

Huntsville

A Novel of Post Civil War Texas

by Glynn Rogers,

Published: 2013



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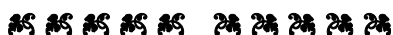
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This story is dedicated to the loving memory of Carol Lynn Rogers and Matthew Layne Rogers, two of my dear children who the Lord has called home. They were both taken in mid-life, and their passing has left a great hole in my heart.

Preface

Huntsville, Texas was founded in 1835 by Pleasant and Ephraim Gray as an Indian trading post, and the town was named for Huntsville, Alabama, former home of the Gray family. The post was ideally situated for trade with the Bidai, Alabama and Coushatta Indians who inhabited the region. Relations between these tribes and the early white settlers appears to have been peaceful. As trade along the Trinity River grew, and colonists arrived to exploit the timber and rich soil of the bottom lands, Huntsville became the center of increasing commercial activity. When the Civil War began in 1861, the population had grown to about 1,000 souls.

Huntsville is an historical novel. The story begins in 1874—nine years after Lee's Surrender—and the action takes place in and around this small southeast Texas town. Most, but not all, of the characters, places and incidents portrayed

are fictional, and these have been woven into the fabric of history in such a way that, hopefully, the reader will find it entertaining.

Most of the factual information about the town of Huntsville, Texas during the post Civil War period, was taken from a collection of personal accounts that were assembled into a book called *The History of Huntsville and Walker County*. Some facts were gleaned from *The Handbook of Texas Online*. The Eutaw House and Gibbs General Store mentioned in the tale actually existed during this period, and were located on opposite corners of Cedar and Jackson Streets at the courthouse square as the story indicates. Creath's saddlery and Hume's blacksmith shop were also in operation back then. The Oakwood Cemetery is still in use today, and is the burial place of General Sam Houston, hero of San Jacinto. The street names referred to in the story were the ones in use at that time, though many of the streets today bear different names.

The chief administrator of the Texas state prison at Huntsville has the unusual title of "Superintendent". In the story, rather than use this unwieldy five-syllable word, the author has chosen to use the more familiar term of "Warden". And those familiar with the town of Huntsville may notice that rather than being in the heart of town, the story location of the prison is a few miles out.

The general information on the Civil War, and the description of the reconstruction era in Texas, as related in the Prologue, is accurately depicted. The brief account of the Battle of Galveston commanded by Confederate General John Bankhead Magruder is true, as is the successful campaign against the Comanche Indians led by Texas Ranger Captain John Salmon Ford. Also, Ford's leadership role in the "Cavalry of the West" during the Civil War, is factual.

Much of the information on Texas history was taken from two comprehensive volumes: one entitled *LONE STAR—A History of Texas and Texans* written by T. R. Fehrenbach; and the other entitled *The Texas Rangers—A Century of Frontier Defense* written by Walter Prescott Webb. And a rich source of western lore was found among the pages of the Time-Life series of *The Old West*. With that said, the author invites you to read and enjoy.

Prologue

The American Civil War lasted almost exactly four years—from the first battle on April 12, 1861 when Confederate troops fired on Union forces at Fort Sumter—until Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. Over 600,000 brave men gave their lives in this bloody, fratricidal war—more than all the U.S. losses in WWI and WWII combined. Confederate fatalities totaled about 250,000, with Texans accounting for about ten percent.

It was not so much their defeat, but the onerous and corrupt reconstruction policies imposed on the South that instilled the resentment and hatred of the North that still smolders in the hearts of many southerners to this day. The reconstruction regime established in Texas was especially venal and oppressive.

President Lincoln's reconstruction plan for the South was one of compassion and humanitarian aid that would heal the emotional wounds and reunite the country. His credo was malice toward none and charity for all. But his charitable policies were bitterly opposed by a vengeful and militant group in the U. S. Congress known as the Republican Radicals. These men wanted to punish white southerners and confiscate their property. Though it has never been proven, there is credible evidence that John Wilkes Booth did not act alone in the assassination of Lincoln, but was the instrument of a conspiracy masterminded by this cabal. (The Lincoln Conspiracy by David Balsiger and Charles Sellier)

After the war, the economy in Texas was in shambles. Practically all wealth, except for the land, had been exhausted. Nearly a quarter of the white male population had been killed or maimed. For nine long years after Lee's surrender, Texans chafed under the yoke of an army of occupation and a despotic political regime of carpetbaggers and scalawags.

At first, the state was placed under military rule, with Negro troops making up the greater part of the occupation army. The composition of these forces was no accident. It was done deliberately to humiliate the people. Occupying forces committed outrageous and lawless acts against the citizenry, and the army tribunals that had replaced civil courts, refused to hear charges against Union soldiers no matter how odious their crimes. The Negro garrison at Victoria terrorized the populace, and at Brenham, Negro troops burned and sacked the town. Union soldiers also raided Brownsville with widespread looting and destruction of property.

For the first five years of reconstruction there was economic chaos and political turmoil in Texas—and then it got worse. In 1870 Edmond J. Davis, a Republican Radical, was elected Governor in a rigged election. One of Davis's first acts was the establishment of a state police force composed of 200 men answering directly to him.

The authority of the State Police was absolute. They were a law unto themselves. Many State Policemen were former outlaws or ignorant, recently-freed Negroes drunk with their newfound power and authority. Abuses were many. Unwarranted searches and seizures occurred daily. Habeas Corpus was denied. State Policemen, both black and white, killed with impunity. In Texas during this era, hatred of the State Police was a white heat burning in the hearts of the people. Nearly all had had some friend or relative severely abused, if not killed by these brigands.

Chapter I

Pardoned.

An elderly guard approached his table just as Jacob Magruder was finishing his breakfast in the big, noisy prison mess hall. Speaking loudly to be heard over the clamor, the guard declared, "Jake, the new warden wants to see ya' in his office."

Magruder glanced up, a questioning look on his face.

"What's he want with me, Carter?"

"Well now, he didn't say, Jake. But I'm shore he'll tell ya' when ya' get there. C'mon."

Heads turned and curious eyes stared as the two men walked toward the exit.

Carter led Magruder down a long corridor unlocking and re-locking two sets of heavy steel doors in turn. Finally he stopped before a large oaken door and knocked. A voice inside responded, "Come in."

Upon entering, Carter announced, "Warden, this here's John Jacob Magruder, pris'ner number 10942. Jake, this's Warden Brian Henders who took Warden Ogilvie's place las' month."

Henders, sitting behind a big desk, rose from his chair, smiled and extended his right hand. Accepting the offered hand, Magruder muttered a barely audible, "Hello."

Peering at the prisoner over his little gold-rimmed spectacles, the warden beheld a tall, broad-shouldered, ruggedly handsome man with a thick thatch of dark hair.

"Carter, you are excused," he said. Carter nodded, turned and shuffled out, closing the door.

"Magruder, I've got some good news for you. Please sit down."

Magruder took the indicated chair, somewhat anxious and still puzzled by this unprecedented summons. The warden, a portly man of about sixty years, then sat down and began searching through stacks of papers on his cluttered desk. Finally locating the desired document, he picked it up and announced, "Magruder, I have here a dispatch sent by special courier from Austin. Governor Richard Coke is granting you a full and unconditional pardon. What do you have to say about that?"

