

Bluegrass Revenge

by Ken D. Greenwalt,

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Chapter 1

The foal Bravo was born the same night Pa's life was snatched away. We were in the barn that night, sitting quietly in the straw with Beatrice, a thoroughbred mare. Pa and I were there if she needed us, but she did fine; the foal's front hooves appeared first and long after sundown she delivered a perfect foal. We watched the newborn learn to stand on wobbly legs and we talked about what to name him.

It was Pa's suggestion to call him Bravo. "He's going to earn a great deal of applause," he said with a smile.

We were cleaning up when a voice called from the yard—"Carson! I need to see you!"

"Reeves!" Pa spat out. He clenched his jaw and his neck began to turn red—I knew the signs. Whoever Reeves was, he was aggravating Pa nearly to the point of losing his temper.

Pa listened for a moment, then called out. "Well, I told you already! I don't care to see you, Reeves!"

There wasn't a whisper outside, and Pa quietly picked up his rifle and stood still, his tall, lean frame resting against a timber post, listening for movement. I was surprised to see the rifle as Pa rarely carried a weapon. After a few moments, we heard a horse take a few steps, then turn and walk away.

"Pa! What's wrong?" I asked him in a whisper.

"Maybe nothing. Dim that light and stay out of sight."

I'd never seen him this cautious before. People called at all hours and we never dimmed lights. I turned the lantern down to just a glow and tried to think who might be out there. I couldn't remember Pa ever mentioning anyone named "Reeves."

He slid the barn door open.

The shotgun blast tore the dark night apart, and Pa was lifted off his feet and slammed onto his back. I saw stars from the flash of the powder and a cloud of smoke drifted into the barn, stinging my eyes. Dimly I heard a horse trot away, but I barely noticed. I was stunned, deafened by the blast and staring in disbelief at Pa's body.

Shaking, I sank to my knees next to him and took his hand.

"Pa!" I shook him as if to wake him, but he didn't move. I moved my trembling hands gently over his chest to see how bad he was hurt and found blood everywhere. My God, he was dead!

"Oh no, Pa!" I moaned, closing my eyes as my head spun. I felt wretched—someone shot him out of hand from the darkness—he never had a chance.

Blinded by tears, I traced the face I knew so well with my fingers. How could this be? An empty feeling, a feeling of sorrow and regret started in my gut and spread throughout my whole body.

Time passed, but eventually I gathered myself together. I was 18, a grown man. It was up to me to do what needed to be done.

I covered Pa with a blanket and checked again on the foal. I sat down and woodenly thought about what to do next. In the morning I'd look at the tracks in the yard. I could read a little sign, but I wasn't very hopeful that I would gather much out of the tracks. I'd have to go in and report Pa's murder first

thing in the morning after I let Doc know, and of course, Mary. Pa was close to Mary, and she would take Pa's death hard.

I sat next to Pa that night, reliving a lot of memories, and mourning him. All night my mind was racing in a hundred different directions, but I always came back to the same question.

Why would someone murder Pa?

* * * * *

Patterson rode away from the Carson place fuming. He wasn't upset about ambushing Carson—murder was required at times in the course of business—he was angry with himself for trusting Blackwell. Blackwell hadn't told him about the boy and for that reason Patterson had assumed that Carson was alone.

He'd fired both barrels at Carson in order to make a sure kill, but afterward he was left holding an empty rifle when the boy appeared out of nowhere. Blackwell should have briefed him about the boy—Patterson would have been an easy mark if the boy had come out shooting. Maybe that was part of Blackwell's plan to get rid of him?

He shook himself—he was getting lazy. Why was he trusting Blackwell? He should have known better, been more prepared.

But if the boy was an oversight, maybe Blackwell was slipping. Was Blackwell getting sloppy?

Patterson mulled that over during the two-hour ride back to Lexington.

Chapter 2

When it got light, I studied the tracks in the yard, hoping for anything to identify the killer.

The killer had ridden his horse up to the corral gate in front of the barn, lifted the latch, and walked his horse into the corral. The tracks were confusing at first near the gate, but then I realized that he'd closed the gate from the saddle and walked his horse toward the barn.

Why close the gate? I thought about what we'd heard from inside the barn. When he called out to Pa, he must have already dismounted and was standing next to his horse. When Pa refused him, he sent the mount walking away, knowing the horse couldn't go far with the gate closed. It appeared to us in the barn that he'd ridden away, but instead he was waiting in ambush with a shotgun.

The footprints where he dismounted showed a big man; they were large and deep with a good size stride between them.

I studied the signs and an even deeper anger burned in my belly because to use a shotgun at that range was simply cold-blooded murder. He worked it out to catch Pa unaware, and I wondered if he'd done this before.

When I saddled one of my favorites, a roan named Aladdin, I also tied on a scabbard to carry Pa's new Sharps rifle. Pa never had much chance to use it and I had a feeling that soon I would.

I walked Aladdin the quarter mile to Doc's place and met Mary as she stepped out onto the front porch.

“Morning, Sam,” she called. She stood there straight and true waiting for me and I was going to break her heart.

I dismounted and tipped my hat to her. “Morning, Mary.”

She heard something in my voice and took a step down the stair shading her eyes from the sun, taking a good look at me. A strand of auburn hair came free and she absently brushed it out of her eyes with her other hand.

“What’s happened, Sam?”

How do I tell her?

“Pa was killed last night,” I said quietly, stepping up near her. “Someone called him out into the yard and shot him.”

She struggled to understand what I saying—the hurt in her eyes as she stared at me in shock cut me deeply. Mary covered her mouth with her hand to keep from crying out. Her green eyes above the palm of her hand searched my face and saw the sadness in my own eyes.

“Oh, Sam,” she cried.

I reached out and held her tight as she started to shake. In years past Pa cared for Mary when Doc traveled to see patients and they had grown close. He taught her to ride and schooled her in training young horses as if she were his own. She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. Seeing her in such pain hurt like a spike in my chest.

“How did it happen?” she asked softly. I told her what happened last night, that it was a late night in the barn with the birth of Bravo and the voice calling out to Pa.

“The only thing I have is a name—Pa called him “Reeves.”

“Reeves,” said Mary. “No, I don’t recall anyone by that name.”

I told Mary I would try to find Doc in town and give him the news.

Just before I turned away, Mary called to me, “Sam, it couldn’t be anyone from around here. Pa was a good man—it must have been someone from the city.”

I had come to the same conclusion last night. I would start my search in Lexington.

* * * * *

Telling Doc about Pa’s death was almost as hard as telling Mary. I found Doc along the road headed home from Willow Springs. He gave me a cheerful wave as he saw me and I noticed that his black curly hair was getting grayer below his hat brim. His eyes sparkled a welcome as always.

“Aye, lad. What’s all this then? Why the long face?” His eyes clouded with concern as I drew near.

His shoulders sagged as I told him and his eyes dimmed.

“Oh, Sam, it is a wicked world we live in,” he said, shaking his head. He had his head bowed and he was quiet a long time. I sat my horse and stayed with him.

“Your father Patrick and I have been close for many years,” he said eventually. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Sam, but recently he and I talked about the trouble in your Pa’s past that caused him to move west, and I’m wondering if this trouble followed him.”

“Trouble?”

He nodded. “He told me that he’d been forced to leave a stable in New York, years ago—before you were born—because of a killing. To keep your family safe he moved out here.”

I was stunned—I had no idea.

“Did he say anything more?”

“No,” sighed the Doc, “but he did say that he’d seen the same man again. I didn’t press him. You know Patrick—it was always hard to get him to say anything about himself.”

I thought about that for a moment. Seems I was wrong—I thought I knew everything about Pa, just because I spent a lot of time with him. Right then I missed him even more.

“Thanks for telling me,” I said, “and thanks, Doc, for looking out for me and Pa. I know your friendship meant a lot to him.”

I could see in his smile he was pleased, but he still looked like someone had kicked the wind out of him.

* * * * *

The service for Pa was the following Saturday. Willow Springs isn’t much in the way of a town, just a short street with a store, a church, and a few other buildings, but just about everyone in the area turned out for Pa’s service.

Afterward, Doc asked me over for supper. Spending an evening with Mary and Doc kind of filled in some holes of loneliness I was feeling. After supper I told them that I’d be hiring some help at the ranch. The two hands we did have, Ben and Matthew, were hard workers, but we could barely keep up. I also need to spend time in Lexington.

“Lexington?” asked Doc. “Why would you go to Lexington?”

“I believe the person that shot Pa is in Lexington,” I said. “I aim to find him.”

Mary coolly looked over the rim of her coffee cup at me, but did not say a word.

Doc looked at me as if I lost my mind.

“Sam, you’re eighteen years old now, and you’ve acted responsibly for years. You have a ranch to run, and two new racing foals to train.” His eyes held my own. “Don’t neglect what you’ve worked so hard for on a wild goose chase. Leave the law to the county—they can deal with the murderer!”

“Doc, we both know the Sheriff isn’t going to find Pa’s murderer. He was there for a couple hours and he has no ideas at all. A lawman needs witnesses and motives, and there just isn’t anything to go on.”

“No,” I continued, “the man who shot Pa is most likely from the city, and my best chance is to look for him there.”

Doc rubbed the back of his head in frustration, and turned to Mary. “Why don’t you say something?” he asked her. “Do you agree with all this?”

Mary put down her coffee cup and gathered the dishes together.

“Dad, Sam’s his own man. If his mind is made up, there isn’t much you can say to change it.” She looked at Doc for a moment, and then said, “Trust him.”

She left the room without looking back.

Doc stared after her in disbelief.

Mary felt like I did—she wanted me to find him.

She wanted him dead.

Chapter 3

Daybreak found me riding to the Rolling W, a ranch tucked in a lowland valley a couple hours ride west of Willow Springs. Martin Oliver owned the ranch and he and Pa had traded horses with each other through the years. He specialized in Percheron draft horses, 2,000 pounds of pulling muscle that average 18 hands high. Martin breeds and trains them for carriage work in the city and to haul the big freight wagons the stage outfits use.

Today I was hoping to hire away his top hand, Nathan Lewis, to help train horses and act as my foreman while I was spending time in Lexington. Pa traveled all over the territory buying and selling horses and in the past Nathan had filled in for him while he was gone. To find the man known as Reeves, I knew I would need to move in the same circles as Pa in order to have any chance of finding him.

This past spring seven new foals were born on our place, two of them racehorses, which gave us more than thirty head to care for. The thoroughbreds really tied up time because they needed to be exercised twice a day. We usually ran out of daylight before we ran out of work. I approached Mary for help and she gave us breathing room by agreeing to keep an eye on the newborns, including Bravo.

“Just try and keep me away,” she cooed, scratching Bravo behind the ears. If Bravo were like the others, he would soon be following Mary around the yard like a puppy.

* * * * *

It was mid-morning when I arrived at Martin’s ranch and found him in the training area in front of the stables. He was closely watching a big gelding trotting around on a longe line. Waiting for Martin to finish, I sat on my horse and watched the Percheron as it circled.

I’ve always been fond of Percheron. The descendant of the warhorse—deep and wide chest, large eyes, small ears and powerful, they are a proud, hard working horse.

As the horse trotted, it seemed to favor the near fore leg for a moment.

“Did you see that?” Martin called, and I swung down and walked to the rail.

Rarely do you get a hello or small talk from Martin—the day is too short.

“I did,” I replied, and stepped between the rails and stood next to him. Martin called a “Whoa!” and asked his hand Larson to come hold the line. I walked in front of the big beast and let him get a good look at me. He took a whiff at the back of my hand and I moved to his side and patted this shoulder.

“Good boy,” I murmured. “What’s his name?”

“This is Sara’s Pride,” said Martin, “one of the new imports from Britain.” Rarely could Martin keep up with demand from the city so he used a stock agent to import horses from Europe.

I called him by name and held his bridle as Martin ran his hands over his fore leg. He then lifted the leg and checked the hoof carefully, then finally released it.

“I don’t know,” said Martin, puzzled. “He’s well-shoed, but maybe it’s nail pinch.”

Once in a while you can drive a nail through a shoe near a sensitive area, causing the horse to favor that hoof. Most horses will react immediately, but others may take a little longer to show soreness.

Martin called Larson over and told him to take him back to the farrier working in the barn and let him know about the shoe.

He took a look at me and motioned with his head towards the house. "Come on in for a cup of coffee."

I nodded, and he continued as we walked. "Some of these shipments we get can be nothing but trouble," he said with disgust. "A couple of horses came in with such poor shoes it's a wonder they didn't go lame between here and the train station."

"It must be hard to buy horses sight unseen."

"Well, it all depends on the broker. The outfit I'm using now brings in a few crossbreeds too, but I'm not interested in those. If they want to keep my business, they better stay with purebreds."

He opened the back door to the house that led to the mudroom. I shucked my boots and put on a pair of moccasins from a pile near the door and entered the kitchen.

Martin called out to his wife, Laura, that I was with him, and she came in and gave me a big hug.

"I'm so sorry, Sam," she said. "Patrick was a dear man and we will miss him terribly."

"Thank you, Ma'am," I said, and took the chair she offered me at the table. Laura poured each of us a cup of coffee, and set down a big dried apple pie between us.

"You best not hurt my feelings, Sam Carson," Laura said as she left the kitchen, "that pie better be all gone when I get back."

"Yes Ma'am. I mean, no, Ma'am." Martin grinned at me and I shook my head and dug in.

After a few minutes, Martin asked me what I planned to do.

Well, I told him how Pa was killed and about Reeves, and how it was likely that he was in Lexington. I told him my plan was to find Reeves in the city and bring him to justice.

"Bring him to justice?" asked Martin. He thought a moment, and then asked, "How are you going to do that?"

Well, I really didn't have an answer yet. I wasn't planning on just walking up and shooting him, an eye for an eye so to speak. My idea was to merge in with the racing crowd and try to spot him and then deal with him.

"Listen Sam, take this slow. Think about it. Go to Lexington and find this guy." I could sense the anger Martin was holding back. "Find out about him—watch where he goes, who he meets, where he lives. Find out everything you can."

I nodded. "And then?"

Martin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked me in the eye.

"Hurt him," he said. "Hurt him financially, publicly humiliate him, or whatever you can think of. Make him pay for what he did to Patrick, what he took away from you. I know you can figure out a way. Just don't kill him."

Martin could tell that I didn't quite understand.

"We all understand that killing a man in self-defense is justified. Afterward, you may think of it often, maybe even have nightmares about it, but eventually the memory will fade with time. Your conscience is at peace." He paused for a moment.

"You go after that man, Sam, and kill him, eventually you'll regret it. That killing will be with you every day for the rest of your life. You wake up some

mornings and you'll think of him. Some quiet night, just before you sleep, he'll be there in your thoughts, keeping you awake."

Then I did understand—Martin was talking from personal experience.

"It's different if you kill a man for revenge. He sticks with you." He peered into his mug of cold coffee and set it aside with a grimace. "If you do find him, Sam, make him pay—but don't kill him."

* * * * *

Martin agreed that I would need a hand like Nathan to work my place for a while and he was willing to let him go if I could convince Nathan to hire on.

Kentucky law read that a slave like Nathan is to leave the state once he receives his freedom, which Martin had granted him many years ago. Problem was, Nathan felt at home here, and so he stayed. Officially, he was a slave until he left the state. Martin paid him well, but Nathan could leave at anytime, and he often took small jobs that might be interesting.

I would have to make Nathan's offer tempting. After tasting that apple pie, I knew that a big hurdle to jump was to pry him away from Laura's cooking. Nathan was a man who appreciated good food and more often than not he would be cooking his own meals at my place.

I found Nathan in the barn working in the tack room. His salt-and-pepper hair looked a little grayer from when I saw him last, but he seemed ageless. A few new wrinkles appeared on his warm, walnut skin, but his eyes were bright like a much younger man. I couldn't say if he's fifty or eighty. He gave me a smile and a warm handshake, and if he knew why I looked him up, he didn't let on.

"I'm sorry about your Papa," he said, shaking his head, "evil lurks about in this world."

He took down a bridle from a hook and started to wipe it with a cloth. "You and I both know a horse can sense the type of man handling them. I never did see a horse that shied from your Pa."

I thought about that and realized it was true. Pa taught me how to encourage a horse, how to help the animal figure out its own way to do what I wanted done. There is more to training a horse than using a step-by-step method. Training a horse is more than that—it is all about trust.

"You're right, Nathan. Pa sure had the touch."

Nathan snorted and hung the bridle up, and reached another one down. "Sam, you have more of the talent than your Pa did. He told me that himself."

My jaw dropped in surprise. "He said that?"

Nathan ignored me. He cleaned the bridle a bit more, and then asked, "You're here to offer me a job?"

I nodded and told him honestly, "I don't know for how long. It may be one month—it could be six months. I know it's asking a lot, but I need to spend some time on the road to find Pa's killer. You'll be cooking for yourself most of the time, so I think it's only fair to pay you extra."

"Well, let's talk about that for a minute." He hung the bridle up and looked at me. "What if I were to take a horse in trade?"

I was stumped. "But Nathan, at forty a month, plus board, you can buy any horse and have cash left over."

"I couldn't buy the filly, Kept Secret."

Again, I could feel my jaw start to drop and I snapped it closed. Kept Secret was a yearling out of Raindancer and Faith. Raindancer was descended from

Admiral, the great thoroughbred that never lost a race. Faith was a mare with one of the smoothest strides I'd ever seen.

Was Kept Secret a winner? I had high hopes, but she was only a yearling and it was too early to tell. She wouldn't start racing for another two years and it wasn't until we put her head-to-head with another horse would we know if she was something special.

A racehorse needs special care. The feed has to be top quality, it needs exercise twice a day and the horse is naturally high-spirited and requires a firm hand. Pa worked hard and planned this bloodline years in advance, but alone, it would be more than I could handle. If I farmed out some of the horses, letting them go to another trainer to groom it would feel like a betrayal. I hoped that together, Nathan and I could handle them.

Except for one problem.

"But you're not white," I blurted out. In Kentucky, only a white man was allowed to own a racehorse.

"Yes, Sam, you're right," he said, marveling at my observation.

I stammered as my face turned red. "I'm sorry, Nathan."

I stuck out my hand for a handshake. "If you want her, she's all yours!"

The smile on Nathan's face was something to see. "It's a deal," he said.

* * * * *

Nathan and I left Martin and Laura's place behind in the early afternoon and headed back to the ranch. Mostly we talked about the racehorses as we rode. Two racing foals arrived this year—Bravo and Peppercorn. The filly Kept Secret and the colt Cortez were each a year old and I had two two-year-olds beginning to train hard. Sahara and Rio, three-year-old fillies, were nearly ready to race.

As a young man, Pa's first love was thoroughbreds. It can be a risky venture for a family man to race and after a string of bad luck, he changed direction and began raising and training the Cleveland Bay breed. He soon discovered that people paid top dollar for a matched pair to pull their fancy buggies about Lexington.

Due to the success of the Cleveland Bays, he finally gathered the capital to try racing again. Raindancer, a thoroughbred that Pa bought from an amateur trainer deeply in debt, sired all the foals. Pa traded a matched pair of Cleveland Bay mares for the dams, Beatrice and Faith. This spring was to be the first chance to race our horses—but Pa wasn't here to see them.

"How is the horse business?" Nathan asked. "You doing alright?"

"Well, as the saying goes, good horses can make you and bad horses can break you. So far, we've managed good ones," I said. "The penny jar is pretty low—with the thoroughbreds, we're paying more for feed of course. Pa and I talked about the risk, and I was all for trying. If we can win some races, we'll have some breathing room."

He nodded. "Still buying the good feed?"

"Best we can find—oats, barley, and corn," I said. "The hay is good and we're still buying that from the German in Racine. Sometimes it seems the horses eat better than I do."

Nathan nodded. "The feed's the thing. Good horses run about the same, but at race time, the faster horse is fed better."

I agreed. A horse can keep its stride going longer and doesn't injure as easily when the diet is good grain. As long as the horse is kept in shape and not allowed to get fat, that is.

I needed to visit the livery stables in Lexington, meet with a few customers, and reassure them that things would stay the same even though Pa was gone. It might be a tough sell. Pa had a rare talent and I knew that things would never be the same without him.

Chapter 4

Patterson walked into the saloon at noon. Nothing much stirred until late afternoon in the Lucky Strike and the early hours were generally his own. Patterson walked to the bar and waved to Goldie for a coffee.

The portly bartender set down a mug in front of him and nodded his head towards the back. "Boss wants to see you when you come in."

Patterson nodded and walked down a hallway to Blackwell's office door. He rapped on the door twice and walked in.

"About time you turned up," Blackwell told him from behind his desk.

Patterson held his tongue as he took a chair and took a sip of Goldie's coffee instead. Hot as hell and strong as sin—just the way he liked it.

Blackwell came and went when it suited him and Patterson was never sure when he would turn up. Blackwell studied him as he drew on his pipe—the man was a walking chimney.

"Last night?"

"Last night went just fine. Problem solved," he told Blackwell. "He had recognized me all right and he knew my name, but he's out of the picture now."

Patterson decided to keep mum about the boy.

"Good." Blackwell nodded. "I want you to pay a visit to Blake, the trainer, today. Let him know you're keeping an eye on him."

Not another horse ride!

"You know I can't tell one horse from another."

"Doesn't matter—I want him pinned down. I've got a feeling that he's going to turn jackrabbit on me—make sure he doesn't."

Patterson nodded wearily. Another day in the saddle under the hot sun, playing nursemaid to one of Blackwell's' bums. He thought longingly of the cool, dim bar, the cold beer and the card tables.

He left the office and headed to the livery stable to mount up. The day was going to get hot and it would be best to start in the cool of the morning.

He had run his own show in Saratoga. Sure, he had to answer to the big boss in New York once a year, but other than that, he'd been on his own.

And he'd done well—receipts had been at an all-time high and Patterson had muscled his way into everything in the area. There'd been bumps in the road, but he'd bulled through them until one witness stubbornly wouldn't listen and had to be silenced. He was tipped-off that the law was about to move on him and he fled the area, his tail tucked between his legs.

Horse racing in Lexington is huge and arriving with a handful of quality thoroughbreds had opened the door with Blackwell. Only a few months after arriving his past caught up with him when Patterson saw the trainer Carson in town one day. Years had gone by, but he couldn't ignore the chance that he'd been recognized by the trainer—loose ends had to be tidied up.

Carson was no longer a problem, but he was beginning to realize the man he worked for lacked vision. Opportunities to expand were everywhere in town and went begging despite his best efforts to point them out—efforts that Blackwell had not appreciated.

He had shown remarkable patience with Blackwell, but maybe the time had come to make a move, to branch out on his own. Lexington was a good-sized city and there should be room for them both.

Stay patient, he told himself. His time would come.

* * * * *

It was hotter than the backside of Hades when Patterson rode in at Blake's ranch. His head was pounding from the heat and his sticky, sweat-soaked shirt didn't help his mood. Blake met him at the bunkhouse, his head covered with a wide brimmed straw and his feet dancing like he was standing on live coals. Skinny as a rail, the man reminded Patterson of a scarecrow.

"Just me, Blake. No Blackwell today."

"Yes, Mr. Patterson."

"What've you got to drink?"

"Ah, I've got some whiskey that Michael brewed up."

"Well, break it out. My head's pounding like a sledge and anvil."

Patterson sat on the porch in the shade while Blake brought a bottle and a couple of mugs from the house.

"Blackwell sends his regards—wants to know if you need anything."

"Well, no, I really don't need anything. The horses are doing just fine." He shook his head. "I train horses everyday at your place. Why did he want you to visit me here?"

"He wants to make sure you're up to this."

Blake snorted. "Those two horses you've got—I've never seen the like. That big blood bay—he's got quality stamped all over him." He looked at Patterson out of the corner of his eye. "Anyone that knows horses will figure out that he's not Fortress."

Patterson pinned him with a glare.

"They're nearly a perfect match and the form card agrees—Blackwell made sure of that! All you need to worry about is having him ready at race time."

Blake nodded meekly.

Patterson hid his disgust of the man—he constantly whined about the risks of this fiddle, yet was first in line on payday. This godforsaken country with its summer heat took a toll on men—made them weak. He hadn't come across anyone yet that could hold his own in a real city, such as New York. He took a sip of whiskey, hoping for some relief for his pounding head.

Blake prattled on about the horses and Patterson listened with half an ear for in his hands was a mug of bourbon that was so smooth he had trouble believing it. The whisky had a slight nutty flavor with a hint of something like vanilla and some other spice he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Blake was looking at him expectantly and Patterson nodded his head.

"Good, good. I'll let Blackwell know you're on top of things." He took another sip from the mug and gave Blake a friendly smile. "Say, this is all right. Where'd you get it?"

Blake nodded and took a sip out of his own mug.

"Pretty good corn, huh? My head boy—Michael—he makes it."

"He makes it here?"

Blake was grateful for the distraction—Patterson seemed almost human when talking about something other than business.

“Yes sir. We’ve got a still out there in the woods behind the barn.”

Not a flicker of emotion crossed Patterson’s face, yet he could scarcely believe what he was hearing. He’d worked the gambling halls from New Orleans to Baltimore and sampled spirits from around the world—yet they paled in comparison to a whiskey made in the back woods by a slave.

Blake had no idea how good this “corn” was. Patterson saw the possibilities instantly—making bourbon like this was as good as minting gold.

“Does he make a lot of this?”

“No sir, it’s just something he does now and then.” Blake was happy to keep the conversation away from the horses. “His daddy worked this place too, and I reckon he learned it from him. You want to see the still? He’s cooking right now.”

“In this heat?” He took another sip and allowed himself to say: “He does make good whiskey, though. Show it to me—I’ll take a look.”

Blake led him to a trail that ran along the hillside. His outfit was almost surrounded by a river that made a big wide bend and nearly joined up with itself again. Where the river had channeled a cut through the hills a series of bluffs laid exposed and a spring flowed near the trail from a cliff down to the river.

“This is the water we use—Michael says it’s perfect for bourbon,” Blake said proudly.

Patterson could smell wood smoke and something else—he assumed it was the whiskey cooking.

Blake led him to a clearing and the kettle. A large square made of sheet copper—the kettle was maybe five feet long by four feet wide and about a foot deep—was resting on a furnace roughly made of brick. At the front of the furnace the slave Michael was tending a fire built into a hearth. Patterson could see the fire’s heat was pulled through and underneath the kettle and out the back. It appeared to hold about a hundred gallons of boiling water.

“How much corn is in there?”

“About four bushels,” Blake replied.

“How much whiskey does this make?”

“About eight gallons.”

Patterson could feel the heat from the furnace, but he ignored it—every bushel of Indian corn produced two gallons of whiskey? Could that be?

Blake led him to a lean-to that contained the still. It was also made of copper and shaped like an urn and appeared to hold a couple of hundred gallons.

Patterson listened as Blake enthusiastically described the process of distilling. As he wound down, Patterson suggested they return to the house and get out of the heat—he had seen enough.

They poured another mug of the bourbon as they sat in the shade once again.

“You ever think about selling your place? I’d give you a fair price.”

Blake dropped his eyes and kept his head down. “Well, I don’t think so—I grew up on the place. It’s my home.”

“How about taking on a partner?” Blake could feel the power of will that radiated from Patterson, almost to the point of smothering him. “You’d still own

the place. I've been looking for a site to build a distillery, and I think this is the place."

He lied—the idea only came to him after sipping Michael's whisky.

Blake nervously shuffled his feet and didn't say a word.

"Well, think about it anyway."

Blake nodded his head. Patterson would have to be happy with that for now.

Chapter 5

The next morning when my two ranch hands Benjamin and Matthew arrived for morning stables, I turned them loose with Nathan and rode to Lexington to register the new foal, Bravo, with the Kentucky Association. The Association was in charge of the local races and they also maintained the thoroughbred studbook. The Association was responsible for organizing the entries for upcoming races, managing the course on race day, and licensing the betting pools. The office of the Association shared a building with the Jockey Club, an elite country club for racehorse owners.

The clubhouse was two blocks off North Broadway, in an area of large homes with wrought iron fences and flower gardens behind low brick walls. A circular drive of crushed rock led to a two-story brick building with a tin roof. Mounted on the door was a brass plate with an engraved "Members Only." I lifted the knocker and let it fall.

