.

"Coming." Lucille carefully pulled the curtains closed and hurried to the working end of the kitchen where Joe piled wood in the box while Laura sliced bacon into a huge skillet. Coffee already boiled. Joe disappeared.

"You should have called me earlier." Lucille tied a fresh apron over her blue plaid dress and adjusted her knife sheath out of the way.

"You were exhausted," Laura said. "You'll make yourself sick rushing around, feeding Archie and ... oh-oh. Someone's out front."

"Pile a plate full," ordered Black. He wore a big grin on his swarthy face, his gold tooth shining. Lucille worried about his evil smile. *He*

knows. He's teasing me like a coon with a frog. He knows Ben can't get away. She dropped a cup with a crash, picked up another one. Her face devoid of expression she put coffee on the counter beside the filled plate and set out eating utensils.

"I saw Joe come in last night but then he disappeared so we couldn't nab him for killin' Doaks and Edwards. You wouldn't know where he went now, would you, fat gal?"

"No, I wouldn't."

Waiting for him to tell his shattering news and snatch the wounded Ben, Lucille watched in fascination as he deftly rolled and lit a cigarette. "Joe sat his damn crow bait and laughed at us. Said he saw your friend get away up by the north pass. Said we couldn't catch a dead horse in a mud hole. Then he rode off too fast for us to catch him. I'm thinkin' you know where he went."

"My friend?" Lucille ignored his hint that she knew where Joe had gone.

"Sure, fat gal. The trapper fella Red's so jealous about. He won't get through the pass though, Lucy. I sent six of the boys up there to check on him. Wounded like he is he won't get far."

"You did?" She mentally cursed herself for sounding like the stupid, mimicking parrot she'd seen back home in a small circus.

"Sure as hell did." He picked up his breakfast plate and sat at a nearby table with Mendoza and two other men Lucille didn't know.

Lucille hurried over by the kitchen table. She discovered Joe hidden underneath it, between boxes of tinned goods. She nearly swallowed her tonsils before she gathered her senses. "Bless you, Joe," she whispered. "Are you sure he believes you? He's not just playing cat and mouse?"

The noise from the dining area covered Joe's reply. "I made fun of him for lettin' the trapper get clear up to the north pass without bein' stopped. The idea just come to me, but I had to ride away fast before he got mad about me shootin' Doaks. I just circled and left

my horse in the river brush. Besides, I think Hack or Ben got Edwards, not me."

The next hour became a rush of bacon, eggs, coffee and flapjacks for surly, search-weary men. Lucille felt like she trod a skim of ice on a pond and the ice could break any moment. No Gorman town people came in, only more and more of Black's outlaws. She counted twenty and told Joe to tell Archie and Tede when he sneaked breakfast across the alley to Clovine and Archie.

With the restaurant finally emptied, Stokes pretended Archie needed care, so he got Ebbitt Ford to tend bar. Lucille carried coffee back to Ben, who now sat on the edge of the cot. She set a plate of solid food beside him on the low table by her lamp.

"I saw the bank bags on the beam back there. I can tell you're almighty pleased with yourself," Ben told her, sounding almost like he was jealous a mere woman had accomplished so much.

"It was so simple. I had the combination to the safe from one of the journals someone dumped with my schoolbooks. Archie was

wounded and no one else came around." She didn't tell him it didn't seem simple when she did the smuggling. She'd been terrified nearly out of her skin a number of times, afraid she would be caught with all those sacks of money.

"Did you get them all?" As usual he wouldn't admit a woman could be capable of handling a tough situation.

"Emptied it completely." An exultant grin pulled at her cheek muscles again. "Hack, Clovine and Bettina have their money. I have mine. Joe took the ones for Orvie Lukas, Adams, Harolds, Mrs. Bricker and Eden Charles. Just Shafer's and yours remain. Shafer has the most, of course, for the bank."

Grudgingly he admitted, "The people are all very pleased, I'm sure."

Lucille sucked in her cheeks to keep from laughing. This man just was not able to see beyond his own responsibilities and accomplishments. If this were the man the Bascom people anticipated she would marry, they would just have to get over the disappointment. Ben needed to learn where his real feelings dwelt.

She suspected he had an inkling where hers had gone. When Bascom people took over their valley would they forgive Archie for being a reluctant outlaw in their midst or would they send him outside the valley. Only time and Ben's unpredictable reactions would tell. Ben had a lot of influence with the Bascom people he'd led into this valley.

* * * *

Ben lay back tiredly on the pile of blankets where Lucille had made him comfortable. The good hearty stew she'd given him had helped his strength. He could soon make it across the alley to Gorman's house. The man wasn't really a bad sort. Under other circumstances, they could get along, maybe not as friends, but both wanted a good town.

The fact that he considered he'd have to arrest the man in order to have a good, law abiding town could be dealt with later, once the Bascom people had control of the town and had either driven Black and his outlaws from the valley or arrested them. A jury could

decide what happened. The carpenter had the jail almost ready to receive them. Men were working on Shafer's bank.

He thought of Dora Hack and how happy she would be to return to her family. He could now see the basis of his differences with Lucille in comparison with the coy, but complacent nature of Dora. He could not see abdicating all control at home as his father had done. Women had their place and men had theirs. Protecting women was one of his "places." He had to admit it was one of the reasons it so rankled him that Lucille did most of the protecting.

Dora would not try to control his business life either. Dora belonged at home, his home, where she would be a properly docile wife.

A clomping of boots, loud voices and a general surge of movement²² echoed from the far end of the restaurant. He listened intently for any distinguishable or familiar voices. Then he took advantage of the hubbub to ease himself from the kitchen out the back door and across the yard to Gorman's big house.

Several days later as Laura noisily stacked dishes behind the counter, Lucille thrust her head and shoulders behind the flour bin. The moneybags were still safe behind the flour bin and she straightened the quilts, just in case they needed the space again. She hoped Clovine and Tede were prepared to hold the fort in Archie's house. With Ben gone now, for several days, she became increasingly worried. He must have succeeded in getting a horse to get out of town.

"I see they've worked on the bank again, for a couple days." Lucille said to Laura as she straightened the flour bin door into place. "If they finish the building they will soon move that safe from Archie's dining room." *And I can get rid of the money bags here so it's someone else's responsibility.*

"Do you think Black will get someone to open the safe, or will he blow it up?" Laura asked. "What if Ferdie gets to it first?"

"Who knows? I feel we are all sitting on a powder keg." Lucille shook her head, worry putting lines in her forehead. She didn't tell

Laura about the empty safe. Evidently, her father had never mentioned having his own money.

"With the banker and the combination gone, they'll have to blow it up, won't they? Tede won't be able to guard it forever."

For two days, the blacksmith and Virgil the carpenter, worked on getting the bank roof boards and sheets of tarpaper in place, ready for the tar they planned to use to rainproof it. Lucille and half the town watched their daily progress.

Lucille figured her life could very well be in more danger than she'd ever faced. When they blew open the safe or found an expert who could work the tumblers in the combination, they would find out the money had disappeared. With Ben gone and Archie not well she had no protection but her own wits. She belted her small knife at her waist and kept a gambler's hideaway gun in a pocket. By the time they eliminated whoever had access to the safe, they would get to her.

Struggling up from the floor by the flour bin, she stood erect and pushed aside heavy hair with the back of her wrist. After a cautious look around, she carried two pails of dirt out the back door. If she had to hide in that cubbyhole she wanted all the comfort she could get. The first pail emptied contained only dirt, the second held gray dishwater mixed with dirt to pour over the first, letting it spread into the rest of the mud back of the restaurant.

"Ben is back," Laura hissed at her as Lucille returned to the kitchen. They hurried into the restaurant. For a second time Lucille had gotten rid of part of her corset padding. The weather had gotten too hot. Rushing back and forth to Archie took its toll on her. Ben didn't even notice.

"Welcome back," said Lucille as she wiped soiled hands on her full apron.

"Howdy, yourself," replied Ben soberly. "Laura tells me you're moving dirt. Hard work, isn't it? Are you sure it isn't a waste of time?"

"I may need a hole to hide in. I had to do something. I feel like I'm on a hot griddle and have to keep jumping or I'll get burned." She tried to keep the fright and desperation from her voice. "Black is bossing everything now and I don't trust anyone. He means to get that safe opened."

"I thought something was in the air. Did Gorman cash in?"

"Archie's still hanging on. Clovine and Tede take care of him. Swede is about the same. Have you seen any of the Bascom people? The town people here are ready to help whenever the lid blows off." Poor choice of words, thought Lucille. *I may be the lid that is blown off.*

"I've covered a lot of territory since I left four days ago. The Adams clan is fine and very happy Joe Texas brought their bank money. Lannie fit right in. When my leg got better Toby, Joe and Lannie helped me round up some of my Morgan horses. The herd stayed together better than I expected. Even added a few wild mares to the

bunch. We found passable pasture for them. Anything new happen here since I've been gone?"

"Is Joe all right? I've been so worried," Laura said.

"He said tell you he's fine. He'll come see you as soon as it's safe."

Surreptitiously, Lucille closed the flour bin door she had opened earlier. She wiped the stove clean with a rag and put the rag on a nail to dry. She kept both Ben and Stokes' bar area in her lines of vision.

She couldn't resist watching the rippling of big muscles as Ben removed his jacket. He still limped a little but he was a handsome man. It had no other affect on her. She sighed, remembering her palpitations when she watched Archie cutting wood. The hot and cold feelings, the inner aching, almost came back at the mere thought.

Stokes came around the counter into the kitchen and accepted a cup of coffee.

"Hello, Stokes," Ben said. "There's a job for you out in the buck brush, among the rocks along the river. There's a man's body that's been there a long time."

Without so much as a twitch of features Stokes inclined his head respectfully. His stiff "I will see to it, sir," surprised Ben, she could tell, but she had become accustomed to the man's in-and-out cultured and illiterate phrases, depending on whom he talked with. He set down his empty cup and returned to his bar for his bowler hat and a jacket.

"Clyde mentioned he had to kill a man the night he picked up food here. He got a scratch but it healed." Ben frowned and shook his head. "This valley isn't the way I planned. I hate all this violence. We will have a peaceful, law abiding town when I get control of it. I promise you that."

"It's not the way anyone planned." Lucille wondered how much more violence would be needed before it became a peaceful, law-abiding valley.

Ben put his cup on the divider counter by Stokes' cup and peered around the corner to the end of the room.

"Hey, Trapper!" A chair crashed as Mendoza saw him and leapt to his feet, gun blazing.

Ben felt himself spun around by the force of a bullet. He threw a shot into the dining area. Other guns fired now, too, but he reached the door and threw three shots back into the saloon. Awkwardly mounting his horse behind the kitchen, he swung between the restaurant and Gorman's house.

He risked a look back as gunfire came from Gorman's house and cut down one of his pursuers. Ben guessed Clovine had gotten a gun someplace. It gave him just enough time to make it to the buck brush and trees behind the restaurant, at the river's edge. A fierce burning scorched his ribs and left arm. He knew he couldn't make it to the Adams cabin and Clyde Boros for help. Much as he hated to bring trouble to Lucille she was his only hope, again.

Groggily Ben slipped from the horse, giving it a tired swat with his hat as he did so. He stumbled into shelter beneath low growing bushes and on his knees clumsily reloaded his gun. Dimly, whether from distance or from failing senses he couldn't tell, Ben heard shouting and horses and several shots.

"Clovine, stay out of it now," muttered Ben to himself, worried that the oldster would draw attention to himself and be killed.

Somewhere a figure afoot detached from wavering shadows. Ben struggled to focus his eyes. The sound of horses faded to the west, following the southward curve of the river. He couldn't keep track of time. In his present condition, he couldn't even think clearly.

"Ben!" A voice came out of the blackness. "Ben!"

He could only grumble a muttering reply to the familiar voice.

"Careful, boy," cautioned the voice. "This is Clovine. Where you at?"

Somewhere in the roiling darkness, a solid shoulder held up under his arm. Two detached feet stumbled along ridiculously. The stupidly shuffling feet must be his own. He tried to grin at the silly, wobbly way they wanted to trip him up. After what seemed hours and hours he sank miles and miles into nothingness.

Ben's next consciousness returned with burning whiskey pouring down his throat. He choked and came around enough to see a blur of Dr. Stedman and Clovine bent anxiously over him. Across the room, he saw the blur of a big bed holding the bulk of the outlaw, Archie Gorman, either asleep or unconscious.

Clovine covered Ben with blankets on the narrow cot next the wall.

Awareness of sunlight streaming through a crack in the heavy drapes at the window came in wavering periods of consciousness. A break in his own shrouding gray clouds carrying him hither and yon only served to confuse him.

"Clovine?" Did his own voice croak like that?

"Take it easy, Ben."

He recognized Clovine's voice, knew the man was there, and relaxed. Too tired to say anything at all, he lay still while clouds rolled over and around him for what seemed like hours. What a fool he'd been to return to town.

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CHAPTER 15

Lucille hoped Ben would be safe now, at least for awhile. Archie's solidly built house could be defended.

A hubbub created by Humphrey and Ferdie's rare appearance at Stokes' bar made her wonder if their lady friends had finally realized the two men were not so well heeled as they pretended. They stayed only long enough for Stokes to pour each a free drink. She dreaded the need for taking a meal over for Archie, Ben and Clovine at a time when it would draw Black's attention. Black liked the special brandy Stokes kept in stock and he liked to torment her with his presence, she felt sure.

She heard the shouting before she had completely crossed the alley between the restaurant and Archie's house.

"I insist Archie give me the Whitwheel diamond ring."

She heard no reply, but Ferdie's high shout, "I insist! As eldest it should be mine. I do insist," reached her ears as she stepped up to the porch. They would have Archie all upset and tearing the stitches she had so squeamishly watched Dr. Stedman put in his torn side.

The shouting stopped but sounds of Ferdie's peevish whining greeted her at the door. A more unlikely brother for the usually robust, big-shouldered Archie was hard to imagine. Archie must have inherited his mother's good looks and healthy body.

"Father, why don't we move back to this house? We would be quite, quite comfortable with a valet and at least one maid. Archie can afford it. Stokes does well as butler but we know he can't cook. We must, of course, have our own cook. We cannot continue to tolerate that disrespectful monster of a woman at the restaurant or that incompetent cook from the Elite."

"The fat lady makes good food, my boy," came the father's reply. "We shall see, we shall see. First these invalids must be removed

from our rooms, at least to rooms further down the hall. They could have a hospital all to themselves."

"My word," Ferdie said as he too entered the room. "Who else is here? More wounded." He stared at Ben on the cot at one side. He pulled back from any contact with either bed.

"No one is moving Clovine or me, or anyone else, Humphrey. Lucy doesn't have time for cooking in two places," came Archie's voice as she stepped through the doorway. Tede's face looked so fiery²²⁷ mad she held back a shudder. The little man dashed back to Archie's bedside, looking about to explode.

"You got a mighty lot of gall comin' in a dyin' man's bedroom." Tede stretched his thin frame to full height.

"Ah, what have you in the basket?" asked Ferdie, suddenly all smiles and reaching out a hand to Lucille's basket. He ignored Tede like a pesky gnat.

"I have beef broth for the patients and stew for Clovine and Tede. Excuse me, I haven't time for dawdling." Lucille hoped Archie didn't argue the stew was also for him. He was not a good patient.

"Since you refuse to serve us in your restaurant," Humphrey said, "be so good as to bring our meals to my son's rooms here, until we can locate a cook. Put it on my son Archie's bill. In about an hour, miss. And you may call me Lord Humphrey. This is Lord Frederick, of course. I'm greatly fatigued by the disrespect around here."