Magruder was stunned. He just sat there with his mouth open momentarily unable to speak. Finally, he stammered, "W-well...Warden...I'm delighted of course...but what brought this about?"

"Governor Coke recently received a visit from a Mrs. Gardner, the wife of the storekeeper you were convicted of robbing four years ago. She told the Governor that on his deathbed, her husband admitted his testimony of your robbing him was a lie. He confessed there had been no robbery at all, but stated he had lost that \$400 you were accused of stealing in a poker game. He concocted the story of a robbery because he feared his wife's wrath if she learned the truth. Then when you, a stranger who fit his contrived description, was caught near town, and a search revealed you had over \$400 in your possession, he felt compelled to identify you as the robber or risk being found out.

"Mrs. Gardner, being a good Christian woman, told the Governor she was mortified to learn that an innocent man had been incarcerated because of her husband's deceitfulness; so she immediately contacted the Governor's office in order to correct this grievous error. Her action, of course, led to the Governor

granting your pardon. Mrs. Gardner has not only returned the \$400 that was taken from you and given to Gardner, but she has given you an additional \$1,000 as, according to her, 'a small measure of restitution for your pain and suffering.' This money is being sent from Austin and will be placed on deposit at the Gibbs General Store in your name. Banking services in town are handled by Gibbs, as Huntsville doesn't yet have a regular bank."

The warden paused here and gazed at Magruder as if expecting a response.

For a time, Magruder just sat there tight-lipped. Finally he spoke. "Many a night I laid awake in my cell thinkin' about killin' that lyin' sonuvabitch when I got out of here! Now, it seems, fate has cheated me out of the satisfaction." He breathed a heavy sigh. "And I intended the same for that carpetbagger judge who presided at my trial. I told that despicable...whoreson, that I could get depositions from prominent citizens in San Antone to account for the money I was carryin'. He could've allowed me to be held in the local jail until the evidence was produced. But no! That fat bastard wasn't about to miss a chance to put another Texan behind prison bars!"

Henders looked sympathetic. "Magruder, it's a damned shame to be convicted on fallacious charges and lose four years out of your life. But you're still young, and have a long life ahead of you. Don't do anything foolish that might get you put back in this place." He paused a moment, then asked, "How old are you anyway?"

"I'll be thirty-eight next month, Warden."

"You don't look it. You also look trim and fit. Prison life doesn't seemed to have harmed you physically. And you have a healthy tan instead of the prison pallor common to most inmates. How do you account for that?"

"I was lucky enough to be assigned to the wood detail, Warden—under old Carter. We spend most of our time outside the walls cuttin' and haulin' firewood for the heatin' and cookin'. The work is hard but we get plenty of fresh air and sunshine. If I'd been confined inside all the time workin' on those damnable cloth-making looms, I'd have gone crazy."

Henders then withdrew a folder from a drawer of his desk and held it up. "After receiving the Governor's message, I pulled your records from the file to learn more about your case."

Then he opened the folder, and after adjusting his glasses, he began to summarize, occasionally referring to the report, and at times injecting his own viewpoint:

"The record indicates that it was Mrs. Gardner, not her husband, who filed the complaint with the town marshal that night. It also says she referred to her husband as a fool for not reporting the loss himself. He probably wanted the whole thing kept quiet for fear that others involved in that poker game might expose his duplicity. But obviously no one did.

"The record also shows that the town marshal enlisted the aid of a few citizens and rode out of town in the direction Gardner claimed his assailant had taken to try to apprehend the robber. And it further indicates that two miles out of town the posse observed the glow of a dying campfire two hundred yards off the road in a grove of trees. There, according to the report, they found you, a stranger answering the general description of the robber sound asleep.

“In addition, the record states that \$487 was found on your person when you were searched. In your defense, you claimed the evidence was circumstantial, and given two weeks time you could obtain depositions from reliable witnesses to account for the money found in your possession. And finally, the record states your request for more time was denied. You were pronounced guilty, and sentenced to five years hard labor.”

At this point Henders laid down the file, leaned back in his chair, and gazed at Magruder over his little spectacles. “How did you happen to be there near Caldwell that night, anyway?”

“Well, I had been in San Antone attending a reunion of my old Ranger Company. And I received a wire from Nacogdoches that my mother was seriously ill. So I was headin’ home. I had ridden over a hundred miles that day, and I was worn out and my horse was goin’ lame. So I decided to make camp by a little creek about dusk. After tendin’ to my animal, I built a fire, made coffee and ate some food, then threw my bedroll and went to sleep. The next thing I knew, I was being prodded awake by a rifle barrel jabbed in my ribs.”

“So you never got to see your Mother. Did she get all right?”

“She died a month after I was imprisoned,” Magruder expressed bitterly. “That’s another reason I wanted to kill those bastards that put me in here!”

“I’m truly sorry, son. But don’t let hate ruin your life. We can’t change the past. So, if you can’t forgive, try to forget, and go on from here.”

Henders looked at Magruder contemplatively a few moments before saying, “There was a Confederate General named Magruder involved in a battle with Union forces at Galveston in ‘62 or ‘63. Was he any relation of yours?”

“Yes, sir, he was. That was General John Bankhead Magruder. He’s my uncle, as well as my namesake. Uncle John retook Galveston from a superior force of Yankees in December of ‘62 with a joint assault by land and sea. He converted two bayou steamboats to war vessels by installin’ breastworks of cotton bales. And he manned the boats with three hundred expert riflemen. Then on a dark night, as his infantry forces waded across Galveston Bay, his gunboats steamed quietly toward the Union warships in the harbor. They took the bluebellies completely by surprise, and after a brief firefight the Yankees surrendered.”

While Magruder recounted the story of the Battle of Galveston, the Warden was silently appraising the man. He noted that Magruder sat relaxed, gazing back steadily with intelligent blue eyes, and appeared not the least bit self-conscious nor intimidated. And his soft drawl, characteristic of the native Texan, fell pleasantly on the ear. Before Magruder had concluded his account of that battle, Henders had warmed to the man. He instinctively liked him. Here is another of the many decent men who have been victimized by the late sordid reconstruction regime, he reflected.

“Magruder, yours is an interesting case—and I am pleased with the outcome. If there were time, I’d like to learn more about you. You’re obviously an educated man—your manner of speech proves that. And your testimony at the trial indicates you have some knowledge of the law. But these questions will have to wait, because I have a meeting scheduled with my officers in a few minutes.

Perhaps we'll have a chance to talk another time. Do you expect to stay in Huntsville for a while?"

"I'll have to, Warden. I've got to buy a horse, saddle, guns, clothes—a whole new outfit. It'll likely take me several days."

"Good. I'll be in town sometime in the next few days. How about joining me for dinner one evening, and we can get better acquainted over a good steak and a bottle of brandy?"

"That sounds fine, Warden. I'll look forward to it."

"You know, Magruder—they have rail service to Nacogdoches. You could save yourself time by taking the train, rather than traveling horseback."

"Thanks, Warden—but after bein' confined so long, I'm anxious to be outdoors. I want to ride through the hills and forests, soakin' up the scenery, and sleep under the stars."

"I can appreciate the way you feel, son."

"Alright, let's finish our business here. I am authorized to spend \$125 to provide you with a suit, boots, and other necessary articles of clothing. Or, I can give you the money along with some clothes from the guard's supply room, and you can buy your own stuff when you get to town. Which shall it be?"