A steward, a man wearing a black store-bought suit, opened the door wide and stepped into the doorway.

"Good day, sir," he said, in a soft Southern drawl.

"Yes, good day. Sam Carson to see the Colonel."

"Of course. This way, sir."

He stepped back and then closed the door behind me, and led me to a small drawing room.

"I will see if the Colonel is available, sir," said the servant, and left the room.

The room was quite plush with a thick carpet, an overstuffed settee, and two matching chairs. A fireplace with an ornate walnut mantle was built into the far wall, and above the mantle was a large oil painting of a horse. I walked closer, and read the small nametag on the bottom of the frame: Sir Archy.

"One of the greatest horses that ever lived," said a deep voice with a slight drawl behind me. I turned and found the Colonel standing behind me. I hid my surprise—as a large man he moved very quietly.

He said off hand, "Of course, his sire wasn't half bad, either."

The Colonel was short and quite round, wearing a white linen three-piece suit and a frilled shirt with a soup stain on the front. His white eyebrows were extremely bushy and his black eyes darted about the room, finally resting on me. An enormous unlit cigar was clamped in his left fist, and he shook hands rather briskly.

"If I remember correctly," I said, "he finally retired because no one would race against him."

"That's right," he gave me a thoughtful look. "You know your horses."

"I want to say thank you, sir, for allowing me to call on you without an appointment. You may have heard my father, Patrick, was killed last week. We are struggling without him."

"Knew your father of course." His eyes swept the floor and darted around the room again, never quite coming back to me. "Terrible business," he said, shaking his head. "Terrible."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well young man, what can I do for you today?"

The Colonel was the manager of the Jockey Club and one of his many duties was to keep the studbook.

"I have a new foal to register, born just last week," I said.

He took a quick step back and waved me along. "Let's go to my office. We'll have you out of here in a jiffy."

I followed him around the corner and down a wide hallway. A series of doors were along the left side of the hall, and on the right, a large, arched entryway opened to what looked like a dance floor. As I walked along I noticed chairs along the walls, and realized this was a ballroom. A few more steps and the Colonel waved me into his office and gently closed the door behind me.

"Take a seat," he said, and eased himself into his chair behind his desk. He set his cigar into a spotless ashtray, and pulled several printed forms from a desk drawer.

We quickly went through the forms. He asked for the foal's name, date of birth, and the names of the sire and dam. The form card also described the horse in detail within a drawn figure of a horse: right and left sides, front and rear. I had those details listed in my own notes. Every distinctive scar, hair whorl, freckle, or spot of color that made Bravo unique was listed on the form card. He opened another drawer, and entered the same information into a small bound book. The size of his lettering looked incredibly small.

The Colonel gave me a copy of the forms and I paid him the required \$10 registration fee.

"If there's nothing else," he said and he stood up to show me out.

"Well, yes sir, there is. I'd like to enter a horse in Saturday's race," I said quickly.

He sat down in his chair again and looked at me for a long moment, then asked, "Do you have a sponsor?"

"A sponsor?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Association races are exclusively for horses that are owned or sponsored by club members only."

"Oh. I see."

"If a member of the club, a sponsor so to speak, pays your entry fee, then you may enter the race."

"I had no idea. Are all the horses racing each weekend following these rules?"

"Well, some members have sponsored the same owners for years," he said. "To expedite matters, the club has the discretion to let the non-member owner pay the fees themselves."

I was beginning to smell a rat.

"So, it is at your discretion to allow a horse to enter?" I asked.

The Colonel sidestepped a direct answer. "Oh no, Mr. Carson," he said, all smiles, "It is not at my discretion. These are club rules, but an exception might

occur at times. As a member, I occasionally sponsor horses myself for a small fee.”

Now I got it—the Colonel needed his palm greased.

“How much is an entry fee?” I asked.

“One horse, for one race, is twenty dollars,” he said.

“And your fee?”

He shrugged. “The same as the entry fee.”

“I’d like to enter one horse, please.” I put two double eagles on the desk.

The Colonel swept those coins up in a blink of an eye.

“Let’s see,” he said, thumbing through his bound book again. “We have room in the second race that day. Name of the horse?”

“Sahara.”

“Sahara,” he said, slowly writing in the book with his tiny print. “I assume the horse is registered?”

“Yes, sir”

“Trainer of the horse?”

“Patrick Carson,” I said.

The Colonel lifted his pen and squinted at me. “What’s that you said?”

“Patrick Carson.”

“It’s highly irregular to list a deceased person.”

The Colonel thought to argue some more and then must have decided it wasn’t worth it. He shrugged and wrote in Pa’s name.

Pa had trained Sahara. He might not have lived to see her race, but any chance she had was all due to him.

* * * * *

The Colonel sat back in his chair as the door closed behind Sam Carson. He mulled over the news that Carson had a three-year old filly out of Raindancer ready to race this weekend and what that might do to the rest of the field.

He took a closer look at the race card and snickered—Blackwell had a horse running in the same race. He thought of Blackwell’s piercing blue eyes, his predatory stare and high-handed manner. The man behaved like he was a lord.

The Colonel had the aristocratic background, not that upstart criminal! Carson’s horse fit in one of the few remaining races with an opening and the easy money to be made from the kid for an entry was a bonus—but twisting Blackwell’s tail by entering a high-class, unknown filly was pure pleasure.

He had his weekly meeting with Blackwell tomorrow. As a board member, Blackwell was free to come and go from the Jockey Club and the meetings with the head of the Club were commonplace. The two met to arrange the field for each race and review which horse should win—the races must look legit to the public yet pay as planned. If he could reach Blackwell today with news of the change he would probably stew over it all night.

He quickly jotted a note and rang for one of the boys to run it over to the Lucky Strike. It was important that he not visit gambling houses himself—tongues would wag and rumors would spread and the honesty of the head of the Jockey Club would be questioned.

The Colonel smiled—everyone knew the Colonel was above reproach.

Chapter 6

Patterson sat at his regular table in the Lucky Strike, drinking coffee and playing chess with one of his hands, Bancroft. Blackwell wasn't due in until later and the quiet game helped him gather his thoughts.

The first task was to take possession of Blake's place. Armstrong, a spineless lawyer he'd used in the past, could draw up a partnership contract and make it seem a great deal for Blake, but slanted heavily in Patterson's favor.

He also needed a point man for the new distillery, someone local to be used as a figurehead and draw public attention away from Patterson. The man needed to be pliable enough for Patterson to handle, but capable enough that he didn't require constant care. From what Patterson had seen of the locals, he might have a problem finding such a man. They trudged through each day almost as if they were wearing blinders. In the time he'd been here it seemed he was the only one with ideas. Even Blackwell was shortsighted—he was so wrapped up in his stable of horses that other revenue streams went begging.

It would be easier to build the distillery if he offered part of the deal to Blackwell. Blackwell had his uses—he could use the politicians on his payroll to push the project through any objections that might arise at the capital in Frankfort. He could also twist some arms locally to get the building materials and labor cheap.

The problem was the more partners Patterson let in, the smaller his own piece of the pie became. It would help if he took care of Blake himself and eventually squeezed out any locals he might have to bring in, but cutting Blackwell out would be a problem.

Patterson was beginning to think it would come down to him or Blackwell controlling this town.

Patterson decided he wasn't going anywhere.

Chapter 7

In Lexington, livery stables came in all shapes and sizes and in the plush neighborhoods, the stable often appeared like a house from the street side. For the wealthy, it was fashionable to keep your own carriage and team. It meant some sort of carriage house for stabling horses, feeding them, keeping the carriage in working order, and keeping a coachman and grooms. The average family hired a carriage to travel about the city if the weather was poor or for a special occasion and in a city the size of Lexington, livery stables were big business.

Dawson's livery was north of downtown, between West Second and West Third Street near Gratz Park. A large brick building that blended in to the neighborhood on the street side, it was quite different in the back. Entering from the alleyway, a broad, graveled yard allowed room for the carriages to be turned and multiple teams to be harnessed. Three enormous doors led off the yard for carriages and a fourth double-door was for the horses. Inside was a

long row of stables and a tack room and dozens of closets with a changing area for the coachmen. A door with glass panes led to the dispatch office.

I found Dawson in his office, sitting behind a desk eating supper. He was a great bear of a man, standing over six feet tall with a barrel chest and powerful arms. The slab of beef in front of him could easily feed a family of four. His hands were enormous yet his fingers seemed almost dainty as he sliced more of the roast. His bushy eyebrows hovered over bright, inquisitive eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

"I'm truly sorry about your father, Sam," he said, absently wiping his mouth with a napkin. I wasn't surprised that word had reached Dawson about Pa. Dawson's cabs travel everywhere in the city and he insists that his drivers relay any of the gossip or rumors they might overhear.

"They didn't give him a chance, did they?" Dawson said. "Any idea who pulled the trigger?"

"Pa called him 'Reeves'—he recognized his voice."

"Reeves?" Dawson sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin, trying to recall the name. Finally, he shook his head. "Sorry, but no, I don't think I've heard that name before."

He paused and studied me. "What're you going to do now?" He needed to know if I was still in business.

"Well, I'm going to keep working with the breed stock; I know that Pa wouldn't want me to quit, and I'll keep training the Cleveland Bays."

"Well, I might have a customer for you." He pulled out a desk drawer and handed me a note with a name and address. "Gent says he wants a matched pair for a buggy," he shrugged. "One horse would pull it just fine, but why buy just one horse when you can buy two, right?"

I smiled. The fashionable keep us in business. "I'll let you know," I said.

He gave me a nod and I found my way out. If the gent bought the pair, Dawson would get a percentage of the sale as a finder fee. It was more than fair as it allowed us, I mean me, to operate the ranch in the county without needing an office in the city. It could be the first step in keeping the business going after Pa's death.

* * * * *

David Graham was the name on the note and the address was just a couple of blocks away. I found the place on Noble Street, a two-story brick house with well-tended flower gardens underneath oak and redbud trees. I rode around the street corner and down the alleyway to the back yard. A large vegetable garden took up the south side of the yard, and a brick carriage house faced the alley on the other side.

I hitched my horse and walked to the back door, the tradesman entrance. Pa had always told me to use this door if there was one. "Nothing worse," he'd say, "than stirring up trouble for the hired help in a house or arriving at the front door without an appointment. You ring the front bell, you better be expected. You knock on the back door, be polite and respectful, and word will spread. We think it's a big city, but in the circles of the wealthy, it's a small town."

A butler-type answered my knock, middle aged, well dressed, but in his shirtsleeves. He was chewing on a large slice of bread and crumbs were perched on his chest. I imagine he kept his jacket hung up to keep it clean until he was called upon.

I nodded a hello. "Good afternoon. My name is Sam Carson, and I'm from Willow Springs Stables, calling regarding a pair of buggy horses."

Shirtsleeves looked me over, decided I was harmless, then opened the door wider and waved me in. I stepped through the doorway and followed him through a pantry into a large kitchen.

A slim woman with gray hair peeking out of her cap was stirring a pot resting on a modern Franklin stove. A big yellow retriever thumped his tail on the floor as I entered, but he was close to the stove and much too snug to bother with a proper greeting. Copper pots and pans hung from a rack above the stove and a stone sink stood under a window with a water tap.

A large wood table was laid out with Shirtsleeve's supper, and he pulled out his chair and offered me another.

"Clarissa," he called to the cook, "could you please fill another bowl of soup for our young caller?"

Before I could politely decline the cook replied, "Of course."

Clarissa brought me a steaming bowl of soup and silverware wrapped in a large napkin. "Thank you, Ma'am," I said. I stirred the soup to cool it.

Clarissa gave me a smile and said to shirtsleeves, "Honestly, David, I don't know why you play these games. Introduce yourself to the young man."

So shirtsleeves was the gent, David Graham. He gave me a small smile and motioned for me to continue to eat. "I often eat in the kitchen," he said, "Much better than eating alone in a stuffy dining room."

"Yes, I can see that. This is a wonderful room."

I took a taste of the soup. It was vegetable soup, with a cream base, and seasoned just right. I idly thought what a treat it would be to bring Clarissa home to cook for the ranch hands. It would be near impossible to hire her away from this house though, especially with running water.

Before I knew it my bowl was empty and I looked up to see Graham studying me.

"I see you enjoyed the soup. Don't get any ideas about trying to hire the cook," he said warmly. He turned to her and said, "We have an iron-clad contract, don't we Mother."

Clarissa just shook her head and smiled.

Graham leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out under the table.

"So, young Sam Carson, tell me about your horses."

"Well sir, Diana and Mariam are Cleveland Bay horses and stand about 16 hands. They're bright bays with black points and black legs with a small star on the forehead. They're identical in stride, well trained in tandem harness, and strong enough to carry you all day if you want to ride single."

He waited for me to go on, but I stayed silent. I let the silence stretch out, and Graham was watching me very closely indeed.

"So? This is your sales pitch?" he asked with a frown. "I'm going to buy these horses based on this?"

"Sir, I'm not concerned about selling the horses—anyone who sees them will want to buy them." I paused, choosing my words carefully. "You might consider this conversation as an interview, to find if you are a suitable owner for my horses."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me. I calmly kept my face expressionless, letting him stare me down, and then I gave the slightest smile. He tilted his head back and laughed.

“Excellent!” he said with a grin. He reached his hand out across the table for a handshake. “Pleased to meet you, Sam Carson!”

I exhaled slowly. “Likewise, Mr. Graham.” Graham’s sense of humor, his little ruse pretending he was the hired help, was the tip-off. Pa always said that the game of poker and salesmanship were very similar. Read the gent holding the cards, and watch for the little clues that he is giving you.

“You’re cautious with your animals,” he said. “I’ll wager you were half serious.”

“I’ve raised them and trained them. You care for something for a few years, you feel protective.”

“You will tell me more, won’t you?”

“Sure. Cleveland Bays are the oldest breed in Britain. In the Middle Ages they were pack animals, and then they were crossbred with Barb blood, and later with Arabians and Thoroughbreds. They’re proud horses and contrary only if you treat them poorly. I imagine you’ve seen them pull a carriage in matched step—it’s really something,”

“How do you know about the breeding?”

“The histories of different horses are well known to those in the business,” I shrugged.

“All right, I guess that I need to look them over,” he said. “How do I find you?”

I gave him directions and we agreed to meet at noon the next day. We shook hands again and as I was leaving, I thanked Clarissa for the soup. “If you ever decide to move to the fresh air of the country,” I told her half seriously, “you have an open invitation for a job at my ranch.”

“Why thank you, Sam,” she said. Looking at Graham she sniffed. “I think I’ll stay here with my son, even if the pay isn’t very good.”

Chapter 8

It was early afternoon at the Lucky Strike and the place was quiet—the evening crowd was still hours away and most of the tables were empty. Patterson was reading a newspaper at his usual table in the corner when the bartender, Goldie, handed him a cup of coffee and passed a note that he smoothly palmed. He took a sip from his cup and casually looked around, then read a note from the Colonel.

The note said that Carson’s son had entered a race on Saturday. Could the son be old enough to train horses?

Thinking back to the night he saw him in the dimness of the barn, he supposed it was possible. It was hard to believe that it had been nearly twenty years now since he and Carson had butted heads in Saratoga.

This meant he needed to be on his toes—his son would be seeking to even the score. Two things he had discovered since arriving here—Kentuckians shoot straight and they avenge their kin. A feud was taken very seriously indeed. He stood and walked back to the office, rapped twice on the door and entered.

Blackwell sat behind the desk, his right hand under the desktop—Patterson knew he had a Colt lined up on the door each time it opened. He handed him the note and took a seat.

“The fool!” Blackwell slammed the desk with his fist. The Colonel had muddled his race set-up with this new horse of Carson’s. The horse was untested and no one knew how fast this horse might be.

It would be the first offspring of Raindancer’s to race and if young Carson was anything like his old man, the filly would be in shape.

The upside would be the long odds the horse would get and Blackwell had a hunch he’d win. If he bet on him he’d earn a big payday courtesy of Carson—the irony amused him.

Patterson waited for word from Blackwell.

“We’ll let him run her,” said Blackwell finally, “Let’s see what she’s got.”

Patterson chose his words carefully. “I think it’s a mistake—he needs to know who’s in charge. You let him run and he wins, he’ll be harder to handle the next time.”

“That’s your job—to persuade people. Or don’t you think you can handle a kid?”

“He’s young and stubborn. You let him go now, he won’t listen later.”

“We’ll see.”

Patterson didn’t push it. Blackwell must have something up his sleeve if he was letting him run—well, good luck to him. Patterson bought in on the rigged races, but risking his money on chance did not interest him—as a professional gambler, he made good money from others who did exactly that.

“I want you to speak to Murphy,” Blackwell told him. “Let him know—remind him—he’s not winning this week. He’s in the third race. The idiot would forget his own name if I let him.”

Patterson nodded and left the office. Working as Blackwell’s muscle was easy—if you didn’t tolerate any arguments from trainers and owners. His experience with men is they knuckle under only if you rule with strength and without mercy. Only once did he need to rough up a stubborn owner—when word spread how badly Patterson had beaten him, no one had dared to refuse him since. He had no reason to think that Carson would be any different.

Chapter 9

I woke up the next morning and realized that race day was just four days away. I was constantly scouting around for Reeves, but for a time getting Sahara and Rio ready for racing needed to come first.

I was outside, tossing the water from the basin when I saw Ben and Matthew Olson walking up the lane. The boys lived nearby and arrived each morning at daybreak. Room and board were included in their wages for working the stables and although the boys still went home each night, they ate breakfast and dinner with us. Their mother was always trying to fill those two boys up and it was a rare day when we had food left over after a meal.

I met the boys in the yard and we gathered up the bridles for the thoroughbreds—we exercised them twice each day, the first time at sunrise. We gave them a slow warm-up mile and then a fast mile run and walked them back to cool them down. Ben and Matthew ran four furlongs with the two 2-yr olds while I continued to clean up the older thoroughbreds with a quick shower with suds, a curry comb, and a little bit of water.

After eating, Nathan cleared the dishes up while I took the boys through the stables. It was full light now and we mucked out the stalls and added fresh bedding, feed and water.

After the stables, I talked to the boys about getting the buggy ready for David Graham's visit. The buggy needed a good sweeping and dusting, and I asked them to recheck the harness in the tack room and make sure it was ready.

Nathan was outside on the porch by the time I got back to the house. I washed up a bit and poured myself another cup of coffee.

"Most likely Diana and Mariam will sell today," I said, sitting down next to Nathan on the porch. "A gent named David Graham will be here soon to look them over."

"Those Cleveland's are mighty popular," said Nathan. "You might think about finding some more breeding mares."

"And another stallion. When I talked to Martin the other day he said his horse broker, Ryan Howard, traded for a couple of Cleveland stallions. I wired him with an offer and he said they were top notch, but he'd sold them already to somebody north of town. I can't imagine who that was—I haven't heard a whisper of anyone else breeding Cleveland Bays."

Nathan shrugged. "You're getting top dollar for them. Only a matter of time before someone else horns in."

"Pa went to Louisville a few times and found good horses. I wonder if it would be worth my time to go up there."

"Well, if you do go, keep one hand on your wallet and the other on your gun."

I nodded. With Pa's killer on the loose and unknown to us, I had no choice.

* * * * *

David Graham turned up after a while. I saw him riding down the lane and asked the boys to harness the Bays. Graham dismounted and tied his horse up to the rail.

"I see you borrowed a horse from Dawson," I said, shaking his hand.

"Well, 'rented' is more like it," he said. "Do you know this horse?"

"Yep, this is Chester." I scratched the horse just above his ears. "He was raised here. We sold him to Dawson about four years ago."

"I should have told Chester where I was headed," Graham said smiling, "I could have saved some time."

"Come on over to the corral and meet Mary and Nathan."

Mary was standing inside the corral leaning on a post, watching Nathan work a two-year old.

Mary turned to say hello.

"Mary O'Connor," I said, "I'd like to introduce David Graham."

Graham gave a small bow and said, "Pleased to meet you, Miss O'Connor."

"Why thank you, Mr. Graham," Mary replied in her soft Irish lilt.

Nathan and Graham shared a wave as I introduced them. We chatted about the two year old, Gabriel, and it wasn't long before Mary had another admirer in Graham. Mary is remarkable—her open smile and her sparkling green eyes are such a fetching combination that men can't help but be drawn to her like a single candle in a dark room.

I waited politely for a few minutes and then suggested to Graham that we take a look at the horses.

"Oh, why sure," he replied, sounding like it was the last thing on his mind.

"Please pardon us, Miss O'Connor."

The boys had rolled the buggy out and were just finishing fitting the harness. Diana and Mariam were patiently waiting, and what a gorgeous pair of mares they were.

I stepped up to Diana and patted her neck. "This is Diana, the dominant of the two, so greet and harness her first."

I stood back while Graham walked around, admiring them. Once he frowned, almost as if he just remembered he was horse-trading; looking happy could lead to a higher price.

I climbed into the buggy and gave Graham the reins as he sat down. After a shake on the reins and a few clucks, the girls started down the lane for a little pleasure driving. After walking a while, Graham put them through their various paces and they remained well mannered as he sped up and slowed down.

Abruptly Graham asked, "Do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

I figured he wanted to know more about Mary and I wasn't going to answer any questions about her.

"I don't mind, but I might not answer."

"Fair enough," he said. "Do you own the ranch?"

"Well, yes. My brother Jason and I inherited it—Jason is trapping out west." I thought about it and decided it wouldn't hurt to tell him more. "My Pa and I bought, bred, and trained these horses. He was shot and killed last week." Graham was a good listener and as we trotted along in the buggy, I told him the whole story.

Graham asked, "Just before he was shot, your father said 'I don't care to see you again, Reeves?'"

"Yes. The law hasn't been able to find Reeves and my luck hasn't been any better. It looks like he left town."

"Well, I don't know. I think he killed your father so he wouldn't have to leave. Your father obviously knew him, knew him as Reeves, but what if he is using a different name now?"

"He didn't want anyone to know his real name?"

"Maybe," Graham said. "Maybe something like that. My first thought was this Reeves might be new to the area, and your father recognized him, knew something about him. That made your father a threat to him. Where did you live before you moved here?"

"Saratoga Springs," I said. "One of Pa's friends said that our family moved here due to some trouble."

Graham slowed the team down to a walk.

"I have a friend in New York that could look for anything about Reeves in the Saratoga area, if you like."

I thought about that for a moment. It might cost a bit, but it could move the search along a mite if he'd been in Saratoga.

"That's a good idea," I said, "Hire them. Do I need to pay you a retainer?"

He looked at me a moment, keeping one eye on the horses. "Why would you need to do that?" he asked.

"That's what most lawyers ask for when hired, isn't it?"

"What makes you think I'm a lawyer?"

"Well," I said, "It could be that you ask pointed questions like one, dress and speak like a lawyer, or ..."

"Yes?"

“Or, I just asked around and someone told me,” I smiled. “So, let’s turn the team around and head back.”

“What about the horses? I haven’t decided if I’m going to buy them.”

I grinned at him. “You decided to buy this team the moment you saw them. We didn’t have to take this buggy ride at all, did we?”

“Maybe not,” he admitted. “This ride might have been a waste of time for you, but for me, it was very profitable.”

He gave me a wink. “After all, I just gained a new client.”

Chapter 10

Patterson had his men out looking for Armstrong and it wasn’t long before one of them, John Wilson, walked into the Lucky Strike and approached Patterson’s table.

“I found him.”

Patterson nodded. “Where?”

“A dive on Tenth Street.”

“Let’s go pay him a visit, shall we?”

It was barely midday yet the lawyer was halfway through a bottle of whiskey. He recognized Patterson as he neared his table and gave him a bleary, friendly smile. Patterson sat down and studied him a moment, then picked up the bottle and filled Armstrong’s glass to the brim.

“Cheers,” Patterson nodded to the man and Armstrong drank the glass down.

“I’ve got a job for you,” Patterson told him, absently turning the bottle on the table with his left hand. “I need you to do some work for me.”

Armstrong watched the bottle rotate and smiled again. “Why sure! Stop by the office tomorrow and we’ll talk.”

“I can count on you?”

Armstrong beamed. “Absolutely.”

Patterson stood and picked up the bottle. “Shall we go?”

“Go?” The lawyer peered at him as if from a great distance. “Go where?”

“Your office.”

“My office,” he murmured, confused. “Now?”

Patterson nodded to Wilson and he helped Armstrong to his feet. They managed to reach Armstrong’s rooms without a lot of fuss and Patterson unlocked the door with the lawyer’s key. Wilson steered the man through the doorway and into an overstuffed hide chair.

“Can I pour you a drink?” Armstrong asked.

“No more drinks today,” Patterson told him firmly. “John here is going to keep an eye on you and make sure you get some rest, aren’t you John?”

“Yes sir.”

Patterson found a throw rug and laid it across Armstrong’s lap.

“I’ll be back in the morning and we’ll talk then.”

Armstrong nodded meekly and Patterson drew Wilson to the door.

“Watch him—he’s got a bottle stashed somewhere in here and he’ll soon try to reach it.”

“Yes sir.”

“I’ll have someone spell you at supper time.”

Patterson left and hailed a cab in the street. Returning to the Lucky Strike, he considered Armstrong's drinking. In some ways the man reminded him of his father—possessing a towering intellect, yet inept in dealing with setbacks.

Patterson was eight years old when his father was crushed by the sudden death of his mother. Grief-stricken, only liquor seemed to ease his pain. He died within a year—mostly from a broken heart, Patterson suspected. As a ward of the State, Patterson was shuttled from one unfit home to another, suffering neglect and abuse until at age eleven he ran away for the last time. He found a new family among a gang on the streets of New York, running messages and numbers for the bookmakers.

At age fifteen he proved his loyalty by doing 30 days in the lock-up for another gang-member's crime. He kept his mouth shut and when he got out he was quickly promoted as muscle to a local boss. Soon he was a lieutenant, running his own small gang along the river—and he wasn't yet eighteen.

* * * * *

Armstrong was in rough shape the next morning—Patterson offered him a small glass of bourbon to ease the lawyer's aching head. He had brought some food but wasn't surprised when the man ignored it.

"I want a partnership agreement," Patterson explained. "I'm putting up cash on my side and my partner will invest real estate for his share."

They discussed the contract for a while and it wasn't long before Armstrong understood.

"You're hoping to push him out eventually," he remarked.

"If he doesn't contribute anything other than the property," Patterson nodded.

Armstrong shrugged. "Easy enough."

After another small toast to the new enterprise, Armstrong quickly wrote out the contract and handed it over. Patterson read it through and smiled. It was full of legalese that Blake wouldn't understand and heavily loaded in Patterson's favor.

"Have him sign it with a witness and we'll get it filed."

Patterson placed a new bottle of bourbon on the table along with five gold eagles. "Fine job, Mr. District Attorney."

Armstrong froze—it had been many years since he'd been called that. Patterson nodded a goodbye as he stepped out the door, but Armstrong didn't see him—he was lost in another lifetime.

Chapter 11

The next day we trained Sahara and Rio with a starting rope. The races at the Association track started with a rope stretched across the dirt track rigged with pulleys and weights. The starter stands next to the rope with a bell and waits for the horses to walk up behind the rope. When all horses are facing the right direction and the lineup looks fair, he rings the bell, throws a lever, and the rope is raised.

We trained the horses by walking them up near a thick rope, ringing a large bell, and quickly lifting the rope up out of the way. They soon anticipated the bell as the start of the race and the rope never seemed to bother them.

Nathan and Mary volunteered to help with the stable chores so I spent odd hours over the next couple of days searching for Reeves in Lexington. I visited the livery stables, feed stores, pubs, hotels, and even the tailor shops asking for him. I was spreading the word around town about him and I was taking a risk. If Reeves killed Pa to keep him quiet, what would he do to me?

Race Day morning came quickly, and Nathan and I left the ranch early trailing Sahara along behind us. We checked her in at the stables in the backstretch area and I left her with Nathan while I scouted the racetrack.

I walked the grandstands for a while, listening for Reeve's voice. I could still hear it in my mind and it might be the only way I might find him. I walked slowly through the clubhouse crowds, listening as men were discussing horses, other horse races, the betting pools, and everything else.