Tede looked at her. He was almost snorting fire, but said nothing.

"Mr. Jones, in an hour I will have forty customers clamoring to eat. Our beef stew is fifteen cents. Able bodied men like you are welcome at that price. I suggest you be there early, with your money, before it is all gone." Lucille caught Tede's wide grin and sucked in her cheeks to avoid laughing at the pacing Humphrey.

"Here, my good woman, here," scolded his lordship. "I must say, my good woman, your understanding of the ways of the world is

sadly lacking. I am Lord Gorman-Jones. Call me Your Lordship, or Lord Humphrey, not, oh my heavens, *Mr. Jones*."

"How long have you been in this country?"

"My dear, at least twenty years."

"Then your own understanding needs a little revising, *Mister Jones*. If you want to pretend to be one of those so-called lordlings who are coming into Cheyenne from Ireland or England or wherever, the last couple years, I suggest you join them in Cheyenne." Ignoring the sputtering lordship, who left the room in a huff, Lucille turned to the invalid in the big bed, and the one on the cot.

"How are you, Archie? Feeling any stronger?" She realized he was shaking with laughter. Tede grinned at the two of them from across the bed.

"Not a lot, Lucy." He grinned mischievously at her, then sobered. "If I gave Ferdie the diamond do you think they would be satisfied?"

Lucille looked across the bed at Tede, who seemed to be holding his breath, dismay in his faded brown eyes. She ached with wanting to tell Archie what she really thought. "Those two will never be satisfied, nor quit their demanding ways as long as those methods succeed for them, you know that."

"I'd tell the blasted idjit that, in a town such as this, he would not hang on to the diamond above half an hour. He's already lost all that money Black gave him so that gang of killers could get in here." Tede had no problem in stating his opinion. Archie looked at Lucille.

"He doesn't look like more than a fifteen-minute man to me," she said.

"Quite so, miss, fifteen minutes." Tede did a fair impersonation of Stokes. His cheeks were sucked in again and he grinned at her. Lucille was reassured that he had no great love for the father and brother, as he often stated. She watched him leave the room, heard

the murmur of voices a moment, then concentrated on fixing the food for the injured man.

Archie was not so injured that he didn't snatch her around the waist and pull her over closer. She could tell the movement hurt him but he gave her a slow, passionate kiss.

They parted guiltily as Clovine came in and sat at a small table to hungrily eat the large bowl of stew she'd brought. She blushed as she saw the smiles coming and going on Clovine's seamed face.

"Let Ben sleep. I'll save him some broth and heat it here," Clovine said. "Tede can feed the big Scandinavian when the man is able to eat."

"Where did Ferdie and Humphrey go?" asked Archie.

"I didn't see where they went." Lucille noticed he did not call Humphrey "Pa" this time. "I'm sure they'll be back, if you want them." She held her breath. When would Archie learn they only

used him? He'd learned it once. Had he forgotten since his injuries? Blood ties were hard to break, even when they were abused.

Archie sounded tired. "It's all for them, isn't it? They'll take it all and run back to the cities and use it all up pretending they're important. They don't care about me or this town or anything else." He sounded thoroughly disgusted.

"Archie, relax," soothed Lucille. "I'm sure everything will work⁴²⁹ out." She saw Clovine fidgeting in embarrassment in his chair. Archie tossed his head this way and that on his pillow and raised halfway up on one elbow, his looks more that of a disgruntled invalid than an outlaw to be feared.

"I'll check to see where they went," offered Clovine.

"Be careful," Lucille cautioned. "If the wrong ones see you moving about it could be dangerous."

"I'll be watchin' "

"Lucy, Stokes told me half a dozen men pulled out today. Is that good or bad?" Archie fingered the folds in the quilt and pushed himself to a sitting position. "Swede is on his last legs. Tede is with him, trying to get some of your broth down him for strength. Humphrey has asked for the money in the safe. He doesn't care how he gets it. He wants to head for Cheyenne. He'll leave as soon as he gets funds, if Black and his gang don't kill him over it."

"Some people are only happy in a city, Archie."

"Him and Ferdie. They just used my mother and Stokes. Stokes got blamed for smuggling the goods in here, but there's no family in England to continue with the charges, thank God for that. Stokes has been more father to me than Humphrey, that's sure."

"I think Stokes was in love with your mother, don't you?" Lucille said.

"It doesn't surprise me."

Lucille circled the small space at the end of the bed. Archie had told her these things before. What could she say to him? She laid a comforting hand on his shoulder as he sat with his strong chin lowered to his chest.

"Lucy?"

"Yes, Archie." She turned to look into his sad green eyes.

"Back in the corner of that fancy parlor is a black box with a lock on it. Would you bring it for me please?"

"Of course. Just relax. Things will look better when you get on your feet again and more help arrives in town."

"Get the box."

She hurried down the short hall to the dining room, where the big empty, drape covered safe stared back at her. Tede stood at the window with his back to the room. In the dark, velvet curtained parlor she held a drape to one side to let in a little of the evening's

waning light. The shiny black box had chips and scratches from long, rough handling. It sat in the corner behind a tattered saddle blanket and a battered saddle. Hurrying back to Archie with the box³⁰ she heard voices outside.

"They are coming back, Archie. They'll be here soon."

"To yell at me and try again about letting Ferdie open that safe. Is Tede still guarding it? They won't stay long then." His gaze shifted again to her. He awkwardly unlocked the small box, dumped the contents between the quilt and the sheet covering him, relocked the box and gave it to her.

"Quick, put it back! Quick!"

Lucille cast a worried look at his sweat-beaded face. She ran with the box, plopped it in the corner behind the worn saddle and hurried back to the weakened man. She reached his side just in time. Would his derelict relatives try persuasion again, or a different approach?

Humphrey did not come into the room with Ferdie. Lucille heard saddle stirrups rattle in the room beyond the dining room. She sighed. Archie had been right to empty the black box, but what would he do with the contents now?

"I must say, old boy," said Ferdie, as he entered the bedroom, "I just realized you don't look well at all. I suggest we get things in order here while you're still with us."

Lucille almost gasped at Ferdie's selfish crudity. She hoped this insane arguing didn't awake Ben and start him thrashing around on the cot. "Archie is going to be all right," she stated firmly. "There will be no visiting tonight. You've already upset him enough. And there are other patients here as well."

"This is a bloody hospital," Humphrey said as he entered the room. "Ferdie, we were wrong. I'm sure we will be more comfortable in rooms at the inn, since Sarabelle and Dixie feel they are too crowded if we stay with them. After all, I do own the Elite. We can, however, take the running of the village off your hands in the

morning, Archibald. We'll begin by opening the safe to see what the town coffers have to work with ... for the good of the people, you know."

Archie growled, seemingly unable to find words. Sweat stood out on his face.

"Tede!" called Lucille, only to find him already standing in the doorway. "Tede, I wish you to keep all visitors out, including relatives."

"Be a pleasure," agreed the old gunman. "Out! Out!" He waved his big gun in the air and shooed the two men toward the door like stubborn, squealing piglets.

"I protest," screeched Humphrey. "He is my son. This is my town."²³¹

"Fine time to think of it. Protest and be damned." Tede followed the two unwilling men out the door.

"Lucy?" called Archie weakly. "Lucy, take these. Ferdie will steal them if they're in that box. Put them somewhere for safekeeping."

Lucille found her two hands filled with several diamond rings, a ruby necklace and rings with green glinting stones among other chains and gems. She didn't dare ask the irate Archie any questions that would further upset him.

"Hide them," ordered Archie. "They were to build Humphrey's town. He stole them from his family in England, and now they are all dead. These will damn well finish building a town whether he wants it or not."

She put a hand to his forehead. She looked at him and thought about crawling under the covers at his side to give him comfort as he had comforted and warmed her following Georgie's near drowning.

"If you're thinking what I'm thinking, I'd raise a temperature for sure, among other things." Archie raised an eyebrow with a knowing look, as though he'd read her mind. He gave a huge sigh and slid down on his pillow.

Lucille felt heat rise in her own face. How could he read her mind? Why did he affect her in all those naughty ways? She was thankful Ben lay unconscious on the cot behind her and could not see her expression.

Archie chuckled and closed his eyes. "Go away, woman. I'm too worn down to do more than imagine."

Lucille bit her lip corner then smiled. "They say imagination is a powerful thing."

"Damn, woman, look what you've done!" His voice weakened.

Lucille glanced once at the raised hump in his blankets, turned and fled.

With the jewelry sagging her apron pockets Lucille met the returning Tede on her way to the restaurant.

"I just told Stokes that Swede done cashed in his chips. Told him them two bastard relatives is after the bank money, too. He said he'd think on what to do until them Bascom people can claim it."

Lucille remorsefully headed toward her door, with the heavily filled pockets of her apron slap slapping against her thighs.

If it wasn't so hazardous it would really be hilarious. Here she was with all Shafer's and Ben's money and all Archie's jewels, getting more terrified by the minute over something that wasn't even hers.³² She slipped inside the kitchen and poured a much-needed cup of coffee.

She sipped the coffee in the soft, golden glow of the oil lamp surrounded by the deep shadows in the room. Laura's softly rounded form made a small mound under the covers of the pallet. Lucille looked all around for a safe place to put the jewels. Stokes now had no lights at all. She would have to find a temporary hiding place for the jewels and give them back to Archie in the morning.

Early as it was, Lucille's morning hours were extremely filled with activity, with no chance to dispose of the jewels. She was not happy about the situation.

Even worse, out in the square intersection, between the well, the Elite Saloon, Hack's General Store and Stokes' bar the crowd kept getting bigger and bigger. Some had attended Swede's burial and most remained long past a leaving time.

Lucille stood with Laura just outside the front door of the restaurant. Stokes and a very weak Ben hid just inside the door. Somehow the understanding between Stokes and Ben did not surprise her. Nor did the fact that Stokes produced a tarnished constable's badge and pinned it to Ben's blue plaid flannel shirt.

"You've had a busy morning, Stokes," said Lucille, without turning her eyes from the crowd milling about. A sudden gasp from Laura did turn her in that direction.

"I just saw Tom Shafer! I'm sure of it. He just entered Hack's store."

"How did he get back in the valley?" Lucille asked.

There was no answer as their attention turned to Archie's father as he climbed atop a buckboard and faced the milling crowd.

"There's more outlaws in that crowd than townspeople," Lucille said. "The good people have someplace safer."

"I am Lord Humphrey Frederick Archibald Whitwheel Gorman-Jones!"

Lucille easily realized he'd already had way too much to drink.

"I have come to aid my wonderful son, Archibald, in handling the reins of this fair ... uh ... village. My son has turned over responsibility to me for establishing a government."

"Hey, frills and ruffles," yelled a voice. "You half lady an' half man with all them fancy doodads?"

"My good man..."

Howls of laughter greeted that.

"Constable! Magistrate! Where is the law? We need law and order²³³ here!" howled Humphrey as he nearly fell from the wagon.

A shot rang out. Then silence.

"Let the feller jaw awhile. He's better'n ary a circus," said a voice from the crowd.

Taking advantage, Humphrey dusted his sleeves and began again. He continually cast anxious eyes down the street toward Archie's front boardwalk. "This fair ... uh ... city, needs a bigger hotel. I will build one. This city needs an opera house. I will build one. Perhaps a school for the children."

"Whatcher buildin' them all with?"

"My son Archibald has been frugal indeed, on my behalf. He has funds secreted away for me ... er ... us."

"Hell, he has," shouted Mendoza, so close to Lucille she jumped in fright.

"They'll be killed," said Stokes, as he stepped to the boardwalk beside her. "I don't really want to see them killed."

"We'll see about that gold right now." Mendoza lunged across in front of Lucille, knocking her backward against the wall. She turned and met Ben's glinting gray eyes, then followed his gaze.

"I don't think a constable will do much good." Ben said.

Barely seen through the skimpy bushes Ferdie stood on the porch of Archie's house with a small, leveled pistol, holding Mendoza in his tracks.

"I think not," Ferdie said coldly, but followed his statement with a shrill scream as a shot brought crimson gushing from his left arm. He dropped the gun.

"We'll see about that safe right now." Black, with a smoking gun, was already entering Archie's house. Lucille caught a glimpse of Stokes running as he disappeared around the back of the house.

"Stokes will go in a side window and get to Gorman, Clovine and Tede in there." Ben stepped around her. The bandage on his arm showed white below the dark sleeve of his shirt. He limped from a leg wound. "I better get over there."

Upon seeing the now polished badge on Ben's shirt Humphrey slid to a stop before them, on his way to join his son. "Arrest those men!" he ordered. "They are stealing my gold."

The crowd waited. Several Gorman townspeople now joined them and held some cowhands and clerks back with words of caution.

"Can't," replied Ben laconically.

"Why not? I order you to arrest them." Humphrey shook a finger at Ben.

"I haven't been sworn in yet."

"I swear you in!"

"It's not your gold. You're not a duly elected town official. I don't think you'll win any election today." Ben turned his back on the irate man.

"I am Lord..."

"We know who you think you are," Lucille said. "Were you keeping attention here so Ferdie could open the safe?"

Bouncing up and down in rage Humphrey surged against the edges of the crowd, headed for Archie's house.

"I see Lannie over at the edge of the crowd," Ben told Lucille. "He and Joe are just disappearing around the corner. This thing is coming to a head right now!"

From their position on the raised boardwalk, Lucille watched Joe and Lannie race toward the livery stable. Stokes had not gone into Archie's house as they thought. He caught up with Joe and Lannie, and the three huddled close in obvious discussion.

"Stokes is worried about Archie," Ben said. "He must have guessed the safe is empty but he mentioned getting them all out of Archie's house. I wonder what he's plotting."

"He's coming this way." Lucille stood on tiptoes to see over some of the crowd.

"Joe and Lannie are leading out a team. They're hooking them to a buckboard. Stokes is up to something, Lucille."

Lucille turned back into the restaurant.

Ferdie stood with his bloodied hands reaching into her under-the-counter cash drawer. He continued to sort and draw out bills.

"What do you think you are doing?" demanded Lucille. She reached the counter swiftly and placed a hand over the drawer.

Ferdie looked down his long, thin nose at her. "I am in need of a small amount of operating money, Miss Martin. I'm sure Red has no objection."

"But I do. Liar."

"That is of no consequence, since the establishment belongs to all of us." He continued picking up scattered bills. "I feel our days are numbered in this godforsaken hole. It's a small price to pay so you'll be rid of us, don't you think?"

Lucille drew her little stiletto knife from its small sheath at her waist. "I think not." She brought the small knife up sharply, just enough to pierce the large base of his left thumb.

He jerked his hand away swiftly for so indolent a dandy, thought Lucille, almost aghast at what she had done.

His howl sounded no more dandified than the coarsest of the outlaws.

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"I run this restaurant, Mr. Jones, or whatever you call yourself. You will not touch any money here without a written order from Archie. Now put back that cash and quit dripping blood all over my floor. Out!"

Ferdie hastily dropped the bills, glared at her and retreated backward around the counter, to where Stokes had come part way down the room.

Lucille watched as the two met. She couldn't believe she had done such a thing, but she still leaned across the counter and added furiously, "That's plain old red blood, not a blue spot in it, Mr. Sticky-fingers."

"Got your comeuppance, Ferdie," said Stokes, as he winked at Lucille. "Come. I'll wrap it for you."

She saw Stokes lay his polished bobby stick on his bar before she turned to close the cash drawer and with now quivering nerves, joined the commotion outside. The crowd had not dispersed at all but trampled all over Archie's side yard.

"Show me where Archie's side window is that goes into the fancy parlor." Ben stood just inside the kitchen's back door.