"I'd prefer to take the money and buy my own things."

"I thought you would, so I made out the check that way," Henders expressed with a smile.

"The other matter to settle is compensation for your property which was confiscated by the State. You're probably aware that your horse, saddle, guns and other property were sold at auction after your conviction. Governor Coke has authorized me to reimburse you the \$175 which the State received from the sale of your property."

Magruder was peeved. "Warden, my horse alone was worth \$300. And my guns, saddle and other trappin's worth another \$200. And all I'm goin' to get for 'em is a lousy \$175? That really galls me! And another thing: how about that \$87 I had in excess of my \$400 that was given to Gardner? What happened to that?"

"I can't say, Magruder. According to the record there was no cash on the list of property turned over to state officials."

"Those damned carpetbaggers in Caldwell stole it—that's what happened!" he griped.

"Perhaps so. I don't know. I'm sorry about your losses. I know it seems unfair, but a total of \$300 is all I'm authorized to give you."

Magruder breathed a long sigh. "Well, it's not your fault, Warden. Let's try to wind this up so I can get out of here."

The warden nodded. "Alright." Then taking some papers from a drawer he said, "Here's a state check for \$300 made payable to you. And this is a letter addressed to Sanford Gibbs, owner of the Gibbs store, identifying you as John Jacob Magruder. Since the State maintains an account with Gibbs, you won't have any trouble cashing the check."

"Also, here are your pardon papers signed by the Governor." Henders adjusted his glasses, then began to read aloud from the document. "Having been found innocent of the crime for which he was incarcerated, the prisoner John Jacob Magruder, presently an inmate at the Huntsville Prison facility, shall be released;

and he is hereby granted a full and unconditional pardon, with all rights and privileges of a citizen of Texas completely restored. By the order of Richard Coke, Governor of Texas.”

Henders picked up a pen stating, “I’m required to co-sign this and affix the date of your release.” He then began writing while speaking in an audible whisper, “Brian Henders, Warden.” Pausing a moment, he asked himself, “Let’s see, this is Monday—what is the date? Oh yes, the thirteenth.” He then resumed writing while exclaiming aloud, “I’m sure you’ll remember this date for a long time, Magruder—April thirteen, eighteen hundred and seventy four.”

As he handed all the papers to Magruder, Henders pretended not to notice the tears welling in the other man’s eyes.

“Do you have any questions about any of this, Magruder?”

“No, everything’s quite clear, Warden.”

“Since you’re planning to be in Huntsville for a while, I’d like to recommend the Eutaw House as a place to stay. It’s a nice hotel. I stayed there several days when I first came to town, and I found it quite comfortable. And it’s also right across the street from the Gibbs store. They’re on opposite corners of Jackson and Cedar at the courthouse square.”

“Thanks, Warden. I’ll do as you suggest.”

“Is there anything else on your mind before we go down to the supply room?”

“Yes, there is one thing. Would you allow one of the prison barbers to give me a shave and haircut before I leave? I’m sure I look pretty seedy.”

“Of course. Let’s go on down now and I’ll turn you over to our quartermaster. He’ll take care of everything.”

They left the Warden’s office and descended a flight of stairs, and as they walked along Henders said, “Oh, I almost forgot—one of our supply wagons will be leaving for town in a couple of hours—you can ride in on it, if you’d like. It’ll be going right to the Gibbs store.”

“That sounds fine, Warden. Much obliged.”

A big man wearing a guard uniform was sitting at a desk just inside the double doorway of the supply room. He stood up as Magruder and the Warden entered.

“Harry, this is John Magruder. He just got a pardon from the Governor. I want you to fix him up with a change of clothes so he can go into town looking half decent. See that he gets a shave and a haircut, too. And he’d also like a ride into town on the next supply wagon. Will you take care of him?”

“Sure thing, Warden. I’ll see that he gets fixed up.”

The Warden extended his right hand and Magruder grasped it in a firm grip. “Magruder, I’m pleased to have met you, and I’m happy you’ve been freed. Harry will take care of you now, and I’ll see you in town in a few days.”

“Thanks for all your help, Warden. And I’m holdin’ you to your promise of that steak,” Magruder expressed with a smile.

Henders smiled back, then turned and walked away.

Harry said, “Okay, Magruder, what’ll it be first—the shave and haircut?”

“That’ll be fine, Harry.”

“Okay, you go down this hallway to the third door on the right. That’s the guard’s barber shop. And in case they’re busy, you tell those birds that Harry Fallon said that you’re to get pri-or-i-ty. By the way, you can also get a bath in there if you’d like to do that before puttin’ on your new togs.”

“Yes, I’d like that, Harry. And thank you.”

“Well, in that case, let’s get your new stuff together first, and you can put ‘em on after you get cleaned up. Do you know what size shirt and trousers you wear?”

Magruder told him.

Harry walked to some bins at the far side of the big room and pulled out some articles. “How about a change of underwear, an’ some socks?” shouted Harry.

“The warden didn’t say anything about that,” Magruder yelled back.

Harry pulled some garments from other bins anyway, then walked back to where Magruder was waiting. “Hell, if you’re gonna bother takin’ a bath, you might as well have fresh things next to your skin.”

He handed the clothes to Magruder. “Okay, you just go on down there now, and tell ‘em what you need. And if they give you any lip, just let me know. And come back here when you get through. Okay?”

Magruder did as he was bidden, and was back in about an hour, looking and feeling refreshed.

“Hey, you look like a new man,” said Harry with a smile. “You just sit down right here now and I’ll find out when that supply wagon’s gonna leave.”

Chapter II

Freedom.

The supply wagon rolled out of the prison gates about mid-morning. It was a wonderful spring day with a cool breeze blowing and cottony clouds floating in the sky. A pair of hawks sailed high overhead, and field birds swooped low over the meadows. The raucous sound of a flock of crows could be heard in the distance, and a mockingbird sang in a nearby copse. Patches of wildflowers painted the landscape with a medley of colors, and buzzing bees explored the blossoms. Magruder gazed contentedly at the beautiful scene. The rolling prairie with its scattered groves of oak and pine evoked memories of his East Texas home. He took a deep breath of the sweet, flower-scented air of freedom, and a great swell of elation filled his breast.

Sitting on the seat next to the driver, Magruder asked, “How far is it to the Gibbs store, anyway?”

The driver, a crusty old man appearing to be toothless, gave a terse reply, “Two ‘er three mile.”

The old wagon bumped along the rocky road, creaking and clattering. Magruder smiled to himself, amused by the thought that the old driver had likely lost his teeth by making this tooth-rattling daily drive.

He noted that the two little mules trotting along ahead of the wagon looked poor and bony, and the harness was about worn out. He'd heard rumors that Ogilvie, the carpetbagger warden appointed by Edmond Davis, had been fired by Governor Coke for misappropriation of funds. He concluded that money allocated for stock and equipment had likely been squandered, if not stolen.

"How many wagon-loads of goods does it take each day to keep the prison supplied?" he asked.

The old driver, who had been continually gumming a wad of chewing tobacco, spat a dark stream at the rear end of one of the mules. After a moment he got the cud over in his other cheek, and replied, "We 'uns got four waggins like this'n, an all of 'em make leas' one trip ever' day. An' sometime, h'it takes more."