The betting pools were set up along the main mezzanine and I put \$100 down for Sahara to win, receiving a sharp look from the bookmaker as I did.

"Hey now, what's this?" he quizzed at me, holding out the money in his palm.

I just shrugged and said, "It's my horse. She's never raced before. Who knows?"

A hundred dollars was a sizable bet for an unproven horse, and the bookmakers were leery of unknowns.

The stands were beginning to fill and it seemed all of Lexington was turning out to see the races. Robby, our jockey, arrived as we saddled Sahara. Sahara seemed to vibrate with excitement. The crowd noise, the other high-spirited horses, and my own quick heartbeat signaled to her that this was the big show—the next few minutes were the reason for all the training.

Robby was a young man of 22 who looked no more than twelve years old, and he couldn't weigh more than 100 pounds. We were lucky to get Robby and Pa had insisted that we hire him for the season. Jockeys travel all about the countryside and could be hired for one race or like Robby, for an entire season. Robby rides for a couple other stables too, but he manages to visit the ranch one day a week to ride each horse; he's been on Sahara many times.

"Remember Robby," I told him, "Sahara is a horse that wants to lead all the way around the track."

"Uh, yes sir."

"If we let her lead, she'll get caught by surprise at the end—we see it when she runs the oval at the ranch. I want you to hold her until you come around the last corner. When you get around that corner, you let her go, all right?"

Robby smiled. "Yes, sir!"

"Good luck!" I left him in Nathan's hands and walked back to the front of the grandstand, which was the start-finish line, and I managed to find a stair step with a good view.

"Five minutes!" the Steward shouted through his speaking trumpet. Nathan held Sahara's bridle as the horse entered the track from the horse path behind the starting area, then he stood on the edge of the crowd, watching Sahara trot and then canter down to the far corner and back to warm up. Robby walked Sahara in a circle behind the starting rope waiting to line her up fifth from the inside post, the position we'd drawn for the race.

Again the Steward raised his speaking trumpet to shout: "Horses to the start!"

Two race officials stood near the starting rope stretched between them the width of the track, suspended from a pulley system on a tall tripod. Their job was to judge the start and signal if there was an unfair start. Another race official was halfway down the straightaway with a red flag. If there were a false start of some sort, he could stop the race by signaling the jockeys with the flag.

My heart was racing and my palms were sweating I was so nervous!

The horses spread out as they walked toward the start and I counted fourteen horses, a large field, but the jockeys did a good job of holding the walking pace and keeping the horses headed down the track. I could see the group on the near sideline was starting to quicken a little, so it was now or never. The Steward came to the same conclusion and rang the bell and released the rope a good twenty paces from the start.

The rope flew up and the horses dashed ahead, leaving the slower starting horses behind almost instantly, but overall a fair start. Sahara had a good jump at the start and I could see that she was near the front when she started around the first corner.

Sahara was moving well and she passed a horse on the outside along the backstretch, and then suddenly horses seemed to bunch together in the far corner and I lost sight of her.

It took a moment to sort it out, but I could see Sahara and she looked to be just a couple of lengths behind the leader. Another horse was just to her right, and inching up to pass her.

"Come on, girl!" I yelled.

Robby did it just right; as the horse on the right started to go by, he urged Sahara on and then let her go. Her back flattened and she surged forward, the instinct to finish first in full force. As they neared, I realized I was still shouting at the top of my voice for her, but a thousand others drowned me out and the crowd noise was overwhelming.

She caught up to the horse on the right, and as a pair they passed the leader. The horses had the finish line in sight and Sahara kept her pace. Near the line the other horse couldn't stay with her and slowed a little—Sahara won by half a length!

I jumped and cheered but the crowd groaned—I realized then that she had beaten the favorite. Robby slowed her to a trot and walked her back to the finish line. Nathan held Sahara by the bridle as Robby dismounted. Sahara stood there, proudly holding her head high while Nathan complimented her, the strength and energy shimmering about her. She won and she knew it. My eyes grew damp a bit watching her, wishing Pa could see this.

I made my way to the track, gave Sahara a present of a sugar cube, and congratulated Robby. I gave Nathan a wink and left to find the stewards table and collect the purse. Nathan shook hands with Robby and at the same time passed a \$20 piece that Robby quickly palmed. Officially, we were not allowed to reward the jockeys at the track. Unofficially, all the respectable owners did.

The purse paid \$300 dollars. Not a paltry amount, but it was clear that the betting pools are where the money is made. Sahara was an unknown and only a few risked a wager on her. I walked away from the bookmaker with a small fortune of nearly \$1200 dollars. She'd made a name for herself today and I might not get 12-1 odds for her ever again.

Nathan and I stayed and watched the following three races, mostly to judge the other horses. None of the races were as close; the winner in all the races finished three or four lengths ahead. There was quite a bit of muttering in the crowd, as once again, the favorite didn't win—all the winners were long shots.

On the ride back to the ranch, I did some thinking about the betting pools.

"You've been at this horseracing game for quite a few years, haven't you?" I asked Nathan.

He gave a short laugh. "Can't remember when I wasn't."

"How often do owners ask the jockey to do things they shouldn't do?"

Nathan looked at me, not quite understanding what I was asking.

"I mean, I'd never ask a jockey to slow Sahara down to lose on purpose, but some owners might do it, wouldn't they?"

Nathan nodded his head grudgingly. "Most of those boys riding the racehorses are slaves. Not being free men—they have no choice." He turned and looked me in the eye. "A few of them boys will get killed this season. An owner tells him to slow it down, he slows it down."

I thought about that. "Is that why Robby smiled when I told him to win? When I told him to win, not lose?"

Nathan slowly nodded, and I silently cursed the practice of slavery.

"What if someone else told a jockey to slow down?" I asked. "They'd have little choice if someone threatened them, someone who could get to them, would they?"

Nathan just shrugged. I could see he didn't want to talk about it.

"I heard talk about race fraud all over Lexington this week, but no one seems to know much. You move in circles that I can't, and I need your help. Is there someone that's fixing races? I mean, thinking about the last three races today, someone could have made a fortune if they knew the favorite wasn't going to win."

I glanced at Nathan, and he looked really unhappy.

"The reason I'm asking," I said, "is I think Pa knew something or saw something he wasn't supposed to, and he got killed because of it. I think Pa came across a crooked player who used to go by the name of Reeves, and Reeves killed Pa to protect his gambling swindle."

"So I'm thinking," I said, "if I know who the players are, the men running this swindle, it might lead me to Pa's killer. Will you help me?"

Nathan gave me a helpless look, but I stared him down and he finally nodded. "All right, Sam. There's been talk of it among the jockeys, but of course there isn't any proof. "

"Sure," I said. "Who are they?"

"These are deadly men, and you've got to be careful. The man the jockeys talk about the most runs the Club," Nathan told me. "His name is Colonel Phillips."

Chapter 12

Watching Sahara's race with great interest, Blackwell was impressed with the speed of the horse—but after all, it was an offspring of Raindancer. The big stallion would have been his if Robert Penny had kept his word. Blackwell

cursed Carson again for interfering in his business and buying the stallion out from under him.

Carson's son was too young to run a stable successfully and he was confident that soon the stallion would appear on the market again. With a little guidance, it wouldn't take long for the young man to run into money troubles—especially if he's also wagering on his horses.

Blackwell decided to help him along by making sure that Carson wouldn't win again—he'd tell Peterson to have the boy's horses stopped. If he couldn't bleed him dry by making him lose each race, some tougher persuasion might be called for.

What would be ideal would be to lure him into the big stakes race at the end of the season—the Phoenix Hotel Cup—then crush him and take his thousand-dollar entry fee.

He smiled thinking about it. One way or another, he was going to have that stallion.

Even if it took a bullet to get it.

Chapter 13

Sunday is a quiet day. The horses take a rest from the gallops and I usually do the odds and ends I don't have time for during the week.

I shared breakfast with Nathan and read from Pa's library for a few hours. Later I worked up a list of needed supplies. It was hard to keep the ranch stocked up and it seemed we were always running short of something.

I also unpacked and cleaned Pa's Colt pistol and took it down near the creek for some target practice. Pa had trained me well, but practice was important.

I carefully targeted a stump at about 30 yards, hitting it with nearly every shot. If I missed it, I missed to the right due to the heavy trigger pressure—I would need to remember to allow for it.

Reloading was a bit faster for the Colt than the old cap and ball revolvers. The store-bought paper cartridge was jammed into each chamber with the loading lever—I no longer needed to measure and pour the powder. After the cartridge is loaded and swaged in tight, I fitted a percussion cap to the back of each chamber, and I was ready to go. I went through quite a few cartridges, cleaning the weapon several times before my accuracy was consistent again.

I figured to listen to Nathan's advice about Reeves and to start wearing the Colt in a belt holster. I was already carrying the Sharps while in the saddle and I felt little hesitation in defending myself against the likes of Reeves. I also decided to change my route to and from the ranch each day. A man that shoots a shotgun point-blank out of the night has no qualms about an ambush along the trail in the light of day.

When Nathan told me the Colonel was busy fixing horse races, my first thought was to follow the Colonel and see who he met with and try to figure out what he was up to. Of course it could be that Reeves was not part of any fiddle that the Colonel was running. It was a long stretch to guess that the two were connected through horseracing, but I really had no other ideas. I'd covered nearly the entire city of Lexington searching for him but Reeves had just disappeared. To find him, I would need a lucky break.

* * * * *

I rode into Lexington early Monday morning just before dawn. One of the reasons for the success of the Kentucky Association is the luxurious Jockey Club. I arrived before anyone was up and about, wanting to take a look around the Club grounds without anyone the wiser. I'd need to be able to watch the place without being spotted and I wasn't sure how I was going to do that.

The Club's drive was empty—I didn't see any horses as I rode by on the street side and then I went around the corner and down the alleyway to take a look at the back. The place was originally a large house converted inside to serve as the Club House, but the tradesman entrance and carriage house in back hadn't been touched.

One look and I could see there wasn't enough cover to hide a horse and a man anywhere in the alleyway. I rode down the alley and around the other corner and smiled when I saw an "Available" sign on a doorway. The house was empty and it was across the alley and a couple doors down from the back door of the Club. If there were a carriage house facing the alleyway in back of this place, the way most houses in the area were arranged, I could watch the Colonel from there.

I rode back down the alleyway near the Club again. The house for sale did have a carriage house, and the door was bolted, but not locked. I lead my horse in and swung the door shut. In the dim light I could see three stalls lined the wall. I loosened the girth on the saddle and settled the horse in a stall. A feedbag hung on the wall with a few handfuls of grain in it. I made a mental note to bring some feed and a spare canteen of water with me next time. I cracked the door open just a bit, enough to see the back of the Club House, and settled in to wait for the Colonel.

It wasn't more than twenty minutes before the Club's hired help started arriving for work. Several young maids (judging by their clothing) and two cooks were the first to arrive, one of them using a key to open the lock on the back door. Nearly twenty minutes later a few men arrived, either butlers or waiters, I wasn't sure. One of the men appeared again quickly and carried some trash into the carriage house and stored it in a wagon.

It was almost an hour later before the Colonel made his appearance. A hack, typical of the type that cruised the downtown area for fares, stopped at the back door and the Colonel stepped down, paid the fare, and briskly walked to the door.

I stayed in the carriage house right through the morning, watching the Club and waiting for the Colonel to reappear. It was a busy place, with lots of deliveries and quite a few people coming and going. It was near noon before another city hack arrived at the back door and the Colonel stepped out of the back door and into the carriage.

I tightened the girth on my saddle, led the horse out of the carriage house into the alley and set out at a walk after the cabby. In just a few minutes we were in the busy part of downtown and I needed to move up a little to keep the hack in sight. After a right turn onto Alameda Street, the hack pulled up and the Colonel stepped out, said a word to the cabby, turned and walked up the boardwalk to a cafe called The Hounds.

I continued past the place and tied up at a hitch rail halfway down the block. I needed to know if he was meeting anyone, but I dare not enter the front door immediately after him or he would spot me. I walked casually along the

boardwalk, looking in the windows as I passed, and spotted him sitting alone at a small table eating lunch. I crossed the street and continued down the other boardwalk, taking my time and keeping an eye on The Hounds.

About a half-hour later he emerged from the café, hailed another cab, and returned to the Club. I left him there and circled back south to the ranch.

Following the Colonel around in hopes of finding Reeves was going to take some time, and I could see it would take some luck too. Watching the back door was risky, as Reeves could call on the Colonel at the front door of the Club and I would be none the wiser. The Colonel was a pretty careful operator, and someone such as Reeves certainly is not trustworthy. The feeling I got from the Colonel is he would avoid meeting Reeves in public, instead meeting only in private, and keeping his tie with Reeves out of the public eye.

I didn't learn much the first day, but I would be back again in the morning.

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I stopped at the general store in Willow Springs for supplies and O'Brien was behind the counter when I walked in. He didn't give a second glance at the rifle I was carrying, as most men carried one, but he took a long look at the pistol when he thought I wasn't looking.

"Nice race on Saturday, Sam," he said cheerfully. "That little pony paid off for us, all right."

I returned his smile. "I'm glad you backed her. It also means I can pay on my account today."

He opened his ledger and I paid the balance.

"Seems like that horse of yours paid off for me twice," he grinned. "Them Olson boys eat you out of house and home yet?"

"They put away their fair share. With all the bacon they eat, between them and Nathan, I'm thinking I need to start raising hogs."

I went over the list with him, and I did order bacon along with some beef, flour, spices, mustard, a barrel of salt, and a pound of pepper, loaf sugar, and coffee. Coffee was up to a dollar for a six-pound bag, but I would have a mutiny on my hands if we ran out. I also asked for three-dozen candles.

O'Brien held up his hand to stop me. "Look over here, Sam. It just came in—coal oil for lamps."

"Coal oil?"

"The latest thing." He had three lamps sitting on the far counter. O'Brien adjusted the wick, struck a lucifer, and lighted one of the lamps. "Coal oil burns cleaner than whale oil, and it smells a lot better too."

I took a whiff, and I had to agree. It also burned rather bright.

"How much?"

"Two dollars a gallon," he said, grinning.

"Why, that's hardly anything!"

Whale oil was over thirty dollars a gallon, a month's pay for a ranch hand, and very few could afford it. I stood and watched the lamp burn, thinking how this could possibly change everything. A single lamp would light up a whole room at night, or chase away the gloom of a winter day—even allow me to read late into the night.

"There's talk that when oil drilling becomes commonplace, the price of coal oil will drop even more," O'Brien said. "So what do you think?"

"I think I'm going to need more lamps."

* * * * *

I bought a couple gross of paper cartridges and percussion caps for the Colt. Once again I ignored O'Brien's raised eyebrows regarding the pistol. I needed to keep practicing—with a man like Reeves, you don't get second chances.

I rode back to the ranch, circling around towards the west and arriving almost from the south. I asked the boys to take the wagon into town to pick up the supplies, and found Nathan in the barn with Rio. He was on his haunches, looking at Rio's leading foreleg.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"Not sure," he said. "She kind of favored it a little in the gallop this morning, and it feels a little warm."

I winced. Here I was, gallivanting all around Lexington, when I should be here at the ranch tending the horses.

"Let's take a look at her." I led her out the door, watching her walk, and she did just fine.

I felt her knee, and it did feel warm. I asked Nathan to lift her leg as I felt her knee, and I could feel no bone chips.

"Let's cool that leg off with a water wash," I said, stepping back.

"What do you think?"

"Well, my guess is she has shin soreness. Who rode her this morning?"

"Matthew."

I nodded. Matthew was twenty pounds heavier than his younger brother, Ben. I was well aware that a young horse, still developing, carrying a heavy load around a small, ten acre track could suffer strain.

"Well, Matthew has eaten himself right out of a ride. Ben will have to train the gallops." I gave Rio an affectionate pat on the neck. "Let's get the swelling down and let her rest tomorrow. I'll talk to the boys when they get back."

Matthew knew the day would come when he grew too big to be riding a young racehorse daily and he didn't like it when I told him that day had arrived. He swelled up like he was going to burst, but he held his tongue. I explained the soreness in Rio was likely to strain and he nodded his head miserably. He was a good kid and a hard worker, and he brightened up a bit when I told him he could ride Rainsdancer in the mornings, as we still gave him a full five furlongs, but to take it easy on the seven year old.

I turned to head back to the house and nearly stepped right into Mary. She had placed herself square in my path, and she was waiting for Matthew to walk out of earshot to speak to me.

Her green eyes were nearly a flat shade of gray and the ready smile was gone, replaced by the jut of her determined jaw. The little freckles across the bridge of her nose were nearly lost in the flush in her face, and her auburn hair was pulled back and tied with a bit of string. She was all business, and I knew immediately what she wanted.

Riders get hurt riding very large thoroughbreds very fast. Strange things can happen, and people get killed. Mary was a good rider mainly due to her training with Pa, but she had not ridden one of the thoroughbreds all out for five furlongs.

Those of us that love horses love to ride fast, and I remembered my first gallop on a racehorse at age nine. The sense of power from the horse and the elation generated from the speed was breathtaking. I did it every morning,

weather permitting, allowed until I grew too big, like Matthew, just after I turned fourteen.

Mary was special and just the thought about her getting hurt from riding one of my horses made me shake. But this was about Mary, not about me, and I tried to put all those feelings aside.

Every argument I would make she would counter. It would come down to the fact that I wasn't letting her ride because she was a young woman.

I held up my hand to forestall her. "You can ride Rio in a couple of days," I told her. "We don't want her trotting except to warm up, nothing more. Then she goes three furlongs at gallop and then cools down. Understood?"

She nodded, holding her arms tightly to her sides, almost on tiptoes, biting her lip to keep from breaking into a big grin. She closed her eyes for a moment, sighed, gave me a small smile, and walked away without saying a word.

"Well, can't say I blame you," Nathan chuckled, walking up behind me, "not much sense arguing with Mary, she'd have you boxed no matter what you said. We all knew it was only a matter of time for Matthew."

I nodded. "I just pray she doesn't get hurt. She's a good rider, but I'd feel like a damn fool if she falls off and gets hurt."

"Once a gal like that sets her mind on something, you can't stop her," Nathan said. "Besides," he snorted, "if she does break a leg, she knows a good doctor."

Well, I sure didn't want to have a conversation with Doc about how she broke a leg riding one of my racehorses.

Nope, I wouldn't like that conversation at all.

* * * * *

The next morning at exercise time Mary turned up with the Olsen boys to lend a hand and watch the gallops. I told Ben to ride Sahara fast, but not at full speed—she needed a run, but I needed her to be at her best for the race in a few days. Matthew rode Raindancer for a good stretch and the big stallion had no problem carrying the growing boy. On the way back to the stables, Mary chatted with the boys and asked advice about each horse. I think she felt a little sorry for Ben and didn't want any hard feelings between them over Rio. She needn't have worried—the boys adored her. She stayed for a cup of coffee, then waved goodbye as she headed home.

Both of the race breeding mares, Faith and Beatrice, would be in season soon, so I assigned the boys to clean up the small stud barn after breakfast.

I checked on each horse during feeding time. There were some big decisions to make about the ranch, but the fate of the racehorses would be decided by our luck at the racecourse. If we could win a few races, it would pay all the expenses and I could give them the training they deserved. Pa loved the racehorses, but the more practical business, the one that kept the ranch going, was the Cleveland Bays. The feed bill was cheaper, they were easy to train, and no one was going to die trying to ride them.

I walked up to Sahara's stall and gave her a few horse nuggets out of my pocket. I had to admit that watching Sahara win had changed me. Seeing a horse run her heart out does something to the insides of a man—I see now why the horse racing business has an attraction all its own.

Rio was tossing her head, waiting for her turn. She would have to wait for her racing debut. Sore shins would take a day of rest, and then she could do a couple furlongs of gallop and very little canter. We lost some time with her, but she'd come back in a week or two.

I rubbed her nose the way she likes and told her to take care of Mary in the morning. “Best behavior, young lady,” I murmured. “You be good to her.” Mary was a good rider, but she had never been on a horse as fast and powerful as the thoroughbred.

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I didn’t sleep well that night and I arose earlier than normal. I stepped outside just as the sky was changing from night to the gray that appears just before dawn arrives. In summertime, the cool, early mornings are the best part of the day.

I walked to the rise behind the house and my thoughts drifted to my family. Ma had died from the fever and Pa had raised me the best he could. He had never shied away from difficult tasks, but I can imagine that educating my brother Jason and me was a challenge. I learned reading and writing and sums at the small schoolhouse, but my education came from sharing Pa’s library and our discussions late into the evenings. We lived on the edge of a great grass plain, yet in Pa’s books we traveled the seas with Homer in the Odyssey and returned from the Crusades with Ivanhoe. Books were a great treasure and each new arrival that was bartered, borrowed, or purchased from the east stirred a greater hunger for more knowledge.

Our lives changed again when a traveler shared with us a geographical atlas. Maps of the States to the east were quite common, but this atlas had the territories to the west in stunning detail. Never before had we seen the scale of the Rockies with the major trails laid out and the passes laid bare. The enormous distance to the Pacific Ocean! It was a wonder that struck my brother hardest of all, and it was only a few short seasons before he could no longer resist the call of the far lands.

Jason was nearly ten years older than me and he’d been gone now for eight years. The last letter we received from him came from the Big Bend area of Texas and he wrote that he was punching cows there and about the great storms that rolled up the coastline. There was a good chance he was still in the area so I had sent a return letter with the news about Pa.

Pa had dreamt big and his plans were cut short because of a low-life snake named Reeves. I felt like I was in some sort of limbo with the killer out there, always a threat in the back of my mind. I needed to find him. Nothing in my world was secure with him on the loose and once I dealt with him I could continue with my life.

I saw a flicker of movement and saw a shadow emerge from the gloom in the direction of the house. Mary walked up the path, quietly stood beside me and took my hand in hers as the dawn arrived and the sky started to brighten. Mary is slight of frame and barely reached my shoulder when she leaned against me—in my own way I was also leaning on her.

* * * * *

Later that morning, I gave Mary a leg up on Rio. I grew more confident about the ride when I saw she was all business and concentrating on the horse as she settled into the saddle. The saddle we use for gallops is tiny, with only one girth strap on each side and a lightweight seat. Mary would ride perched up on Rio’s shoulders and only sit in the seat while walking her.

Today was just a brief warm up and then three furlongs of gallop. The slower paces aggravated shin soreness, so we would work her fast then water wash her legs to cool her when we were done.

I rode halfway out along our training oval and waited for the riders to start. Soon Mathew, riding the seven-year-old Raindancer, charged down the lane in good form. He might have grown too large to run the youngsters, but Matthew sure could sit a horse.

Ben was riding Sahara, and he had spaced enough distance between them that she didn't feel like she needed to try and catch Raindancer. Sahara looked really smooth, and the temptation was there to run her again this weekend, but I probably should hold off and wait another week.

Mary had also spaced Rio right, and I studied her as the pair neared. Rio's stride was steady and she didn't favor her sore leg at all. The pair thundered past, throwing great clods of earth up from the soft track. Mary was riding well—her hands were a little high, but I wasn't going to mention that today. She was well balanced on her feet and looked comfortable as they raced by.

"I'd say she's doing fine," said Nathan. He had followed us out for the gallops, something he rarely did, to judge Rio's run on her lame leg.

"Yep," I said, "looks like the soreness has gone down. We'll keep her on a short schedule for a while."

Nathan snorted and gave me a look out of the corner of his eye. "You know I wasn't talking about the horse," he said. "Mary will be just fine. You can relax now and let go your chokehold on those reins."

I looked down and saw the knuckles on my hands were white—I was gripping the reins hard. I took a deep breath and relaxed.

"You didn't ride out here to watch Rio, did you?" I accused Nathan.

"Nope," he said, shaking his head. "I knew both ladies would be fine." He turned to leave and said with a grin, "It was you I was worried about."

Chapter 14

Goldie caught Patterson's eye as he handed him his coffee and they walked to the end of the bar out of earshot.

"Someone's asking around for Reeves," he said quietly. "He's looking for a man recently from New York."

"Who's asking?"

"Name of Sam Carson. He's a local—about six foot, husky, maybe twenty years old." He glanced at Patterson. "Looks like he can handle himself—carries a Spencer and wears a Colt on his hip."

"Thanks," Patterson nodded and took a sip of his coffee, apparently unconcerned.

So Sam Carson was looking for him. Well, best of luck. Now that his father was dead, there wasn't anything to connect Reeves to Patterson—he was chasing a ghost.

Patterson walked back to the office and found Blackwell behind his desk.

"The Carson kid has a horse in the last race Saturday," Blackwell told him. "He'll be in barn fourteen, stall seven. I want him slowed or stopped."

"You want him gone?"

It was tempting, but when Raindancer became his it needed to look legal. Reputations were everything and whispers about how Blackwell came into possession could hurt the stud demand for the horse. No, everything needed to appear aboveboard.

“No. I’ll deal with him later—just don’t let his horse win.”

He handed Patterson a packet of money.

“Murphy’s cut—remind him again when you see him today.”

Blackwell left through the back door, leaving Patterson wondering why Blackwell bothered with horses—he’d be way ahead expanding the casino in the Lucky Strike or running book on the races. The receipts from the racing weren’t much and the feed bills were outrageous. The only way to make good money on the horses was from the bookmakers.

Of course! Patterson sat up straight in his chair. Blackwell was running two books—one for the syndicate in New York, the other personal—he was skimming! Blackwell sent a percentage of his winnings to the syndicate, but if he’s bankrolling other bets, he was taking all of those winnings and putting them in his pocket.

Patterson smiled—that had to be it!

Walking back into the casino he saw Bancroft idly playing solitaire and caught his eye. Bancroft was a drifter good with a gun and had a reputation as a man you didn’t want to cross. Patterson hired him to keep the spotlight off himself—with Bancroft around, nobody much noticed the man in black that didn’t say much.

* * * * *

Patterson and Bancroft rode out to Murphy’s place to remind him about Saturday’s race. The old coot was willing enough to follow directions—he just had trouble remembering them.

When they rode in they found Murphy and his trainer closely watching a horse trotting around a race oval.

“Morning, Murphy.”

“Who’s that?” Murphy was squinting at him.

“Patterson. You’re entered in the second race, but you’re not to win,” he said, speaking more to the trainer than to Murphy. He handed the old man his cut in an envelope.

“Yes, I’ll remember,” he said, his eyes lighting up.

“Be sure that you do.”

Patterson nodded to the trainer. The man was watching Bancroft out of the corner of his eye and he nodded back gravely.

* * * * *

“Distillation building?” Blake looked at Patterson, his eyes wide. Patterson had ridden to Blake’s place after seeing Murphy, determined to get the whiskey project started.

“Why sure. We want to go year-round. We should allow enough room for three pot stills, but we’ll start with one.”

“Three?” Blake’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed several times.

Patterson talked through Blake’s objections as if he hadn’t heard them. His non-stop patter had put Blake off balance from the moment he’d ridden in.

“The other building, the barrel warehouse, we’ll put over there,” Patterson pointed to an open area near the drive. “It needs to be far away from the still, of

course, because of fire. We'll extend the drive around the building so the wagons can load and unload from the docks without having to turn around."

Patterson had very definite ideas in mind. He had visited a distillery in the neighboring county—posing as a buyer for a large East Coast distributor—and had received a tour of the whole works. He planned to copy the layout exactly. The other distillery was highly efficient, improved after generations of trial and error. It would be a pity for all that knowledge to go to waste.

"On the third side of the square will be the supply warehouse. We'll store the grain, the new barrels and everything else there."

Blake could hardly follow along as Patterson continued to rattle off his plans.

"How much bourbon do you plan to make?" he finally asked.

"The world is a thirsty place, Blake. I'm confident we'll sell every drop we produce."

"But how do we pay for all this? You're talking a pile of money!"

"You let me worry about that. Besides, your part is the most important—the land and the water—right?"

Blake thought about it for a moment. "I guess without land and water, we couldn't build, could we?"

"That's right—we couldn't build. Now that I've looked the place over again, I'm ready to get started. I've got a partnership contract right here," he patted his pocket, "you take your time and think about it some, then let me know."