Lucille quickly wiped her hands on her apron, glad she'd removed the gems from the pockets and put them in a place she hoped they would be safe. She preceded Ben out the door and led him around the woodshed on the back of the big house.

She and Ben entered the large room after tapping the glass out of the side window. They moved close to the inner door, being very quiet. They carefully opened the door and peered through a narrow crack. All eyes were on a bandaged Ferdie. How had Humphrey spirited him in here so quickly?

Ferdie knelt before the big safe, listening intently and rolling the tumblers of the combination.

"Hell, what gold Red has is all ours," shouted Mendoza, so close against the wall outside the room's door Lucille gasped.

Ferdie suddenly stood and raised his hands for silence. The bloodied bandage on his left thumb looked out of place. Unbelievably the entering crowd quieted to a murmur. "I have some skill in opening safes. If you will be so good as to maintain absolute quiet, I will open it."

Lucille caught his meaningful glance at his father. Humphrey had a hand out of sight, but she caught the shape of a gun beneath his shoddy jacket. She looked at each of the silent outlaws intently²³⁶ They showed various stages of agitation. Black's saturnine face showed in profile, grim and determined. Mendoza already held his deadly knife in readiness, his greasy hair tied out of his way with a headband of glaring crimson. Several others crowded into the room.

Her quick sideways glance flicked down the hall to the bedrooms. Archie leaned weakly against his doorframe. She gasped at his

paleness. Tede had his big gun out of its holster and across his flat belly, his left hand holding the long barrel.

The usually imperturbable Stokes had moved just ahead of Tede, looking more upset than she had ever seen him. A worried frown creased his aging face and he constantly ran a tongue across his full lips. His hard-topped black bowler was on his head.

Just watching him made her, too, suddenly moisten dry lips. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. What would happen when the expert safecracker opened the empty safe? Anxiously she watched Stokes lean toward Tede, evidently telling him something, before he quietly stepped into the group of men.

"Quiet!" yelled Ferdie. "How can I hear the tumblers?" He spun the dial viciously. "Go! Leave! All of you. I cannot be disturbed!"

"Disturbed, hell. That's our gold in there an' you better open it or we're gonna blast it open," declared Black. "I got a man getting the dynamite right now."

Lucille watched as Stokes moved forward and whispered first to one and then another of the outlaws along the edges of the crowd. She saw their startled faces turn suddenly as they stared at the big man. Stokes first held a finger to his lips, then hunched his big shoulders in a shrug, at the same time splaying out his big hands in an "I don't know" gesture. He stepped around that man and proceeded to the next.

Absolute quiet held the room with a breathless quality. Stokes had a squeaky boot and Lucille smiled. What was the man doing? What did he tell those men? She saw Ferdie grow paler than ever, glancing beseechingly at his parent. Bravely she stepped partially through the parlor door. No one even noticed her.

Where had Tede gone? Had he gotten Archie back to bed? Would she be suspected when they found the safe empty? Even Ben had disappeared from her side. She couldn't push through the crowd of³⁷ men. She'd have to return the way she had come, out the window and around the back of the house. Ben must be joining Tom Shafer

and the ranchers from the valley who were mysteriously appearing around town.

As Lucille slipped carefully through the window she and Ben had opened she caught a glimpse of Stokes as he disappeared back of the woodshed. As she rounded that same woodshed, she heard the shout, "This fool don't know nuthin' about safes. I seen thet banker man in Hack's store. Get him up here!"

The crowd quieted. They patiently waited until Bert Shafer was pushed unwillingly through the mob and up across the side porch. Lucille saw him go inside.

"Don't dynamite my safe! Please wait. I need it for the bank. That safe is my whole life!" Shafer declared.

Lucille guessed immediately that Hack had told him the money had been removed. The banker was putting on a good act though. But what would happen to him when they found the money all removed?

"I'll open the safe. Just let me through." Shafer leaned in front of the safe door and spun the dial. He had lost much weight since Lucille had last seen him, just as she had. Life here was hard. It could get much worse.

Shafer took three tries with his trembling fingers before he swung the heavy door open and hastily stepped aside.

"It's empty! You dadgum fool, the damn safe is empty!"

At the back of the crowd a voice shouted, "Ferdie opened it four days ago!"

Lucille gasped. Ferdie couldn't have. What would happen to Mr. Shafer? What was going on? She tried to see around the few men who were too tall for her to look over their heads.

Furious cursing and banging of tables and chairs followed.

"You already had that safe open!" shouted a voice from the side porch. "Ferdie and Humphrey took the money!"

"You fake! You..." Black's unmistakable voice was furious. He spluttered off into such a vicious tirade Lucille held her ears. Not daring to miss what came next, she peered around the woodshed. She could be in extreme danger. Her hand went to the small pistol in her pocket.

Ferdie's and Humphrey's frantic denials came in such screeching tones she turned to watch the porch doorway.

Four men carried a terror-stricken, fiercely struggling Ferdie^{es} sprawled between big shoulders. Mendoza and two others dragged a white-faced, protesting Humphrey off the porch.

Lucille picked up her skirt, ran across the alley and up the step to her back kitchen door. In seconds she entered the kitchen, then crossed the dining room and came out on the front boardwalk as they hurried the two protesting men down the rutted street.

"Hang 'em at the livery!" shouted one voice. "There's a big beam there."

"I got a better idea!"

Lucille couldn't tell if that was Stokes' voice or not but she saw his broad, black clad shoulders and bowler hat on the edge of the crowd. He used that hard-topped hat freely on men he wanted out of this way. Words became a steady hum.

Laughter spread in the gang of wild outlaws.

Laughter? Lucille's amazement wouldn't let her stay safely inside.

"Oh, my lord and little green apples," she cried to herself. "They are headed for the tar kettles cooking for the bank roof."

"Ever hear of tarring and feathering, Lucille?" Ben unexpectedly stood at her elbow. "I think we are about to have one. In this case I would allow it. They are more nuisance than criminal."

The conceit of the man amazed Lucille. Ben still thought of this as his territory, his town, his responsibility and authority. He passed judgment without a jury.

"Where will they find feathers?" Lucille looked out over the crowd.

"Right there." They watched as two men dropped a feather mattress off the balcony of the Elite Saloon.

"I don't see Stokes and his bowler hat, do you?"

"No, but unless you want to watch a couple naked men get tarred and feathered maybe we should go in and have a cup of coffee."

Lucille quickly retreated to her own doorway. She did not go inside. "What if Ferdie and Humphrey convince them they don't have the gold?"

"Then they'll head for Archie's place and tear it apart, but not for awhile," Ben said. "They're having too much fun right now. I better grab that cup of coffee and locate Joe. He or Lannie need to ride out to the Adams ranch and get the reinforcements in here. Tom and Jace Brown's cowboys will be there by now. If Tom comes this way tell him to hold his men behind the stables. You stay put and I'll see you later."

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CHAPTER 16

"We'll have this town cleaned up in no time," said Banker Shafer as he headed toward Lucille and Ben. They all turned to watch the disappearing buckboard with its two hapless passengers trailing flying feathers. There would be no further trouble from Humphrey and Ferdie Jones. Each bounce of the buckboard sent more feathers aloft into the wind until they disappeared beyond a small hill on the way to the valley exit between large cliffs on each side.

Remarks flew about like fluttering sparrows and diving eagles. Tar smell permeated the entire street. Timid suggestions and forceful statements came all at once at the quiet end of town.

"Too bad all Black's and Gorman's outlaws don't follow that buckboard out of town. I'm not sure I've recuperated enough to enforce the law," Ben told Shafer. "I would certainly have to arrest Red Gorman. I saw his face and description on a poster in Cheyenne. The Pinkertons are after that barman, Stokes."

"Archie has been proven innocent," Lucille told the men. "We need a real election first." She quickly realized another man being present caused Ben pointedly to ignore her statement. She pinched in her lips in anger. The man's men-first attitude irritated her more every day. She hoped Archie would not be that difficult to convince that women were equals in every way but muscular strength.

"What will happen when the tar and feathers no longer distract Black's outlaws and the howling cowhands out there at the far end of the street?" Lucille asked.

When neither Ben nor Shafer answered but seemed inclined to do no more than stand watching Lucille said, "Did you still want Tom and the men from Jace Brown's to wait behind the stables?" That would divert both Ben and Shafer from hearing or seeing the ornate carriage now parked back of Archie's house.

"I'm not so weak I can't handle the thinking, Miss Martin." Ben stared down at her as she stood at his side.

So it was now Miss Martin, since Shafer stood there. Lucille glared at Ben and was again ignored.

"We need more action, not just thinking, Mr. Menkin. It's Black's outlaws who need to be driven out, not the town residents." Lucille smiled hopefully as Mr. Hack joined them. She had the feeling his daughters were keeping him focused on the rights of all inhabitants, including women.

"No one is going to arrest the town folk here, Lucille," Hack said.⁴⁰ "We haven't a judge and you couldn't find a jury that would convict any of them anyway."

Lucille wanted very much to add Archie and Stokes to those innocent ones. Ben had set his mind on arresting them. Whatever reasons he had would not be pounded out of his skull with a sledge hammer. She knew that from past experience.

Tentatively, Hutchins the cobbler, stood next to Hack. Hack placed a friendly hand on his shoulder and Lucille realized she'd been holding her breath. At least Hack knew who stood for the town and

not the outlaws. Both men carried double-barreled shotguns and their pockets bulged with shells.

"This could get out of hand," Shafer warned. "Want I should round up Tom, and Jace and his men?" It irked Lucille that it now came out as his idea.

"We'll make a stand right here in town," Ben said.

"Didn't mean to ignore you, Miss Martin," Shafer said. "I understand you saved all our money. Good! If ever you need a loan for your house, or whatever, there will never be a problem at my bank. Once it can open, that is."

Clovine stepped up beside them as she slanted a look up at Ben. She refused to move aside as Danby, the blacksmith, and Virgil the carpenter, joined the knot of men before her restaurant. She winced as she realized any shooting would demolish her plate glass windows. She turned to Ben to protest his choice of site and glanced past his shoulder. What she saw took her breath away and rattled her thoughts.

"Are you all right, Lucille?" Bettina came beside her.

"I'm fine." Lucille realized she must have turned as pale as her white under drawers. To Bettina she whispered, "Earlier I saw Tede and Ford hitching up the matched teams to Humphrey's fancy carriage. Now I know why. They are taking Archie away from here to safety. What if Ben or Shafer see them?"

"Ben has always wanted to arrest Archie, Stokes and Tede," Bettina whispered back. "I think Ben's jealous." Ever the romantic, Bettina evidently felt that reason enough, thought Lucille. But she did not. Ben's staid attitude clung to every iota of law being obeyed.

Lucille had only seen Humphrey's ornate carriage once as he'd entered town with his criminal entourage. It now moved past the back wagon track at the corner of Archie's house. The matched dapple-gray horses pulling it looked almost white against the dark of the buck brush at the river. They would soon be noticed! The shouting and drunken yelling following the tar and feathers wagon delayed discovery, but only for the moment.

Lucille hastily averted her eyes. Ben looked the other direction, out over her head and beyond, to the town livery stable. She turned quickly so the blurring tears in her eyes would not be seen.

"Bettina, what shall we do? They haven't time to cross the river and get to the mountains out of sight. Black will think they have the bank money and Ben will want to arrest them. If Black and his twenty outlaws take out after the carriage with Archie helpless inside, he and his friends won't stand a chance."

Lucille caught Hack's questioning look in her direction. He, too, glanced to the movement this side of the river. Bettina leaned and whispered in Lucille's ear. She listened carefully and bit her lip in consternation. Would it work?

"Ben, Dora got back to town from the Adams' ranch," Hack said, drawing attention to him. "Mabel and Laura are gonna help defend my store. Laura's husband said he'd be along, too. Will you help?"

Lucille gave him a quivery smile. She didn't dare let loose and howl her grief here and now. She had to do something. What Bettina suggested?

Clovine's hand rested lightly on her shoulder. "He'll be back, Lucille," he said softly. "He'll pull out of that fever with Stokes lookin' after him."

"You knew?"

"Helped load. Mendoza was in the house raisin' holy hell but he never came to the stables. Now he's over with the rest of that pack of varmints."

"Here comes Black!" Ben warned. The town men squared off to meet Black's crowd of killers as they slowly rode their horses down the dusty street toward them. Saddle leather creaked and horses tossed their heads. The grim faced men continued up the street.

Black very slowly rode toward them, plodding every frightening step, past Hack's store. Lucille couldn't see if he glanced in at the

store or not, but his men did. They came on past the long bunkhouse on his right. Twenty of his men rode behind him.

Lucille and Bettina slipped behind the local men and entered the restaurant.

"Ain't no use runnin' off, fat lady!" Black yelled through the batwing doors. "Mendoza just searched Red's rooms. Ain't nobody there an' there ain't no gold hid no place. Where'd Red go with it? You better be ready to answer questions."

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"Oh, my lord," Lucille whispered to Bettina as they stood at the door. "We have to keep them from thinking of the stables, or hearing Archie's carriage leave."

"You do as I said and we'll keep those men distracted as long as we can." Bettina pushed Lucille across the dining area.

"You can't go in there, Black." Clovine's voice raised above the rattle of horse sound and the creak of saddles.

"Hurry! Hurry!" urged Bettina, back in Lucille's bedroom area. "Ah, this should do it, a few minutes at least." She ran back across the dining room to the batwings. "She'll talk to you in a few minutes, Mr. Black. She thinks she knows where the money is. If you have that then you can leave our valley."

"Hell, I don't care about the fat lady, except for information. I want Red Gorman and that bank money. Ain't nobody gonna stop us neither. Clovine, you and these men might as well stay out of our way."

Lucille recrossed the dining room, fastening tiny buttons on the way. Bettina's words in her ear were, "Now aren't you glad I insisted on making that dress?"

"Just help me hurry," whispered Lucille. More loudly she called, "Black, I'll be right there. I can tell you where the money is, but I won't tell you where Archie is."

"One more hair pin," said Bettina. "Now go!"

At the boardwalk Mendoza and five men stood to Ben's right, facing him, guns at the ready. Straight ahead Black and the rest of his gang of criminals also faced Ben, Clovine, Hutchins and Shafer. Virgil and the blacksmith held shotguns at one side. Hack had slipped away. Lucille saw him circling around behind the outlaws as she moved to the batwings.

Head held high, Lucille stepped through the batwings. Her imagination told her what she looked like. She hoped her buttons were done straight, and that her jellied knees did not collapse her right there in the street.

"Oh, my gawd!" Clovine declared, after his initial astonishment. He put it on thick with another "What a beauty! Lucille, what have you done?"

With sable brown hair out of her usual braid and caught up in a high comb it spilled onto her almost bare shoulders. Her slim neck, white and satiny, above the ridge of her collarbone, was framed by ruffles of lace. The fullness of her breasts, where tiny buttons held the

bodice of her blue satin gown together, were enough to bulge the eyes of all the outlaws. The tight sleeves on her slim arms ended at the elbows with more lace ruffles.

"Hell and damnation!" Black gawked, his glinting ebony eyes almost rolling from his head. The ladies-man in him held him momentarily enthralled.

The tight bodice of her ice blue dress nipped in at a tiny waist. The satin fell into cascades of folds and ruffles of lace. As she turned sideways to let the doorway come quietly shut, her slight bustle swayed enticingly.

"Lucille! Miss Martin!" Ben shouted in her ear. She ignored his aghast voice.

All eyes followed the former fat lady restaurant cook as Lucille moved elegantly past men who hastily stepped out of her way.