Magruder grinned at the old driver's backwoods vernacular. "Seems to me, they should get some bigger wagons and make fewer trips."

"Humph!" grunted the old driver. "These hyar scrawny mules can't hardly pull a full load as t'is."

After a bone jarring ride, which seemed longer than it actually was, the supply wagon pulled to a halt in front of a large two-story clapboard building. The sign above the doorway read Gibbs General Store. As Magruder stepped down, he said, "Thanks for the ride, ol' timer."

The old driver spat another amber stream, and acknowledged his thanks with a curt nod.

He entered the big store and looked about. It was one of the largest establishments of its kind he had ever seen. There were hundreds of shelves and racks full of a miscellanea of goods stacked almost to the ceiling. He saw hardware, tools, harness, feed, flour, clothing, and a variety of other merchandise. Dozens of people were busily shopping, and a number of clerks scurried about waiting on them. He stopped a comely young lady with a pencil behind her ear. "Pardon me, Miss, but are you one of the employees here?"

She gave him a disapproving look. "I certainly am. I'm in charge of the dry goods department. What is it you wish to purchase?"

"Well, not anything right now, Miss, I'd like to see Mr. Sanford Gibbs, if I may."

The young lady now narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips and looked Magruder up and down. "Do you have an appointment with Mr. Gibbs?" she asked in a haughty manner.

"No, Miss, I don't. But you see, I have a check to cash, and I have a letter identifying me that's addressed to Mr. Gibbs."

The young lady's attitude seemed to soften a bit. "In that case, it will not be necessary to see Mr. Gibbs. Just go to the rear of the store and present your letter and check to Mr. Collins. He takes care of all the banking business. You'll see a sign with his name on it above his booth."

"Thank you very much, Miss. You've been most helpful," said Magruder, offering a slight bow and an amiable smile.

The young lady evidenced mild surprise at this gesture, then responded with a quick half smile, and hurried off, her head held high in a self-important manner.

He stood there a moment admiring the provocative wiggle of the young lady's shapely derriere as she walked away.

Magruder found the bank booth at the rear of the store, where a sign above the teller's window proclaimed: Fred Collins, Cashier. He was able to cash his check without difficulty, and he inquired of Mr. Collins if there had been a recent deposit of funds from Austin in his name. Collins consulted his records, and reported there had not been.

Well I guess it will be along shortly. In the meantime, I've got \$300 to tide me.

He was tempted to do some shopping while at Gibbs, but decided to do that later. He wanted to check in at the hotel first, and then find a good restaurant—he was hungry, and he was looking forward to a good meal of his own selection.

Magruder stepped out of the store onto the board sidewalk. And he stood there a minute watching the bustle of activity around the courthouse square. Horse drawn conveyances of various description were busily moving about on sundry errands.

He crossed the street, carefully avoiding a large freight wagon with a four-horse team. Then he walked through the open doorway of the Eutaw House, crossed the wide lobby and went up to the desk. The small, bald man behind the desk asked in a friendly manner, "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I'd like a room, please."

"How long will you be staying, sir?"

"Well, I'm not sure—probably several days."

"Our rates are three dollars a day or fifteen dollars per week. Would you like our weekly rate?"

"Yes, that'll be fine."

"Please sign that register, sir, and I'll see what rooms are available." The clerk turned, picked up a ledger and began to examine it.

He signed the register, then looked about the elegantly furnished foyer. There was only one other person there at the time. It was a woman. She was seated on one of the velvet settees with her head in her hands, and she appeared to be sobbing.

When the clerk looked up, Magruder asked in a low voice, "What's the matter with the lady? She seems to be cryin'."

The clerk replied in like manner, "That's Mrs. Gersemann. She and her husband were held up by outlaws north of town this mornin'. They shot Mr. Gersemann and stole all their money."

"Was the husband killed?"

The clerk nodded. "They were on their way to Houston from Crockett, and now she's stuck here with no money. I told her if there were any unrented rooms at the end of the day, I'd let her have one for the night."

"How many rooms do you have available?"

"We have two on the lower floor and three upstairs. I'd recommend one of the upstairs rooms. They're toward the rear and it's quieter up there."

Magruder pulled out his roll of bills and extracted three tens. "Alright, here's thirty dollars—a week's rent for two of the upstairs rooms—one for me and one for the lady. Tell the lady that you have arranged with your management to let her have a room for a week free of charge."

"That's very kind of you Mr.—uh," the clerk quickly referred to the register, "Mr. Magruder. I'll tell her. I'm sure the poor soul will be relieved."

"Wait," he said, and pulled out his money again peeling off a twenty-dollar note. "Give her this as well and make up some story to explain it."

"Mr. Magruder, that's an exceptionally generous gesture. I know the lady will appreciate it—and frankly, I do too. If there's any way I can possibly assist you while you're here, just tell me and it'll be done. My name is Karl Swartz."

Magruder saw a skinny blond youth of about sixteen enter from the rear of the lobby carrying a broom and dustpan. Swartz motioned the boy over, and said quietly, "Willy, I want you to watch the desk for a few minutes while I take Mrs. Gersemann up to her room." The kid just nodded and walked behind the desk.

Then Swartz turned to Magruder. "Here's the key to your room, Mr. Magruder. You'll be in 210, and I'm puttin' Mrs. Gersemann in 211. I'm goin' to take her up now and make sure she's comfortable. Do you think you can find your way?"

"Yes, of course—but I'm not going up right away. I want to find a café where I can get some good food. Any suggestions?"

"We have a dinin' room here, but we won't begin servin' dinner till 'leven-thirty." He turned to look at the clock behind the desk. "That'll be another twenty minutes, Mr. Magruder. If you don't wanna wait, there's a nice café a coupla blocks down the street." And he indicated the direction with a tilt of his head.

He expressed his thanks, and walked out the front door. He turned in the direction Swartz had indicated and walked along looking in the various stores and shops as he passed. He found the café and went in. Although it was early, there were several diners already eating. He found an empty table and sat down. The place was light and airy, and very clean; and there were tantalizing odors emanating from the kitchen that made his mouth water. He picked up the menu on the table and scanned it just as a pretty young waitress came over. She greeted him with a warm smile.

"May I take your order, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am, you surely may. I'd like the roast beef, mashed potatoes, black-eyed peas, corn bread, apple pie and coffee."

The young lady flashed him another charming smile, and hurried away. She was back in only a few minutes, and set before him a large platter of steaming hot food. For a minute, Magruder just devoured the food with his eyes, savoring the wonderful aroma, and then he began eating slowly, relishing every mouthful. And he continued doing so until it became almost painful.

As he was finishing, the pretty waitress came over and asked, "Can I get you anything else, sir?"

He groaned. "No, ma'am, I couldn't eat another bite. The food was excellent—and the beauty of the one servin' it will long be remembered," he offered with a winsome smile.

The young waitress, who was very fair, turned fiery red, but maintained her equanimity. “It’s kind of you to say so, sir—and it’s been a pleasure servin’ you.”

“What do I owe you?”

“Fifty cents, sir.”

“That’s entirely too little for such a splendid meal. Here’s a dollar. Please keep the change.”

When Magruder walked out of the restaurant, he noticed a shop across the street advertising boots and shoes. He decided it was time to be getting some decent attire, and walked over. When he opened the door, a tiny bell tinkled, and a gray-headed lady with a kind grandmotherly face came out of a back room.