He looked around the place again, but didn't meet Blake's eye—it was time to cast out the bait.

"Yep, when you're ready to sign you'll get your bonus."

"Bonus?"

"Your thousand dollars." Patterson walked to his horse and took the reins, ready to mount and ride away.

"A thousand dollars?" Blake asked weakly.

Patterson turned. It was time to set the hook. "Why sure! You get a thousand cash for signing—don't you remember?"

Blake would have remembered if he had mentioned it. A thousand dollars—three years of pay for the average man—you don't forget that!

* * * * *

On the ride back to Lexington, Bancroft's curiosity got the better of him.

"That contract I witnessed," he asked Patterson, "Blake didn't even read it. You just bought his place for a thousand dollars, didn't you?"

Patterson shrugged. "Standard terms. He got his money."

Bancroft shook his head—Patterson was some piece of work.

"I've got a job for you before the race on Saturday," Patterson told Bancroft a few minutes later. "There's a new owner on the scene that needs a lesson. I want your boys to stop his horse."

"Is he expecting us?"

"No, and I don't want an alarm raised—do it like before with a few buckets of water."

Patterson gave him the horse's name and stall number.

"And Bancroft?"

"Yes?"

"You witnessed that contract, but we'll never speak of it again, will we?"

Bancroft knew better than to interfere with Patterson.

"No sir, we surely won't."

Chapter 15

I was in the carriage house the next morning waiting for the Colonel to arrive. I'd spent a few days following his routine as he arrived at the club, traveled downtown for dinner at various cafes, then left for his rooms in the early evening. I was arriving later in the morning now, as he didn't get to the club until mid-morning.

Soon a city cab arrived and the Colonel emerged, paid the cabby and made his way to the back door. Before he could reach the backdoor, one of the manservants that worked at the club stepped out and spoke briefly to the Colonel. The Colonel turned and hailed the cab just as it was about to leave, then climbed back in and the cab set off down the alleyway.

"Well, this is a change of routine," I told my horse as I tightened the girth on the saddle and led him out of the carriage house. "Let's go stretch our legs, shall we?"

I routinely switched rides when coming to town so as to make myself less memorable, and today I was riding a roan named Lucas.

The cab turned left leaving the alleyway, away from downtown and the Colonel's usual haunts. I held the cab in sight, but kept my distance. The Colonel was observant and had a habit of looking closely around as he moved about. We headed north out of town, and I had to drop back even more as road traffic thinned out and we traveled more open country.

At about two miles or so from the city, the cab turned right into a narrow roadway to a well-maintained ranch. I slowed to an amble and took a look down the lane as I passed. The lane was lined with a whitewashed fence on either side and there was absolutely no cover to view it without being noticed. The fence enclosed a large pasture worn by an oval track that circled the field along the fence line. A large white house was at the end of the lane with several outbuildings that looked like stables.

I could see the cab had stopped near a large hay barn and the Colonel was walking to the fence near the field where two other men were standing. The road just ahead traveled through a wood of black walnut and bur oak trees that also lined the far side of the fenced field. Once out of sight of the Colonel I walked Lucas into the woods deep enough to be hidden from the road, hitched him to a branch of an ash tree and retrieved my field glasses from the saddlebag. I weaved my way through the trees and brush until I could see the fence, then walked north a bit until I had a good view of the field from underneath a large witch hazel tree.

A horse was trotting along the track nearing the three men when I managed to get the glasses focused correctly. I recognized Blake from the other day; he must be training the horses. The other man standing near the Colonel was tall, well built, and wearing a black frock coat and trousers. They were too far away for me to see their faces clearly, but I felt I would remember the man if I should see him again.

I moved the glasses to the Colonel, and I was surprised to see that the Colonel was uncomfortable. He leaned forwards on his toes constantly and he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. He acted almost as if he was

nervous, and for a blustering, confident person to seem almost hesitant, well that really threw me. I could see the Colonel was pointing to the horse and speaking diffidently to the man in black, when it struck me. The Colonel was afraid! This other man had the Colonel completely rattled. What kind of man was it that could create fear in the heart of someone like the Colonel?

The horse the three were discussing was a leggy dark bay with black points, standing 16 hands high. The dark bay had to be from out of the area—I knew all the locals. Pa and I had kept track of every racehorse in the county—it was our business as a breeder to know each one. We discussed the bloodlines of the breeding mares and stallions available and their offspring, speculating the outcomes of other breeding programs and their results. We never missed the spring sales where the breeders gathered and horses were discussed from sunup to sundown. Sadness struck me as I thought about a future without Pa.

The rider turned and trotted a furlough back along the fence, wheeled the horse and put his spurs to it. The horse shot down the track past the two men and around the corner, smooth and powerful and with a full head of speed in a few steps. I studied the horse so that I would know it again when I saw it, and turned the glasses back on the three men.

The man in black followed the horse as it raced down the backside of the track towards me, but then something odd happened when the horse neared me. The man in black stopped watching the horse and instead, seemed to stare right at me. I was looking from under the witch hazel from a good distance, not moving, wearing a gray shirt and black trousers, clothing that blended in well with the brush. The sun was over my shoulder into his eyes so the glasses could not have flashed a reflection. His stare was unnerving. Could he sense me watching him?

It seems that at times I had felt the weight of a stare from someone in a crowd. Daniel Boone had mentioned in his journals that he learned not to stare at hostile Indians from cover when scouting, as it seemed to draw their attention. I slowly lowered the glasses and turned my head away from the men and watched the dark bay as it circled the field and finished its lap. I was impressed; the horse was fast and moved easily at speed and had all the signs of a polished, blue blood thoroughbred.

The Colonel and the other men spoke briefly and the Colonel left by the cab. The other man said something to Blake and walked across the stable yard and into the house.

I gathered up Lucas and rode back towards town, soon catching up with the Colonel's cab. There was a chance that the man in the black frock coat was Reeves, and the uneasiness of the Colonel in the presence of the man proved that he wasn't just another crony. As I followed him back into the city, I thought about the Colonel and his connections. The Colonel set the race card each Saturday and was responsible for the form cards in the studbook. He would be an ideal partner-in-crime. I knew personally that he was skimming entry fees from owners.

When the cab turned into the alleyway headed for the Jockey Club, I headed west to Noble Street to call on David Graham. David answered the door and opened it wide once he saw me.

"Please Sam," he said, "feel free to call at the front door."

"Force of habit," I shrugged. "I thought I'd find you back here and save you some steps."

He nodded and led the way through the kitchen and down a short hallway to his office. He handed me a large envelope and waved me to a chair.

“My associate in New York sent this along,” he said, “it arrived just the other day.”

I opened the envelope and inside were several newspaper clippings and a note:

“DG,

Description of person of interest:

6-ft tall, 240-250 pounds, muscular build, and dark complexion. Has scar across knuckles on left hand.

Dropped out of sight. Watch out for this one. Bad things happen around him.

—C”

I unfolded one of the newspaper clippings with a story about a fire:

STABLE FIRE KILLS RACEHORSE

About 12 o'clock on Sabbath night last, the large barn at the Stonecrest house on Brighton Road was discovered to be on fire, and so rapidly did the flames spread that everything contained in it was consumed. Eight racehorses, including the Northern Cup winner Titan, about one hundred and fifty bushels of feed, which had been put in bags ready for use, several wagons, and nearly all the farming implements belonging to the farm were consumed. The loss to the property by this fire will exceed \$15,000.

The other clipping was about horse thieves:

THIEVES TARGET SHOOTLEY STABLES

A gang of thieves struck a stable in Warren Township, in this County, on Friday night last and the owner assaulted. Numerous thoroughbred horses were stolen and the owner received a severe blow from a brick in the hands of one of the thieves. Another man named Parker was severely beaten. In the melee a pistol was fired which, it is said, wounded one of the thieves in the leg.

The third and final clipping was about a man that was beaten and robbed as he was traveling from a race meeting in Saratoga.

“Your friend seems to think Reeves was involved?” I asked him.

David nodded. “Nothing could be proven, so no charges were filed. Then a witness came forward and Reeves disappeared.”

“The description is general, but it may match a man I saw the Colonel meet with today,” I told him. “I wasn’t close enough to see if he has a scarred left hand, but there’s a chance it could be him.” I would need to get closer to this man to identify him.

“I’ll ask my friend about anyone that was known to work with Reeves,” David suggested. “Maybe we’ll have a better chance of finding him if we’re looking for more than one man.”

The unusual dark bay horse that ran so well this morning perked my interest too.

“Also ask about the horses that were stolen,” I said. “If Reeves stole the horses from Saratoga, he’s running them here.”

“Right.”

I had another thought. “Let’s also get Titan’s description. They found a burned horse in a burned-down barn; who’s to say the dead horse in the barn was Titan?”

David looked at me intently.

“You really are quite young to have such a devious mind.”

“I’ve seen Reeve’s in action.” I said slowly, “I think about him a lot. Also, let’s talk to anyone who worked every day with those horses, such as the trainer or the lads; they should be able to give us a pretty good description of them.”

David gave me a puzzled look.

“Each horse is unique,” I said. “They’d remember things like little freckles, odd patches of hair, or scars.”

David nodded. “I can understand that,” he said, “but why do you care about Reeve’s horses? I thought you were out to find him.”

“I’m beginning to feel that he might not ever face me. He fires shotguns from the dark, sets fires to barns, hits people in the back of the head with bricks. I don’t see much chance of flushing him out in the open, but if I can track down those horses, they might lead me to him.”

I thought about what Martin had told me several weeks ago, about killing Reeves and feeling guilty about it for the rest of my life. It seems the more I think about Reeves, the less chance I’ll ever feel guilty by striking back. Today was the first glimmer of hope that I might even find him—I would leave all options open at this point.

“My Pa told me once during a chess game that a good defense is created by attacking your opponent,” I said “I plan on getting in Reeves’ way, to draw him out. Maybe the only way I find him is to push him and push him until he comes after me.”

David raises his eyebrows in disbelief. “So your plan is you want him to try and kill you?”

I nodded. “Whatever it takes.”

* * * * *

After leaving Graham’s place I rode downtown to West Second Street to Dawson’s Livery. I made my way through the large brick building and found Dawson in his office.

“Thanks again,” I said shaking his hand. I handed him four double eagles. “This is your share for the horses that Graham bought.”

“Anytime,” he rumbled, and dropped the coins in his watch pocket.

“That horse of yours surprised a few last Saturday,” he grinned.

“But not you?”

He shook his head. “Your old man knew horses,” he winked. “I saw his name on the betting sheet and figured that filly would be fast.”

He gave me an appraising look. “The bookmakers know your name, too,” he said. “Your horses won’t get long odds from the boys again.”

“That’s alright. I’ll take it as a compliment.” I shrugged. “The other horses still have to beat mine and anything can happen.”

I thought about the dark roan I saw that morning. If Dawson knew some of the bookmakers, there might be a chance to make things a little difficult for the Colonel.

"You might let the boys know about a horse I saw run this morning, a dark roan with dark points," I said. "I don't have a name for her because she's from out of the area, but she's true blue."

Dawson raised an eyebrow.

"She's about a three-year old, not quite grown all the way into her legs, if you know what I mean. Blake is training her. Tell them to keep an eye out because they'll get burned if they make light of her."

I told Dawson about seeing her run this morning for the Colonel and the man in black.

"The Colonel, eh?" he said, sitting down behind his desk. "What did this other gent look like?"

"Six-foot or so, black hair, long mustache, big ham-like hands. He was dressed in black from head to toe."

"Patterson," he spat out. He gave me a warning look. "Don't underestimate him. He likes to pull strings, operate without anyone being the wiser. Not many know about him—in fact, he won't like you knowing about him."

"How long has he been around?"

"Less than a year, I guess," said Dawson. "He runs a casino down on Fremont called the Lucky Strike." He looked at me sharply, "You think Patterson is this "Reeves" that killed your Pa?"

"I'm not sure," I said honestly, "I don't know enough about him. How many know the Colonel is crooked?"

Dawson shrugged. "Like most, I thought the Colonel was mostly harmless, just a small time operator, making a little on the side here and there."

He absently rubbed his jaw as he thought. "I didn't know he was tied up with Patterson—makes me wonder about Blake, too. The bookmakers won't like it. If word gets out the Association is corrupt, the bets dry up and horse racing is out of business in this town."

He paused and gave me another warning. "Patterson is a whole different kettle of fish from the Colonel," he told me. "Watch your back."

* * * * *

I thought of what Dawson said during my ride home. I wasn't sure if Patterson was Reeves or not, but I best be on guard anyway.

I pulled up and studied the ranch from the road, looking at it in a new way—if I were to defend against an attack, how would I do it?

Like most horse farms in the area, a four-board fence circled around the pasture high enough to discourage the horses from jumping, but it certainly would not keep an attacker out. What could hamper a frontal attack was very little cover—we had a few big white oaks and blue ash trees scattered here and there, but everything was pretty wide open.

The lane to the house ran gently uphill for a quarter-mile then curved to the left and eventually came to the house and barns. The stables and the big hay barn were beyond the house, on the backside of the hill, and only the roof of the hay barn could be seen from the road.

Reeves had walked his horse right up to the barn and called out Pa through one of the big doors. In hindsight, Pa should have left the barn through the back door and circled around. The big barn doors were slow and bulky and it was easy to ambush someone using them—if I built a smaller man-door further along the wall, I could defend against that. I took a look inside the barn and

found a spot between two timber frames in one of the stalls that would work just fine.

We had some board stock on hand for repairs and I used four pieces of sawn pine as a doorframe, two pieces six-feet-long for the sides and two pieces three-feet-long for the top and bottom. I nailed them to the interior side of the wall then sawed along the outer edge of the frame to make the door. I used a couple of hinges and a bolt latch off an old door Pa had stored in the surplus bin. After a bit of paint, the door nearly disappeared—it blended right into the side of the barn.

Reading the newspaper article about someone purposely setting a barn on fire had given me a chill. We all worried about fires and everyone working for us understood the reason for the rule of no open flame in any of the buildings. Pa had staged hogshead barrels of water every fifty feet along the stable walls and one of our daily chores was to top them off to make sure they were full. The barn timber gets bone dry at this time of year and if a flame were to be set it could spread so quickly we wouldn't have much of a chance to fight it. I would need to think about hiring a few hands and keeping a guard at night.

Chapter 16

The next morning I was at the pasture gate, checking on each horse, when I realized that the big stallion, Raindancer, was missing. The Cleveland Bay stallions sharing his pasture were waiting near their gate as usual, but there wasn't any sign of the thoroughbred. As the dominant stallion, he demanded a certain routine, and one of his quirks was to insist he be fed first.

Mary and the boys had just arrived to halter the thoroughbreds and lead them to breakfast. As I slipped through the gate I called over my shoulder to Mary that Raindancer was missing and to fetch Nathan.

I jogged to the top of the hill behind the last stable building. The morning sky was a bit brighter now and I spotted Raindancer lying on his side, along the fence line near the roadway. My heart lurched in my chest.

"Please, please, please be all right!" I prayed as I ran down the hillside, afraid of what I might find when I reached him.

When I got near he moved, turning his head towards my footsteps, and a wave of relief washed over me. He was alive!

"Easy, big fellow," I told him, kneeling in the dew-wet grass near his head. His eyes were bright and I looked him over quickly. I couldn't see any blood and I traced his legs with my hands, but I didn't find anything unusual, but he was breathing hard and sweating. Raindancer gave out a moan and rocked his body side-to-side, stretching his legs, and turned his head to look at his flank. Then it struck me—the stallion could have colic!

Somehow his gut was stopped up, and the pain was so intense he couldn't stay on his feet. I couldn't understand how this could happen—our hay was clean and we were so careful with the grain. Was I feeding him too soon after his workout? I was sickened to think that some sort of neglect had made him ill, but what could it be?

Oh please, Lord! All our hopes rested on this stallion!

I didn't know how bad his colic was, but I knew we would lose him if he didn't stand up. If he rolled around on the ground, there was a good chance he could twist his gut and that would be fatal.

I talked to him gently, trying to calm him. I rubbed the snaffle bit on my pants to warm it up and slipped it in his mouth, slid up the noseband and pulled the crownpiece over his head.

Just then Nathan and Mary arrived, Nathan puffing, catching his wind, and Mary, alarmed, searching my face.

"I think its colic," I told them. "Help me get him up."

I handed Mary the reins and moved behind Raindancer's neck. Nathan moved to his hip, and we pushed on him to tell him we wanted him to roll.

I spoke into his ear as Mary gently pulled on the reins, and Raindancer rolled to his knees.

"That's it!" Mary cried, "That's a good boy! Come on! Up! Let's go!"

Raindancer wobbled for a moment, then stood up, protesting.

"That's my boy!" Mary said, hugging his neck. I could see her shoulders shake as she wept, her face hidden against Raindancer.

I stepped aside with Nathan. "Tell the boys to do the gallops this morning. Mary and I will watch Raindancer."

Nathan nodded and started back to the gate.

"Mary," I said gently.

She wiped her eyes and turned to me. "Oh, Sam," she said. "I just couldn't take it if we lost him."

"I know," I said, nodding. "We can help him by walking him and keeping him from rolling until he can relieve some of the gas that's hurting him. We need to be extra careful—he may walk into you, not on purpose, but just because he's in pain and not aware of where he is." I paused. "I can start with him and you could spell me later if you like."

She shook her head. "Oh no, I'll walk him. It will help him and give me something to do."

"All right," I said, "keep him in sight of the barns so we can tell if you need a hand."

She nodded.

"It's too early to tell how bad it is," I told her quietly, "but it's a good sign he was laying quietly and not thrashing around."

I knew if Raindancer didn't get better in the first hour, we were in big trouble. My worry must have been obvious to Mary, for she reached out and squeezed my hand. She gave me a brave smile, straightened her shoulders and turned to Raindancer.

"Come on, you silly horse," she scolded him as she took his reins, "Don't just stand there—we have some walking to do."

* * * * *

The sky was brightening and the sun nearly up as I walked back to the gate where the horses had gathered. I walked among them looking for signs of colic and was relieved to find the horses were all in good shape.

Spring had been warm and rainy and the low areas of the pastures were filled with tall, lush grass. I'd been cautious with the feedings there, letting the horses sample it for just a few hours before moving them up to the hilltops where the grass was shorter and drier. It was hard to imagine that Raindancer had over-grazed in the pasture enough to develop colic. Pa and I had talked a lot

about grazing and I followed the same routines he'd taught me out of habit. He always seemed to know what to do and I wish I could ask him about Raindancer. It was in times like this that I missed him most—he wasn't here to share the burden.

I saddled Aladdin and rode out to see the gallops with the boys and then did a walk-through of the barn, checking each stall. Raindancer's stall had some leftover hay from yesterday, which was surprising as he usually ate everything in sight. I picked up a handful and checked it—sure enough, it was musty and sour. I spread the hay out and found clumps of hay so moldy the strands of grass were almost glued together.

I climbed the ladder into the hayloft to look around. We bought our alfalfa hay from a farmer living nearby who had always brought us clean, well-cured feed. But the hot, humid days of summer take a toll on hay and if the hay is pushed right up to the eaves, it doesn't dry completely and spoils. When I got to the top of the ladder I saw we had a different problem—the light was dim up here, but a bit of daylight peaked through a hole in the roof. A few shingles had gone missing, maybe torn from the roof during a storm, and water was trickling through the gap and into the loft, spoiling the hay. Hopefully this was the only source of Raindancer's colic.

I shook my head in disgust—how could the hands be up here twice a day to fork hay and never notice the leak? Thankfully, this would be a simple fix; the boys could clean out the spoiled hay and I needed just a few new shingles to patch the roof.

I left the barn to find Mary and Raindancer in the pasture and saw them still walking along the fence line, so I circled back to the grain room in the barn. I sorted through four stacks of grain bags and found nothing out of place—all the grain bags were dry and smelled just fine.

I walked back to the pasture to check on the colic treatment and met Mary walking Raindancer to the stable. Mary's radiant smile and the stallion's normal jaunty walk told me all was well.

"The walking seemed to relax him, and the pain is gone. You can see he feels much better now," Mary said.

"Don't we all," I said with relief. Raindancer would go in his stall today and have as much water as he wanted, but he wouldn't get another meal until evening stables. Horses thrive on routine and at feeding time Raindancer would be first in line to eat as usual.

It was going to be a good day.

Chapter 17

Racing had bit into me like a rattler and wouldn't let go—it was now in my blood. I had lain awake in bed most of the night thinking about the race the next day, agonizing over details, running different races through my head. I had two 3-year-olds this season that could pile up the wins. I was benefiting from Pa's hard work and foresight and if we could race to our potential, the winnings could support the ranch and leave enough for a rainy day.

The morning dragged on, but finally Nathan and I were traveling to Lexington for Sahara's second race. We arrived at the track early to let the filly rest. I

wanted to scout around a bit, so I left Nathan and Sahara in our assigned stall and walked through the grandstand. Enormous crowds were milling around the mezzanine, filling the passageways and discussing the merits of each race. I spent quite a bit of time looking at the betting sheets—the Colonel was rigging the races and I was determined to find out how.

The best bet to make on a horse is a bet you know you will win. The next best bet is to avoid betting on a horse that will lose. If I had the grasp of this fiddle, the Colonel would arrange the race with a heavy favorite and a relatively unknown horse that would receive long odds. With a heavy favorite in the race, the long odds horse would be nearly ignored. Only an outstanding race by the long odds horse could beat a big favorite—the key was to figure out which horses the Colonel was backing.

There are many ways to slow a horse, from paying off the rider to giving the horse too much water before the race, but how to make a normally slow horse run faster was a mystery to me. Drugs came to mind, but what drug would do that and how do you give it to the horse without raising suspicions?

I studied the betting sheets and found a likely race. It was the second race of the day, and the favorite, Timetable, had placed in the last three races it ran, winning just last week. One of the horses in the race caught my eye, named Scarlet Fever. The horse that the Colonel watched run a practice lap the other day could very easily be named Scarlet Fever due to the color of her coat. She was currently listed at short odds on the board despite her listing on the betting sheet showing middle to back of the pack finishes. I smiled—the bookmaker had listened to Dawson's warning about Patterson and his ringer red horse. I could imagine the shock of the Colonel and Patterson when they saw the poor odds their horse had received. When I looked up at the betting chalkboard there was very little money placed on her. I was tempted to wait near the board, watching for what I was sure would happen—a large bet on Scarlet Fever placed at the last moment—but I wanted to take a look at the horse at the starting area.

As the second race drew near I made my way from the bookmakers to the backstretch area. In this saddling area the trainers were getting their mounts ready and I immediately spotted the favorite, Timetable. He's a big black gelding with a powerful chest and strong haunches, bouncing with energy. He sure looked fast.

Scarlet Fever was nearby in the arena and I spotted her immediately. It was the same dark point roan all right, and the trainer was Blake. Standing on the edge of the crowd and watching the red horse get ready was a tall man, dressed in a black city suit and wearing gloves. It was the same man that the Colonel had met when Scarlet Fever ran her practice lap!

I felt my heartbeat quicken and it seemed like a small part of the puzzle was coming together. The betting sheet listed the owner of Scarlet Fever as C. Holt, but I wasn't sure that this man was the owner. I studied him carefully from amongst the crowd, and it seemed that he could feel my gaze as he turned his head in my direction and scanned the faces near me. I carefully made my expression neutral and casually watched the red horse, ignoring him. Eventually he turned his gaze back to the horse and it seemed he had not spotted me. If this was Reeves, it was to my advantage that he should think of himself as still unknown to me.

I suddenly realized that the horse I was watching, Scarlet Fever, appeared drugged. She was full of nervous energy and her eyes were wide, showing a lot of white around the pupil. Her breathing was quick and she anxiously bobbed her head, behaving completely different from what I saw of her the other day—she displayed none of the poise and natural grace that made her so memorable.

Blake was holding her bridle and trying to feed her from his hand as another groomsmen was tightening the cinch on her saddle. Seeing him pull something out of his pocket and feed the horse with it, I assumed as everyone else did that it was horse nuts or another treat. But what if he wasn't giving her treats? My heart sped up as I realized that this was the perfect way to drug a horse! I myself carry a handful of horse nuts in my pocket as I make the stable rounds each evening, handing them out to the horses with a pat on the head and a few words. This was an easy way to drug the horse right in front of everyone!

The horse was quickly lifting its head against the bridle, a sure sign of unease, when I noticed something spill from Blake's hand to the dirt below as the horse nibbled. Soon the jockey mounted and the horses were lead along the horse path through the grandstands and out onto the track. The man in the black suit turned with the crowd and followed the horse to the start line. I stepped to the area where Blake had stood and casually searched about for what had spilled. I felt a little conspicuous and just in case someone might be watching me, I knelt and acted like I was adjusting my boot and pant leg. As I fiddled with my boot, I spotted an object about the size of a bean on the ground that was sort of shiny and looked like a small piece of candy. As I adjusted my boot, I palmed it and slid it into my pocket and walked away.

I walked back to the grandstand and found a good view of the track from a step on the front entrance stairway. Waiting for the track to clear and the race to start, I scanned the crowd and discovered the Colonel in the crowd—he was sure to stand out wherever he might go.

I watched him for a few minutes as he chatted with several men and a young lady nearby. The Colonel had his charm in full force, smiling and very animated, nodding intently at a remark the young lady made and laughing. He was speaking to a man on his left when he seemed to freeze for a moment, then he recovered and continued with his conversation. I caught a glimpse of a figure in a black city suit stop and stand near the Colonel. The crowd was filling in between the Colonel and me making it difficult to see him at times, but I did manage to see that it was Patterson. Neither man looked at the other, but it seemed as if the air had gone out of the Colonel. He wasn't the jolly fellow anymore—he stood rigidly listening to the conversation swirling around him.

I gave up my viewpoint on the stairway and made my way to an opening near the rail a few yards behind them and to the left. Patterson's very presence seemed to upset the Colonel and for the first time I thought that maybe the Colonel was a reluctant partner in this scheme. The Colonel loved the status and attention managing the Jockey Club gave him. Maybe he was being blackmailed? He sure didn't want to Patterson anywhere near him.

The stewards got the horses lined up and the race began cleanly with most of the horses bunched in the center of the track. As a mass the horses went around the first corner and it was difficult to spot any front-runner. They spread out over the length of the backstretch, and Timetable was in the front group; Scarlet Fever was several lengths back, but keeping pace. Scarlet Fever put on a burst of speed out of the final corner and the horses were three wide

as they started down the homestretch. Timetable and Scarlet Fever left the third horse behind and the crowd erupted as the two horses ran neck and neck, most everyone cheering on Timetable. Suddenly one voice to my right rose above the others, calling for Scarlet Fever to hurry. A chill went down my spine as I recognized it as Reeve's voice! My head turned of its own will and I found myself looking into the face of Patterson, hearing Reeves voice, and catching his eye as he saw me turn. Patterson was Reeves! This was the man that shot Pa!

Everything from that night came back to me—the shouting, Pa standing still in the dark listening, then opening the door ...

I was the only person looking the wrong way during a horse race and I cursed myself for a fool as I turned back to watch the finish. I tried to relax and act like nothing had happened as I could feel the weight of his stare. I felt a grim satisfaction, as I now knew his face; he was no longer a shadow in the dark outside Pa's barn, but an enemy smoked out and pushed into the daylight.

Scarlet Fever finished a half-length ahead of the favorite, Timetable, and the crowd groaned in dismay. I acted disappointed too, and shook my head as I walked away through the crowd. Little did the Colonel and his double-dealing partner know that I had been impressed with the filly when she ran earlier in the week and I'd put a sizeable bet on her to win. Why they felt they needed to drug the filly was beyond me—she had speed and spirit and would have won without the drugs.

I could feel Patterson's eyes boring into me like a knife in my back as I walked away. I felt like yelling and dancing a jig—I had him now! He had changed his name to Patterson, but I had found him. It was not the right time to confront him, but I knew the face of Pa's killer.

* * * * *

Sahara's' race would start soon and I walked back to our stall in the backstretch area to help get her ready. As I slid the door open I found Nathan sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, holding a bloody rag to his head. I knelt next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Nathan?"