"Fat gal?" Black almost exploded. "You cheated on us! You shoulda been in on the gambling." He quickly shed his lustful

feelings and regained his sense of greed. "That don't tell me where the hell that bank money is."

"Try Mr. Adams' ranch, or Mr. Harolds' ranch," said Lucille sweetly. "Try Mr. Hack's store where his safe is locked tight, and well guarded. That is where the people's gold has gone."

Black slammed his big Stetson hat down on his saddle horn, swore mightily and jammed it back on his head. He lifted his gun as Lucille marched by, her sideways glance on that formidable weapon.

"Where the hell are you going, Lucille?" Ben roared.

Most of the outlaws hadn't decided quite what to do. They watched their flabbergasted boss for instruction. Lucille turned and glanced back through the crowd with a coy look. Ever so slowly she flipped open a feather fan and peered at them over it. "I'm going to visit Mr. Hack's store, Mr. Menkin."

Every eye followed the sway of her bustle as she slowly made her way down the short street.

Bettina caught up with her part way to the store. Below the sudden buzz of outraged male conversation she whispered, "I heard them cross the river. If they reach the foothills Archie will be safe."

"I just saw Lannie and Jace Brown at the livery stable. Mr. Hack and the girls are in his store with guns," Lucille whispered back.

"And Ben, Shafer and Clovine can duck inside the restaurant," said Bettina. "The rest of them can get around the building."

"That means Black and Mendoza and their killers are bottled up on the street."

"Look! Isn't that Clem Adams leading a lot of riders into town?" Bettina said.

"It certainly is. Black's men won't have a chance. Do I dare run now?" said Lucille. "I'm scared positively spitless. Or else I'll pee right down my legs I'm so nervous. What if Black shoots me?"

"Run! Run!" screeched Bettina.

Bullets rained a torrent all around them. Lucille and Bettina dove in the doorway of Hack's store. Laura grabbed Lucille in her arms.

"I was so scared!" Laura kept saying. "What a crazy, brave thing to do!"

Lucille collapsed in the nearest rocker offered for sale.

Hack and his daughter, Mabel, leaned carefully out the door and the shattered window. Lucille couldn't even remember hearing glass break. Joe Texas stumbled in the door beside them, out of breath from running. Laura immediately clung to his arm, bumping against Lucille.

"The Adams bunch are in town," announced Joe. "Ken Harolds is with Clyde someplace out there. Black and his men are hightailin' any way they can, as long as it's away from here. They'll run into Adams at the end of the street."

"I'll be back!" Black roared in a voice that sounded even above the gunfire. "I'll burn this damn town end to end!" More gunfire rattled the windows.

Lucille couldn't stay put in the rocking chair. She grabbed a straight wooden chair and placed it in front of a tall side window. She climbed up so she could look toward the western mountains. Two outriders, like small dots, kept pace with the ornate vehicle, one in front and one in back. They had to be Stokes and Ebbit Ford. Tede would be at the reins. Little reflections of light flickered off silver. She knew without being able to see it, that the crest of Lord Humphrey Frederick Archibald Whitwheel Gorman-Jones emblazoned the side of the carriage. She wondered if Archie would keep that fancy crest on the coach's door.

With Archie's carriage out of sight in moments Lucille turned her attention back to the two groups of men facing off in the street. She came down from the chair and joined the Hacks and Bettina at the hole where the big front window had been.

"He killed a lot of people," shouted a voice in the crowd.

Half the outlaws spurred horses off between the restaurant and the bunkhouse. As more Bascom men appeared in the street the rest split down the side street toward the cobbler's shop and Bettina's dressmaking shop. Explosive gunfire echoed and resounded off the buildings. Lucille winced as a bullet shattered one of her plate glass windows and another burst her street lantern.

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"Let's end this once and for all," Ben shouted.

Running horses churned the dust. A united front by Bascom and Gorman factions had turned the tide. Sounds of gunfire came sporadically from further away.

"Ben and Clovine have Black's men on the run." Hack quit firing from his doorway. "Ben is coming this way."

"Adams and his crew turned them at the end of the street. What is left of those outlaws will head out of town." Ben watched from the steps of the store.

"Good job well done," said Hack as Ben and Clovine entered the store.

"I think Jace Brown and his men went after Black's rustlers," said Joe.

"Brown may have headed back out to save his cattle and catch those rustlers at the same time," said Lucille.

"Good thinking, Lucille," agreed Ben as he joined them.

"Did you think I couldn't?"

"Not that again, Miss Martin," said Ben with a frown. "We have gone over that before. Yes, you can think. Women can think as well as men. Agreed. Now I have to go do things women can't do. While you go do things men can't. Like looking like a dancehall fancy lady in that garb you have on, so Gorman got away." He glared at her.

Clovine stepped up beside them as she said in an undertone to Ben, "You've known for weeks that I had deliberately increased my size. By fighting off Black's outlaws now we women won't be in danger of being taken as a gambling prize."

"Then leave off the padding stuff so you can move around." Ben glared down at her with resentment written all over his face. "Gorman knew long before I did. Why did you have to deceive me? What the damn hell were you thinking, getting all gussied up like that and making a fool of yourself? No wife of mine is going to be a stage show!" He started to stalk off.

"Lucille's new found beauty kinda knocked you for a loop, Ben, that's all. Don't be a sore loser, and make her feel bad," Clovine said.

"Loser, hell. I've got Dora. Gorman's gone. He's the loser and so is she."

Lucille sucked in her cheeks. The man was an egotist. She meant to protest but thought it a waste of her time.

"The poor man wanted you." Bettina said as she chuckled softly beside Lucille. "He also wants Dora and can't make up his mind. Oh my, the power of love."

"You should talk, Bettina Belon. Do you think we haven't seen you and Mr. Hack sparking along the river walk?" She hugged the seamstress. "I need to see what can be salvaged in my restaurant. I'll need to order a new front window."

Lucille started out the door to walk down the street, being careful of broken glass and splintered wood pieces. She'd be glad to get into a

simple blouse and skirt after the parade she had made. It did her heart good to know she looked so well in her normal figure and could remain that way now that the outlaws were leaving.

Ben came up behind her. He almost pushed her through the batwing doors.

"You've thrown all modesty to the four winds ... again. First you crawl in bed with an outlaw and claim you were freezing to death and now..."

Lucille's slap swung Ben's head around. All the power of chopping wood and kneading endless bowls of bread dough was behind it. It knocked him back a few steps and left a red handprint on his cheek.

"He's twice the man you are. He has a heart. You have only ego. I pity poor Dora. You'll have her in sack cloth and brown sunbonnets."

"Damn you, Lucille, you ... you ... Oh, hell!" He almost spun the batwings off their hinges as he left.

Lucille plopped into the nearest hard chair. She laughed and laughed, a little hysterical after all the emotional turmoil, the battles and the sudden release of her feelings. Archie was safe, and poor smitten Dora could claim Ben all she wanted. The poor girl would likely be clothed in browns and drabs if she were unlucky enough to marry the staid, jealousy-ridden Ben. For she knew Ben would be jealously possessive of anything and anyone he had control of. Lucky for him, Dora probably liked it that way.

Only it would never be Lucille, she'd make sure of that. For the sake of the town she'd have to somehow find a balance between Ben's tenacious egotism and justice for the inhabitants of the valley.

Lucille brought a simple blouse and full blue skirt from the depths of her trunk and put them on. They were wrinkled but would fall in place while she bought herself a new broom at Hack's store. Hers on the boardwalk had a bullet-shattered handle.

She entered Hack's store in time to see Dora fly down the center aisle into Ben's arms. Leave it to pretty little Dora to wait until

danger was past. Lucille envied that Dora had her man safe, while she could only wonder if Archie had gotten far enough away.

Archie was gone!

It hit Lucille now like the wagonload of bricks waiting for Shafer's⁸⁴⁷ bank front. With all the excitement the reality and finality of his leaving hadn't occupied her mind as much as the necessity of his getting away from the danger of Black's gang or the inevitable arrest by Constable Ben Menkin.

She'd never see Archie again. Her eyes blurred with tears and a hand went to her trembling lips. But he was safe. No one followed them, had they?

As the firing thinned out and moved to the far road out of the valley Lucille stepped back out on the boardwalk. Most everyone continued to watch the outlaws being chased full tilt for the pass, out of the valley. Those in town were being wary of stragglers coming from between buildings or from the direction some of the other outlaws had taken.

Ben limped wearily toward her with Dora again clinging to his arm.

Did he see what she did, or not? Far off to the west, heading into the difficult pass that had been rarely used, until today, she saw the big, bright dot that was the coach. Four matched dapple-gray horses pulled it. Tears blurred her vision, but not so much that she didn't see the two other riders leaving the river brush and also head in that direction. Going after Archie? Her heart dropped to her shoe toes and she closed her eyes in silent prayer.

* * * *

Archie first became aware of swaying motion below him. Pain engulfed his entire body. Lapsing into the black void of unconsciousness seemed a blessing, even accompanied by the blast of the fiery heat of his fever. He came alert a few seconds. In his hazy vision Stokes did one-handed padding along his ribs where Doc Stedman's stitching had torn loose when he'd been moved. Fever dried his mouth.

Lord knows you're a reckless fool Archie. Lucy will get a battered, scarred and crippled old man when—or maybe that's if—you ever get back to her.

He let himself drift into the black cocoon of near unconsciousness as he heard Tede's strident yells to the horses and the harsh slap of the reins as he hurried the animals along after a brief rest stop. Stokes no longer seemed to be in the coach.

In his next conscious moments, Archie laid on a short legged cot next a small fire. He'd just drunk his fill of water and the cold cloth on his head felt good.

"Good thing we seed this a-comin'," Tede was saying to Stokes and Ford. "Else there'd been no box of grub ready an' waitin'."

"Good thing Miss Lucy kept that Menkin feller and them outlaws⁹¹⁸ lookin' the other way." Ebbit Ford stirred the red coals of the fire and added a stick of wood. "She ain't a bad sort fer a female."

Arche listened to his friends without moving. Ebbitt hadn't arrived in Gorman until later, but Stokes and Tede had been with him for many years. He couldn't move as he wanted to. One arm was tied tight to his body. His recovery had been slow enough before, now all the jarring of getting him moved to safety put him behind again.

"Hutchins and the smithy done a good job stirrin' up the tar and feather party oncet you give them the idea, Stokes," Tede said. "You shoulda let them fellers hang ole Humph an' thet worthless pipsqueak Ferdie. Then they'd be out of Arch's hair fer good."

"I'm not as vengeful as you. I'm not sure the tar and feathers are less painful, but it's not fatal." Stokes said.

"This here jerky soup is ready. You think Arch will come around enough to drink some? He needs suthin' to build his strength," Tede said.

Archie croaked his own reply from a dried out throat. Stokes rushed over to him with a tin cup of water but Tede had to support his head so he could drink.

"Your arm, Stokes?" Archie asked, aghast at how weak his voice was.

"With all the shootin' thet day one shot went through Stokes' arm and glanced into you, or you'd be dead meat, younker," Tede said.

Archie wondered at the excitement that lit up Tede's pale brown eyes. "Now thet female of yourn, she's some woman I hev to finally admit. She done sashayed her pretty ass ... her behind, right down the street in front of Black and his dadburn outlaws. Seein' her all skinny and duded up in thet low cut dress near knocked their socks off. Kept them and thet stiff-necked Ben feller watchin' her when they got done seein' the tar and feather breegade move out of town. I jest wish we coulda seed more but there warn't no time. We hed to skeedaddle."

"Clovine helped us get you loaded in the carriage," said Stokes.

"Now thet suprised me," Tede said. "Fer an old codger he's got the right smarts in his ticker."

"Like he's a day older than you," scoffed Ford.

Archie took several spoons of beef flavored water while the three men talked but could no longer keep his mind on their words. He thought of the blue silk yard goods in the package he'd had for Lucille from his last trip to Denver. It matched the blue of her⁷⁴⁹ gorgeous eyes. Just so Hutchins didn't forget to deliver it. Would she ever have it made up in a dress?

* * * *

Lucille was all alone in the quiet restaurant building. So much had happened it seemed like several days instead of only one. Bettina had remained at the General Store to see how Mr. Hack had come through the fighting.

Stokes would no longer ever be at his bar, practicing his writing skills. Tede would no longer work with the horses in Archie's stable. Ford's reports on the few cattle Archie owned someplace out of town were over.

A sob choked her. She tried to swallow past the egg-sized lump in her throat. She ran from the dining room and threw herself on the new cot in her bedroom. She howled her grief into the pillow until she was too weak to move and finally fell into an exhausted asleep.

Next morning Lucille knew her eyes were red and puffy and her face pale as the sheets of paper held out to her by Mr. Hutchins.

"What are these, Mr. Hutchins?"

"It's from Archie, Miss Lucy. I've had them quite a while. It says he's giving you his house and stables and his half of the restaurant to use and such until he can come back and claim them. Me and the Missus signed as witnesses."

"Would he dare come back?" Lucille's mind snatched at what was most important to her, Archie's return. He would have the jewels she had returned to him for income until he got better, but what if he decided never to return?

"Ain't nobody here would ever find him guilty of a damn thing. 'Scuse my cussin'; but they wouldn't. He did too much for this town, building it up outta nothing for folks like the rest of us who needed to prove our innocence."

"Thank goodness, but would Ben let that happen? The Bascom people might still listen to him, especially if he is officially elected sheriff, over the whole valley."

"Menkin's got a lot of good in him, Miss Lucy, but he's got a twist in his tail when it comes to you. He'll get over it. To my way of thinkin' Miss Dora is taking care of that. He just needs to get off one set of railroad tracks and onto another. Miss Dora makes a good little switchman."

"I surely do hope so. Thank you for bringing the papers to me."

"If you need help moving to the big house or settin' up your school you just say so. The wife could help with the cleanin' up, after the mess them outlaws left."

Lucille chuckled, her first effort at humor since Archie's departure. "Too bad the jail isn't ready so Ben could use his energy keeping some of the outlaws locked up, instead of harassing innocent people. Those wounded outlaws will soon be out of here."

"This little package was left with me, too, Miss Lucy. I reckon you'll like openin' that in private. There's a mail order comin' I'm to pick up at Pinedale for you in the next week or so. I'm not sure what that will be."

"Thank you, Mr. Hutchins. We are lucky to have you picking up and delivering our mail. Tell Mrs. Hutchins I'd be most happy for her to take over the housekeeping at the big house." She watched him leave, at the same time wondering what Archie could have left her. She opened the box as Ed Hutchins left.

"Lucille?" Bettina called out. She and Laura Texas came across the dining room.

"It's blue! Blue like your eyes, Lucille," Bettina said. "Gorgeous blue silk. What a beautiful dress I will make you!"

"It's so silky." Laura touched the fabric softly.

"What else is in the box Ed Hutchins delivered?" Mabel Hack entered the room and peered around the carton's edge.

"I see there are no secrets in a small town. I don't mind." Lucille smiled at them all. "We really need a post office."

"We needed a school, a doctor and a lawyer," Mabel said. "We have a doctor and a teacher. Mr. Gorman made a really good beginning for a town."

"Do you suppose Ben will change the town's name to Bascom?" Laura asked.

"I hope not," Lucille burst out without thinking. Her heart thumped in her chest. She was no politician but it seemed she might have to do a little politicking. She had had no chance to do much with Archie. Now he'd left her on her own. She swallowed with difficulty. Would he ever return to his town?

The four women sat at one of the small tables in the restaurant dining room. Laura poured coffee into cups for each of them.

Lucille opened a small box.

"Diamond rings!"

"Huge diamonds!"

"What does the note say?" Mabel edged closer.