“Can I help you sir?”

“Yes ma’am. I’d like to look at some of your boots, please.”

She nodded and led him to a long table displaying several styles of boots. “Have a look at these, sir, and see if there’s somethin’ you like.”

He picked up a boot that caught his eye and examined it. It had a sturdy sole with a good arch, and a heel of sufficient height to engage a stirrup. It also had the rounded toe he preferred, and soft leather foot and upper part. He told the lady, “I’d like to try on a pair of these—size ten, please.”

The lady went into the rear storage room and returned with the boots. He sat down, pulled off his old shoes, and put on the new boots. Then he got up and walked around a bit.

“How do those feel, sir?” asked the lady.

“They feel just fine. I think I’ll take ‘em.”

He peeled off some bills from his roll and paid the lady, and then he held up his old shoes. “Do you have a trash can where I dump these?”

“I’ll take care of them, sir, and thank you for your business.”

As he walked out in his new boots, he recalled passing a store with a display of men’s clothing while on his way to get breakfast. So he returned there to shop. He bought three pair of trousers, four shirts, a waist length jacket, underclothes, socks, a belt, and finally, a hat. He was particular about the type of hat he wore, and he was pleased to find one to his liking. He favored the low crown style with a medium brim, rather than the high crowned, wide brimmed sombreros popular with many Texans.

Well, it’s about time to look for some artillery. And since I haven’t run across a gunshop, I think I’ll go back to the hotel, deposit these purchases, and ask Swartz where I can buy a hogleg.

While strolling back to the hotel, he began wondering what the law was doing about finding the men who robbed and murdered Mrs. Gersemann’s husband. He decided he would inquire of Swartz to see if he knew anything.

When Magruder entered his second floor room, he was pleased with the cleanliness and the comfortable furnishings. He was also delighted to find a small table with writing materials. He sat down and quickly dashed off a note to his father telling him he had been pardoned and would soon be home. He put the letter in an envelope and sealed it, and then he decided to change into his new

clothes. After dressing and donning his hat, he looked at himself in the mirror. "I'll be damned!" he said aloud. "I don't even look like the same hombre."

As he turned to leave the room, he noticed the small sign on the backside of the door announcing: The Eutaw House maintains a stable at the rear of the hotel. Saddle horses and a surrey are available for hire. Care for the animals of our guests can also be provided. The Management.

"Well, that's good to know. I just might have need of a horse—if I can remember how to ride one."

He went down to the lobby and walked over to the desk. Swartz was there, and looking up and recognizing Magruder approaching, he became somewhat flustered. Before he could say anything, Swartz exclaimed, "Mr. Magruder, I owe you an apology. I'm afraid, due to my stupidity, Mrs. Gersemann has learned you are her benefactor. You see, I made the mistake of tellin' Willy, our janitor, when he asked where she'd gotten the money. Though I told him not to tell, Mrs. Gersemann encountered him sweepin' upstairs, and asked if he knew. Instead of sayin' 'no', the fool said, 'I'm not supposed to tell.' Well, it didn't take her long after that to wheedle it out of him. Willy is not very bright. I'm sorry, sir—I should not have told him."

"Well, don't fret about it, Karl. I've been thinkin' about her plight, and I had thought about approachin' her myself to ask if I could help in some other way. But, I was afraid she might resent my interference. Perhaps this will make it easier."

"It's kind of you not to be offended by my bunglin', Mr. Magruder." Then remembering he obviously had some other business in mind when he walked up; with a weak smile Swartz offered, "If there's something else I can do for you, Mr. Magruder, I'll try to do better this time."

"There is, Karl. I'd like to know what the law is doin' about catchin' the men who killed Mrs. Gersemann's husband. And I'd also like you to direct me to a gunshop."

"Well, as for the first question, very little's bein' done to catch the killers. Old Sheriff Colson is laid up with arthritis and hardly ever leaves the house. One of his deputies recently eloped with a pretty school marm. And the chief deputy, Sam Mason, left two days ago for La Grange to bring back a horse thief the law is holdin' there. That only leaves the junior deputy lookin' after things. He's mainly the jailer, and I have very little faith in that boy doing much. I doubt anything will happen before Mason gets back."

"That's a helluva note!" exclaimed Magruder. "Those bastards could be in Mexico before anyone even begins lookin' for 'em!"

Swartz nodded. "I know. As to your second question, there are several places that sell guns, but I'd recommend Gilbert's. Jess Gilbert is unquestionably the best gunsmith in town, and he has a good selection of fine weapons. I'm sure you'll find what you're lookin' for there. His shop is located across from Creath's saddlery about four blocks west on Cedar Street."

"Thanks, Karl. I'll try Gilbert's. And by the way, where does Sheriff Colson live?"

"The sheriff lives out on Tyler Street on the east side of town. Do you plan to go see him?"

"I'm thinkin' on it."

"Well, if you decide to, go south on Jackson three blocks to Tyler, then east about five blocks. You'll recognize his house by the big sycamores in the front yard."

"One thing more, where can I post this letter?" he asked, extracting the envelope from his pocket.

"You can leave it right here, Mr. Magruder. There'll be a mail pickup and delivery here later today. I'll take care of it."

Magruder thanked him and headed for Gilbert's.

He found the shop, opened the door and entered. It was a small room cluttered with guns of every description. Rifles and shotguns hung on every wall, and dozens of pistols were displayed on shelves. An elderly man was bent over a table with a magnifying glass meticulously examining the innards of a pocket watch in the poor light of a kerosene lamp. It was then Magruder noticed a glass-topped case containing a number of watches. Without looking up, the old man said, "Sump'n I can do fer ya?"

"Yes, sir, I'm lookin' for Jess Gilbert."

"Wal, you found him," was Gilbert's droll remark finally looking up, and exhibiting a smile. "What'll it be today—guns or watches?"

"I'd like to buy a handgun. I heard that Colt came out with a new model recently in .45-caliber. Is that right?"

"Tha's right. Come out las' year. It's called the Peacemaker, and you can git it with a seven'n half-inch bar'l, or a five-inch bar'l. There's one of each on the end of that shelf over there," he said pointing.

"Peacemaker, huh? Strange name for a gun," observed Magruder, and he stepped over and picked up the short-barreled version of the weapon. He checked the cylinder to verify it was unloaded, and then cocked the hammer and squeezed the trigger. It had a smooth, easy pull. He hefted the gun and noted its excellent balance. He also liked the shape of the handle—it felt comfortable in his hand, much like the Walker-Colt he remembered.

"What's this model sell for?"

"The plain model with walnut grips like you're holdin' sells for seventeen bucks. The fancy ones are more."

"I believe I'll take this one. And I'd like a coupla hundred rounds of ammunition."

"Plan to do some shootin', eh?" remarked Gilbert with raised eyebrows.

Magruder smiled. "Well, yes. I plan to do some target shootin'. I want to get acquainted with the gun."

Gilbert picked up four boxes and placed them on the counter. "You'll 'preciate these new one-piece ca'tridges. With that Colt, you don't have to fool with percussion caps. Let's see, that'll be \$25.00 including' the bullets. You wanna sack for this stuff?"