He mumbled something and opened his eyes. He grimaced a bit and squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again to look at me. It took a moment, but his eyes focused and he recognized me.

"Sam?"

"Yeah." I reached up and lifted his hand holding the rag and took a look at the cut on his forehead. It started just above his eyebrow and was a couple of inches long. The bleeding had nearly stopped, but the skin around the cut was swelling up like a hen's egg. I untied my kerchief from around my neck and folded it up into a square pad and placed it on his cut.

"Here," I told him, guiding his hand to the bandage to hold it in place. I stood up and walked over to Sahara. She was dozing a little and she muzzled my hand as I checked her over. I didn't see anything wrong with her—she was fine. It was a moment before I saw two buckets against the wall. I picked one up and found a little water in the bottom.

"They watered her?" I asked.

"Yes," said Nathan bitterly, "had a couple of visitors right after you left. Those skunks busted in and hit me before I could say a word." He looked at the bandage, swore softly, and tenderly placed it back on his head. The cursing made me feel better—Nathan would be fine.

Feeding water to a horse just before a race is an old trick to slow them down. The weight of the water pulls on the muscles that support the lungs, making it difficult for the horse to breathe while it's running.

"Just two buckets of water?" I asked.

"Maybe—I kind of faded in and out. One of them stood over me while the other held the bucket to get her to drink."

On a warm summer day a horse might drink as many as ten or twelve buckets of water this size. I wasn't sure if they gave her enough to slow her down, or maybe they gave it to her too soon before the race. It wasn't likely, but we had a small chance she could win.

I gritted my teeth, sure this all would lead back to Patterson. He must have a horse in the same race and was changing the odds to help it win. I had underestimated him by thinking our stable wouldn't matter to him, but now I could see that Sahara's win last week had caught his attention and he felt he had to take steps to slow her.

A man with a reputation like Patterson's probably doesn't need to strike very often. Word gets out that you'll get a beating if you cross him—most would follow along. It could get to the point that most owners would simply take a hint from Patterson about a race. If you ignored the hint, he had the muscle to make you wish you had listened.

Hell would freeze over before I did anything he told me to do. He must be betting big on this race and if Sahara could win, she'd cost him a pretty penny.

"Come on, old son," I told Nathan, helping him up on his feet. "We've got a race to win."

He was a tough old bird. That was quite a shiner they gave him, but he was game. We walked the horse into the paddock and I noticed the excitement of the race crowd was infecting Sahara. She was getting a little wound up, tossing her head and stepping lively, letting everyone know she was the horse to watch. Even Nathan smiled as we walked Sahara through the crowd.

Robby was waiting for us.

"Ain't she just fine looking?" he exclaimed, his perfect white teeth flashing in a broad smile.

I nodded and leaned down to tell him quietly, "Patterson tried to slow her down. His men walloped Nathan on the head and gave her a couple of buckets of water to drink."

Robby let out a low whistle and asked Nathan, "Are you all right?"

Nathan just grimaced and slowly nodded.

"He's all right," I told Robby. "He was cussing them earlier—I take that as a good sign."

"You want me to take it easy on her? All that water and all?" He gave Sahara a few strokes along her neck.

"Heck no!" I told him. "You race to win. I think she'll be alright."

Robby looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Mr. Sam," he said seriously, "if Patterson tries to slow your horse and it doesn't stay slowed, his men will pay you a visit."

"You know about him?"

"Everyone around the track knows about him."

"Well, I'm just catching on. He's not going to tell me how to run my horses. Besides, Sahara knows only one way to run—and that's all out."

If Patterson and I were to tangle he might as well find out I wasn't going to be pushed around. Besides, I wasn't about to crush Sahara's spirit by forcing her to slow down. Winning is such a fleeting thing—she must understand to never stop trying.

* * * * *

The favorite in our race was a filly named Topper, a winner in every race she'd entered this year. I'd been keeping an eye on the big black horse not only because of her winning streak, but also because her owner and trainer was a man Pa had known by the name of Mark Blackwell. Blackwell and Pa had been competitors, each with an established breeding stable and at times bidding against each other for young colts at the spring sales. They didn't see eye to eye on many things, but Pa had respected his judgment of horseflesh and no one could fault his results.

I couldn't imagine Blackwell accepting any interference from Patterson with Topper. If Patterson slowed my horse to make sure Topper won, how would he benefit? A winning bet on the favorite normally won odds of 5 to 4 and that couldn't be enough to interest Patterson. I studied the crowd in the paddock and spotted Patterson near a horse wearing the number seven.

"Robby!" I called the little jockey over. "Is number seven Fortress?"

He looked at the horse and frowned, and stepped up to whisper to me.

"Mr. Sam, that's supposed to be Fortress," his eyes were wide in surprise, "but that ain't him."

I had the same thought.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well," he said, scratching his head, "It's not his face."

I did know the horse, it was local, but like Robby said, something wasn't quite right.

I nodded, wanting him to say more.

"He mostly looks like Fortress, his bay color and all, but his eyes are different and he walks different too—I'm sure that's not him."

"Let's keep this between us," I told him quietly.

He nodded, relieved.

So this was his game—Patterson had switched horses. He must have discovered a horse nearly identical and believed that no one would spot it. With the Colonel backing him up in the Association, Patterson could change the form card slightly to match the new Fortress. The true Fortress was at long odds nearly each time he raced. What horse had taken his place?

I couldn't challenge Patterson without proof. The identity of Fortress would have to be proved some other way.

I gave Robby a leg up onto Sahara.

"Our big worry is Topper," I told the little jockey. "Keep an eye out for a fast start at the get-go. Also, don't let that number seven horse get away—stay with him."

My heart was in my mouth—I wasn't sure how much water Sahara had to drink and there were two big competitors in this race. Would she be able to run or would the other two leave her behind?

It was nearly race time. Robby walked Sahara out onto the track in the parade line and I moved down the mezzanine to watch the race. I didn't walk as far as the finish line area as I had no interest in watching the race near the

Colonel or Patterson at the moment, but I did find Blackwell in front of the Association Clubhouse.

He was smoking a big pipe and seemed totally relaxed, waiting for the start of the race. He appeared to be about the same age as Pa, but that is where the likeness ended. He had snow-white hair with piercing blue eyes and was fashionably dressed as a city man in a tweed suit and bowler hat.

“Mr. Blackwell?” I asked, getting his attention. “Sam Carson,” I explained, extending a handshake.

He paused for a moment as the name sank in, then covered my hand in his massive paw and gave me a firm shake.

“Ah yes,” he said around his pipe stem. He gave me a close look without warmth and pulled the pipe from his mouth and tapped it against his left hand, stepping on the smoldering ash as it touched the ground—it seemed that I had spoiled his smoke.

“I knew your father, of course.” He let that statement sit between us for a while. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, sir. He did respect you.”

Blackwell nearly scowled. He looked resigned to the fact I was going to offer glowing praise about Pa.

“But the two of you never got on. He hardly ever agreed with you, did he sir?”

Blackwell speared me with his blue eyes, giving me a glare meant to make me flinch. Eventually I cracked a harmless smile. Finally he chuckled deep in his chest and shook his head.

“No, there wasn’t much we agreed on. Patrick Carson was a hard-headed, ornery old cuss.” He looked at his pipe again and dug in his suit vest for tobacco. He gave me a frank gaze and said, “and it appears the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

“No sir, I imagine it didn’t,” I smiled. “Might I call on you sometime this week?”

“Not for advice,” I added quickly as he frowned.

I could see he was curious. “Certainly,” he said, studying me again.

“Thank you sir,” I nodded, and continued down the walkway. I could feel him watching me until I disappeared in the crowd.

* * * * *

Sahara was lined up straight when the starting line was raised and she shot off the starting line like a cannon. Robby had her going all out right from the first jump and it took the other jockeys by surprise. Just that little bit of guesswork by Robby turned into a two-length lead at the first turn.

Myself, I was standing there with my mouth open in shock. I snapped my jaw shut and then grinned like an idiot. Robby must figure the extra water Sahara had would slow her at the end of the race, so she better get a lead if she was to have any chance at the end—it was brilliant.

It seemed to take a long time for the horses to circle around and enter the final straight, but they sorted themselves out and Sahara was still a length in the lead. Robby was riding a beautiful race, tucked up right on her neck and coaxing her along the rail. I then realized she was laboring, struggling to keep her pace. The nearest two horses quickly gained on her. The distance to cover the finish line was too great and tears welled up in my eyes as she gamely carried on. In the end, she crossed the line behind Topper and Fortress.

It was my fault. Sahara had run her heart out and I had failed to give her the chance she deserved. Pa had always said that training a winning horse meant taking care of the little things—a couple buckets of water took away her win.

I made my way to the gate near the finish line and did my best to offer Robby my approval of how he ran the race. I knew that if Patterson hadn't interfered, we could have won. I felt some pleasure that Topper had beaten Patterson's substitute for Fortress and I watched as Blackwell positively beamed while his horse was rubbed down. I walked over and offered my best wishes on another win.

I looked over to Fortress to see how Patterson was taking his loss. He was in the crowd behind Fortress, also watching Blackwell and absent-mindedly tapping his cane on the top of his boot. But what surprised me was I saw a smug, satisfied look on his face before he turned and walked away into the crowd.

I couldn't figure it out. Why would Patterson be satisfied finishing second to Topper? If he didn't want to win the race, why attempt to slow Sahara at all? I shook my head as we left the track—I'd thought I knew what was going on, but today proved that I knew very little after all.

Chapter 18

It was a long, quiet ride back to the ranch. Nathan was nursing his head—each movement making his head pound like a drum—so I slowed the pace to a walk. I led Sahara to her stall and gave her an extra ration of grain and spent a long time on her with a currycomb.

Mary walked into the stall just as I was finishing brushing her and affectionately rubbed Sahara's nose.

"What a nasty man he is," she said quietly.

I didn't need to ask who she was talking about. Mary and Nathan worked with the young foals each day and I'm sure he gave her an earful when we returned. I set the brush aside and walked Mary to a bench under the eaves. I sat next to her and went through the day, explaining how I discovered Patterson was the man who shot Pa.

She was quiet for a few minutes, then asked, "You can't prove it, can you?"

"No."

"And now he's suspicious that you know about him."

"I'm sure he is."

"He's going to come after you. In his world, you are a big risk—a threat."

I was surprised at her perception. "You're right."

"What are you going to do?"

Mary's deep green eyes studied me calmly. I struggled to put into words the anger I felt that Patterson was getting away with murder. I needed to retaliate.

Years ago I could have pressed him into a duel, forced him to face me as they did in the old days. These things are still done secretly, but it would never happen with Patterson. He had no social standing or honor to uphold—he would scorn my challenge and ignore it. He worked in the background, using hired muscle to do his bidding like the two heavies that beat Nathan.

Mary brought me back from my thoughts with a squeeze on my forearm.

“Sam Carson,” she said intently, “what do you do better than anyone else?”
“Train horses.”

“Exactly. And what is Patterson using in his crooked game to get rich?”

Ah, yes.

“Horses,” I said slowly. Of course! Patterson was vulnerable through his racehorses! I suspected they were stolen—if I could prove it he would be left with nothing.

I looked at Mary in admiration. “Brilliant,” I told her.

That brought a smile and then she was serious again.

“Promise me you’ll be careful, Sam.” I nodded and she gave me a quick peck on the cheek as she stood and walked away.

I absently rubbed the spot she kissed, feeling her warmth on my cheek. Mary had never asked me to be careful before. What did she sense that she felt she had to warn me?

* * * * *

Sunday afternoon David Graham stopped in for a visit, riding up the drive in his buggy pulled by the matched mares Diana and Mariam. The Bays were in a glorious spanking trot and I couldn’t help but smile seeing them again. He pulled up with a flourish and I walked over to greet him. He was dressed in the fashion of the city with a cravat tied around the neck of his ruffled shirt and a top hat trimmed with beaver fur.

“Well met,” I told him, shaking his hand.

“Sam,” he said warmly.

I looked over the two mares and nodded with approval—they were sleek and fit.

“You’re not letting the girls get fat,” I said.

“Funny thing, that—they never stop eating,” he said with a smile. “Most of my business has been in Louisville lately, so they’re getting some work in.”

I brought each of the Bays a bucket of water and led Graham to a seat in the shade on the front porch.

“Say, I’ve received more news from Saratoga and I thought you’d like to hear it right away.” He dug into his vest pocket and unfolded an envelope. “This is a list of the stolen horses and the best descriptions at this point.”

He handed me the list and I was pleased to see that Titan was on it, although the description was not very detailed and might have been copied from a bill of sale. His height was 16 hands, and his color was described as a blood bay with black points. A small black patch on the right shoulder and a scar above his left hind knee were listed, and two hair whorls were noted just above the eyes and several above the right hip.

Each whorl in a horse’s coat is unique to that horse. Pa and many other trainers felt the whorls on the face reveal much about a horse’s temperament. If the whorls are above the eyes, the horse trains easier and seems to accept changes quicker than a horse with whorls between or below the eyes. One spring several years ago Pa passed up a beautiful yearling at a sale because she had a hair whorl below her eyes—he was convinced the horse would be too stubborn and too much of a handful to bother with.

Titan didn’t have a brand, which wasn’t very surprising as brands were used more out West and not very common around here. The scar and hair whorls should be enough to identify him if I could get a good look.

The trainer, Blake, owned Fortress and I was certain that Patterson was involved in the switch. They could try to disguise him by changing the small patch of black on his shoulder with dye or adding a couple of other markings, but scars were permanent and hard to disguise.

Also on the list was the description of a horse named Dakota, which was very similar to another of Blake's horses, Saffron.

"Does this information help you at all?" Graham asked.

"Yes, it does," I replied. "I'll stop by your place in a couple of days and let you know what I find out."

It was time I introduced myself to Titan.

* * * * *

That evening I rode to Patterson's ranch, circling north in a wide loop so I could approach his pasture without being seen from the ranch house. I hitched Aladdin in a clearing in the trees and weaved my way through the brush to the pasture fence. I followed the fence east a short way until a large oak tree standing near a small guesthouse shielded the view of the pasture from the ranch house.

Blake was training Patterson's horses, and he was doing what all trainers do at this time of year—turning the horses out to pasture at night. The light in the sky was fading, but I could see the horses well enough to spot Titan near the middle of the pasture in a group near a salt lick. I had to shake my head at Blake's ignorance—salt blocks were good for cattle because they have rough tongues and can lick off all the salt they need, but horses can't lick enough salt from a block because their tongues are too smooth.

I was losing daylight—I could hardly see thirty yards now—and I began to work on the four fence boards in the section of fence in front of me with a pry bar. The fence boards were old and the nails came out easily. I took all four boards off the fence and set them aside. The gap in the fence would let me in and out of the pasture without going near the gate.

I walked slowly to the center of the pasture, near the salt lick, keeping my eyes open for Titan. The horses would soon be just big shadows, but for now I could see features when I got near. I spotted him and took a few steps towards him, letting my body feel soft and gentle. You'll never catch a horse that has decided not to be caught and I didn't want to pressure him. As I stood nearby and he started to look at me I didn't make eye contact, but stood quietly, letting my sense of well-being reach out to him. As he went back to grazing, I took a couple more steps stopping to let him see that I was closer.

His eyes could see much better in the dusk than mine, and he raised his head and did a soft snort asking if I was friend or foe. I talked quietly to him and repeated the baby steps until I eventually got close enough to touch him. We shared a treat, an oatmeal cookie, and I slipped a soft rope hackamore over his head and led him through the fence back to the clearing.

Aladdin was pleased to meet his acquaintance and after he did a little blowing and some nuzzling of his coat, Titan decided they were friends and he calmed down.

I gave him a feedbag with some oats and lit a storm lantern. A small slit of light showed from the side of the globe, but it was more than bright enough to look over the horse closely. The two whorls above the eyes were there and I found the scar above his left hind knee. On his shoulder was a small black

spot—Patterson had tried to change his appearance with dye, but the hairs were growing out and the spot was returning.

So this was the Northern Cup winner, Titan. I put the light out and stood with the horses for a few minutes, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness once again. Patterson was cheating, substituting a stolen horse under a different name to win races, but it didn't prove that he set the fire that burned the barn to the ground. I thought of a couple of people who deserved to know what was going on and I decided I should talk with them in the morning.

I led Titan back to the pasture and removed the hackamore. He stayed with me, asking for another bite of cookie, then walked away into the darkness after I gave him another nibble. I decided to be doubly sure while I had the chance and I checked the horse known as Saffron also. A close look and the black mare proved to be Dakota.

I had brought a handful of nails with me and replaced the boards on the rails by pushing a slightly smaller nail through the board into the old nail hole of the post. It wasn't solid, but the fence looked untouched and the boards would stay on unless someone really bumped it. As I trotted down the road on my way home I had a feeling that, one way or another, I might be back—knowing where to find a few loose fence boards might come in handy.

Chapter 19

Early the next morning I rode into Lexington to see David Graham. I talked to him for a few minutes, gave him a letter to forward, and then headed northeast towards a small town called Paris in Bourbon County.

When the first settlers arrived in Bourbon County they seeded the rolling hills of pasture with a mix of grasses they brought from their homes in Europe. The mix was mostly bluegrass, a rich, dense grass that allowed high-quality livestock to flourish here. The shallow rooted grass grew well in the humid days of spring and early summer and survived the summer heat by going dormant. As the years went on, the grass was spread by more ranchers and carried by animals and blown about by the wind and soon every hill was covered with bluegrass.

Blackwell's home was built by one of the early settlers. An original homestead, it was built of native limestone, designed for strength and defense. Narrow rifle slots were spaced here and there along the walls of the home allowing a good field of fire from inside. They were no longer needed, as it had been a good many years since the last Cherokee raiding party had appeared from the south.

The lane from the road to the house passed through pastures on both sides dotted with some of the prettiest horseflesh you might ever see. I stopped midway along the lane and took a moment to look them over. I've always enjoyed watching thoroughbreds. They glow with confidence—they know they're something special. Blackwell seemed to be partial to chestnuts with white stars on their faces. I could see a little Spanish blood in them because of the long manes and the shape of the nose. They were impressive.

I heard steps behind me and when I turned, I found Blackwell himself walking down the lane towards me. I dismounted and walked forward to shake his hand.

"I thought it might be you," he smiled around his pipe stem. "You truly are a horseman, aren't you? You couldn't pass them by without stopping to take a look."

"It's true, but my word—you have some of the finest horses I've ever seen."

"Well, all but one. There is one horse, a stallion, that I consider the finest horse in the area. And when I say that, we're talking about the finest in the world."

"Raindancer."

"Precisely. Raindancer." He turned his head and was lost in his thoughts for a moment, then went on. "For some reason, Major Sanders gifted that horse to Robert Penny. Of course, you know the bloodline ..."

I nodded. Raindancer is a son of Boston, a descendant of Sir Archy. In his day, Sir Archy became one of the greatest runners in America, unbeatable in the longer four-mile races.

"Robert Penny owed me a debt," he went on, "and we agreed that the debt would be cleared in exchange for Raindancer."

I didn't say a word. Penny had his own reasons for selling Raindancer to Pa. For whatever reason, in the end Penny had slighted Blackwell. All I know is that Pa had walked right into the middle of a feud.

Blackwell was looking right through me, lost in his thoughts. Pa wasn't the man that broke his word over selling the horse and neither was I.

"Pa never talked to me about Penny and why he sold Raindancer to us. We did talk about Raindancer's bloodline and what might be possible with him if we bred him smart." I thought about how excited Pa was when Sahara and Rio started showing promise. "Pa was a likeable man and he sure didn't want to feud over that horse."

Blackwell seemed to come out of his fog and he focused on me again.

"Of course," he said, nodding, "I know that now. I once had strong words with your father, and I regret them."

It was an apology, of sorts, and I had no reason not to accept it. "He shared your passion for thoroughbreds," I said, "I'm sure he understood."

Blackwell met my eye and seemed to accept I was sincere. He gave a short nod and asked me indoors for tea.

"You've seen my horses," he continued as we walked up the lane, "and I saw your filly Sahara race. It seems if we could come to some agreement, it could benefit both of us."

Blackwell knew horses, and what he said made sense, but I'd play my cards close to the chest. "I'm sure we can work out something," I told him.

We entered his home, walking through a parlor to a study. The floors were waxed to a high shine with thick carpets placed here and there and every wall was papered in various designs and colors. The house had the mark of a woman's presence, but the study was all his own.

He had two large comfortable leather chairs next to a fireplace divided by a low table and a big quarter-sawn oak desk near a bank of windows that overlooked the stables. Several oil paintings of horses hung on the walls and I wouldn't be surprised if they were his horses. It was easy to see this is where he spent his time.

He waved me to one of the chairs and I had just sat down when a young woman entered, carrying a tray with tea things and some sandwiches. She shared her father's blue eyes and seemed to be about the same age as myself. She had come in from the warm kitchen and her fair-skinned cheeks were a little flush and a strand of gold-brown hair had slipped out of her hairpin and was tickling the bridge of her nose.

I rose to my feet and Blackwell introduced her. "My daughter, Elizabeth."

I nodded a hello. "I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Blackwell spoke up. "Liz, this young man is Sam Carson."

Her smile seemed to falter for just a second, but she carried on and set the tea tray down on the table and then said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Carson."

I saw her glance at the Colt strapped to my leg. In these times, carrying a weapon is not common and I hoped she didn't think I was something of a fool.

"Sam owns Raindancer, if you remember the stallion," explained Blackwell.

She turned and looked at me closer. "Of course. Raindancer out of Sir Archy."

"That's right," Blackwell nodded, pleased. "That's my daughter—she knows horses."

She might know horses, but it was obvious from her manner and the look in her eye that she wanted nothing to do with me. Maybe it was how I was dressed. Elizabeth was in a crisp white calico dress and Blackwell was in a black frock coat. I was in traveling clothes—canvas field trousers and a wool shirt and split cowhide vest. Everything was clean, but like my boots, a little worn down. Maybe she was used to gentleman callers wearing city hats and embroidered shirts.

Liz hesitated, gave a very cool look at me again, and told her father, "Please call me if you need anything else, Father." She closed the door to the study, and we sat there for a moment in embarrassed silence.

"I apologize," he said with a grimace. "She's normally very pleasant."

I waved it away. "Please, it's all right."

He shook his head. "Her callers are sons of merchants, more interested in how their ascot is tied than anything else. I thought she had more sense than that." He gave a chuckle. "You're the first working man near her age that's been in this house."

Blackwell sighed, and then looked down at his teacup in disgust. "How about a real drink?"

"Of course."

He opened a cabinet against the wall and removed two glasses and a small bottle and placed them on the table between our chairs. Filling them mostly full, he handed me a glass and offered a toast.

"To racing."

I seconded and took a swallow. It was good Irish whiskey, better than everyday sipping whiskey and served in a fine lead crystal tumbler. Born and raised in Kentucky means you know your drink—this whiskey had traveled by ship from Ireland after many years of storage in oak barrels.

Blackwell and I talked about some of the more exciting races of the year and possibilities of some of the younger horses. After we lowered the level of whisky in his bottle a bit, I picked the little horse treat out of my pocket and handed it to him.

"This was given to a racehorse just before a race." I told him how I had picked it up from the ground after Blake had given several handfuls to his horse, Fortress.

There was nothing remarkable about it—simply a roasted coffee bean with a glaze on it. Blackwell studied it for a moment then handed it back and leaned back in his chair.

"It looks like a coffee bean," he said.

"Yes, you're right. A roasted coffee bean with some sort of honey coating."

He frowned, his eyebrows nearly meeting on his brow.

"Coffee beans are bitter," I continued, "a horse wouldn't eat it if it wasn't sweetened with honey."

"Coffee helps me wake up in the morning, I'll grant you that," said Blackwell, "but you're saying coffee beans will make a horse run faster?"

"Maybe not faster, but a horse will run farther before tiring. It's risky, though. Too much coffee can poison a horse."

I let him think about that for a moment.

"Many other tracks have outlawed feeding anything to a horse two hours before race time," I mentioned. "One owner is already cheating with coffee beans—we need the same rule at the Association races."

I could see that it was painful for him to think that someone would cheat at his beloved racetrack. He frowned again and looked me in the eye for a few moments.

"There's more to this than what you're telling me," he finally said.

"You're right. Other means are being used to fix races and I think you are the target."

"Me?" he said, startled.

I nodded. "My filly, Sahara, had water forced upon her just before the race on Saturday."

"The race the other day against Topper?"

"Yes sir. Two men pushed their way into our stable, struck down my man, and fed her several buckets of water."

"I see. How does that involve me?"

"I believe the men weren't trying to win the race, but only to finish second."

I could see he was working it out.

He said slowly, "Topper finished first. Fortress finished second, and Sahara finished third." His head snapped up, and he looked at me doubtfully. "You're saying this was a set-up for Fortress for the Phoenix Cup? The stakes race?"

I nodded once again. Only horses that had finished first or second during the racing season qualified for the Phoenix Hotel Cup. Horses that had won their races were given an eight-pound handicap—those that had finished second did not carry additional weight. The stakes were one thousand dollars each, winner-take-all, and the total purse averaged nearly fifteen thousand dollars. It was a hugely popular race and the climax of the season.

"This is all well and good only if Fortress can really beat Topper. Maybe they slowed him on purpose," he said, "but he's really done nothing to suggest that he could beat Topper. Your theory doesn't add up."

"Maybe," I admitted, "but I know that the horse racing here as 'Fortress' is actually 'Titan', the champion from Saratoga."

"Titan!" he barked.

He stood abruptly and walked to the windows overlooking his stable yard. He dug out his pipe and lit it, standing in a large cloud of tobacco smoke. He stared out the window for a while, and I knew there was a chance he could toss me out on my ear.

Blackwell, as active as he is in the sport, had heard of the loss of Titan in the fire. It would be a simple matter to swap a similar looking horse before setting the fire and then walk away with Titan.

He turned and drilled me with his blue eyes. "You can prove this?"

"I've had a close look at the horse and I'm convinced it's him," I said. "As for proving it, I hope to be able to do that soon."

"Humph," he grunted. I could understand why he was skeptical. He turned back to the window and thought for a few minutes.

"Titan, with an eight-pound advantage—if he's in good shape—he could beat Topper," he mused aloud.

I agreed. "Topper is a fine horse, but you give Titan a dose of coffee and a weight advantage—that changes the odds."

He gave me another appraising look. "How did you put this together?"

"I found the coffee bean and just connected the dots."

"And you think Patterson is behind this?"

It was my turn to be surprised.

"One does hear rumors," Blackwell said with distaste.

"Yes, I know he's behind this." I kept the fact about Patterson murdering Pa to myself. "He also runs another horse stolen from Saratoga—Dakota."

"The sooner we clear this up the better," he said emphatically. "I certainly hope so before the Cup, eh?"

"Well, I have an idea about that," I said slowly. I explained what I wanted to do and it took a little convincing, but Blackwell finally agreed. I finished my drink and set my glass down, deciding it was time to go.

"I have something you may be interested in," said Blackwell. "Take a minute and visit the stables with me."

I followed him through the yard to one of the stables, and as we walked down the isle I expected him to show me a thoroughbred, but instead he led me to a couple of Cleveland Bay stallions. Blackwell was the buyer that had snapped up Ryan Howard's horses! I studied each horse, and they were everything that horse broker had said.

I looked at Blackwell and saw the gleam in his eye, and I had to admire how he had out-foxed me. He had heard about the horses and purchased them quickly—he now had the leverage over me he needed.

"You think we might come to some sort of agreement?" he asked.

I knew what he was thinking.

"The stallions in exchange for breeding rights?"

He nodded.

"You bring two mares, and Raindancer will cover them," I said. He smiled and held out his hand, and we shook on it. Blackwell was pretty pleased with himself, and I knew I might regret this. Some day soon, Blackwell would be racing against me using Raindancer's offspring.

The two Cleveland Bay stallions were magnificent and as a business decision, he knew I couldn't turn it down. We walked back to the yard and I tightened the cinch on my saddle, ready to leave.

"It's a pity, really," Blackwell said sadly.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a pity when a man’s daughter prefers to walk out with a fashionable shopkeeper instead of a hardworking man, like a horse trader.” He gave me a grin.