Lucille's fingers trembled as she unfolded the paper in the box. She read "For your schoolhouse."

"That's all it says?" Laura asked.

"Isn't that enough?" Lucille turned the two large rings this way and that to catch the light. They must be worth quite a bit.

"Banker Shafer loves to put on the dog," Mabel said. "I bet he'd buy them so you could get a schoolhouse built with the money. Now²⁵¹

that it's safe living here, his wife will be coming soon. She's been waiting in Pinedale."

"And then you could really teach." Laura leaned back in her chair and sipped coffee. "The slate is already here. Virgil can build a frame to put it on the wall."

Lucille's heart raced. Archie had done this. She wished he had delivered the box in person. Her chin threatened to pucker and she took a swift sip of coffee.

"Archie is the strangest outlaw I ever heard of," said Laura.

"Forie says he's a gambler, not an outlaw," Mabel said. She studied her coffee cup very seriously.

"Oh, yes, Mabel, we noticed how long Forie shops in the store on Saturday nights." Lucille knew rumors had previously gone on about Forie coming to the restaurant often when they first arrived in town. With real delight she saw Mabel turn very pink. It gave her

rather plain face a pretty glow. Mabel looked directly at Lucille and Lucille did not look away. "I am so happy for you."

"Really?" Mabel's tone sharpened.

Lucille heard the self-doubt in the older girl's voice. "Really," Lucille said firmly and she heard Mabel's small sigh.

Lucille would be glad to see people's assumptions give up on her and Ben having the first wedding. She had long ago. There had really never been serious rumors about her and Forie Drescher. They were just friends. All she foresaw remaining in her relationship with Ben were the arguments they'd had over women's rights. She hoped they could keep them amicable.

"A wedding would be a nice reason for celebration, Mabel," Lucille said.

"A yellow dress for you," Bettina declared. "To show up your brown eyes."

Lucille nodded. She picked up another small box. Her pulse battered her ear drums. She could hardly breathe. Why? It was just another box.

A collective "Oh, my!" filled the dining room.

A gold ring with a large emerald set with diamonds all around nestled in a bit of white satin in the small box.

"Just like his eyes!" Laura exclaimed. "How romantic! Is there a note?"

Lucille couldn't speak. She only held out the paper.

Laura snatched it. "For you. Do with it what your heart tells you."

"Oh." Bettina sobbed into her handkerchief. Mabel wiped a quick tear and Laura's lips trembled.

Lucille jumped up from the table, upsetting her chair. She hurried to the front window and stared out. She swiped at twin tears and

brought a small handkerchief from her skirt pocket. When she returned to the table she wore the emerald ring on her left hand.

"There's more in the box," Mabel said.

Lucille lifted out a small book and a block of papers.

"Oh, my gracious sakes alive!" Lucille waved them in the air with both hands.

"What are they?"

"Ballots! Printed voting ballots!" Lucille shook them under their noses. "Archie is still working for his town. Look! We can have an election! A real election! And we'll all vote. Agreed?"

"Agreed," three voices said at once.

"Pa won't object," said Laura. "We made sure of that. And I know Joe won't."

"Delbert says the blacksmith and the livery stable hands asked to be allowed to stay in the town. Mr. Shafer and Ben told them it was all right but they'd be watched closely." Bettina patted Lucille's one hand as it lay on the table after she again sat down to sip coffee. "Ed and Jeanie Hutchins will gladly stay. We will have to persuade them both to vote."

"His name is Delbert, Bettina," Lucille said. "That has a nice ring. Delbert and Bettina Hack. It looks like we'll have weddings all over the place."

"But not the one everyone anticipated, right Lucille?" Bettina patted her hand again and Lucille turned hers up to squeeze Bettina's small fingers.

"No, not that one. Much better ones."

Another round of filled coffee cups kept them silent a few moments.

"Will you hire Darcy and me both to work in the restaurant if you teach school?" Laura asked, after a few moments.

"What a great idea! Of course. And Joe can manage Archie's cattle herd, and his horses." Lucille said enthusiastically.

"Peace! What a wonderful thing now." said Mabel. "Most all the outlaws are long gone. We'll bury three of them in the cemetery beyond the livery. Pa says a church best be built up that way. It's close by the graveyard."

Lucille's mind centered not so much on the outlaws who were dead, or the outlaws who had ridden up through the pass to the south. Those going north past the Green Lakes didn't bother her at all. It was the two going west into the high mountains where Archie and his men in the opulent carriage had disappeared that bothered her. Even when they found there was no gold those men following them would exact a vicious revenge. Or try? Would they succeed?

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CHAPTER 17

PEACE!

It was a wonderful thing! Finally, thought Lucille. After all the turmoil and fear most of the spring, it was wonderful just to sit in a rocker on her boardwalk and relax. She watched the sage grouse out beyond the edge of town, and admired the small garden put in by the Hutchins. She saw the early flowers behind their house down the side street that abutted her street at the walkway.

Then why did she worry about the glowing fire she'd seen last night at the southern pass, not the direction Archie had taken, and where no one had a reason to be?

Maybe the peace had come too fast and too easily. Being surrounded must have given Corey Black second thoughts about getting the bank money. Her spectacular parade down the street had taken all the attention so the wounded Archie and his friends could escape. Had it also allowed many of Black's lesser gang members a

chance to sneak out of town? Would a vindictive Black find a way to gather up the remnants of his gang members and return? He'd threatened to burn down the town.

Surely not, Lucille argued to herself. Outlaws wanted the easy way. They wouldn't go to all the hard riding, the hard discipline and plotting when there were easier places from which to steal.

Ben was in town. He acted as sheriff. Should she tell Ben about the strange fire? He surely will be elected sheriff and it would be his job to check it out once elections were over.

"What a beautiful morning!" called Laura from inside the restaurant, and Lucille's questions about the glowing fire from the night before fled her mind.

"It certainly is," Lucille agreed. With Laura and Darcy handling most of the reduced restaurant work, Lucille sighed at her laziness. She couldn't even plan the schooling for the children until summer ended. She leaned her head against the chair back and closed her eyes.

A beautiful morning and I can have beautiful memories if nothing else. I should count my blessings, Lucille thought. It takes time to believe in peace. It still feels like this isn't over, like there is unfinished business, good and bad.

It wasn't the good memories, but the nothing else part that bothered her. The good memories could even center around the restaurant⁴ behind her. She spread her slim left hand on her knee and again admired the emerald ring. It glittered like Archie's green eyes.

Like his eyes had glistened when she asked him how he knew her weight was fake. She remembered saying, "How could you see when I padded so well?"

"When a man's hands reach around a woman's arms as he pulls her across a counter for a kiss that tells him plenty."

"Oh." Lucille's mouth had formed a small circle. She'd purposely let her smile form around her eyes before allowing a wide grin as she leaned across the counter between them.

"Shall I show you?" he asked.

"I think I remember the occasion ... but you could refresh my memory, before Laura and Joe come over to help with dishes."

"And before Stokes brings in his next case of whiskey."

Archie had reached, but not to pull her across the counter as he had before. He drew her down to the counter opening and snuggled her full length against him. Lucille blushed as the small gun belt she'd started wearing pressed into flesh along with his larger gun belt, and the lower hot hardware pulsed between them. His lips had claimed hers in a searing kiss she would never forget.

She knew he referred to the bedroom when he said, "Next time there won't be icy wet clothes between us."

His lips had claimed hers again, moved to her temple and her...

"Lucille! Are you daydreaming again?" Darcy laughed as she rested a hand on Lucille's shoulder. "What did Menkin say about the ballots?"

Lucille noted the "Menkin" from Darcy. Not everyone liked Ben Menkin and his narrow-mindedness. His attitude never let Darcy forget he'd thought her a whore, even when she wasn't. It was only her association with the saloon and he'd automatically jumped to conclusions she did not like. Lucille couldn't blame her for cold feelings regarding the man. "I haven't told him yet. I have a book where I read a little bit about the duties of each office but I suppose someone will have to write in the candidates' names. I didn't open that package. I only saw the blank sample ballot on top."

"Menkin won't talk to me because I worked in a saloon, but I overheard him mention using the restaurant for a town meeting. He⁶⁵ plans to tell you."

Tell, not ask, Lucille thought but she only said "Good. We need to be organized." For a moment she gave thought to probably having

as much trouble getting the women to vote as she would talking the men into allowing them their own voice. She followed Darcy inside to supervise moving tables and benches even before Ben came to see her about it.

The meeting was well attended, Lucille admitted that afternoon. The noise almost deafened her as much as the short but fierce battle with Black's outlaws the day before. Most everyone had stayed in town to get this business settled. It would save them some long rides back from their far out ranches if everything could be handled now.

No one kept a record of what their discussions were about so she rummaged in the school supplies crate and brought out a student's paper tablet. She banged a small pan on the counter for attention.

"If everyone will take turns I'll write all these suggestions down."

Ben glared at her. Lucille guessed he was angered that she showed more organization than he did. She wrote as the points to consider came slowly at first, but with increasing speed as new ideas came. Renaming the town came first. She wanted to object but knew that

would antagonize the Bascom people. She felt sure the Gorman people were intimidated by the Bascom crowd because they represented prosperity more than they did.

"We need a church," Martha Adams spoke up. Many feminine voices agreed.

During that discussion Lucille counted. Martha, Jeanie Hutchins, Mrs. Bricker, Darcy, Laura, Mabel and Dora, Bettina, and four women from the Elite Saloon attended the meeting. Her former companion, Cora, did not appear. Would they be enough influence on the sixteen men she could name, plus the cowhands from the ranches?

"We need a church and a preacher, regardless of denomination," repeated Martha. "I'm glad we now have a doctor." She smiled and nodded at Dr. Link Stedman.

"And a school!" Mrs. Bricker spoke up. "I know we have a teacher."

"I have funding for a school," Lucille announced.

"You have?" Ben's amazed voice was almost at her elbow, from where he leaned against the wall. She stood on the kitchen side of⁵⁶ the long counter in order to face the crowd. She had known he was there, frowning.

"We should vote on a mayor so we can have a real meeting conducted," said Ben.

"I move to nominate Hiram Clovine for mayor," Lucille said.

"Hey, women ain't got no say!"

Lucille couldn't pinpoint that voice.

"Lucille, you can't nominate anyone." Ben turned to face her.

"Wyoming gave every woman in the state the right to vote, why can't we make nominations, too?"

"Not in my town!" yelled Ben.

"This is not just your town," declared Lucille. "Women live here, too."

"Women wouldn't vote even if they got the right," stated Shafer. "Mine never would, if she ever gets here."

"Cause you wouldn't let her," yelled young Tom Shafer and they all laughed.

The meeting disintegrated into talking groups, some yelling and some merely discussing the issues involving women's voting and the town and valley future.

"Ben," said Lucille, her voice tight with held in anger over her disappointment in him. "I think we should have them think about things for a week, then call another meeting."

"Another meeting you are going to conduct," Ben said sarcastically, with a nod toward her notes. "We need it sooner than that, before

they have to make another trip in. And no women allowed this time."

"Ben Menkin, if I have to pay taxes on my restaurant and my house, I'm going to have a say in how that money is spent, whether it's boardwalk or street lanterns or whatever. By the oxymoron of your past actions, the blatant hypocrisy, by the esoteric position you are taking, you claim I'm not qualified to vote?"

He stared at her, his widened eyes darkening. "Quit spouting all those big words, woman. I'm sure you'll have your say, no matter what." His eyes black with fury Ben stared back at her, then turned and stalked, stiff-backed, from the room.

Lucille painfully swallowed her dismay. Anger was not the answer and she'd let her temper sway her common sense. The right to vote and be considered the mental equal to men was of utmost importance to her. Ben knew that. He had shot down all those expectations in one moment.

"It takes some men longer than others to understand they aren't the world with a little red fence around it," said Martha with a smile. "I think a little female planning is in order, don't you?"

Lucille drew a shaky sigh. "Yes, it definitely is."

"I wish we had a newspaper, or a printer of some kind. We could print flyers and post them. How many women are there?"

With heads together, the women listed every person in the valley over the age of twenty one years.

"Are saloon girls allowed to vote?"

"All they have to be is women over the age of twenty one, the way I understand."

"Do you really have money to build a school?" Martha asked.

"I ... inherited the means to build a school. It was very specifically stated it should be for a school." Lucille's thoughts flew to Archie.

Would she ever see him again? How was he doing now? Was he still alive?

"That is wonderful!"

Lucille could see the questions in Martha's eyes, and in those of the quietly observing women. She was grateful when Martha said quickly, "If we can convert just five or ten of the men, and all the women vote for it, we can win. We must each do a lot of electioneering and do it very soon. What if they can't write their name when they register to vote?"

"All the Elite girls can write their names," volunteered Laura. "We taught them a long time ago. We can't count on Dora to go against Ben though."

The women scattered like chicks from a hawk once outside the restaurant door, obviously headed about town to continue their discussions and complete their shopping from the newly arrived goods at Hack's General Store.

Lucille sat disconsolately in her kitchen chair, resting her tired feet. She was really glad for the eager cooperation of the women. She felt sure Darcy could convince her friends, the soiled doves at the Elite Saloon. She felt equally sure the men held their own meetings in the day that followed. Lucille saw Ben everywhere. So were Clovine, Hack and Clem Adams.

Talk buzzed in her restaurant and stopped when she was near. There was good-natured shouting, often ringing loudly through open doors and windows, but she could distinguish no actual words.

She missed the laconic, levelheaded Stokes and wondered if he and Tede, with Ebbitt Ford, had gotten Archie to safety and good medical care. She would probably never know. She sighed heavily. She wasn't even sure how Archie would vote if he were here. Toward the last, that had not been a topic discussed between them. He had, however, left her the two big diamond rings, designating them for a school. Now she only needed to find a buyer or a place to trade the diamonds for lumber, shingles, windows and nails.

Those were the good thoughts. Despair bent her shoulders and brought rainbow-hued tears to distort her vision and quiver on her lashes, making her blink.

Archie was gone!

Lucille knew Clovine made sure every one of them was aware she had been the one to save their gold from Black's thieves, so they had the means to build whatever they had originally intended. It was almost laughable the way he embellished the story of her sneaking about in the dark night, braving the dangers of outlaw discovery and things that went hoot or howled in the dark. He made it sound like coyotes and wolves dogged her every step and the Bascom people were duly impressed, very grateful, and inclined to vote.

Word spread rapidly that the nominations and voting would be done next day right after the noon meal so everyone could return to their own ranches before dark. Two men struggled in through her restaurant door with a three sided, topless, rather weak walled affair,

followed by Martha and Bettina with a length of curtain material to be tacked in place, for a voting booth.

All tables were surrounded by waiting people. The restaurant did a lively noon business and kept her as well as Laura and Darcy busy. The few children raced in and out the batwing doors. Lucille was pleased to note that Darcy's little boy Georgie was among them. With Darcy working only in the restaurant and not in the Elite, she felt pleased they were both a little more accepted.

Lucille scanned the newly opened package of ballots for the long resolutions. Approval for a church was listed, also the school. Nowhere on it was the long question of women voting rights.

Sight of the waiting, smiling crowd disappeared off the edges of her vision. Ben strode toward her, with arm bent to escort her to the voting booth. She couldn't believe her eyes! Ben Menkin backing down?

"Did you read the damn ballot?" Ben's voice ground out between set teeth. "You damn well know saving that boy got the women up in

arms and saving the gold got some of the men who only think a day ahead at a time."

What was he talking about? Lucille's eyes quickly rescanned the ballot, obviously ordered by Archie. She was more careful this time, not searching for that fatal question of women's right to vote as before.