Magruder nodded and pulled out his money and peeled off the bills. "By the way, where can I get a gunsheath and cartridge belt?"

"Cross the street at Creath's. The sign says saddles and harness, but if it's made outta leather, they'll either have it, or'll make it up fer ya special."

It suddenly occurred to Magruder it would be convenient to have a watch. "What would you charge for a pocket watch?"

Gilbert picked up a piece and handed it over. "Here's a good'n I jus' cleaned and fixed up. This'n cost fifteen dollars when it were new. I'll let you have it for five bucks and throw in this purty chain. I'll also gar-an-tee it fer three months. You kin see I already set it to the kerrect time. What d'ye say to thet?"

He examined the watch that appeared to be a reliable timepiece, and he grinned at Mr. Gilbert's sales spiel. He handed over the five spot and stuck the watch and chain in his pocket. "Much oblige," he said, and walked out with his purchases.

He crossed the street and entered the saddle shop. Three men inside were busy working on leather products.

One of them walked over. "Somethin' for you, Mister?"

Magruder laid the pistol he'd just bought on the counter. "I need a holster suitable for this gun, and I also want a cartridge belt. Can you fix me up?"

The man he assumed to be Creath turned and asked of one of the others, "Do we have any more of those gunsheaths we made for the short Colt pistol?"

"Yeah, I think we have one left," the other man replied, and he got up from his bench and retrieved the article from a shelf. He handed it to Creath who handed it to Magruder.

He slid the pistol into the holster to check the fit. It fit perfectly. The he examined the workmanship and saw that it was masterful. "How about a cartridge belt to match in a 32 inch waist size?"

Creath walked back to some racks where numerous belts in various styles were hanging. He sorted through them for a minute, and finally picked up one and brought it over. "Try this one."

Magruder noticed that the design matched the holster, and the craftsmanship was equivalent. He slid the belt through the loop on the holster, and buckled the belt around his waist. He then placed the pistol in the holster and checked its position while letting his arm hang down naturally. It seemed a little high. So he let the belt out a notch and pushed it down on his hips. "That's better," he said. "How much for both articles?"

"Twelve dollars for the pair."

He paid him and requested that the goods be wrapped or placed in a bag. Creath complied, then Magruder picked up his purchases, walked out and headed for the Eutaw House.

Magruder noticed the clock in the hotel lobby read 2:45 when he walked through, and he thought about going on over to see the sheriff before suppertime, but decided to put it off till the next day. He deposited his new things in his room and sat down on the bed.

Well, what shall I do till suppertime? he pondered. He considered stretching out on the bed and taking a nap, but immediately rejected the idea. Then suddenly the notion hit him: By golly, I haven't had a taste of booze in four years, and I think I'd like a coupla shots of good whiskey. He remembered seeing a saloon two blocks north on Jackson Street across from Nora's Café. So he got up and went back out, locked his door, and proceeded on over to that establishment.

From the exterior, the Sundown Saloon looked like a fairly respectable business. It didn't have the shabby façade of most barrooms. The building appeared fairly new, and there was a pleasant prairie scene with a setting sun painted on the false front above the name.

Magruder walked through the batwings, then stopped and looked about. He was pleased to find that the interior seemed to support his first impression. It was very clean, and contrary to the dungeon-like interior of most saloons, it was well lighted with several windows opposite the bar. There were less than a dozen customers in the place at the time. Three men were at the bar, while six men sat around a table playing poker. Two others stood observing the game.

He walked up to the bar, and greeted the bartender cordially. "Afternoon Bartender—I'd like to sample some of your very best whiskey. Hopefully it'll be something over two weeks old," he expressed with a smile.

The bartender was a short, stocky, red headed man of middle years who seemed to wear a perpetual half-smile. He looked like a man with a sense of humor, which proved to be the case. That individual replied, "Mister, we've got some stuff that came over on the Mayflower." And he exhibited a big grin as he turned and picked up a bottle. "This is the best in the house. It's five-year-old Kentucky corn whiskey straight from Bourbon County. It'll set you back forty cents a shot, whereas the regular fare is two bits. If you'd like more'n one shot, I can let you have a small glass of about three shots, for a dollar. What'll it be?"

"I'd like the small glass, please," he said as he placed a dollar bill on the bar.

The bartender poured his drink and pushed it over, and he stood there watching as Magruder took his first swallow.

Magruder closed his eyes as the fiery liquid trickled slowly down his throat. The sensation was wonderful and something to be savored. "Bartender, this's the best whiskey I've drunk in four years," he whispered through scalded vocal cords.

Magruder took his drink and walked over to where the men were playing poker. He watched the play for about ten minutes while sipping his whiskey. Then one of the men got up. "Hell, I'm busted! I'll see y'all next payday, if my wife don't shoot me."

A fat man chewing on an unlit cigar appeared to be the big winner. He had a large pile of bills and coins on the table in front of him. This man was dressed in a wrinkled business suit, while the others wore the common attire of artisans or farmers.

Addressing those observing, the big winner exclaimed, "How 'bout one of you kibitzers settin' in? Six makes a better game than five."

None of the others indicated an interest, so Magruder said, "I'll sit in a few hands, if nobody else wants to."

"Set down, Stranger, an' welcome," said the winner in a loud voice. "Maybe you can make this more interestin'. These fellers shore ain't much competition."

Magruder sat down. He had already observed that the game was strictly five-card draw with a four-bit ante and pot limit. Openers were jacks or better, and they were using no wild cards. Table stakes were required, so he placed a hundred dollars in bills and coins on the table. Then he tossed his fifty cents in the pot as the dealer dealt the cards.

He was sitting just to the left of the dealer. He was “under the gun” as they say in poker parlance. He drew a pair of queens, but he declined to open. “I pass,” he said.

The next two men passed, and the big winner said, “Open for three bucks.” The next man and the dealer dropped out. It was now up to Magruder. He said, “I call, and raise six.” Everyone else dropped out but the big winner. He studied Magruder a moment then said, “I think you’re bluffin’, I call.”

The dealer said, “Cards to the gamblers! How many, friend?”

Magruder said, “Two cards, please.” He had kept an ace kicker to go with his pair of queens.

The big winner also took two, and stated, “I’ll check to the raiser.”

Magruder said, “Bet twelve bucks.”

The big winner sat there for a half minute looking at Magruder and chewing on his cigar. Finally he said, “I still think you’re bluffin’. I call.” And he placed \$12 in the pot.

Magruder said, “Pair of queens.”

The big winner burst out laughing. “Haw! Haw! Haw! Three tens,” he said, and laid his cards on the table. “Thought you could pull one over on ol’ George, huh? Heh, heh. I eat pilgrims like you for breakfas’.” And he dragged in the money.

George offered to buy drinks all around for all the players, but he didn’t order any for himself. Two of the players accepted, but Magruder declined. He knew about that ploy. Get your opponents a little drunk, and they’re apt to play carelessly. He didn’t drink anymore after finishing his original glass.

The previous dealer pushed the cards over to Magruder. “Yore deal,” he said.

He shuffled and dealt the cards, but as there were no openers, everyone threw in their cards. Magruder passed the deck to the man on his left, and each player sweetened the pot with another four-bit ante.

The new dealer dealt the cards, and the man to his left said, “Open for five dollars.”

George, the big winner said, “Raise ten.” And he threw three fives in the pot.