I mounted Lucas and turned to go, but I couldn’t resist one more comment. “One pirate in the family is enough, don’t you think?”

That got a chuckle from him and he waved as I rode away.

* * * * *

Blackwell watched Carson leave and cursed. The man had pieced together the scam and it was only by chance that he had come to him to report it instead of someone else.

He had underestimated Carson but he thought he might silence him yet. He’d have Patterson’s hired gun—Bancroft—warn him off.

He turned and walked back into the house and was met by Elizabeth.

“Is he finally gone?” She looked out the window.

“Yes, dear.”

“Why on earth would you allow him to call here?”

“He confided in me and it’s already paid off. He’s also agreed that Raindancer will cover two of our mares.”

“Well, don’t overlook him. He’s not as young and slow as he appears.”

Blackwell agreed. Maybe this time she has judged a man accurately.

“I’ll have Bancroft scare him off.”

“He’s not the type to scare,” she said tartly. “He’s not some farm-boy who only cares about feuding over ‘kinfolk.’ I say put a bullet in him and end it!”

Elizabeth’s sweet face twisted in spite and Blackwell was reminded again why all of her suitors eventually fled. He had serious doubts that she would ever marry.

“Why Lizzy! You sound most impressed with our young caller!”

“Not impressed,” she said, chewing on her lip, “just cautious. I had a strange notion when I first saw him—a sense of loss.”

“Hmm. We’ll see.” Blackwell dug out his tobacco to fill his pipe. “We may have to use a bullet on him, but it would jeopardize our plans for Raindancer. With a little patience and some bad luck on his part, Raindancer will come up for sale.”

Elizabeth surprised Blackwell by griping his arm tightly.

“Just be careful, Father,” she said intently before turning and walking from the room.

He looked after her thoughtfully—rarely had she displayed such emotion. He stepped out into the stable yard and stood along the fence to watch his horses graze. His best ideas came to him while watching his herd, almost like some men clear their thoughts watching the flame dance in a fire.

He liked the young man—in a way, Carson reminded him of himself at a young age—but there was no turning back now. Vengeance for his fathers’ murder drove Carson, spurring him down a path that would eventually lead to Blackwell.

Blackwell shrugged. It was simple—if Carson listened to Bancroft, played it smart and left things alone, he might live. If he came gunning for trouble, Blackwell would kill him.

Chapter 20

The next morning Rio looked terrific in the morning gallop, running a mile quickly. Her spirits were up; she was full of mischief and a real handful for Mary. The lingering pains from the sore shins were gone and she was in top form. Walking Rio back from her run, Mary's eyes were enormous.

"She's bursting out of her skin!" she said in wonder.

It was time for Rio to race.

Later that morning I rode into Lexington to the offices of the Association and paid the Colonel a visit. He was deeply involved with Patterson and Blake and full of little frauds, but I didn't take him lightly. I saw his eyes widen a bit when I told him Rio was an offspring of Raindancer. As I paid my entry fee for Saturday's race I knew it wouldn't take long before word got back to Patterson that I had another contender.

The Colonel had a stack of printed bills promoting the Phoenix Hotel Cup race on his desk and I picked up one and read it.

"The Cup is the following weekend?" I asked.

The Colonel froze for a moment and I doubt he'd ever thought I might buy into the race.

"Yes, it is. You do have an eligible horse, but of course the \$1,000 stake will keep a few horses out of the race."

"Of course," I nodded, "when is the entry deadline?"

"Well," he paused to clear a sudden cough in his throat, "Tuesday. This Tuesday is the entry deadline."

I thought I'd leave it there and let the Colonel and Patterson stew on the chance I might enter. With my winnings I had enough to pay the entry fee, but it was a big risk, nearly my entire bankroll. I'd think about it after watching Rio run on Saturday. Blackwell's horse Topper and my Sahara were well matched, but Rio could be peaking and running faster than any of them.

When I got back to the ranch I helped Mary and Nathan put the young horses through their routines. The filly Kept Secret was nearly fourteen months old and now doing some light training. She had learned hand and voice commands and how to tie up quietly and now was learning from Nathan how to walk and trot next to him without pulling against the rope. Pa was the best I'd ever seen at training the youngsters.

"Sam, don't train them how they are, treat them how you want them to be," he'd tell me again and again.

Mary was working with a couple of yearlings, Cleveland Bays, using the lunge line. The time she spent with each horse was only a few minutes on each lead, but it was important to get the younger horses in the habit of training.

Shortly after supper I was outside working on a stubborn gate latch when a lone rider turned up the drive. I didn't recognize him and as I waited for him in front of the barn, I took a good long look around to make sure he was alone. As he rode closer I could see that in spite of wearing a city suit, he sat a horse very well. He was carrying a pistol low down on his right leg and a rifle in a well-oiled scabbard.

Underneath the city suit he'd been honed to a sharp edge by the outdoors. His eyes were partly hidden by droopy eyelids that caused him to look like he was half asleep, but I sensed he was alert and ready for anything.

He pulled up and pushed his coachman hat back off his forehead and took a long look around. He finally looked me over, and it seemed he decided that he had nothing to worry about.

“Nice spread,” he said, passing the time of day. “Be a shame to lose a place like this.”

“Don’t intend too.”

He nodded, but his face was still, like I hadn’t said a word.

“Kid, I’m here to tell you you’re not going to win Saturday.” He talked like he was discussing the chance of some rain before morning. “Me? I couldn’t care one way or the other, but someone who hates to lose pays me. You follow?”

“What if I win?”

He sighed and shook his head. I truly was a test of his righteous patience.

“You’ll regret it,” he said bluntly.

“You’ll come back and kill me?”

He took another look around the place, seemingly bored.

“No, I don’t make the easy kills,” he eventually said. “We keep a couple of coyotes around for that.”

He gave me another pointed look and then slowly turned his horse around and trotted away. I had to admit, he had nerve.

Nathan walked over and watched the gunman ride away.

“He warn you off?” he asked.

I nodded. “Who is he?”

“He’s been around, lately from down Mexico way. Hires his gun—his name is Steve Bancroft.”

That made sense—the West sure puts a stamp on a man.

“What you going to do?” asked Nathan.

What could I do? Rio was an idea of Pa’s that started with buying Raindancer and the careful breeding with a select mare. I thought of the training and feeding and care invested just to get her to this point. I couldn’t let anything stop her.

“I’m going to let Rio run,” I told Nathan.

Nathan shook his head—probably thinking I was a fool—but I don’t think he really was surprised.

“You better fetch some more ammo,” he said, “with all the pistol practice you’re doing we barely have a couple hundred rounds left.” He turned and watched Bancroft in the distance.

“I’ve got a feeling we’re going to need a heap more,” he muttered.

* * * * *

Saturday, the day of Rio’s racing debut, finally arrived. At daybreak Mary ran a short three-furlong warm-up on Rio. After a walk to cool her down, Rio stood with the other steaming thoroughbreds on the wash-down rack and got a good sudsy bath. Pa had told me the best thing for a horse on race day is to keep the morning routine going—just shorten the run in the morning.

The last thing I wanted today was to allow a chance for Patterson to interfere in our race, so I mixed things up on the way into town. Instead of putting Rio in her assigned stall at the track, Nathan and I brought Rio into Lexington and boarded her in a livery barn a quarter mile away. Nathan stood guard while I walked to the front stretch of the track and placed a number of bets on Rio.

“She’s a fast one, is she?” asked Martin Lansford, one of the sharpest bookmakers on the track, as I placed a hundred dollars on Rio to win.

“She’ll win,” I nodded. “Have you ever met an owner that didn’t believe his horse will win?”

“Of course.” He gave me a world-weary smile and snorted. “But only the true believers back it with coin.”

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By now, the bookmakers recognized me and knew I was playing it straight—putting down money on my own horse to win. Naturally they were cautious with Rio as she had no racing history and a good lineage, but I managed to get an average of 6-to-1 odds for the nearly four hundred dollars I staked.

I walked back to the livery barn and Nathan and I walked Rio over to the backstretch area of the track. Rio had never been off the ranch other than a few times when I took her on rides along the back roads, and I was curious to see how she handled the noise and confusion of the stable area.

We turned down the road towards the stables and waited at the gate. The steward at the gate was missing, and it was a few long minutes before he turned up again. This gate was to keep the general public out of the backstretch area, and after agreeing to check in at the receiving barn we walked down the main horse path to the first barn.

At the receiving barn another steward checked us present for our race listing and compared our horse with Rio’s form card to confirm she truly was Rio.

I had thought about this before—when the horse was well known, the comparison check against the form card became almost a ritual. If a steward didn’t know the horse personally, it was much more difficult to rely on a form card for identity. Patterson—with the Colonel’s help—had substituted almost every horse in his stable with stolen horses. Whoever controlled the form card had to be above reproach—the Colonel and Patterson had the Association by the throat.

We were then assigned stall number four in barn number twenty-one, and informed we had drawn number seven in the bottle draw for starting position.

A bottle draw occurred on the morning of race day. One bottle was filled with the post-position numbers, and the other bottle had the horses’ names inside. One person drew a number from one bottle, and someone else drew a horse’s name from the other—and that’s where you were assigned at the start.

We left the receiving barn and found Rio’s stall less than fifty yards away. Nathan and I had her inside and buttoned up without any trouble in just a few minutes. She was calm but curious, lifting her nose and taking in all the sounds and smells. Sahara had walked in like she owned the place and Rio seemed to take it in stride without getting too excited.

I planted myself outside her stall to keep watch. Nathan gave her a grooming and in time, another steward came by and checked her off on his list. A few trainers stopped for a friendly word and a peek at the new filly, but I saw no sign of Patterson’s men today.

The odds-on favorite for our race was a sorrel gelding called Hamlet that had done very well this season, but I thought it likely that Patterson’s horse, a black named Saffron, was the horse to beat. Saffron was the horse Dakota, stolen several months ago from the Saratoga area, a granddaughter of the great runner Black Tide. The original Saffron would have been out-classed in today’s race, which is why the bookmakers had her at 12-to-1 on their tally sheets, great odds for Patterson.

I was surprised to see Robby as he entered the barn—normally we would meet in the paddock area.

“Mr. Sam!” said Robby, looking worried. “We’re running against Mr. Patterson today, aren’t we?” he asked softly.

“Whatever anyone has told you about today’s race, forget it,” I told him quietly. “Patterson has no influence on me. Ride to win.”

I could see he was still worried.

“Robby, you are about to ride one of the fastest horses ever seen in Lexington,” I told him, “wouldn’t it be a shame if she didn’t win today?”

He nodded dully, and I wondered.

“Were you threatened?”

He looked at the floor of the barn and wouldn’t meet my eye.

I swore. Patterson was taking no chances.

“Listen Robby, you know how this game works,” I said. “You cave in—let them tell you how to ride just one time—and they got you in their pocket. It won’t take long before word gets out and your rides dry up.”

He looked miserable.

“Patterson’s the man that killed Pa.”

Robby looked up at me, startled.

“It’s true. He and I are going to tangle and you just need to stay out of the way until this gets settled.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got friends out here—just say the word.”

Rio poked her head out over the stall gate to greet him.

“Hello beautiful!” Robby exclaimed, back to his normal cheerful self. He petted her along her neck and cooed into her ear. “How could I resist you?”

I gave a sigh of relief—Rio was in good hands.

* * * * *

When the rope went up to start the race, Robby had Rio ready and they bounded away quickly. By the third furlong she had broken from the field and had two lengths on the nearest horse, Hamlet. I thought her pace was too fast—Robby needed to slow her in order for her to have a chance at the finish. When she reached the midway mark she had gained another length and was ahead by three.

“Come on, Robby,” I muttered as I watched the race through my field glasses. “Hold her back!”

But Robby proved me wrong. Rio had never raced at a large track before, but she knew all about running fast. She was in a rhythm that gobbled up turf and Robby let her go, sailing around the backstretch. The other horses couldn’t get near her as she kept pace through the far turn and in the final two furlongs. When she passed the finish line she was a solid five lengths ahead of Dakota and not slowing a bit.

The crowd was stunned that a debut horse had won so handily, but that was part of racing. First time starters are a real wild card and it’s a game of luck—if you keep the bad apples like Patterson out of it.

Robby was jubilant as I met him after the race.

“She just wouldn’t slow down!” cried Robby. “I think I could have rode her another mile at that pace!”

I looked at Rio for a moment, watching as well wishers stopped by to dish out compliments. I sensed a change in her—something that can happen after an

experience like this. She was quieter and there were no little fidgety movements—she was solid and confident. In fact, she looked about half asleep.

I caught Nathan's eye and he nodded to me, seeing the change in Rio too. I had to laugh. She acted like she was an old hand at this and this win was just routine. With the big money on the line for the Phoenix Hotel Cup next week, I hoped she was right.

Later I found Blackwell at his normal vantage point in front of the Association Clubhouse.

"Another fast horse," he smiled around his pipe as he shook my hand.

I nodded. "After a day like this, it's easy to see why you continue to race."

"Well, there are ups and downs," he admitted, "but if the wins come along often enough, you keep at it."

I told him about Robby's predicament. Once again I put him off his smoke as he emptied his pipe and ground the ash into the ground with his heel.

"The man's a menace," he said thickly, speaking about Patterson.

I asked if he might have room in his bunkhouse for Robby.

"Of course!" he lit up. "The man's a genius on a horse. It would do wonders for my lads to watch him ride." He looked at me slyly. "Maybe I could convince him to ride for me next season."

I winced and shook my head with misgiving—hopefully he was just baiting me.

Chapter 21

We actually smelled the smoke before we saw it. Nathan and I were headed back to the ranch after the race and we had just climbed out of a small valley to a notch in the hills when I saw it—a towering black column of smoke through a gap in the trees. It felt like a kick in the gut when I saw it. Patterson had struck quickly because I had ignored Bancroft's warning. I knew it was my place that was burning and I began to worry—Ben and Mathew were watching the ranch while we were gone.

Our easy trot home from the racetrack turned into a gallop as we raced along the road through the hills. When the ranch came into view I could see that the stud barn was fully in flames. Cinders and ash billowed from flames that were fifty feet in the air and were landing on the nearest stable, creating fires on that building too. The two boys were holding back the fire by tossing water on the stable walls and roof with buckets filled from nearby barrels.

Everything I owned could go up in flames and I grew wild with desperation. Nathan led the horses through the pasture gate while I ran to the stable. Even though the stud barn was some forty yards from the stable, the heat from the burning barn was so intense I was amazed that the stable wasn't completely in flames. The walls and roof areas not on fire were steaming and it was difficult to stay more than a few moments in the area before the heat became unbearable.

Ben and Mathew were taking turns running to the stable walls and tossing buckets of water on the roof, but the fire was spreading and the heat was pushing them further back with each bucket. I could see it was only a matter of moments before the stable fire got away from us—and then all the other

buildings would go too. My heart was in my throat—I needed to do something fast. Somehow I needed to get closer to the fire.

My new barn door! It was solid planked and would shelter me from the flames! I ran to the hay barn and quickly pulled the hinge pins from the door. It was heavy and nearly four-feet wide, but I lifted it up at an angle above my head, rested it on a shoulder and staggered back to the fire.

I got in close to the stable and leaned the door to the ground and ducked behind it. The heat from the nearby stud barn felt like it was cut in half. Matthew saw I was using the door as a shield and ran to me with a bucket of water. This time he was able to pause and throw the water right on the flames. He turned and ran back and then Ben came running with another bucket.

Smoke billowed from the fire and embers constantly drifted in the wind and rained down on the stable roof, but as the barn fire slowed, the embers gradually became smaller until it was mostly ash falling from the sky. At times the wind swirled and the caustic smoke would get pushed down along the ground into our path and blind us.

Ben, Mathew, and I relayed buckets from more and more distant barrels as we drained the nearest ones. Nathan fetched sand from a pile near the rear of the hay barn and we tossed that on the roof too. One-by-one we got the fires on the stable roof out and then we retreated a safe distance away.

The stud barn burned hot but it burned quickly, and eventually the flames dropped as the fire began to run out of fuel. I breathed a sigh of relief—the fire was beat and nobody got hurt. We lost a barn, but it could have been much, much worse. I covered the last of the embers with sand and leaned on my shovel.

“We didn’t stand a chance,” Ben told me. He explained how two men had ridden up and held them under their rifles while they set the fire.

“They picked the stud barn because it was new, and they joked about maybe locking us inside,” added Mathew.

He was covered with gray ash and had tracks of tears from his eyes down his cheeks from the smoke. Embers had burned large holes in his shirt along his neck and shoulders and he had spots on his head where his hair had caught fire.

“I want to thank you for saving the ranch today,” I told them sincerely. “You showed a lot of mettle fighting this fire and you should be proud of yourselves.” I told them to take the day off and get cleaned up; Nathan and I would do stables in the evening. “From now on you’re both getting top-hand wages, thirty a month. You’ve earned it.”

That pleased them both and they had a little swagger in their step as they left. Nathan nodded approvingly at them, but turned to me and cocked his thumb at the ash pile.

“An awful lot of clean-up left. Don’t you think you let them go a little early?”

“Nothing that a couple of seasoned top-hands couldn’t handle,” I said with a grin.

I walked to the horse trough and pumped fresh water into it, washing my face and rinsing out the grit around my eyes. Fighting fire is simply survival—you smell your hair burning, hot pokers are going down your shirt and you just can’t see anything.

Two riders turned off the road and traveled up the drive. I didn't recognize the gait of the horses and the riders were strangers. They slowed and walked

their horses the last few yards near us, looking at the heap that used to be the barn.

One of the riders was sporting a long beard shot with gray and a hat with silver studs on it. The other rider was younger, maybe mid-twenties and had his horse short-reined with two hands. I saw the flank of his horse was scared from spurs, and my blood rose as I studied him. His type I've never liked—no animal deserved to be abused like that.

"That sure is a shame, isn't it Bob?" said the younger one, nodding to the burned-out stud barn. The other rider—Bob—played along.

"It is, Will, it surely is," Bob said with a big grin on his face. "I almost feel like crying."

Will looked around the yard and shook his head. "Looks like you had some luck though. The whole place didn't burn down. Could happen on a windy day, I suppose," he carried on. "Hope no one got hurt?" he asked innocently.

I was hot, tired, and mad clear through.

"Say your piece and get out," I snapped.

"I guess I can understand you being so cross an' all with a big fire to fight," Will grinned at his partner, then looked at me again. "Judging how you look, seems to me like the fire won."

"I bet you know all about setting fires, don't you?" I taunted him. "You the kind that gets excited from burning things up?"

His eyes narrowed down to slits and his face turned red. "Watch your mouth, boy. You ain't too young for me to take down a notch or two," he growled, yanking on his reins and making his horse hop about.

I was thinking he would be the type to jump his horse at me and try to stomp me down. Bob was looking thoughtfully at the big Colt on my hip and didn't say a word.

"You sure aren't man enough to do it," I roughly told the younger one.

He brutally reined his horse to jump me. My Colt cleared leather and I coolly shot him out of the saddle before he got his horse turned at me. I hit him high in the right shoulder and that big caliber slug slapped him out of the saddle like a big fly swatter. His horse bucked a bit and trotted off, probably happy to get rid of him.

My gun was already pointed in Bob's direction, but he was sitting very still, both hands on the pommel of his saddle. "Hand me your gun—slowly," I told him.

He handed me a pocket pistol without comment, and I found the same kind of gun in Will's coat. He was lying on his back, his left hand bloody from pressing it against the seeping wound, his face pale and ruttled in pain.

I stepped back and studied Bob. "You got a message for me?"

He nodded and he sure looked uncomfortable. "The message is: 'Do what you're told,'" he said reluctantly.

"Seems you're a bit brighter than your partner, here," I told him. "Can you guess what my answer might be?"

"Ah, yes sir,"

"Good." I stared him down. "You burned my barn and threatened my men. If I see you again, I'll kill you."

He nodded miserably—he knew I would do it. Nathan fetched the injured rider's horse and Will nearly passed out when we put him back on it.

Bob turned to go, but the injured Will held him up and stared at me bitterly.

“You’re dead, kid,” he hissed. “You just don’t know it yet.”

* * * * *

Burning the stud barn was a reminder that Patterson would do anything to get what he wanted. Nathan and I agreed we needed to keep a closer eye on the ranch and we split up the night into two watches—I would take the first watch until late and then wake Nathan who would keep watch until dawn. It was nearing midnight when I walked around the barns and along the fences under a clear night sky. I had to walk upwind of the ashes of the barn to enjoy the cool air. It was quiet and I could hear the horses cropping grass in the pasture as they grazed.

A horse moved about in the pasture and as she neared, I recognized Rio. She held her head low and stood near me next to the fence—her invitation for a scratch behind the ear. I gave her eyebrows a rubdown, then I found that favorite spot behind her ears.

In a few minutes the whole herd was at the fence asking for attention. Pa had believed that horses should be together as much as possible, and rarely should a horse be by itself in a stall for more than an hour or two.

“The Good Lord put horses on this earth before he put us here,” he’d say with a smile. “They seem to do well as a herd. Who are we to come along and tell them different?”

The ranch held fond memories of Pa and it was all I’d ever known as a home. Odd how it took nearly losing the entire place to remind me how much I loved it. I was ready to fight for it, but today brought home the fact that if it were destroyed, I had no fear about being able to rebuild it.

If Patterson were to send all his hands against us, we didn’t have the manpower to protect the ranch and the horses. To lose the horses would be too much—their value was hard to estimate, but to me they were irreplaceable. It was time to move them off the ranch to keep them safe. When I pushed back hard against Patterson he would exploit any weakness.

The fire brought me to another decision—it gave me another reason to enter the Cup race. Patterson had tried to push me around before every race, and if he thought that burning a barn would keep me away, he didn’t understand how stubborn I could be.

I could enter Rio, Sahara, or both horses for the Cup. Some owners might enter two or three horses thinking it improved their odds, as it is a winner-take-all stakes race. I couldn’t risk more than one entry fee, and I felt that Rio was peaking and had the best chance to win. But first, she had to disappear.

I touched Nathan on the shoulder to wake him up for his watch, and then hit my bunk for a few hours of much-needed sleep.

* * * * *

I rode west along the Fort Spring Road after morning stables, a late May morning and already the sun was hot. I took a break at Elk Horn Creek and watered Lucas in the shade under some birch trees. The road was empty and it wasn’t too much longer before Martin spotted me approaching up the lane to the Rolling W.

“Sam!” he called, crushing my hand in a handshake. “Light and sit. You’re just in time for dinner.”

I lead Lucas to the water trough and loosened his cinch, letting him have his fill, then led him to a shady corner near the barn and forked him some hay. I

used the bar soap in a dish near the hand pump to wash up and combed out my hair with my fingers and went to find everyone.

Laura had supper spread out in back under the shade of several huge sugar maples. Ranch hands were scattered on benches and several tables groaned under the food heaped on them. Martin worked hard and expected his hands to work hard too, but one reason few left to go find easier work was due to Laura's table. How many times has a hand had second thoughts after just one meal?

Laura gave me a warm smile and a hug as I neared the table.

"Why Sam Carson!" she exclaimed, holding me at arms length. "You keep getting better looking every time I see you! You must have to brush off the girls every time you turn around in order to get something done!"

I knew she was teasing, but that didn't keep my cheeks from turning red.

"Now Laura," Martin said, "go easy on the lad. He turns up rarely enough as it is."

Laura gave me a grin and sat me down next to her.

"I'm sure it's been hours since breakfast, knowing you," she told me, passing a platter of fried potatoes. "I guess I can wait until after supper to pester you with questions, but I do have some news for you."

I looked at her expectantly and she shared a look with Martin.

"I'm with child," she said, "we're going to have a baby!"

"Well, that is fine news!" I told them. "Congratulations!"

Martin looked pleased and Laura glowed. I could see that they were overjoyed and it lifted my spirits to share their happiness.

In between bites of fresh eggs, smoked ham, more fried potatoes and several quarts of coffee, I filled them in about how I discovered Patterson, the training of the horses, and what was happening at the racetrack. They both became quiet when I told them the news about Patterson burning the barn in retaliation.

"There's no telling what that man might do," Martin said after a moment. "He sounds capable of anything." He nodded at the Colt on my hip. "You any good with that?"

"Good enough to take care of myself," I said simply. "What's got me worried right now are my horses. If you're willing, I'd like to graze them here for a bit."

"Good idea," he nodded, "you can use the south back-forty. Last time we were in there was in March, so there's good grass on it."

He waved my thanks away. Ben and Matthew would sleep in the bunkhouse and Nathan would keep the training of the thoroughbreds on schedule.

"I think it's best if I stay away until after the race," I told them, "Patterson might have me followed, and the last thing we need is for me to lead them here."

"Well, after this is all over," Laura smiled, "you need to bring your girl over for a visit."

"My girl?" I asked, surprised.

"Sam Carson!" Laura said, exasperated. "I meant Mary, of course. You told us you see her everyday and she's training one of your racehorses, of all things! You mean to say you're not courting her?"

My jaw dropped and I could feel my cheeks turning red again. This time Martin grinned at me right along with Laura.

Chapter 22

Patterson poured a couple of fingers worth of bourbon into each glass and added a splash of water. He set a glass in front of Blackwell.

“Your health,” he raised his drink in salute and took a swallow.

“What’s this?”

“Blake’s whiskey.”

Blackwell saw that Patterson had lowered his drink by an inch—at least he wasn’t trying to poison him. Besides, the syndicate didn’t flourish as long as it had by allowing its members to kill each other—there were standards after all. He lifted the glass to his nose and cautiously sniffed. Apricots came to mind, or maybe it was apples. He took a swallow. He was a little disappointed by the flavor, as it didn’t have a touch of peat like a good whiskey should. He was a single malt man himself and good whiskey came from the old country. It just wasn’t the same without the peat flavor. The finish was smooth—not bad.

“Bourbon?”

Patterson nodded. Blackwell leaned back in his chair and waited. Patterson had something in mind.

“I’m offering you a share,” Patterson said. “I need some grease up at the capital. I want to begin exporting and if you’re in on this, the roadblocks stay away.”

“My share?”

“Twelve percent.”

“Fifty,” Blackwell said flatly.

“Fifty?” A startled Patterson looked at Blackwell closely. “Are you mad? You want half my business for calling in a few favors?”

“That’s a good point—I’m using my pull to get it done. I think I’m being generous.”

“Taking fifty percent is generous?” Patterson said slowly, working on keeping his temper.

“No, giving you fifty percent is generous. After all, it is my land.”

Patterson froze. What’s this?

If what Blackwell said was true, his contract with Blake was worthless. He’d been in a hurry to lock the place up, but why hadn’t he checked title on the place? Blake had inherited it from his family—hadn’t he?

Blackwell leaned forward, his eyes hard. “Blake owed me money for a loan a few years back. I wouldn’t take his payments—I took his property instead. The place is mine.”

He leaned back into his chair. It was time to remind Patterson who was in charge. “He was quite proud of his little deception. Blake came to me and offered to split the thousand you paid him.”

“Which you took,” Patterson said woodenly.

“Of course I did.”

Blackwell let that sink in for a moment and then told Patterson his terms.

“You run every decision past me. I don’t want you to sink both of us because you do something—unwise. Do you agree?”

“Of course.” What choice did he have?

Blackwell watched him go, reading him correctly. Patterson would be gunning for him now, looking at any opportunity to bury him.

Blackwell shrugged—a measure of a man is the strength of his enemies. He had bested men much tougher and sharper than Patterson. He'd keep him around until he was no longer useful—then get rid of him.

Patterson sat at his regular table and thought of his next move. Inside, the anger burned bright, but he managed to keep his face calm. Blackwell had won this round, but there were more to be played. He knew he would come out on top in the end, but this made it personal. It would make standing over Blackwell's dead body even more enjoyable.

Blackwell was always on guard, but if he was forced into action and Patterson happened to be nearby, he could be ambushed. Like a chess game, he had resources and could move them into place to force Blackwell's hand. He smiled as he thought of a pawn to sacrifice for the win—Sam Carson.