Mayor ... Ed Hutchins ... Delbert Hack

Justice ... Hiram Clovine ... Clem Adams

Treasurer ... Bertram Shafer, Sr.

Sheriff ... Ben Menkin ... Joe Texas ... Tom Shafer

Town Clerk...

"Lucille Martin! Town Clerk! What is this? Oh, my heavens! Oh, my!"

Laughter rumbled through the crowd. Her startled gaze covered a sea of eyes surrounding them. Friendly laughter was not joined by Ben, but that she expected.

"Hey, lady," yelled a voice from somewhere, "Are you gonna jawjack or are you gonna vote?"

"Be my guest," said Ben as he drew back the tiny privacy curtain on the little walled cubicle. "I'm next." He finally grinned, which she regarded with misgiving.

"Since we know Wyoming already approved women voting statewide, it is no longer necessary to vote on it," Shafer Sr. repeated as he tucked thumbs in his suspenders and strutted for the benefit of the crowd. He was assured of being elected treasurer. "Register first with Martha Adams, Lucille. She's a good writer. You can take over when you're done voting."

As Lucille entered the booth she heard the shuffling of feet as people lined up at the registration table behind the waiting Ben. It didn't take her long to vote on town officers, and she immediately

voted for approving a school, even though there were only half a dozen children. There would be more. She left the booth and took over the registration book so Martha could vote.

"I hate a bossy woman," stated Ben when he came to her table from voting. He wasn't really grinning, was he? "You should have seen your face! I will never forget it as long as I live, even if I still don't agree. Clovine persuaded some of these men the only way to shut you up was give you a government job. Between clerking, teaching⁶⁰ and looking after your restaurant you just might leave the rest of us alone to do our jobs."

Lucille's private thought was that somehow, Archie Gorman was still running his town and doing a good job of it. He'd picked the names on the ballot and ordered them printed. No one had added any written in any other candidates.

* * * *

"I have a job for you!" Inside the cave Archie's roar echoed in his own ears.

"We done jest got back from a job, younker," Tede called back.

"Any trouble on the way? Did Black follow you?"

"Jest a leetle trouble. Eb here got off a lucky shot so Black hed to haul Mendoza off to git mended." Tede entered the narrow slot of the cave opening, followed by Ebbit.

"Lucky shot! I did that shot right careful, putting it where I wanted." Eb's protest brought grins to the faces of the other men.

"Wal, Mendoza won't be flingin' no knives fer a spell, thet's sure," Tede said.

"Did you get a good price for the horses and carriage? Did you bring back a comfortable surrey, plain black?" Archie asked.

"Course I did. Some high-falutin' lawyer got the fancy rig and them fat horses." Tede dropped a leather pouch on the cot beside Archie. "Thet's what's left after buyin' a team of bays an' a black two seater

surrey like you ordered. It's got a gold stripe, is all. You want thet painted over?"

"It took you long enough," Archie said. "Nevermind, Tede, I'm just impatient. I know you did your best and I'm satisfied." Archie leaned back on the makeshift pillow on the low cot. "How far is Denver anyway?"

"We didn't count no miles. Two weeks workin' the ribbons an' gittin' them fat ponies to move pullin' thet blame carriage done stove up my legs. Them ponies wa'nt so damn fat when we got there. Looked better, too. Comin' back warn't much better neither. My old bones groaned all the way."

"It's a good thing sleeping inside the carriage was comfortable going there," said Ebbitt. "Tede wasn't happy about drivin' back. He woulda stayed in Denver a spell but the canary he knew way back when, got married, and has got grandchildren."

"I was too comin' back, but I don't need no more jobs. I need a rest," Tede said. "My old bones are about broke or badly bent."

"How would you like a broken head, Tede?" Archie swung a big right fist.

Tede ducked back with ease. His high-pitched laugh echoed off the cave walls. "Feelin' yer oats, lad. 'Bout time."

"Seeing how you both did such a good job, now you can help get me on my feet for my daily constitutional."

"I'll boost from the rear," offered Ebbit. Stokes took one arm, Tede pulled on the other. With much grunting and groaning Archie stood almost erect.

At first, he couldn't move the wet noodles that were his legs. He finally got one foot ahead of the other, swayed and broke out in a sweat.

"Just get me up on the damn buggy seat!" Archie said between set teeth.

"You ain't fittin' to go jouncin' on thet rough track, Boss." Tede stood with thin arms akimbo and determination in his light brown eyes.

"Boss is the right word, Tede. Now do as you're told."

"Perhaps you would consider a start later in the day, sir," Stokes said calmly. "At dusk you won't likely be seen crossing the sage flats to your destination."

When Stokes called him 'sir' it meant he was quite upset with him. Frustrated, Archie glared at Tede, Stokes and the silent Ebbit. "Well you want to get your speech made, too, Eb?"

"You want to tear them stitches and make a bigger scar for Miss Lucy to look at, that's your business. That leg of yours is still a red mess of scar."

"Oh, hell!" Archie thought of Lucille back in Gorman. Had her eyes lit up at sight of his ring? Did she wear it or pack it in a drawer?

"They likely renamed our town Bascom," Archie said his thoughts out loud.

"Reckon they did." Tede gave out exaggerated moans and groans until Archie glared down at him. The little man grinned as Archie shifted his weight forward and took a tentative step.

A trip outside, into the fresh air, felt like just what he needed, and all he could handle at the moment, much to his chagrin. The daily ritual had become easier and easier. His left arm moved freely as he struggled onto the ledge outside the cave.

"That direction is Gorman," Archie said unnecessarily. They all knew it.

"You'll be going back in no time," Stokes told him.

"See that ridge across the way?" Archie said. "Tomorrow I'll ride⁶² part way there in the surrey, and the next day I'll ride all the way. From there I can see the town, whatever they named it. We can sleep under the surrey at night."

At the edge of town, at the end of the boardwalk past Archie's house, now her own, Lucille twirled her sun parasol as she strolled, debating whether to get the dust of the rutted road on her shoes, or just to remain on the newly swept boards.

Would Archie ever come back, she wondered. Her gaze went to those western mountains where he had disappeared. Would he ever rub noses with her again, or kiss her as he had at the restaurant counter? Would he ever lie naked with her again and warm her body with his own?

Lucille felt the heat of her thoughts in her face as Laura came up beside her.

"A preacher came in on the one o'clock stage," Laura said. Her face reddened also as Lucille turned to her. "Just in time, too. The little one ^{will} only be a mite early."

"Laura! A new pupil for my school!" Lucille hugged the younger woman.

"When will they start your school? What will you call it?"

"Virgil is carving the sign in his spare time. He can't work on the building until the bank bricks are finished and the jail roof is done. I suppose the church will be next since we won't really need the schoolhouse until fall."

Laura laughed and swung her own parasol. "The new order of tar came just in time before the bank roof leaked. It's good that job is done. And the safe installed in its proper place."

"When is the wedding?"

"The wedding will be in the church and the dance in the schoolhouse," Laura said. "Virgil promised to get every available man working. He'll wait to put the desks in after the wedding."

"Desks! What desks?" Lucille saw Laura's grinning face through a sudden blur of tears. Archie again!

"They came in with the stage, tied all over the top and stacked inside."

"The first day I've missed the stage and didn't see it." Lucille swiped at an eye with the back of one hand. "How many are there?"

"A teacher's desk and four large and four small ones. He's taking good care of his town even when he's not here." Laura said. "Too bad they didn't leave it called Gorman."

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"Bascom folks are stubborn. They came in here with more money than the Gorman people ever had, but we still all need each other."

"Maybe they'll pick a different name entirely. That would be nice." Laura turned to go. "I have to get back to the restaurant. Darcy's all alone except for Georgie."

Lucille continued beyond the boardwalk alone. Twin wheel tracks cut into the soil to the top of a small knoll and she slowly followed them. Halfway to the knoll she looked back toward town.

Across from the big house a place had been cleared for her school building. She paused long enough to picture it in her mind and smiled, thinking of the work Virgil was doing in his spare time.

Upon reaching the crest of the knoll, Lucille stepped into the shade of a tenacious cottonwood clinging to the soil around a tiny seeping spring. She shaded her eyes better with one hand, looking to the western mountains.

Archie, are you out there?

As if in answer a flash of light glinted from a small ridge. Lucille gasped and her mouth went dry. Her heart thudded and wild pulse beats pounded in her ears. Twin lightning bolts jolted streaks up the backs of her hips. Her inner thighs suddenly ached clear to her knees.

Shocked, Lucille shook her head in denial. What was happening to her? Archie couldn't possibly affect her this way and not even be present. He couldn't be out there. It was merely sunlight reflected off rock.

Lucille turned and ran down the knoll and back to town, her inside-out parasol trailing behind her.

* * * *

The small dot moved across his vision. Archie cursed the inadequate field glasses. The dot disappeared in the shadows at the edge of town. He steadied his shaking arm on the ridge of the buggy seat. He wasn't as well recuperated as he thought.

"It's getting dusky out, Archie," Stokes said. "Perhaps early in the morning we can move to that ridge yonder and you can see better. Tede found a good camping spot right under the ridge."

"All I can see from here is specks and squares the size of toy blocks."

"I see the steeple of a church that wasn't there before." Stokes lowered his own glasses. "They must have finished the bank front and the jail roof. Those Bascom people have money, since Miss⁵⁴ Lucy gave out the safe money." He tucked the glasses under one arm and made his way down the rocky slope toward their camp.

Archie chuckled. He could picture Lucille sneaking in the dark back and forth between the safe in his house and the woodpile next her kitchen door. Her graceful hands and nimble fingers must have made short work of the safe combination once she'd found the numbers. Without all that fake padding she'd used she could carry more bank bags away and hide them quickly.

Thinking of the natural padding Lucille had, drove him into a sweat, not induced by his slow recovery. Her chilled naked body next to his made a memory pleasant enough to warm him against the chill that came at night in the mountains, even though for only a moment.

In the cool evening air, he set aside the field glasses, stood on stiffly held legs and drew his gun. Again and again and again. He was

bathed in sweat and with new confidence in his strength, learned to relax the stiffness of his injured leg enough to satisfy himself, for the present.

Uneasiness crept up his spine. Something he couldn't put his finger on bothered him. He sat again on a rock just below the top of the ridge, facing east.

Light specks blinked on across the dark expanse of sagebrush and grass hummocks. He fancied he could see Pinedale many miles to the south and hear the train at Benson, and grinned at his own imagination.

Reluctantly Archie turned from his perch. He crossed the crown of the ridge and slowly made his way downward a hundred yards to the shiny new surrey. Dust had obscured some of the shine. He swiped at it as he rested against a wheel while Stokes readied their evening meal. Tede and Eb appeared with more firewood.

The firelight reminded him of the highlights in Lucille's hair. The sparks brought back memories of the way her eyes snapped when

she grew angry. If she married Ben Menkin what would he do with all those memories? If he didn't get well quickly and get back to her before she married, how could he have a chance to get in his request for consideration? He again wondered what she did with the emerald ring.

Archie shook his head in agitation, pushed long fingers through the⁶⁵ snarls of his curling red hair and brushed it back from tangling in his beard. If Lucille saw him now she'd have a right to scream, "Outlaw!" and flee for her life.

His mind's picture of Lucille running on long, slim, very wet legs as she emerged from the lake with the small boy nearly undid him. Those legs belonged to him! They were for him to warm and entwine with, no one else!

"A couple more days, men, and we're going in there."

"Menkin will arrest us."

"On what charges? I have court papers proving I shot in self defense over in Denver. The two men I shot in town here were killers. Both drew first and I already had injuries. What could the man charge me with? Nobody paid the Pinkertons so they gave up on you, Stokes, and it did them no good to catch up with Pa and Ferdie, I'm sure of that."

"Ben's a very jealous, possessive man. A good man otherwise, but he has Lucille on his mind and it is hard for him to let go."

"Maybe Clovine has talked to him."

"I don't think he'd need to speak up for Lucille. She'll take care of her own problems. The last time I talked with Clovine the man had given up hope that Menkin would show any interest in a cattle ranch. The old fellow is disappointed. Menkin is all horses and upholding the law as sheriff. He wants to live in town like the rest of his family back east, according to Clovine."

"My only hope then is that the youngest Hack sister will turn his head."

Stokes permitted a smile.

"You'll have your own house to live in once you go back. You know how they do in Cheyenne. Live in a fancy house and ride out to their property once a month in the summer. Or if they're from Ireland or England, it's once a year. All they want is that their investments pay off."

"Not me. If there is anything left unclaimed in the valley I'll get title to it and live on it, like Clovine."

"In our discussions, Arch," said Stokes, "Mr. Clovine revealed that a David Ogden, who is the "O" in Bascom, turned back with most of his cattle and went elsewhere. His land borders Clovine's property."

"Good. I'll claim it and prove up on it. You three can register claims likewise."

"The rustlers and killers are driven out. The voting must be done⁶⁶ long ago. Do you think it possible we could finally settle down and get on with our lives?" Stokes rubbed at aching knees and back.

"Not until I have Lucille ... or I know I have lost her. We will not live in the valley if she has married someone else."

That gloomy thought burned in his soul. He ate automatically to keep up his strength. The food had no taste and only filled the hollows that growled at him.

An even gloomier thought hit him like a felled pine in the forest. He sprang to his feet and slammed his right fist to his left hand. "I can't believe Corey Black left so easily. Why didn't I realize something is wrong? You said there wasn't much shooting going on when we left. What does that tell you?"

"The gang split up. Eb said he saw them riding out in all directions. You know dang well Black and Mendoza followed us, but it did them no good."

"To meet later do you think, once Black realized we didn't have any of the safe money? Tede!"

"Don't holler, damn it. I'm right here."

"Tede, once you finish eating ride into town. Can you get in touch with that livery stable manure mucker named..."

"Honker? Hell, he genally don't know more than a mule-eared rabbit."

"He does hear all that goes on in town though. Talk to him. I don't like the feeling I'm getting. Yesterday I saw two riders come down from the north and they never showed up going into town."

"Holy damn," Eb contributed. "You mean this fracas isn't over yet? You want me to go with Tede? This here settin' around is wearin' me down."

"No, I want you to head for Pinedale. Bring back your saddle bags filled with ammunition. Tede, Joe Texas might be another man to contact, but no more than those two. And stay clear of Menkin."

Archie felt better already. Action! It filled his thoughts and warmed his bones. It chilled his mind however, that Lucille might be in danger. How had he been so stupid? No ladies' man of Corey Black's caliber could pass up a beauty like Lucille. The man's vengeance on a tall beauty at his own eye level was one thing. How much greater it would be now that he knew Lucille had deceived him that she was not three times as wide as he was. The rumor that he had shot the resisting Carolyn Bricker way back in the²⁶⁷ beginning, could be true. Maybe it wasn't her suicide.

No matter what they called that town, it was his town. He'd built most of it. He'd protect it if the feeling in his gut meant anything at all. It hadn't led him astray before. He trusted it now. It bothered him that he'd allowed his senses to become deadened while he regained his strength. He paced the flat area of their campsite with only a slight limp. He practiced his draw as he strode.

The sluggish recuperation is over, Archie told himself. I feel better already. There's something I can do, if only I'm not too late.

He watched Tede ride east over the ridge. Eb rounded the ridge, going southeast.

"Maybe we'll see some action here, Stokes. I don't trust all this peace and tranquility. Black high-tailed his men out too easily. He had a backup plan."

"I think there are three men who want that valley. You, Ben Menkin and Corey Black are all after that town for different reasons."

"I can see Black wanting revenge, and a safe place for his outlaws, once he gets rid of the people in there. I wanted it for my innocent outlaws. Most of them got their proof and proved their innocence in court. So why does Menkin want it so bad?"