The next two men folded.

“I believe that’s fifteen bucks to me,” said Magruder. He had been watching the others, and hadn’t yet looked at his hand. He then squeezed them off. He had the nine of hearts and four spades—the two, three, four, and five.

“I call,” said Magruder, and pushed the bills in the pot.

The dealer folded, and the man who opened called.

Dealer said, “Cards to the gamblers—how many?”

Opener took two cards.

George said, “I’ll play these. “ And displayed a big grin.

“One card, please,” said Magruder, and he discarded the heart.

Opener said, “I check to the raiser.”

George smiled his arrogant smile. “Twenty bucks,” he said, and threw a double sawbuck in the pot.

Magruder slowly squeezed off his cards, and was surprised and delighted to see he had drawn the ace of spades. “Your twenty and forty more,” he said, as he placed three twenties in the pot.

Opener said, “That’s too rich for my blood.” And he tossed in his cards.

That move left only George and Magruder in the hand.

George chewed on his cigar and studied Magruder for a minute. "You tryin' to pull another fast one, friend?"

Magruder smiled. "There's one way to find out...friend."

"Buddy, I'm not about to fold what I'm holdin'. I ought to raise. But I jus' call." And George threw in the bills.

Magruder laid his cards face up on the table. "Little straight flush, George," he said with a smile. "Ace to the five."

George's fat face got so red he looked like he'd explode. "Goddamit," he exclaimed. "And me with a pat full-house!" Then he slammed his cards down on the table.

"I just wanted to offer a little competition," said Magruder trying to suppress a smile.

The other players as well as those watching were chuckling or exhibiting big grins to see George beaten for a change.

Magruder continued playing until the game broke up at about 7:00. At that time two of the players got up saying they'd had enough. Another man had already dropped out at six. That left only three players at the table. George wanted to continue playing, as he had lost a good deal of money. But Magruder declined saying he had business elsewhere. This was not true, but he didn't want to spend the whole evening at poker, and he was content to quit while ahead. By then he had won over a hundred and sixty dollars—mostly from George. George stomped out in a huff. His cigar lay on the floor in pieces. He had bitten it in two.

By this time there were quite a few more customers in the saloon. Another poker game was going on at a back table, and several men were standing at the bar.

As Magruder got up, he decided he'd like to have another touch of that good whiskey before he departed. So he walked over to the bar. He had heard others there call the bartender "Jerry", so when he caught his eye he said, "Jerry, I'd like another taste of that great booze you purvey. Just a shot this time."

Jerry grinned, picked up the bottle and poured the shot. "I've been waitin' a long time to see somebody take that loud-mouthed sonuvabitch down a peg or two! This one's on the house."

Chapter III

The Widow.

As Magruder strolled back to the hotel, he decided to try their dining room for supper. On entering the dining area he saw Mrs. Gersemann. She was sitting at a table alone and a waiter was pouring her coffee. She saw him about the same time, and whispered something to the waiter. The waiter glanced up at Magruder, then set the coffee pot down and walked over.

“Mr. Magruder, the lady would like for you to join her at her table.” He nodded, and removed his hat as the waiter led him over.

Mrs. Gersemann smiled warmly. “Won’t you please sit down, Mr. Magruder? I would like to talk to you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gersemann. It’s good of you to invite me.” He then sat down and asked, “Tell me, how did you recognize me?”

“I insisted that Mr. Swartz point you out at the first opportunity, which he did this afternoon as you walked through the lobby.” She paused, and then said, “Mr. Magruder, I want to thank you for your kindness and generosity. I don’t know what I would have done otherwise. But thirty-five dollars is a lot of money, and I have no way to repay you.”

“Please don’t concern yourself about that, Mrs. Gersemann. I came into some extra money recently, so that small amount is of little consequence. Please consider it a gift.”

Tears began to form in her eyes, though she tried to suppress them. Finally she managed a wan smile.

The waiter, who was still standing there, interrupted, “Pardon me, sir. Mrs. Gersemann has already ordered. Would you like to place an order for supper?”

“Yes, I would. I’d like a small T-bone steak, medium rare, potatoes, green beans, biscuits and coffee, please.” And then he turned back to Mrs. Gersemann.

“Mrs. Gersemann, have you spoken to anyone with the sheriff’s department about your loss?”

“Yes. As soon as I got here, Mr. Swartz sent the hotel janitor to fetch that young deputy...uh, Ron, something or other. I told him what had happened, and he explained that he was presently the only officer in town, but would see what he could do. He didn’t sound too hopeful.”

“Mrs. Gersemann, I know this is painful for you, but if you could tell me exactly what happened during the robbery, perhaps I can help apprehend these criminals. I used to be a Texas Ranger, so I have some experience in these matters.”

“A Texas Ranger! You are an unusual man, Mr. Magruder. I’ve never before known such chivalry. Yes, I would dearly love to see those killers caught, even if the money isn’t recovered. However, my immediate concern is getting poor Bernie buried. He’s over at the funeral parlor. They want \$100 for a casket, gravesite, and burial. My only hope of raising any money is to sell our wagon and team, and I don’t know how to go about that. The wagon and harness are practically new, and there’s a matched team of fine draft horses. Bernie paid over \$1800 for the complete outfit. They’re presently at Spencer’s Livery Stables. Do you have any suggestions for selling them?”

“I believe I can arrange that, Mrs. Gersemann. A new wagon and a good team of strong animals should be easy to sell. But it may take a few days. In the meantime, I’ll pay the burial fee, and you can repay me when you make the sale.”

“Mr. Magruder, how can you possibly be so generous?” And the tears began to flow even though she fought it.

The waiter happened to bring their orders at this time. He had obviously held her order so they could be served together.

“Let’s eat our dinner and then go into the lobby and talk,” suggested Magruder. She gave him another wan smile, and nodded her head.

As they ate their meal, he stole several quick glances at the lady. This was his first time to see her at close range. She was really quite beautiful, with full lips and a smooth ivory complexion. She had rich chestnut colored hair put up in a bun, and her eyes were a brilliant green. He estimated that she was somewhere in her mid-thirties.

When they had finished, Magruder got up and paid the bill, and then took Mrs. Gersemann's hand to assist her rising from her chair. As he followed her to the lobby, he realized this was also the first time he had seen her when she wasn't sitting. She was tall for a woman, perhaps five foot nine. She was full-figured and extremely well proportioned. He suddenly felt a strong physical urge as he watched her sensuous movements. Then he silently cursed himself and suppressed the feeling with iron-willed determination. Only a scoundrel, he thought, would think of taking advantage of a lady in such a vulnerable state.

After they were seated in the lobby, he said, "Now please tell me all you can recall about the holdup and the outlaws."

She nodded and began to relate the story. Her husband, who was considerably older than she, had a successful business in Crockett. He sold farm tools and machinery. But his brother in Houston, whom she had never met, persuaded him to sell out to join him in a cotton exporting business there. She was opposed to this move. They had a nice home and security in Crockett, and they had many friends there. She also felt Bernie was too old to be getting involved in a new business he knew nothing about. But he was adamant. His brother had convinced him there was a fortune to be made in the cotton business. So they sold the store and their home. Their furniture and most of their private possessions were shipped to Houston by rail. And most of the proceeds from the sale of their property—over \$50,000—was sent to Bernie's brother to invest in the new enterprise.