Chapter 23

I got back to the ranch and Nathan was loading the wagon in the barn, away from prying eyes. I wanted to move the horses without warning—just have them disappear without a clue as to where they went. If we could get them started without being spotted, the hardpan on the road and everyday traffic would mix up the tracks leaving no one the wiser. In just short of an hour we had the wagon packed with the horse tack, blankets, stacks of feedbags, and all the odds and ends needed for training. I planned to keep a couple saddle horses on hand, but all the other horses including the yearlings would go to Martin's.

I had an itchy feeling, like I should leave right away, but I didn't want to go if there was a chance they could follow me. Just then, a rider started up the lane from the road, and I recognized him—it was Steve Bancroft. He'd been buzzing around in the back of my mind since his last visit, as I knew sooner or later he'd turn up.

I waited for him near the barn as he slowly walked his horse up the drive and pulled up a few yards from me. He did a slow look around the place as he did before.

"You leaving town?" he nodded to the loaded wagon.

"No Bancroft, I'm not," I told him. "I'm just moving the horses. Seems you were right about coyotes roaming the neighborhood, and I have little doubt they would shoot them for sport."

Bancroft grimaced and looked me over again, studying me for a minute.

"Those boys said you were pretty good with that hog leg you're carrying," he said casually.

I shrugged. "I can usually hit what I'm aiming at."

"You might find it's a bit different when somebody's shooting back."

"My Pa taught me to take my time with the first shot—make it count. Too many men hurry and miss the first shot altogether."

He grunted and looked at me with approval. "Well kid, I figured something like that. I'd hit you first, but I'd bet you'd put some lead in me too."

I just nodded. My throat was suddenly so dry I couldn't trust my voice to speak, yet my palms were sweaty and I wanted to wipe them dry. I was half listening to him, concentrating on his hands and the big Colt on his hip.

“Fact is, I kind of like your style, kid—you’ve got sand. You remind me of myself at your age. I’m not here to call you out, but give you a word of advice.” He slowly took his hat off and wiped the band with a kerchief, and then put it back on. He looked over my shoulder into the barn and smiled ruefully. I didn’t trust him, so I remained alert.

“Patterson wanted me to ride out here and plant you six feet deep,” he shook his head. “You sure know how to pick your enemies, kid. That man is hopping mad to do you harm.”

“And you’re not going to do it?”

“Nah. I’m a hired gun, not an assassin. I ride for the brand, but if Patterson wants you dead, I say he needs to do it himself.” He looked at me questionably. “Funny the way he hates you.”

I nodded. “We got a little history.”

“That’s it! That’s what you got—you’ve got some history with each other.” He started to reach for his vest pocket, and then stopped. “I’m reaching for a smoke,” he said.

I nodded. He pulled out a cigar and lit it with a sulphur match.

“Habit I picked up down Mexico way,” he said, watching the cigar burn. “I’m headed that way now. I’ve got a hunch that time is short for Patterson and I don’t intend to be nearby when it happens. Besides, I’ve had my fill of cities for a while.”

He caught my eye again. “Watch out for him, kid. He’s cold as a viper and you never know what a snake will do.” He turned his horse to head back down the drive. “I’d wish you luck, kid,” he said, “but with a Sharps backing your play, you kind of make your own luck!”

I wiped my sweaty palms along the seam of my pants, glad to see the back of him and took a deep breath as he rode away. I looked around for Nathan, wondering what Bancroft was talking about, when I noticed the barrel of his big .52 Spencer rifle poking out from the load on the wagon.

“Come on out, Nathan,” I called. “He’s gone.”

The rifle tipped up and Nathan stood up from behind a feedbag and climbed down from the wagon.

“You had that rifle on him the whole time, didn’t you?” I asked. No wonder Bancroft was so cautious.

Nathan’s smile lit up the whole yard. “I sure did,” he said. “I just knew it would have made you happy, despite being dead an all, if that gunman got his just reward for killing you!”

“How thoughtful you are,” I said sourly.

“Ain’t I though?” he grinned.

* * * * *

I was planning on moving the horses early in the morning, but something was spurring me to move now. Bancroft had left, but for all I knew, there could be one of Patterson’s men watching our place right that very moment. I stood in the yard and looked at the surrounding hills, thinking about the most likely vantage point that Patterson’s men might use.

As a kid I explored the fields and woods and I was thinking there were really just one or two areas that had a good viewpoint of the ranch. The best view was from the neighbors’ woods across the road—from there, most of the drive from the road was in sight as was the house and the barn. The stables were partially hidden by the hay barn, but the pathways were in the open.

“I’m going to take a look around,” I told Nathan. “I got an idea that we’re being watched now and then, and I’d like to know where they’re hiding.” I walked into the house, took a rifle from the gun case, walked out the back to a pasture gate and then hiked down the far hillside to the road. I climbed the fence and walked across the road into the woods, and began to weave my way through the trees back up the hill.

My neighbor used this woodlot for fuel. He felled a few trees each year as he needed them and kept the underbrush down, making it easy walking beneath the hickory trees. Here and there were scattered oak and sugar maples. I was cautious—I didn’t want to stumble into an ambush—but eventually I found a clearing that had been used as a lookout. As far as I could tell, two men and a couple of horses had been there lately, watching the ranch.

Horse sign seemed to show they had spent a few hours there, but when I found the log that someone had been using as a rifle rest, my blood turned cold. The log was just the proper height and laying in the right direction to support a rifle for a sharpshooter. In fact, I could see where a rifle stock had rubbed the bark on the log as the shooter waited for a target. I kneeled down and rested my rifle along the rub mark and took a sight. It lined up with my front door!

I looked around and it was like I remembered it, a small area atop a knoll with a view of the drive leading up from the road to the house. Most of the barn could be seen from here as well as the front of the first stable building.

I felt a need to act and I walked back up the drive.

“Tomorrow,” I told Nathan. We made plans to leave in the morning and I told the two boys they would be gone for a couple weeks and to pack the gear they needed.

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon when a couple of men turned off the road from Lexington and trotted up the lane towards the house. I was watching the road from inside the house and had been expecting some sort of showdown—if they didn’t do something soon they wouldn’t be able to keep me from the race on Saturday.

I put my field glasses on the two as they neared. The one on the right was quite the dandy, wearing tweed trousers, a white, long sleeve shirt with a gold colored brocade vest. The other rider had a long beard streaked with gray and was wearing a black hat with silver studs. I recognized him as one of the skunks that set my barn on fire the other day. Well, I warned him.

I scanned the woods on the knoll with the glasses—if there was a sharpshooter up there, he was well hidden.

They pulled up a good twenty yards from the front porch.

“Carson!” called out the dandy dresser. “We’ve got a message for you!”

I pulled open the front door—which surprised them—but I stepped back from the doorway and out of sight.

A sharpshooter on the knoll couldn’t see me in the shade under the porch and through the doorway—he needed me to walk out. I couldn’t see him either, but I had the Spencer lined up near the log lying on the hillside. There were seven shots loaded in the rifle and I could shoot all seven in about twenty seconds by working the lever to load a new cartridge and then cocking the hammer.

“What’s your message?”

“Stay away from the races on Saturday and you won’t get hurt!” The dandy wearing the gold vest didn’t believe his own words and he just wasn’t convincing me.

“Here’s my answer!” I called back.

The concussion from the 45-grain cartridge was loud indoors, bouncing off the walls and ringing my ears. I put one bullet where I thought the rifleman was and for good measure I put a couple more right next to it. I couldn’t see anything through the cloud of powder smoke after the first shot, but I thought one of the shots might land near enough to the sharpshooter to convince him to leave.

Nope. He fired back and put a slug of lead right through the doorway and into the plank floor. He showed he had some firepower too as he put a few more rounds just as fast through the windows.

Broken glass was spread all over the floor, but the powder smoke was clearing quickly with the extra ventilation.

Gradually the ringing in my ears faded a bit and I could hear horses running away. I took a quick look and saw the hind ends of the two riders as they went scampering down the lane. They wanted no part of this fight.

I moved farther inside the room and lined up the log through a broken window and slowly squeezed the trigger.

I heard a yelp as I ducked back down below window height and scooted out the back door. I must’ve nicked him or at least startled him—he was mighty mad and he emptied his rifle into the front of the house.

I edged up to the front corner of the house and peeked around. Smoke was slowly drifting along the hillside and it gave me an idea of his position. I kept my eyes glued to the area and saw a slight movement and plugged him. I knew it was a good shot, but only a fool goes tromping through the brush to check on an armed, possibly injured man.

Minutes dragged by and after all the ruckus of gunfire it became eerily quiet.

I was worried that one of the boys might think the battle was over and stick their heads out to see what was going on. I turned and walked to the back of the house and called out.

“Ben! Is your brother with you?”

“Yes, sir!” he called back faintly—sounded like they were in the barn.

“Keep your heads down until I give the all clear!”

“Yes, sir!”

I entered the house through the back and kept an eye on the hillside from deep within the room. It might have been a quarter-hour later when I heard a hoarse call from the woods.

“The house!”

“What do you want?”

“I’m hit. I’m giving up.”

A rifle was tossed out of the trees and it tumbled down the bank.

“Come out where I can see you!”

A few rocks rolled and some brush moved and the shooter slowly crawled out into the open.

I set the Spencer aside and started out with the Colt drawn, keeping my eye on him and using all the cover I could muster to trace a route to his side.

When I neared I saw I was too late—he had already passed on.

The sharpshooter looked to be in his late forties, small in frame and wearing a few days worth of beard. My bullet had hit him in the chest and his fate had been sealed at that instant.

* * * * *

I felt a need to act quickly, before another attack could be organized. I walked back up the drive to find Nathan muttering, shaking his head as he surveyed the damage the house suffered. I turned and called out an all clear to the boys.

“I think the time to go is now,” I told Nathan. We had planned to leave first thing in the morning, but it didn’t seem right to wait. I shrugged my shoulders. “I’ve got a feeling that if we wait, we won’t get a second chance.”

Nathan nodded. “Then we go.”

I talked to the two boys and explained we were leaving and that they could pick-up their gear from home another day.

In a matter of minutes I was leading the herd out the gate and down the drive, Ben and Matthew riding drag, and Nathan tagging along behind in the wagon.

The smooth striding Beatrice, a six-year old thoroughbred mare, was the leader of the herd. I rode alongside her and twenty-two horses followed her down the road.

Normally it was a two-hour ride to Martin’s ranch. I kept the pace steady to keep moving, but not so fast that the youngsters would lag behind. It wasn’t long before the herd settled into a rhythm and we put some distance behind us. At Elk Horn Creek we watered and then pressed on. Soon we were trotting up the hill to Martin’s place—a quick-thinking ranch hand saw us draw near and he jogged ahead to open the pasture gate.

Martin, Laura, and some of his hands walked over to admire the horses. Nathan got a hug from Laura and a back slap from Martin as he stepped off the wagon.

I got the pump going and filled the water trough as Nathan got caught up.

“Which one is Rio?” asked Martin.

I walked him over and reached up to Rio and gave her a nose rub. “This is the girl,” I told him.

“I thought so,” he said and nodded, looking her over carefully. “I’ll grant you, she looks fast just standing still.”

“Pa said her name means ‘river’ in Spanish,” I smiled. “He probably gave her that name because he couldn’t translate ‘Express Train.’”

I stayed just long enough to water my horse and thank Martin again before heading back. I checked our back trail carefully and was pleased to see we hadn’t been followed.

After returning from Martin’s place I stayed busy around the ranch doing repairs. I cleaned out the broken glass that remained in the window frames and just left them. I would need to order new panes, but I just couldn’t be bothered right now.

That evening I had a quiet ceremony for the lone sharpshooter. I had no idea if he was a religious man, but I read the Good Book over him for a while anyway. I buried him deep on that knoll in the hopes he might haunt the next sharpshooter.

If Patterson wanted to pressure me to quit the Cup race, he couldn’t do it by threatening the ranch hands or the horses. The only soul on the place beside

me was the roan Lucas, and he had no complaints—he had the run of the hay barn and could spend a week in there getting fat and lazy.

Maybe now I could keep a step ahead of Patterson.

Chapter 24

Friday, just about dinnertime, I watched another rider turn off the road and gallop up the lane towards the house. It was Doc. I stepped out the back door of the house and waved him over as he neared and I led him inside.

He was shaken—something had really rattled him.

“What is it, Doc?”

“Someone’s taken Mary.”

The floor felt like it fell from underneath my feet.

Doc reached into his pocket and handed me a note. In block letters on rough brown paper the note read: “FINISH SECOND.”

“It was pinned to her horse’s saddle blanket,” he explained. “She’d taken a ride and she didn’t come back.”

Her horse, Twister, had been turned loose and eventually the filly walked back to the barn where Doc had found it.

Patterson showed me once again his vicious side—the man was deranged. Just thinking about her being held by him made me want to smash him. It had never crossed my mind that Mary might be in danger from Patterson. Men that abused women were asking for a lynching—only someone truly desperate would do this.

Would he harm her? I really didn’t know, but I wouldn’t give him a chance to think about it. It was my feud and my fault if Mary got hurt—Doc knew and I knew it, but he never said a word about it.

“I’m going to go get her, Doc. Are you coming along?”

“Just try and leave without me,” he replied firmly.

I nodded to him, picked up my rifle and headed for the barn.

I knew that Doc wanted the law in on this, but he had come to my place instead of into town for the sheriff. He knew as well as I did that hours would slip by convincing the sheriff that Patterson was behind this. The sheriff would also need a warrant and he’d gather a posse—all the while burning up time.

I saddled Lucas and stuffed extra cartridges and a small bottle of coal oil in the saddlebags. I wasn’t sure if anyone was watching the place from the woodlot, but at this point I really didn’t care, so we rode right down the lane and turned west on the road.

We needed an old warrior like Nathan in on this, so we rode hard to Martin’s place to fetch him and some fresh horses. Of course, once Martin got wind of what happened he expected to be asked to join up too—but I never asked.

“No hard feelings, I hope,” I told him, “but three men will be enough. Without you here at the ranch, I’d worry that they’d try and harm us here.”

What I left unsaid was the fact he had a child on the way. The grateful look I got from Laura proved I had made the right decision. Martin had a wistful look on his face as we rode out.

“You think Patterson has Mary at his place?” Nathan asked.

“Most likely,” I agreed, “but we’ll stop in and pay a visit to Blake on the way. Training his horses means he’s at Patterson’s place nearly every day—maybe he saw something.”

* * * * *

Blake’s ranch was Northeast of Lexington near Salt Lick. North Elkhorn Creek rambled in big loops in the area as it flowed west and then east and nearly surrounded his place. His ranch house and barn were tucked against the face of a bluff overlooking the floodplain of the creek.

The three of us rode into his yard carefully. We had our rifles in hand and were in a bad temper to boot. Blake was adjusting the load on a packhorse and watched us ride up, thoughtful like.

“Blake, my name is Sam Carson.”

He nodded mechanically, and then it seemed my name registered and he took another look at me with a start.

“Sure, I know you, Carson,” he said. “I knew your Daddy, too.” He looked at me and then Doc and Nathan, and our rifles. “Why the visit Carson? And why the rifles?”

My rifle was across my knees and if not lined up directly on him, it had him covered. Doc didn’t say a word, just sat on his horse and stared at him. Nathan had no expression on his face at all—he was ready for anything and it didn’t matter what it was.

“We’re here to look around.” I pulled the hammer back and his face went pale, “I’m hoping you’ll lend a hand.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Anyone in the house?” I asked him.

He shook his head no.

“Check the house, Nathan.”

Nathan swung down and stepped around Blake and walked into the house. In a few moments he came out, shaking his head.

“Now the barn.”

Nathan walked across the yard and slid a door aside and went inside.

“What are you looking for?” asked Blake.

I stayed silent and kept the rifle on him. Nathan re-emerged, shaking his head.

“Your partner, Patterson, kidnapped a young woman by the name of Mary O’Connor,” I told Blake, and motioned to Doc. “Mary’s his daughter.”

Blake was only worried about his own hide as he heard the news.

“I had nothing to do with that!” he said worriedly. “I saw her when they brought her to Patterson’s ranch—that’s when I decided I’d had enough. Patterson hired me to train his horses—that’s all! I wanted nothing to do with taking a woman!”

I believed him, but I kept him on the hook.

“It really doesn’t matter if you helped or not,” I said frankly. “You’re in it up to your neck and you’re going to hang right along with Patterson.” I reached into my saddlebag for a coil of braided rawhide and tossed it to Nathan.

“Tie his hands.”

“Now see here!” Blake exploded. “You’ve got no right to do that!”

“I guess this gives me the right, for now.” I motioned with my rifle, aimed right at his chest. “No reason to worry if you’re innocent. We’re just gathering anyone who was involved—we’ll sort it out later.”

“But I had nothing to do with taking the girl!” Blake’s eyes were showing white and the pitch of his voice was higher—there was no reason for him to think we wouldn’t string him up.

“You had no idea what he was up to?”

“Patterson keeps everything to himself,” he said bitterly. “I see him sometimes around the stables, but I try not to have anything to do with him—everything ends up in his pockets.”

His shoulders slumped. “I might as well tell you—I crossed him and I know it’s only a matter of time before he kills me.” He looked at us for sympathy, but quickly realized he wasn’t getting any from us.

“Anyway, I’m leaving and all I have left are the clothes on my back and a few horses.” He nodded to the coral where Fortress, Saffron, and a few other horses were tied in a string.

“We know about Titan, Dakota, and the other horses,” I told him.

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I told Patterson it wouldn’t work,” he muttered. “Too many people know those horses.” Blake was beginning to see that all the risk was his, yet the payoff went to Patterson.

“If you want to live, I suggest you start talking. Where is he keeping her? In the main house?”

He shook his head. “No, they walked her over to the guest house. A couple of guards are watching her.”

I asked him some more questions about the layout of the house and guesthouse.

He told us that when he was training at Patterson’s ranch, most of the hired hands were gunman and they didn’t know horses at all.

“He’s got half dozen slaves to clean the stables and groom the horses. One of them, Andrew, oversees the others when I’m not there.”

I asked him a few more questions, but he swore he hadn’t known about Patterson’s plans for Mary.

“Listen, that’s all I know—you’ve got to believe me,” he pointed to the packhorse. “I’ve got nothing left. Let me go and you’ll never see me again.”

I looked to the Doc. “Your call.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t stop riding until you cross the Missouri,” Doc told Blake gruffly.

“I can go?”

“We’re not lawmen. I’ll not stop you.”

Blake never looked back as he trotted what was left of his string of horses down the lane and turned west.

We turned east for Patterson’s ranch and Mary.

* * * * *

I led Nathan and Doc through the trees and brush to the clearing near Patterson’s pasture about an hour before dusk. We tied the horses then crawled to a spot under the overhanging branches of a big witch hazel to a gap in the brush that overlooked the ranch. I’d walked Titan through this same gap in the brush just a few days ago. The fence boards that I had loosened were just a few yards to our left and we had Patterson’s place laid out in front of us.

The lane from the road led straight to a circular drive in front of a two-story sawn-plank house. To the left of the house, closer to us, another lane led from the circle to a carriage house and blacksmith shop. Two long, low stables were

a short distance from the carriage house and behind them was a large hay barn.

The building that Blake mentioned was a small guest cottage and was about 50 yards behind the main ranch house. I looked the place over with my field glasses and spotted a man under the roof of the porch near the front door. The sun was making its way down below the trees and he was almost lost in the shadows as the light began to fade. If he was a guard, then maybe Mary was still inside the cottage.

I told Doc about the man on the porch and handed him the glasses. "Aye, I see him," he said. He looked the place over and then handed the glasses to Nathan.

"I don't like the look of that drive in front of the main house," Doc said, shaking his head. "If we go up that lane from the road, its wide open and they're too many windows overlooking it."

Nathan agreed. "It's a damn trap, alright!" he muttered from behind the glasses.

"What about that guest house?" I asked. "That could be a trap, too."

"Aye, it could," said Doc, "the whole place smells like a trap, doesn't it?"

"Somebody in the windows of the main house," said Nathan, handing me the glasses.

I took another look. It was near the end of evening stables; the ranch hands had already moved the horses into the pasture in front of us and were now mucking out the stalls. I watched the windows of the ranch house and saw a face peering out, then pull back.

"They're expecting us," I said. "I was thinking we could do this without gunfire."

We all thought about that for a few minutes. They were out there to ambush us. We weren't taking Mary without a fight.

So be it.

"The question is, where are the other hands?" asked Doc.

I nodded. "There's one at the cottage, maybe one inside it. Trouble is, I didn't ask how Blake how many men Patterson's got on his payroll."

Nathan spoke up. "I don't know how many, but I know they're inside those buildings, waiting for us."

"The first thing I need to do, before they know we're here, is to get into that guest house and find Mary. You get ready to keep the guard busy in front of the cottage in case I get delayed," I told Doc.

"No, Sam, I'm going in." He didn't even look at me.

"But Doc, there could be somebody inside—you might have to shoot somebody."

"I took an oath as a doctor, but tonight I'm here for my daughter—Lord help anyone who gets in my way."

All right. I could understand that.

"We need to give you some time to get her out of there," I told him.

"That's the truth," said Nathan. "We need to keep them busy somehow."

I looked the place over again and had an idea. I handed the glasses over to Doc. "Look at that wagon next to the barn. If that were to catch fire, they'd need to scramble to try and move it to keep the barn from catching fire. Luckily, I just happened to bring some coal oil."

I admit I was still sore about Patterson burning down my new stud barn.

Doc looked the wagon over and a slow grin spread across his face from under the field glasses. He put the glasses down and looked at me. For the first time today his worry for Mary lifted a little.

“You just ‘happened’ to bring coal oil?” He snorted and shared a look with Nathan. “Firing that wagon would sure would keep them busy, all right.”

“Especially if I give them a dusting,” said Nathan, patting his rifle. “I’ll hunker down behind that tree,” he pointed to the big oak rooted between the pasture fence and the guesthouse. “I can cover you and keep an eye on the wagon, too.”

Nathan had a score to settle, too. He had the right idea, covering the cottage from behind.

“If you leave that pasture gate open on your way to the guesthouse,” I told Doc, “Nathan and I will push all his horses in front of us ...”

“And straight into the yard and down the drive,” Doc finished with a nod.

It would just be too bad if Patterson’s horses didn’t get any rest the night before the big race.

* * * * *

We sat quietly for a time, worried about Mary, waiting for the sky to dim. Mary was strong and she knew her strengths—many had underestimated her because she was lovely to look at, graceful and considerate. There was a rod of steel in that girl.

“It’s time,” I whispered and Nathan walked back to fetch our horses. I stepped up to the fence and pushed the nail-pegged fence boards off the posts and carried them off to the side.

Nathan handed me Aladdin’s reins while Doc was leading Mary’s horse, Trickster. She wore a halter and was clipped to a rope lead for Doc to carry—so far she’d behaved very well.

I headed to the right and Nathan went left and we started the horses in the pasture towards the gate. Anything unnatural will spook a horse and set it running, so I pulled out an old feedbag and snapped it taut and made strange noises with it.

Horses are herd animals and if one animal senses danger and starts trotting away, it’s only natural that others start leaving too. Soon I had them heading in Doc’s direction—he had walked the horses straight across the pasture and through the gate, quietly working his way to the back of the guest cottage. It was risky to walk in the open with a guard on the cottage porch, but Doc impressed me with his nerve—he got there without raising the alarm.

The horses in the pasture could see the gate was open and most of them headed that way when we got near them. Soon we had a steady stream passing through and trotting into the yard. I wanted to get as close to the cottage as I could without being seen and my chance cropped up when three horses split from the herd, swung left and started to head in the direction of the cottage.

The noise of twenty or so head of horses passing by finally roused someone and I’d just reached the hay barn when a hand at the ranch house started swearing and cussing up a storm. I had to grin as I pictured him, astounded, seeing all the horses trotting by. The noise had also caught the attention of the guard at the cottage—I saw a lighter shadow move under the porch as he walked out from under the eaves to see what was going on.

I was lying along Aladdin's neck and it was a simple thing to follow the horses as they walked past the porch, then rise up and emerge from the darkness with my rifle pointed at him.

"Don't move!" I hissed. The sound of me cocking the hammer on my rifle backed up my words and he didn't move an inch. "Now put the rifle on the ground."

He laid the rifle down and stepped back. I kept my aim on him as I slid off the saddle and put my boot on his gun. "Who's inside?" I asked.

The night exploded as someone shot at me from close range, the big caliber slug screaming past my ear and tearing a hole through the siding on the house. I turned and fired in one motion and then dropped to one knee. I'd already had the hammer back and unlike him, I had a good target, a muzzle flash, to help my aim.

I had a good idea that I hit him, but I never saw him. Our exchange stirred up the men in the ranch house and suddenly rifles opened fire, peppering the porch and the front of the little cottage like hail from a sudden thunderstorm. I gathered up Aladdin and ducked around the corner for cover. I'm not sure what happened to that gent on the porch, but his friends didn't seem to mind if he got in the way of a bullet.

Nathan started firing the Sharps from behind the big oak tree 30 yards behind me, sending .52 caliber slugs into the back of the ranch house, shattering windows and tearing up window trim. The gunmen in the ranch house were returning fire and the roar was deafening.

I jogged around to the back of the cottage. I could make out the shape of the two horses behind the house, but no sign of Doc. I edged along the back towards the first window, taking it slow and easy—I didn't want to get shot by Doc or anyone else that might be in there. I inched closer to the window near a dark shadow that turned out to be Doc's jacket draped on the window ledge. I took a listen at the open window and didn't hear a sound.

"Doc!" I called out and ducked down below the sill.

"Sam!" came the reply, and I stood up and saw him leading Mary to the window. My heart was pounding in my ears—I was desperately trying to see her face in the dark night, look into her eyes so I would know if she was hurt. She didn't hesitate, but held out her arms and I lifted her over the windowsill with a hug.

"You're a bonny lad, Sam Carson," she whispered in my ear as I set her down. Those few words were all I needed to hear—Mary was going to be all right.

"Doc?"

I lent a hand as Doc climbed out of the window. He pulled his jacket off the sill and stepped toward me to speak in my ear.

"There's a young man in there that's going to have a headache in the morning." I could see his white teeth as he grinned. "He heard me at the window, but forgot about Mary—she clubbed him on the head."

"He needed a bath something awful," she shuddered.

"We could use that fire you talked about."

"Right," I nodded. "Wait until the flames get high then head back to the woods."

The worry I felt for Mary turned into burning outrage in my belly. I was here to fight—and now I was free to strike. I climbed onto Aladdin and eased up to

the corner of the cottage. I knew that soon men would start approaching the cottage on foot when they realized we weren't shooting back. We needed this fire as a distraction, but also the bright flames would destroy their night sight and allow us to fade back into the shadows.

I spun Aladdin around and sprinted for the barn. It took just a few seconds, but that ride between the cottage and the hay barn seemed much longer. We made the backside of the barn without drawing fire and I ground-hitched the horse and walked to the corner nearest the cottage for a look. I didn't see anything moving, so I stayed low and crept around the corner and approached the wagon. I uncorked the cap and reached up and poured the oil onto the wood deck and struck a sulphur match. The match caught right away and the flame raced along the wood boards, devouring the oil and lighting the wood on fire. I ducked down and scrambled for the cover of the barn as lead started flying in my direction.

The wood deck of the wagon was tinder dry and soon the barnyard was brightly lit from flames that were six feet high. I kept an eye out from the corner of the barn and spotted someone carrying a rifle, creeping around the edge of the light, headed for the guesthouse. I hit him high, spinning him around and putting him down hard.

That shot gave away my position and soon lead was buzzing through the night like swarming locusts. I had to move. Already the corner of the barn was getting hammered from rifles near the ranch house, big slugs chewing fist-sized holes out of the barn siding. I took a last look around the corner—the siding next to the burning wagon was starting to smoke and turn black—it was only moments until the barn would catch fire.

I climbed back on Aladdin and staying in the shadows of the barn, I eased into the darkness, circling around to the pasture gate. A flicker of movement appeared next to the oak tree and Aladdin snorted and flinched—the gleam of a rifle barrel! The rifle fired as I rolled out of the saddle and I shot back at the rifle flash.