"According to Clovine, Ben's menfolk are all town officials and bigwigs and he was the slow learning outcast. Clovine claims he

helped get his head on straight. Now Ben wants to be a town official, too."

Archie chuckled and ran a hand across his curling beard. "I put his name on the ballot for sheriff. Maybe that suits him. I thought it was what he wanted."

"It didn't make Clovine real happy though that Ben isn't interested in cows, only a few of those Morgan horses he raises, and his being a town official. Clovine wanted him to take over his ranch, since he has no heirs."

"While we hid Clovine in the big house he showed me a map from his saddle bags. I pretty much know the layout of the ranches in the valley. We'll know how to get to his place if we need help when Black tries to retake the town. It sure sticks in my mind that is what the man intends. I aim to be ready for him. I just hope we're not too late."

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CHAPTER 18

"Lucille, stop worrying. You know you can handle the job of town clerk." Laura continued doing the evening dishes at the big kitchen table. "You're already elected and you can do it. With your hair up in a pompadour you even look official."

"I've read all the duties three times. Ben will pick apart everything I do," Lucille said. "I'll show him women can do it. Archie must have thought so, even though he didn't really say he approved of women voting. He teased most of the time."

"Archie knew what he was doing when he had those ballots printed." Laura started laughing. Lucille gave her a questioning look with one raised dark brow. Laura set the dishes on the shelves. "Dora is keeping Ben occupied these days. I think he's learning a new way of life."

"I hope so."

Just the mention of Archie's name sent darts of desire down her hips and through Lucille's midsection. She wound the ties of the big apron twice around her waist, wondering if Archie's big hands would ever again get to feel how slim she'd really become. Or would he remember her with all the padding Black's gambling had forced her to use as a disguise?

"I wonder if Arch and Stokes will ever come back." Laura so easily voiced what she was thinking, and dreading to face. What if Archie never returned? He could be dead and buried, and she might never know if he'd gotten tired of her bossiness or her need for independence. A huge knot clogged her throat. The glinting light reflections in the western mountains told her another story. Could she believe them?

"I'll do the bread." She pulled the heavy crock across the big table.

"We won't need much," Laura told her. "The town is as dead as last year's weeds. All the ranchers are out rounding up what cattle Black's rustlers left them."

"Did Joe get a job with Clovine?"

"Foreman, no less."

"I'm glad for you. With the baby coming you'll need every penny."
Lucille added more flour to her bread mixture.

"He's looking after Arch's cattle and his appaloosa herd, too. What will happen if Archie never ... oh, Lucille ... I'm sorry. Of course, he'll come back safe. I should never have said that. Now I better tell you."

Lucille swallowed a lump big as a hen egg. She choked down a sob. She would have to face the fact he might not return, sooner or later. Preferably, much later. Maybe someday she'd marry an older, more⁶⁹ settled man, she told herself. One who didn't send her emotions skyrocketing out of control like the hot air balloons she'd seen. Or plummeting to earth like one of those balloons had, causing serious injuries.

She felt injured already without a balloon ride, her heart bruised with the worry of getting Archie safely away. Would he come back? Had Stokes gotten him healthy again? Or...? She pummeled the bread dough unmercifully. It would probably never rise, she'd beaten it so long.

"Darcy is clearing the breakfast tables, so she can't hear," Laura said. She came over close. "Lucille, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone, but you are feeling so low, I just have to. Tede was in town last night. I caught him talking with Joe, or Joe would never have told me. No one is to know and he won't tell me why."

"He must have a good reason." Surprised at the calmness of her words, she marveled that she heard her own voice over the wild beating of her heart. Archie was near! No one could separate his loyal friends from him. Why hadn't he come?

The bread loaves were in their pans to rise. Out of habit she brushed the dough with melted lard and set them in a row on the shelf behind the stove, then covered them with a clean towel. Lucille

stared at them in wonder. Her thoughts so occupied her mind she scarcely remembered putting dough into loaves. She hoped they weren't hard as rocks when Laura arrived early in the morning to bake them.

"Darcy and I will manage easily now, Lucille, if you want to leave."

"I'm not much good here." She removed her apron.

"Just think. You used to do it all by yourself."

"I didn't set tables then, or make bread so often, just biscuits. We threw it on the bar in the kettles. Times have changed."

"But you and Archie haven't changed," Laura said. "Tede asked about you. I'm sure it was so he could tell Archie."

"What if Archie will never be really well again? Even if he's crippled I'd take care of him. He should know that."

"Lucille Martin, don't even think that until you have to. Can you reach to light the outside lanterns when you go?"

"Of course, shorty. My long reach is good for something." She took matches from the shelf. Her yellow gingham skirt swished out from her slim waist as she strode across the dining area and out onto the boardwalk.

She brought down the first lantern, lit it and returned the bale to its hook. A flicker of movement in the alley between the restaurant and Archie's big house made her pause. She stood very still, listened, but heard nothing. Had that sound been the same as when she'd later found the small pile of straw along the restaurant wall? She'd forked it up and put it back in her stables.

Hearing nothing further she moved toward the second street lantern. Far down the boardwalk, on the other side of the street, Hack's Store already had lanterns lit. On the side street Ed Hutchin's cobbler shop had one lantern lit. The much older, small hardware store had become Bettina's Notions and Sewing, clerked by the original

owner. He also was the town gunsmith. She waved to him as he put up his lantern. Bettina must be inside.

Warily, she looked over her shoulder. A coyote howled far away. A grouse skittered between sagebrush and grass clumps at the end of the boardwalk. The creepy crawling of dread spiraled up her spine. She saw nothing really suspicious but the feeling of being watched wouldn't leave.

She brought down the second lantern. This one hung to one side of the restaurant door. Laura and Darcy were out of sight inside the restaurant. Lamps were already lit but no one sat at the tables. Very few customers came, only stragglers from the range if they came in for needed supplies from town.

Every muscle in her back turned brittle as fragile glass. Stiffly she made her way past the restaurant batwings. Foley now ran the bar but she still couldn't locate Laura and Darcy. Where were they?

A movement at the far end of the kitchen reassured her. They were moving a cracker barrel. Relief surged through her.

Still, apprehension dried her mouth. She lit the lantern with shaking fingers. Held aloft, its light reflected off the new framing for the schoolhouse across from the house Archie had left her. She gasped as a figure darted back from the lantern glow, but not before she caught a brief glint of reflected light. She heard a slight rustling in the brush and a scrape of clothing.

Someone was out there! Someone stealthy and dangerous. Someone deliberately creating fear and tension.

She tried to move calmly on to the third and last of the lanterns she would light tonight. Her trembling made her drop the box of matches. Quickly, self-consciously, she bent to pick them up.

A whir and a thunk!

She stared, speechless, at the huge knife sticking in the restaurant wall. She spun around. No one.

"Mendoza!" His name burst on her brain like a cattle brand.

A week of calm days and quiet nights followed. The town relaxed for Laura and Joe's church wedding, in the partially completed church building, but only momentarily. Lucille couldn't get rid of the feeling everything could change in a matter of seconds. Tension hung in the air like fog on a marsh. She and Laura were extra watchful ever since the knife had narrowly missed her. Just as scary was the disappearance of that same knife, the same night. It made her wonder if her imagination worked overtime. But the hole in the restaurant wall still provided evidence that Sheriff Ben Menkin studied. He warned her to stay inside at night and went on his way. There was nothing more he could do, except be more watchful as he patrolled the streets.

"The townspeople haven't forgotten Black's threat completely," Ben told her at the time. "But too many of them think it was threatened in the heat of anger and means nothing."

"Then why are we being watched?" she argued. He had no answer.

Lucille pushed her porch rocker back and forth. Her eyes flitted to shadows here and there each time she came out to appreciate the evening breeze.

"It's late, Lucille," Laura sat down beside her on the wide porch of the big house for just a moment. "How about some chamomile tea to calm your nerves? It's been a week since anyone reported anything suspicious."

"That sounds good." Lucille couldn't drum up much enthusiasm tonight.

"You can't sit here staring at that school sign you propped against the corner post over there. The building won't be done for a week, if then."

"I know." Lucille sighed, searching for something happy to talk about. "Your wedding was so beautiful, Laura. We may dance on the school flooring yet, even if there is no roof or walls."

"I'll fix the tea. Do you want it in the bedroom or out here?"

Lucille thought longingly of the big bed in what had been Archie's room, now hers. Would he ever return to share it with her?

"Set it here. I'll just walk over to admire my school building while it cools enough to drink."

Laura disappeared inside the huge house. Lucille sighed, wishing she had an attentive husband like Laura did. Sharing the big house with them had seemed a good idea, until their loving looks and attention to each other only made her feel more lonely. Still, when they moved out to a ranch she'd have to get used to the quietness.

She lifted her blue skirt enough to keep the hem from the street dust as she crossed over to the partially framed school building.

A scraping noise stopped her in her tracks. A cottonwood branch? She listened intently. Any strange comings and goings made her question what went on in the town. The two street lanterns at the end of her front entrance walk shed scarcely enough light to see where the new beams and framing were. She heard nothing further and continued to the edge of the school lot.

Her eyes automatically went to the beautiful hand carved sign Virgil had worked on for her in his spare time.

"It's pretty nice, Lucy." The voice was soft with emotion.

Lucille spun around with a gasp. Her heart gave a huge leap from chest to throat, then thundered in her ears. She couldn't catch her breath. "Archie?"

"That's me. I didn't expect a sign like that."

Over her own trembling reaction she caught the thickness of emotion in Archie's voice. Her heart sang with the knowledge the sign had pleased him.

"I ... thought it fitting and proper. It was your money and after all you've done for the town, you certainly deserve some recognition." Should she run to him? Should she throw herself in his arms? She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry. But he seemed so quiet and still, reacting to the sign.

"Gorman School, District One, Established 1882." His voice came to her, stronger and deeper with emotion. She saw his raised hands.

"Oh, Archie!" She flew into his outstretched arms. His lips nudged at her temple. She clung around his waist, hugging him tightly. She raised her face to his and Archie's firm lips covered hers immediately. They left only long enough to spot themselves here and there all over her face and neck.

"Let me catch my breath," she managed at last.

"I guess this greeting means you haven't married Ben, like folks figured."

"Ben?" She even sounded to herself like she wondered who Ben was. "That was ages ago, before we reached the valley. Everything²⁷³ changed."

"When you met an outlaw and he captured your heart, right?"

"Now you are being conceited."

His hand ran down her left arm, to her fingers. He held them up to the faint lantern light. "Am I? Or am I just so damn glad you're wearing my ring?"

They both paused, filling their eyes with each other.

A noise. Archie pulled her into the shadow of the big cottonwood tree that shaded the schoolhouse lot.

"Hush, Lucy."

"I smell tobacco smoke," she whispered against his shoulder.

"Someone is moving beyond the lumber pile." Archie's breath stirred the hair at her temple.

Night bird sounds shut off completely. The partridges had stopped their pecking for seeds hours ago, now their restless fluttering stopped. Stillness prevailed.

"I've seen strange movements in the dark every once in a while. Does it mean anything?"

"Corey Black."

A chill dashed up and down her spine, spread to her arms and set up a trembling in her limbs. A standing up, face-to-face confrontation she could handle. These sneaking, creeping shadows made her grip her courage with both hands, and cling to Archie with fierce, frightened fingers.

"Joe told Tede about Black's threat to return and burn the town."

"Joe knows you're here tonight? Have you been ill all this time?"

"Way too long." Archie leaned against the tree.

"Your leg? You need to sit down, not stand here. Come to the house."

"No, love. The fewer people who see any of us, the better. Black and Mendoza trailed us, back when we left town. Ebbit wounded Mendoza but not badly enough, I'd say. They've been seen with some of their old gang, outside the valley, not too far away."

"When will it happen?" She didn't want to worry him about Mendoza's knife.

"Not until Black can get together enough help to pull off a raid. Joe will keep watch in town and across the river where my land joins Clovine's. Tede is east of town up in the hills. Ebbit is north. Stokes is at the pass where you came into the valley. I'll patrol the west side."

"How will we know when they're coming?"

"We have signal fires ready to light."

"What can I do?"

"That's my girl." Archie gave her an extra squeeze. "I see a shadow moving out from the school lumber. Go back to the house. Act natural. I'll get back to you in a day or so."

Archie disappeared.

He must have been watching over her shoulder all along. She stood⁴ still, put a hand to the tree trunk, paused, then tried to walk as naturally as possible to her porch.

The cup of cold tea sat on a small table by her porch rocker. She sipped the tea anyway, peering intently over the cup rim to see if anyone moved in the outer darkness. She pulled her shawl close around her neck.

A cow moaned low and a shuffling sound whispered in the grass. To the south she heard hoof beats pound the earth and gradually fade. She waited. In a few minutes she again heard movement to the west. Archie?

She went inside the house, shut the door and locked it.

Archie closed the door of Clovine's big log ranch house. The one large room felt cozy and homey after all the nights in a cave or a tent. He tried not to limp as he accepted the cup of coffee Stokes poured. His arm ached from the constant gun practice and sore ribs still plagued him. It wouldn't do for his friends to realize he wasn't in top condition.

"The ranchers have finished branding what cattle Black's gang left them." Tede also took a cup of black coffee. "If'n they gets sixty dollars a head on the market like they say, then they ain't too bad off."

"Black and Mendoza are camped up in the rocks by that lake north of Pinedale. It's really rough country there. Boulders the size of a small house to hide behind all over the place. Four more men rode in while I watched." Stokes sat down with a weary sigh. Archie felt guilty for asking so much of these older men like Stokes, Clovine and Tede.

"Ebbit, anything north of where we are now?"

"Six men above the Roaring River. They're nervous, keep watching south, like they expect somebody."

Archie paced the small area before the big fieldstone fireplace, thankful Clovine had built high ceilings in his one room home. Gradually the muscles loosened up after the hours in the saddle. He felt all their eyes were turned to him, as well as their expectations for a resolution to their problem.

"What now?" Clovine finally asked.

"Do we talk to every man in town to get them prepared, or do we wait?" Ebbit Ford wanted to know.

"Even Ben is a believer once he saw the knife hole in the restaurant wall." Clovine refilled coffee cups and clattered the pot onto the black kitchen stove.

Prickles skimmed the skin under the beard Archie had let grow. He^{ev5} paused in his pacing. Lucille hadn't said a word about that. Had she hidden a wound?

"She's all right?"

"She's fine. A little shaky, upset as a hen chicken raising ducklings. She's buckled on the little gun," Clovine said.

"I found four piles of straw scattered around town," Joe Texas told them. "They were kinda hid down in the grass and behind trash barrels. Lucille moved one from by the restaurant wall."

"Black means to act soon then." Archie set his cup on the table. "Or he's building up the tension."

"Everybody in town is jumpy as cold water in hot lard in a skillet, even more so since Mendoza threw the knife, then waltzed right in and retrieved it when no one was looking." Clovine lifted his big hat and scratched his head. "Mayor Hack is set to call a meeting. Will that be a dead giveaway that we're getting prepared?"

"Not if Lucy publishes the agenda for the meeting on a big bulletin board on the side of her restaurant."

"Done." Clovine nodded his white head.

Archie watched Clovine work his kitchen pitcher pump to refill a coffee pot with fresh water. The man scarcely showed his age, except in the slump of his big shoulders.

"Congratulations on winning the Justice of the Peace election," Archie said.

Clovine grinned and shrugged. "Clem didn't really want it and I'm closer to town. I can see the lights come on down there from my big window. I'll be damn glad when I can do some judging over those criminals of Black's. Ben wants to arrest every stray in town. He's so edgy he snaps at everything since that knife left a hole in the wall."

"Does Menkin have a deputy?" Archie asked.

"Tom Shafer."

"You say everyone is getting very nervous, right?" Archie stretched his arms above his head, pondered the peeled pole ceiling above him, then sat down on one end of the polished bench by the trestle table. He contemplated his own hands a moment.

"They're takin' turns watchin' the streets and halfway patrolling their own property." Clovine stared at him with his pale blue eyes under heavy white brows. "They're likely to shoot one another, this waiting is making them so all-fired nervous."

"If you can see town lights," Archie said slowly, "then the town can see your lights. Clovine, how would you like to have a big party? A town meeting and a big party afterward. Get everyone out of town⁷⁶ and up here in plain sight."

"At a time like this?"

"Arch, be you outta yer ever-lovin' mind?" Tede put in. "When it comes to brains, younker, you be a huckleberry above a persimmon, but danged if I figger what you hopes to gain by thet."

"If all the folks are partying at Mr. Clovine's it will leave the town wide open for Black to come in and burn it," Stokes said. He suddenly grinned.

Archie grinned at all of them.

"Aha!" Clovine slapped his hand to his knee. "A party it will be! But how do we get in two places at once?"

"We want this over with, don't we? Pick our own time and place." Archie arose and began pacing again. Thoughts barreled around in his head like a swarm of hornets. "The women! The women will do the partying right here. That will get them and the youngsters safely out of town."

"I can foresee Miss Lucy raising a few objections," Stokes said. "Especially if Black comes and she has to help Doc Stedman sew you up all over again."

"I'll worry about getting Black's men out first. Worrying about Doc and his stitches can come later." He sat, then swung around on the bench and leaned on the table. He waited while they all sat down, except he motioned Joe to keep a watch outside. "Let's get our heads together here. We may need a two-day party before Black's men get the idea the town is wide open for burning. There's no need to pile on the agony if we can bring this thing to a head. It's gone on long enough. Let's bait the trap and draw them out. Let them get nervous for a change."

* * * *

"I'm so nervous my fingers are jumping like grasshoppers." Lucille pushed a stray hair in place with another hairpin.

"Just don't let it show, love," Archie told her. "Most of the town thinks this is just a big, welcome party after all the roundup and

building and such. They don't even know I'm here." He pulled her away from view of the window.

"I sure do like you in pink." His arms were so tight she knew he feared it could be the last time he held her close. She clung to him, her eyes closed. How had she progressed from furious schoolmarm to jelly-kneed female in such a short time? His chest hair in the vee of his shirt collar tickled her nose. She blinked away tears.

"Get thee from me, heartless woman. You'll have me weak as⁷ Samson. Isn't that Delilah who made Sam weak before his enemies or something like that?"

"Don't joke, Archie. I'm scared to death something will happen to you or you'll be all shot to pieces again."

"Just don't worry your pretty head. Have you got all your plans ready to go?"

"The best I can." She noticed he was a little paler than usual.

"Tede, Stokes and Ebbitt will either signal or come in from their posts. Every horse trough and water tank needs to be full with buckets hidden nearby."

"What if it's days before they come? I've watched and watched for signal fires and I'm sure others in town are watchful. We can't party all..." Lucille muffled a scream.

"It's jest me, boss," Tede said. He slipped inside Lucille's kitchen in the big house. "Nobody movin' out my di-i-rection but one. I figger he's takin' information to them other dadburn outlaws camped out around the valley. The ones left are watchin' the town with big fieldglasses like youn. Where you want me at now?"

"Up in the hayloft at the stables," Archie said. "Watch out for any fires. Get away if you can't put them out quick."

"How long we gonna wait?"

"We four can't show ourselves even if it's all night. Lucy, do you have the list for Clovine and Menkin?"

"Right here." She looked from one to the other.

"Then off you go to the buggy. If you're hostess for Clovine you better be early. Keep the women busy so we don't have to worry about them."

She stood on tiptoe to brush her lips to his. She might never see him alive again. Her eyes burned. She felt the tension in him as well as herself. He crushed her to him in a long, passionate kiss, then pushed her away. One last long look and she forced herself out the door.

Warily she watched all around as she hitched her pink skirt up so she could mount the buggy step. Lifting the straight front of her skirt swung the fullness at the back around onto the wheel. Surreptitiously she eyed back lots and buildings as she moved her skirt. What if Black already had men hiding around town? What if Black guessed a trap was set? Only five knew, besides herself. What if she couldn't persuade Ben to act? He could be very stubborn when something wasn't his own idea.

Many of the rancher's families were already at Clovine's when Lucille pulled her buggy horse in at the hitch rail back of the house²⁷⁸. She had plenty of help unloading the many pies and cakes she'd made. More people came. The Hutchins came. The blacksmith came waving a letter acknowledging his official pardon from a southern governor. He proceeded to celebrate at the liquor table. Almost everyone seemed present as Lucille and Martha counted noses.

Lucille watched as Del Hack and Bettina drove into the yard. Hack bounded off the buggy seat, rushed around to help Bettina and together they hurried past everyone on the long porch and rushed inside to where Lucille waited.

"They're coming!" Hack was pale as his boiled shirt. Bettina clung to his arm. Her face was equally white.

Lucille felt a flutter of fear begin in her stomach. It screamed all through her body, increasing like a wild tornado.

"Clovine, the list," she managed through stiff lips. She handed him Archie's written instructions.

Clovine calmly drew Ben away from Dora's side. His other hand gripped Mayor Hack's arm to pull him into the group.

"I'll never breathe right again." Bettina now clung to Lucille's arm. "How could you know all this time and not go into wild hysterics?"

"It's only a few days that I've known Black was out there for sure." She held the smaller woman's quivering, icy hands in her own. "Clovine will tell the rest."

But Clovine made no move to tell anyone anything. She stared across at him, Ben and Hack, now standing with Tom Shafer, willing them to do something. Ben motioned to Tom. The young deputy nodded and left the room. She tried to direct a questioning look to the white-haired Clovine.

The older man sported a string tie at his white shirt collar, and wore a black suit jacket. He stood there with such a calm expression she wanted to jerk on that string tie and scream at him to do something.

What was he doing? Did he suddenly not believe Archie? But Mr. Hack had told them "they" were in town. "They" had to be Black's outlaws.

People crowded through the door, ushered in by Tom. Family groups blended with other family groups in the closeness of the room.

"Attention folks!" Ben's deep voice turned them all to face him. Clovine winked at her and she understood immediately that he wanted to give Ben the authority to salve his wavering self-esteem.

"As you know, our town was threatened by Corey Black and his⁹ men. They vowed to return and burn us out. The last few days have been tense and..."

"Cut the palaver. Get to what we gotta do, sheriff."

Bless that man, thought Lucille. She caught Clovine's wink and nod in her direction and wondered. Archie's note had been to Clovine. Was Clovine being a mediator between the two leaders, who obviously could not be friends.

"Here's what we do," Ben said. "I understand our town clerk is prepared to take over this party. Mr. Clovine has two wagons padded with hay so half a dozen of us can go in each wagon, back to town. Clovine knows the quietest route into town. We will go as fast as possible and walk the last distance. Bert and Tom Shafer, you will go at once to the back of the bank. That could be Black's first target, and he'll have men ready to burn your stores. The rest of us will go in from four directions and be prepared to put out any fires."

Lucille let the man-talk go over her head. "Come, ladies, we're going to make this look like a bang-up party and the biggest celebration ever put on. I have several dresses and men's suits on hangers in the back of my buggy. Hang them every place you can around the yard so from the town it looks like everyone is still here.

They may watch us with field glasses just like our men have been watching them. We'll put more lanterns out after they are hung in place.

"Kenny Adams, I understand you play fiddle. You'll take Mr. Hack's place in the hay shelter and you'll make lots of loud music."

"What about Honker and his harmonica?" Martha came beside her. More softly she whispered, "He isn't smart enough to trust with guns and the men, but he'll do his part making noise."

"Good idea." Lucille went outside to her buggy and handed out hangers filled with garments. "After all the tension, I think everyone is glad to be doing something."

"What if they don't get them all?" Mabel asked. "Should we be armed in case they decide to also come here?"

"We'll cross that bridge later. If they get Black and Mendoza I think the rest will forget the whole thing and run. They won't be back,"

Lucille said. "But yes, we should be prepared in case some run this way."

Food was set out on the long trestle table under a big cottonwood tree. None of the women seemed inclined to eat. The men grabbed food they could have in their hands and hurried to the shadows among the trees. The children raced wildly here and there, grabbing cookies as they passed the long table. Lanterns lit the whole scene and the sounds of violin and harmonica filled the air.

Kenny's violin and Honker's harmonica didn't always jibe with the same song but Lucille felt amazed everything ran as smoothly as it did. The men slipped away quietly as Clovine passed out extra ammunition. Each wagon disappeared in the darkness. Tension returned. Two at a time women wandered away from the music so they could listen intently to any sounds coming from the direction of the town.

"I think one wagon went far to the east," Martha said. "There is a river crossing that direction."

Lucille joined the women dancing around in the firelight. It was the longest half hour she'd had in months. Between dances they went to the punch bowl and stared at each other with worried looks. They gathered in Clovine's big room for a break in their frenzied activity.

"Can't we do something?" Martha asked.

"I walked out away from the music, like you said, Lucille." Laura faced them all with fright and dread written over her face like wrinkles on a prune.

"And?"

"There's lots of shooting. It started just as I reached Mr. Clovine's corral gate."

"Any fires?" Bettina asked.

"I couldn't see any."

"If they trample my garden I'll chop off their..." Little Mrs. Hutchins trembled with rage. "We must do something!"

"My riding skirt is in Clovine's bedroom with the shawls," Clara said. "I'll change and be ready to ride in to see what is going on."

"We'll wait one half hour," Lucille said firmly. "It will take us that long to get our buggies lined up. If any of you have buggy guns, have them ready. Clara will ride her horse and she and I will lead the way. Laura, ride with me in the buggy, please. We'll go toward town quietly until we cross the river, then make all the noise you can. They'll think another army is coming."

"Maybe the fight will be over by then." Mabel helped Bettina into the Hack buggy. "Dora can keep the children occupied here. Maybe Laura should stay, since she's pregnant."

"Fire!"

Lucille didn't know who said it but felt the spread of terror flood through the women and children.

"The men can't do two things at once. That's my house in there. I should have stayed in town." Mrs. Hutchins turned exceptionally feisty.

"And gotten shot? If you think I'm staying here, think again." Laura looked at her and Lucille could say nothing. Keeping the women and children safe was more important than saving a house. Couldn't they see that? But they all wanted to be in on the battle. She slapped the reins on her buggy horse. Clara rode out ahead. The cavalcade drove toward town, scattered out one by one. They covered the four miles quickly.

"Hold up, Clara!" Lucille signaled a hand to the side and blocked the roadway with her buggy. Four various styled vehicles and a couple riders pulled in behind.

"What do we do now?" Martha called out.

"We go in with a roar, but keep those older children outside town. Make all the noise you can. Stay at the west end of town. If there's shooting back at us, head back to the wagons."

"Four!" Archie's roar sounded above the noise of scattered gunfire. He had a wounded man stumbling ahead of him in the street.

"Five!" Del Hack pushed a limping prisoner ahead of him.

A fire blossomed by Hack's store but Joe had it out in minutes.

"Six!" Ben's triumphant yell was followed by the clanging of metal doors in the new cells of the jail.

Archie's bay horse went up on hind legs, then came down. He waited. At the west end of town the outlaws had been completely surprised by the presence of townspeople.

From the east end of the street a small cavalcade came sedately toward him. A woman sat side-saddle on the first horse.

"Shafer!" Black's stentorian call filled the suddenly silent street.

Heads poked out from the buildings along the street. Shafer peered out from his bank building. His son Tom hung close beside him.

"Evalina?" Fear and astonishment filled the pudgy banker's voice.

Icy fingers raced up and down Archie's spine as he faced the outlaw contingent.

The woman sat her horse between Black and Mendoza. Their guns were trained on her slim form. Behind them rode four more outlaws.

"Shafer!" Black called again.

"Oh, no!" Archie closed his eyes half a second. The timing was all wrong! He heard running horses behind him, women's screaming, youngsters yelling. Lucille pulled in her buggy horse beside Clara who rode in on her big black horse.

Two lines formed. Archie, Ben, and Hack faced the outlaws²⁸² Lucille, Martha and Clara were next in line behind them. Laura stayed behind them but had refused to remain at Clovine's ranch.

Facing them were Black, Mendoza and four strangers. All with guns. All surrounding Evalina Shafer.

"Your wife stayed in Pinedale too long, Shafer," Black said. "Open that bank vault and give the bags to us or the woman dies. Right now!"

"Evalina?" Shafer couldn't believe his eyes.

"Ma?" Tom Shafer came out on the bank steps.

"Sonny, yer ma will get the first bullet."

"Do as he says, Bert," Evalina said. She seemed surprisingly calm. "Remember I wasn't raised in Texas for nothing."

Archie caught the hint at the same time as her husband and son. From the corner of his eye he saw Tom tense, his alert eyes on his mother. Bert half raised his shotgun.

"Put it down, Shafer," Black ordered.

Evalina's horse nudged into Black's.

"Hold that horse, lady, or you're dead."

Her horse reared high. Archie was ready, but Evalina's horse came between him and the outlaw. He heard a spiteful little pop and Black fell from his horse. Evalina's smoking pepperbox belched again but Mendoza ducked and she hit nothing.

Tom yanked his mother from her horse, dragged her aside and pushed her onto the bank steps. Shafer's shotgun roared.

Simultaneously Archie started firing. He saw Ben join in. He looked back to Lucille. Joe was at Laura's side. The buggy got turned from his side vision. Lucille and some women herded the children into the restaurant.

Black and Mendoza didn't have a chance. Black tried to rise and was caught with the second blast from Shafer's double barrel. Mendoza lay sprawled in the street dust. Smoke billowed as small fires were put out by women and older boys. Running outlaws

disappeared in the shadows, their timing completely disrupted by the noisy coming of the women, and the surprise of Evalina Shafer.

Ben and Tom arrested a couple more men. Archie could find no more outlaws.

The sudden silence was broken only by the whining ringing in his ears from all the shooting.

"Jail's full!" Ben shouted.

"Anyone hurt?" Archie yelled out. "Head for the restaurant for treatment, if you're able." Above the ringing in his ears he heard the drumming of many horse's hooves, leaving town in a hurry.

The Shafers stood on the bank steps. Archie knew now who young³³ Tom took after, his Texas born mother. Bert hadn't done too badly either in defending his bank.

"You saved the day, Mrs. Shafer," Archie told her. "I sure am glad you were born in Texas. Where was the gun?"

"I'm also glad my men remember that." Evalina held up her raggedy handbag with the bottom shot out. The Shafers went into the bank.

Archie watched the Hacks and Bettina at the store. Dora drove into town with a wagonload of the much younger children. She leaped down and crossed the street to Sheriff Ben. Archie sighed. Where did Lucy go?

He walked into the restaurant. Lucille's head came up immediately from checking a bandage. Her beautiful blue eyes met his across the room. Dr. Stedman took the bandage from her hands.

"Look at me, Lucy!" Archie said as he held his arms wide. "See! I'm all in one piece. No battle scars this time."

Everyone laughed as he crossed the room to Lucille. Women herded their children out onto the quiet street. He watched Mrs. Hutchins help a limping Ed, smiles all over their faces. Stokes took his customary place at his bar as though he had never been away. Tede and Ebbit were his first customers.