I stayed on the ground, watching the area near the tree. I wasn't sure I hit him and he could be waiting for me to move too. A few minutes crawled by until my eyes adjusted and then I found the shooter slumped against the trunk of the tree, his rifle on the ground in front of him.

I mounted again and Aladdin guided me across the pasture. Nathan appeared out of the gloom and I followed him to Mary and Doc, waiting in the road. As we turned for home, I looked back and I could see a glow through the trees. Maybe they could save the barn or maybe not. Either way, it didn't matter to me.

We got Mary back.

Chapter 25

I woke up the next morning in Doc's barn. Nathan and I had decided to bunk there after last night's skirmish at Patterson's place—it seemed wise to stay clear of the ranch and to go somewhere unexpected.

I got up and brushed the straw off my clothes, lit a lantern and checked the horses. Aladdin was not happy spending the night inside a barn in a stall, but

eventually she quieted when I started to curry her. She knew the routine—a currycomb and a brushing meant a saddle blanket and a saddle, and that meant a morning ride. As I made small circles with the currycomb it seemed to relax her.

Nathan was already saddling his trail horse for an early start—he was riding to Martin’s place to fetch Rio for the race today.

The side door latch sounded and Mary stepped in—she must have been waiting for the light of the lantern. She offered each of us a cup of coffee.

“Oh, bless you my child!” said Nathan delightedly, smothering the cup in his fist and drawing a big gulp. He slid the barn door open and led his horse into the dim light of morning. I took a look outside at the weather—the morning dawned clear and calm. A storm had moved past in the night, shedding some rain and bringing cool air that might last several days.

Mary walked over to Lucas—her eyes hidden in shadows, she picked up another comb and began to curry near his shoulder.

I scrubbed Aladdin’s entire coat, stopping often to knock the dirt and dead hairs out of the comb. She was a little sensitive around her shoulder blades, like some horses are, so I used a lighter touch there. I got the brush out to sweep the dirt from her coat, using short, sharp strokes to get the bristles of the brush through her hairs to the skin.

“How do you feel?” I asked Mary, letting the silence stretch on as long as I could.

“A little tired,” she admitted. “I didn’t get much sleep.”

I wanted to ask her about how she was treated yesterday, but I knew Mary wouldn’t say a word until she was ready to.

“Ready for a little warm-up ride this morning?” I asked.

I could hear the smile in her voice. “I’m ready.”

It was full sunrise and Aladdin was nearly prancing as I led her out the barn and through the gate to the lane. I didn’t get to ride her often enough and she was letting me know it. Mary and I trotted down to the road and around a bend until we had a few miles of open road behind us.

I gave Aladdin a pat on the neck.

“It was my fault Patterson went after you,” I told Mary. “I’m sorry you got caught up in our fight.”

“It’s not your fault, Sam. What can you do when someone believes they are above the law?”

“Did they harm you?”

“Oh, no. He was a perfect gentleman. He’s an odd man—quite charming at times, but someone you could never trust. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, I think so. Someone that says all the right things but it doesn’t quite ring true?”

“Yes, something like that.” She was quiet a moment. “One thing more—is there a chance he could be taking orders from someone? He said a few things about being burdened with ‘following orders.’ Does that make sense?”

I shrugged. As far as I knew, Patterson worked alone. I was just happy to see that she was all right and back safely.

If I had listened more carefully to Mary, I could have saved myself a lot of grief.

* * * * *

We walked a quarter mile before Mary asked, “What’s your plan?”

“My plan?”

“You can’t fool me,” she looked at me accusingly. “You are hatching something and I’d like in on it.”

“Well, I do hope to cause some trouble today for Patterson,” I admitted with a smile. “A few weeks back I wrote a letter to Titan’s owner to tell him that his horse was being used as a double for another horse. At first I thought if Patterson were caught with stolen horses, he’d do some jail time,” I explained, “but Graham says that horse theft is no longer a major crime; it’s just a misdemeanor.”

“A slap on the wrist,” she nodded.

“Graham received a telegram that the owner will be at the race today. We can reunite Titan and his owner...”

“And cause all kinds of grief for Patterson.”

“That’s the idea,” I agreed, “but the Association may not even ban him from racing—he has someone inside at the Jockey Club. It’s obvious Patterson doesn’t know horses very well and he could easily blame the whole scheme on Blake, his trainer.”

“You can’t prove it.”

“No. So far, I can’t prove any of it. I know he was in Saratoga a while back and several men were beaten and fires were set when he stole the horses, but there’s no proof or witnesses.”

“And then he showed up here and killed Pa,” Mary said.

“And Pa—I can’t let him get away with that.”

Mary was quiet for a moment, and then put it together.

“Patterson will know you were behind this,” she said. “He’s going to come gunning for you.”

“I hope so,” I told her flatly, “especially now that he has attacked you. He’s hurt everything that I hold dear.”

She didn’t flinch, but eventually nodded that she understood. I was tired of fighting Patterson’s shadow. It was the last day of the racing season and he would just drop out of sight unless I acted. If I could provoke him enough to take a swipe at me personally, I could draw him out into the open and finish it.

Chapter 26

I took the back way out of the ranch and circled around to Lexington. David Graham was waiting for me at the backstretch gate, right on time, but a little anxious.

“I’ve been with Floyd, the owner of Titan, all morning,” he told me. “He arrived with a Federal man, a Deputy U.S. Marshal. He also brought Judge Baker from Frankfort.”

“And you’re worried that I’m seeing things.”

“Well, no, it’s ah, I’m out of my element here,” he said. “I barely know the back end of a horse from the front.”

“The judge makes you nervous.”

“I occasionally argue cases in front of him, and yes, I’m just a little nervous,” he admitted. “I had no idea your letter would light such a fire in New York.” He let out a sigh. “It’s never dull around you, is it?”

“It probably would be best if they met the horses when they check in with the steward at the first barn.”

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“No one is going to be happy about this. All the betting pools will be skewed once word gets out they’re scratched.”

Graham shrugged. “Other horses have dropped out before. I just hope they didn’t get wind of this and show up with the correct horses.”

I didn’t want to think of that. “If the horses don’t check out, tell them that Patterson must have been tipped off and Titan is around somewhere.”

Graham’s jaw dropped. “If the horses don’t check out?”

“It could happen.” Something felt amiss, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

I saw Nathan entering the backstretch area with Rio.

“I have to go now, but we’ll talk later,” I told Graham. “Do it like we planned and keep your fingers crossed.”

I turned and met up with Nathan in front of the horse gate.

“Any trouble?”

He shook his head. “I watched my back trail and didn’t see anyone at all.” Rio looked good; her coat looked sleek despite the road trip to the track. I led her through the gate to the steward’s office to check her in.

“Mr. Carson,” the racing secretary stepped forward, “we have a slight rule change today for the Phoenix Cup race. A steward will be in the presence of the horse at all times—this is to ensure the race is conducted fairly.”

I nodded. I had suggested the idea to Blackwell last week to keep Patterson from drugging his horses, and it appeared he had agreed. Rio had a six-pound handicap to carry this race as she had finished first in her qualifying race, but I’m not sure it means much to a fit, thousand pound horse. The secretary handed me two three-pound lead weights that slide into pockets on each side of the saddle.

I winced when I looked at the starting board on the wall—Rio had drawn number 15 during the bottle draw for starting position, which put her on the outside at the starting line. It couldn’t be much worse than that. It would be up to Robby to get Rio off the line fast enough to avoid the pile up in the first turn.

* * * * *

All the horses racing in the Cup were assigned to the same barn. As I followed Nathan and Rio through the barn to our stall, I noticed that Blackwell was already there. I shook hands with several other owners and we offered each other half-hearted best wishes.

I took a moment to look Rio over. Her ears were flickering, picking up the sounds of the other horses and the chatting of a great many people in the barn.

As Nathan groomed her, I checked her legs for hot spots. I was going over her carefully, more from feeling nervous about the race than anything else.

“How did she train this week?” I asked him.

I saw Nathan give me a look out of the corner of his eye. “She did just fine,” he told me, “And no matter how you might fuss over her, she’s going to be ready for this race when the time is right.”

“All right, I can take a hint.”

I left the stall before my nervousness infected Rio and walked down the alley and out to the backstretch area. My heart sank as I spotted Patterson and his horses arriving—he had cleared the steward’s check at the first barn, which

meant he hadn't brought Titan. I leaned my back against the barn and watched them approach—it was Fortress and Saffron with him all right.

I groaned. Seeing the horses made me realize that I'd made a mistake yesterday with Blake. I told him I knew about Titan and Blake hadn't left the area, but took the horses and his news straight to Patterson.

There was some comfort knowing that Patterson had spent a small fortune in entry fees for horses that had almost no chance to win. To him, it was a small loss of cash for saving face.

But the question was, where was Titan? I hope Graham didn't get too sore at me for losing the horse.

* * * * *

Robby came along a few minutes later and was surprised to find me outside.

"Nathan thinks I'm too nervous and might upset the horse," I told him.

That got a hoot out of him, and we talked about the race.

I told him we had drawn the far outside position. "We're in a hole right from the start. Try for maybe third in the first corner—don't be afraid to go two horses wide there."

Robby nodded.

"Topper is a speed loving horse, so stay in touch with her through the back and the final turn," I continued.

Robby gave me a thoughtful look, and then smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr. Sam, I see you know something. I won't worry about the other horses—I'll watch Topper."

"Good."

We walked back to Rio's stall and lead her out to the saddling area. Patterson was already standing near the fence watching his two horses getting ready. Fortress and Saffron had not been seriously training for several weeks and they just weren't fit.

Blackwell was calmly standing near Topper as they readied the big black gelding. Topper had drawn lane number 5 for the horse—a good starting position.

Finally it was parade time, and the horses filed down the horse path and into the grandstand area. Rio looked eager—she was a quick learner and she knew why she was on the track. I walked to the main mezzanine area, my eyes torn between Rio and Topper who was showing the confidence of a seasoned winner.

The lineup was good and the horses were spread out fairly at the start. The starting rope was flung into the air and in an instant the horses lunged into a gallop.

At the start Robby picked his way towards the rail, flashing past some runners and weaving through traffic and overtaking other slower horses. Nearing the corner a horse in front of her, a big gray, swung wide right and slowed directly in her path! I watched in disbelief as Robby had to rein in Rio—he had no room on either side—then make his way around the big oaf and rejoin the race.

Unbelievable! What was the jockey of that big gray thinking?"

As they left the first turn Rio was shoulder to shoulder with the slower horses in the middle of the pack and Robby took her wide to give her room.

Topper was in the lead at a very fast pace. Through the backstretch Rio had inched up the line a few places and as they entered the far turn she was far

back, but in fourth; Topper had at least a seven-length lead going around the final corner. The jockey on Topper quickened the pace through the turn and at the same time a small gap appeared between the two horses in front of Rio.

“Now, Robby! Now!” I yelled in the crowd from behind my field glasses.

Robby asked Rio to shoot through the gap and the young filly responded, bolting between the two horses. Once she was clear, Robby angled her back outside for a clear run and she was chasing Topper down when she ran out of track. Topper won by two lengths.

Oh, I was sick! The foul at the start had killed any chance she might have had. She and Robby had nearly pulled off a comeback, but she had spotted Topper too much of a lead.

I tried to be gracious as I reached the winners circle and gave Blackwell a handshake and a “well done.” I watched from the stands as the racing secretary and the head steward presented him the Phoenix Hotel Cup and a bank draft for the fifteen thousand dollar prize.

Nathan led Rio back to the barn for a bath and a grooming. Robby was heartsick.

“Mr. Sam,” he said with tears in his eyes, “that other jockey moved his horse in front of us on purpose.”

“He what?”

“It’s true. He looked backwards several times, under his arm like this.” Robby leaned forward and stretched out his arms in front of him, then ducked his head down and glanced under his arm. “He was out there to slow us down.”

I tried to recall what I’d seen of the start of the race, but I’d been watching Rio—and up ahead, Topper. I’d only noticed the gray when it was directly in front of Rio.

“He put his horse in front of us on purpose?”

Robby stood very still and then looked around us to make sure we weren’t overheard.

“Mr. Sam. I am a good rider—one of the best. This is what happened.”

“I believe you,” I put my hand on his shoulder. “It was my fault for not asking you to take the safer route around the outside.”

“She is a fine horse, Mr. Sam. She will win many races.”

I managed to give Robby a smile even though I was torn up on the inside—had the jockey on the gray been paid off to slow Rio down?

I took out my betting sheet and found the gray wearing red and white check was going by the name of Gabriel. Gabriel’s name rang a bell—she was owned by Blackwell!

I walked back to the barn and found Blackwell surrounded by a crowd in the alley that had gathered around Topper.

Blackwell met with me a firm handshake. “Bad luck, Sam,” he said, “strange things happen on a race course—you just never know.”

“Did your jockey say anything to you?” I asked him.

“Well, just that he’d made a hash of things. The horse had a loose shoe and he was going outside to get out of the way and, well, you had the bad luck to be there.”

There are only six or seven thin little nails holding a shoe on and they come off all the time. It might have been pinching him or he could have been stepping on a “hot” nail—a nail hitting a sensitive area of his hoof. I suppose it would explain why the jockey was slowing so quickly, but why go outside? Robby felt

we had been slowed on purpose. I had the sense that we'd been robbed—but was it because of design or by lady luck? It just didn't seem likely that Blackwell would purposely slowdown another horse in order to win a race.

Chapter 27

Patterson had scouted out the ranch a month ago and remembered the clearing in the woods that had a good field of fire—the distance wasn't bad and even the barn behind the house was within range. He settled in and rested the rifle along a fallen log and settled in to wait. Patterson had his rim fire Henry this morning—he didn't need the buffalo gun for this kind of work. The Henry was a small caliber model, but extremely accurate.

The sun was just rising yet work on the ranch was in full swing—Carson was already riding horses in the lower pasture and should return soon.

Nichols and his riders were stationed down the road and out of sight, waiting for the sound of gunfire to come running.

The old slave that worked for Carson appeared from behind the house and walked to a stack of firewood and gathered an armload. He had made several trips before Carson and some other riders appeared at the pasture gate. Patterson grunted in surprise when he realized that one of the riders was Mary—she was comfortably atop a big thoroughbred mare and it appeared that she actually had ridden it!

Carson handed off his horse to one of his hands and walked towards the freight wagon, saying something to the old man. Patterson got in position and had the back of Carson's head in his sights as he turned towards the barn. Carson was making a careless mistake by walking in the open and Patterson was there to make him pay for it.

Carson slowed and stopped as he reached for the barn door and Patterson slowly put weight on the trigger.

"You owe me one," he muttered as he inched the sights away from Carson's head to his left shoulder.

* * * * *

The racing season was over, but the morning runs continued. Mary seemed subdued and even running Rio all out for five furlongs didn't bring a smile. Ben and Matthew were also quiet and they seemed to sense that there were problems on the ranch.

I had feed bills due—big bills acquired feeding the thoroughbreds. I knew when we started racing that the stakes were high and I might lose everything. After all, the same thing happened to Pa when he was young. The winnings for the year were just enough to cover expenses after losing the thousand-dollar entry fee for the Cup race and it was nobody's fault but my own. The loss was due more to my poor race strategy than a sign of Rio's ability—I should have had her running wide and staying clear of the field.

The question about Blackwell's horse kept nagging me. When his horse swerved and slowed Rio nearly to a standstill, was it as deliberate as it appeared?

The sun was just clearing the trees and we all seemed to be distracted as we walked the horses back to the stable.

I was headed for the barn when I got slugged from behind—it felt like a horse had kicked me. I found myself on the bent over, confused, with the sound of a rifle in my ears. A piercing sting in my shoulder erupted into a blaze of pain and a wave of nausea choked me—I grit my teeth as my head swam. I reached up to the fire in my shoulder and wrenched my hand away covered in blood! I'd been shot!

My heart was racing and I was gulping air when another shot rang out. I looked around and found Nathan lying on his back near the wagon, not moving. "Nathan!"

I crouched low and ran towards him and the rifle kept firing, searching me out. I reached him and dragged him with me under the wagon. He was breathing, but he was hit hard and blood was soaking his shirt. I tore his shirt away from the bloody area and found a bullet hole in his chest. I tore a corner of his shirt off, struggling with numbness in my left arm and rolled the cloth patch up and pushed it into the bullet hole. It immediately turned red with blood, but the bleeding seemed to slow.

I heard riders approaching and I drew the Colt, waiting for them. As they crested the hill the masked riders slowed and covered Mary and the boys with rifles. A rider saw me and lifted his rifle to shoot Ben.

"All right! All right!" I yelled. I had no choice—I tossed the Colt aside and he turned his rifle my way as the other rider gathered the reins of the horses. As they turned to go I realized that I had seen that hat before—it was a hat with silver studs.

"Bob!" I called.

He whipped his head around and lifted his rifle. I held my breath and time seemed to slow as I braced myself for the slug.

* * * * *

A cloud of gun smoke hovered in the air in front of Patterson and he waited impatiently for the smoke to clear. He thought his shot on Carson was pretty good, just where he wanted it. He also aimed a little high when he hit the slave in the chest. If it was his lucky day, he might live.

Nichols and his men had reached the gate and were gathering horses. Two men split off and rode after the thoroughbreds near the barn—Patterson had told the men to take every horse in sight.

He watched as his men gathered up the horses and turned to go. He nodded in satisfaction—the men were under explicit orders not to fire. Patterson had his reasons for the raid, and he made it clear they would regret it if they didn't follow his orders.

"Bob!" Carson called. One of the riders stopped and turned with his rifle up, ready to fire.

Patterson quickly put his rifle on the man, set his sights on Taylor's chest and slowly exhaled. He was drawing up the tension on the trigger when the man spun his horse and rode away. Patterson shrugged. Taylor was expendable and Patterson wouldn't have thought twice about shooting him. He needed Carson alive.

Patterson was satisfied. He turned and walked back through the trees to his horse, quietly humming an old tune.

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“Let’s go!” the other rider called, leading the horses. Bob lowered his rifle and spurred his horse to follow him.

I was shaking and I took a big breath as he rode away. I felt foolish to have called out like I had, yet now I knew Patterson was behind this.

Mary and the two boys came running. Between the four of us, we moved Nathan to a groundsheet and carried him inside.

“There’s a saddle horse in the second stable,” I told Ben.

“I’ll fetch Doc,” he nodded and ran out the door.

Mary had just started to cut away Nathan’s shirt to get a better look at his wound when he began to come around.

“Thirsty,” he whispered. Mary gave him a sip of water and he closed his eyes and slept.

“That’s a good sign,” she whispered to me. Her gaze dropped to my shoulder and the bloodstain.

“Sam! You’re hurt!”

“I’m doing all right. Just do what you can for Nathan—please.”

I’m sure Mary had seen a lot of doctoring through the years. She looked at Nathan’s wound and asked me to help roll him over onto his side. She took the rest of his shirt off and draped a sheet over his chest.

She began to help me out of my shirt.

“How’s Nathan?”

Her green eyes were very deep and she looked at me with hesitation.

“Please, Mary.”

“The bullet is still inside him—it didn’t pass through.”

“That sounds bad.”

She nodded. “Doc will have to go in and take it out.”

So, the odds for Nathan were long. She gently washed my shoulder with a warm, damp cloth.

“Thank goodness he missed! It just nicked you!” she said.

I could just see the wound in the corner of my eye—the bullet had burrowed a path through the muscle above my shoulder bone.

“You’re still bleeding a bit,” Mary said matter-of-factly, concentrating on cleaning out the wound, “but Doc will stitch you up good as new. You were lucky.”

I kept an eye on Nathan, hoping to see him wake up again. To ambush an unarmed man like that—it was wicked. When the time came to finish Patterson I decided he deserved the same compassion that he showed to Nathan and my Pa.

Ben arrived with Doc and he quickly checked on Nathan. He spent another minute looking me over and agreed with Mary.

“You were lucky,” he told me as he sewed me up with catgut. “These stitches will be strong for a week, then they start to dissolve and get weaker, so take it easy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kind of peculiar,” he went on. “Both of you were hit with a small caliber bullet. Maybe a .22 or so.”

We gently moved Nathan to the supper table—Mary had spread clean linen and Doc began to get ready to retrieve the bullet from Nathan’s chest.

Nathan was in good hands and I felt pressed—my best chance to get back what was stolen was to move fast.

Oddly, other than the nagging pain of my shoulder, I felt sharp. Deciding to go on the attack gave me a sense of freedom I hadn't felt before and my mind cleared. There was no pretense of civility in me anymore—I was going after him. He had stolen everything and I had nothing to lose.

Chapter 28

It was just nine in the morning when Patterson arrived in town and walked through the door of the Lucky Strike, stopping at the bar for a cup of coffee from Goldie.

“Say, if Sam Carson comes in asking for me, send him back, would you?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Patterson.”

He walked down the hall to the office door, rapped twice and stepped in. Blackwell sat at his desk and studied him from behind a newspaper.

“How'd it go?” he asked Patterson.

“Good. We got all the horses. They should be halfway to Louisville by now.”

“And Carson?”

“I got him. It was long range, but he went down.”

“Fine. One less trouble maker.” Blackwell folded up the newspaper and took out his pipe and began to fill it.

Patterson considered him and then asked, “How will you sell his horses? Won't the buyer know they're stolen?”

“You let me worry about that. I'll tell you what to do when the time comes.”

Patterson clenched his fists, yet his face remained calm. He wanted to reach out and grab Blackwell around the neck, shake some sense into him. He imagined the triumph of gunning him down right here at his desk, watching as his life drain away—to see in his eyes that Blackwell knew he'd been beaten.

The syndicate didn't operate with many rules, but one rule was golden—no murder in the ranks. Patterson needed Blackwell out of the picture, but he couldn't risk doing it himself. The syndicate had a long reach and Patterson had little doubt he would pay with his own life if word got out he had gunned down Blackwell. He settled down in his chair to wait, confident that a solution would arrive soon.

* * * * *

I was faced with a decision. Following the horses I could tell that they were being led northwest in the direction of Louisville. Patterson wouldn't follow the horses, I was sure of that. He would be in a public place, establishing an alibi and swearing that he had nothing to do with the morning's attack—he would be in Lexington.

Do I follow the horses or do I go after Patterson? I guess in the end it wasn't that hard of a decision.

As I rode into Lexington I was pretty sure I'd find Patterson where Dawson had told me he played cards: at the casino on Freemont Street, the Lucky Strike. I'd been in there once before when I was searching for him under the name of Reeves—I'd hit every dive up and down the red light district that week.

Now I had a face and a name and figured like a rat returning to his hidey-hole, most likely Patterson would be there.

I looked around the place a fair bit while tying Lucas to the hitching post, took a big breath and walked through the front door. The place was dimly lit and nearly empty with just a few customers scattered about and a single bartender. A keno dealer perked up when I glanced his way, but then went back to his solitaire game when I headed for the bar.

The pale-faced bartender watched me approach and wiped the wearied oak bar in front of him with a towel.

“What’d have?”

“Looking for Patterson.”

“Who’s asking?”

“Carson.”

He nodded and jerked his head to the right. “Down the hall.”

I walked through an alcove and turned down a hallway. My heart was racing, but my steps were sure. There were a couple of coal oil lamps on the wall and I could see a glimpse of the kitchen at the end of the hall and a door on the right.

As I walked down the hallway alarm bells were ringing in my head. The bartender had been expecting me and I felt like I was walking into a trapdoor of a wolf spider. I’d been pushed and prodded to arrive at this door—I knew it in the back of my mind—but I couldn’t stop now.

Patterson was sitting in a chair when I stepped through the door and he didn’t turn a hair when our eyes locked. I’d given chase as he expected I might.

I was stunned when I realized that sitting at the desk near him was—Blackwell!

Within a few heartbeats everything came into focus and I knew that the two men were working together. Blackwell had fooled me completely! He had me dancing like a puppet on a string!

Blackwell acted so quickly that I didn’t have a chance—he fired a pistol at me from under his desk. The round blew out a fist-sized chunk of wood from the desktop and was deflected slightly, hitting me in the left side, just above the belt.

I spun from the impact of the big slug and fell heavily against the doorframe, feeling like I’d been hit with a sledgehammer. There was no hesitation in Blackwell as he brought his Colt out from under the desktop, working the action and taking aim at me again.

My hand streaked for my own pistol, but I could see I was much, much too late.

Out of the corner of my eye Patterson made a move—with a polished motion he drew and shot Blackwell in the back. The room was filling with powder smoke, but I saw Blackwell gasp in surprise as Patterson’s bullet hit him and knocked him to the floor.

Patterson had used me as a diversion—he needed me here so he could catch Blackwell off-guard! Patterson had planned this ambush carefully, but his plan fell apart—Blackwell hadn’t finished me.

I was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall with my arm extended when Patterson turned towards me, pistol raised. The last thing he ever saw was the view right down the barrel of my Colt.

* * * * *

Gradually the smoke cleared as footsteps sounded in the hallway. Goldie the bartender looked in and behind him, peering around the corner, were a few saloon regulars. Goldie's jaw dropped when he took in the scene and he was near to bursting with questions, but he managed to swallow them. He turned to the cook who was standing nearby.

"Fetch the doctor over on Madison and then ask that lawman O'Leary to come by," he told him.

The cook turned to go.

"Wait up," I told him. I struggled and then stood up and leaned against the wall. "I'll find the Doc."

Blackwell's bullet had hit me and glanced off my hipbone, tearing some muscle on its way to burying itself into the wall. Blood was seeping into my shirt and down my leg, but pressing my left hand on the wound had slowed the flow. The tear in the muscles along my side was a fiery pain, but the shock of the bullet striking bone was a deep ache. I was starting to stiffen up and I knew I would be sore for weeks.

"Don't you think it would be best to wait for the law?" Goldie asked.

"They can find me if they want me." I holstered the Colt and held Goldie's eyes. "It was a fair fight."

Goldie was uneasy, but didn't make an effort to stop me as I made my way down the hall. A few men grumbled as I walked away, but I could care less.

I needed to find the doctor on Madison Street, wrap this wound so I could travel, and get back to the ranch. Nathan was in dire straits and I needed to be there.

Chapter 29

At times the ride back to the ranch was a blur, but Lucas knew the way home and all I needed to do was hold on.

The city doctor had stitched me up pretty good and wrapped a bandage around my waist.

"You're in no shape to travel," he told me gravely. "You'll pass out and fall off that horse and you'll split this wound wide open."

I told him it'd been a long time since I'd fallen off a horse.

Doctors see a fair share of fools in their line of work, and he decided I was a leading candidate.

Mary was waiting, keeping an eye out for me from the porch as I rode in. I managed to slide off Lucas without falling.

"How is he?" I asked.

Mary gasped as she saw the dried blood on my clothes. She turned and opened the door.

"Dad!" she called.

I reassured her that I was fine. I was still talking nonsense when my head began to spin and it all went dark.

* * * * *

The smell of bacon woke me up. Nothing like a bit of side meat frying in the pan to stir a hunger—and I was hungry. The sun was up and the morning light

was streaming in—I couldn't remember the last time the sun had caught me in bed. I turned to see who was at the stove when my left side reminded me why I had passed out.

I must have made a noise as Mary was at my side in an instant. She helped me sit up a bit and then put a mug of coffee in my paw.

"You sit still, Sam Carson. I'll have breakfast ready in a minute. There's no sense in tearing those stitches fidgeting around," she scolded me, but I could see the relief in her eyes that I was up and alert.

I turned my head and saw Nathan in his bed with a mug of coffee in his fist. His white teeth flashed in a smile and he raised his mug in a salute. He looked a little gray around the gills, but it was a fine sight to behold.

Well. This was all right then.

I sipped my coffee and thought about how to fetch my horses back. I was pretty sure Blackwell left tracks somewhere about where we might find them. I could enlist Titan's owner and his Deputy Marshall in the search—most likely they were together, stashed away on a ranch somewhere near Louisville.

Mary brought me a plate. I felt my chest constrict as I thought of how fine she looked in the early morning. As always, she could read me like a book and her green eyes laughed at me.

"You'll need to get stronger before you start courting me," she said, "and I don't hold much for a man that doesn't get up before the sun."

"But we'll talk?"

"Aye," she said softly, and she gave me a warm kiss.

Well. This was all right then.

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