A few months earlier, her husband had bought the freight wagon and team to deliver farm equipment to his customers. However, he didn't want to sell them. He claimed they could be used in the Houston business. But the real reason was that he couldn't bear parting with the horses. He had become attached to them. These big, gentle giants would come at his call, and Bernie treated them like pets. So they had a canvas cover installed, then loaded the wagon with their clothing and other personal effects, and headed for Houston. Her husband was carrying the remainder of their money—about \$15,000—in a money belt.

She estimated that they had made camp about ten miles northeast of Huntsville the previous night, and they had only been traveling a short time this morning when the robbery occurred.

"What time was that?" asked Magruder.

"It was about an hour after sunup. Around seven o'clock."

She continued: Having been told by a stage driver that it was fifty miles from Crockett to Huntsville with good road, they had hoped to make the drive in one day. But they got a late start, and when the darkness overtook them, her husband decided to make camp for the night. She told Magruder she was a city girl from

Pittsburgh, and had never camped out like that before. She was apprehensive about it, and hardly slept at all.

The next morning she was so tired and drowsy that her husband insisted she try to sleep in the wagon while he drove. She had just dozed off when she was awakened by a rude shout of, "Hands up!" Her husband pulled the team to a stop. She raised up and peeked out below the driver's seat. There were two masked men on horseback with pistols pointing at her husband. They ordered him to get down, which he did. One of them yelled, "Keep those hands up if you don't want a bullet in your belly." All the while she was relating this story, she was staring into space and speaking softly as if in a trance.

"Can you describe the men, Mrs. Gersemann?"

"Yes. The one that seemed to be in charge and did most of the talking, was tall and slender with long, dirty blond hair. The other one was dark, like a Mexican, and had a slight accent. Although he never dismounted, he appeared to be shorter."

"What happened then, Mrs. Gersemann?"

"The blond man got off his horse and walked up to my husband. And while holding the gun with one hand, he began to search him with the other. It only took him a moment to discover the money belt. He made Bernie take it off and hand it over. The brigand laughed and held the money belt up for his partner to see. Then he said, 'Looky here what I found.' And as he began to examine the contents of the belt, he took his eyes off Bernie a moment, and that's when Bernie hit him. Bernie was fifty years old, but he was strong as an ox, and the blow sounded like a mule kick. It lifted the outlaw completely off his feet. His hat flew off, and he dropped his gun, and he fell flat on his back. Then Bernie tried to scoop up the gun, and the other man shot him. Bernie staggered back against the wagon and then fell. I almost cried out at the shot, but I held my hands over my mouth to keep from screaming. It took the man on the ground a full minute before he could get up. His mask had come off and I could see his lips were broken and bleeding, and he was white as a sheet. He staggered over, picked up his hat and gun, and the money belt; and then mounted his horse with difficulty. The dark man pulled his mask off and said, 'Hey, ain't you gonna search the wagon?' The other one said, 'No, the Lufkin stage is due here any minute.' Then he said, 'Let's get the hell outta here!' and they rode off."

Tears welled up in her eyes and began to run down her face, though her expression didn't change at all. Magruder damned himself for not having a kerchief. That was something he had forgotten to buy.

He took her hand and held it, and said softly, "Go on, Mrs. Gersemann. What did you do then?"

"I got out of the wagon as quickly as I could. Bernie was still alive and he said, 'Hilda, help me get in the wagon.' With my help he was able to stand up, and somehow we managed to get him into the wagon. Then he told me to drive as fast as I could to Huntsville. I had not driven this team before, but I had little difficulty. They were well-trained animals, and once I started shouting and slapping the reins, they began to gallop. It seemed like we would never get here, though it probably took no more than thirty minutes.

“As we got into town I slowed the team and began screaming at people on the street asking directions to a doctor. A man came running out into the street shouting that he was a doctor, and I pulled the team to a stop. I told the doctor my husband had been shot and was in the wagon. The doctor hastily climbed in and checked Bernie. In only a few seconds he looked up at me and said, ‘I’m sorry, ma’am, but your husband is dead.’”

At this point she completely broke down, and began sobbing uncontrollably. Magruder earnestly wanted to hear more about the outlaws, but knew it would be unkind to persist at this time.

“Mrs. Gersemann, let me take you to your room, and we’ll talk some more tomorrow. Would you have breakfast with me in the mornin’?” She nodded. “Will eight o’clock be alright?” She nodded again.

He helped her up and then accompanied her to her room. He bid her goodnight, and cautioned her to lock her door before retiring. He also told her that he was in room 210 just across the hall, and she was to call him regardless of the time, if she needed assistance.

He went back downstairs and walked over and spoke to the night clerk. He asked where the funeral parlor was located, and if anyone would still be there this time of evening.

“They’re located on the corner of Spring and Fannin, Mr. Magruder. That’s two blocks west, and one block south. They usually close around six, and open at seven in the mornin’. But the undertaker lives in quarters behind the parlor, and if you need to see him now, just beat on the door. He’ll open up.”

As it was already after eight, he said, “No, my business can wait till mornin’. By the way, how do I go about findin’ Spencer’s Livery Stables?”

“Spencer’s is out on the Lufkin road,” explained the clerk. “It connects with Cedar Street five blocks east of the hotel. You’ll find Spencer’s ‘bout half mile out from that point.”

He thanked the clerk, then went back up to his room.

Magruder unlocked the door, went in and relocked it from the inside. He found the lamp and lit it. It was only 8:30, and he had far too much on his mind to think about retiring. He pulled the Colt revolver from the bag and examined it closely. It was a fine weapon. He then decided it was time for a little practice.

He unwrapped the belt and holster and put them on. Attached to the lower end of the holster were two leather thongs about 18 inches long. He tied these around his lower right thigh. From long habit, he again checked the cylinder of the pistol to verify all chambers were empty. Then he placed the gun in its holster and stood before the mirror hanging above the dresser. He smiled at the image peering back at him. It reminded him of years past. There was a time years ago when he was considered one of the deadliest gunmen in Texas. But that now seemed like another lifetime.

In slow motion he now began drawing the weapon, cocking it with his thumb during the draw, extending the gun forward at waist level and pulling the trigger. The gun felt strange in his hand, and at the same time familiar. He repeated this sequence of movements for over an hour, gradually increasing his speed. Around

ten o'clock he took off the holster and gun, and put them away in a dresser drawer. Then he undressed, turned out the lamp and went to bed.

Tuesday:

Magruder awoke the next morning a little before six. For a moment he was disoriented—he was not in his prison cell. Then he remembered he was free, and he felt that elation in his breast all over again. He sprang from the bed with alacrity, lit the lamp, and while getting dressed, noticed his reflection in the mirror. His hair was disheveled and his beard showed darkly on his face. "Hell!" he exclaimed aloud. "I forgot to buy a comb and razor." He recalled he also wanted to buy some kerchiefs. Well, I'll go see if I can find a place open that sells such stuff.

He put on his hat, then left his room and descended the stairs. He smelled the wonderful aroma of coffee before he got to the lobby, and much to his pleasure, found the dining room open. He went in and sat down at the counter, and had a cup of scalding black coffee. Then he walked out to the street, which was quiet at this hour. The twilight of dawn was evident in the eastern sky, and the spring air was cool and sweet smelling to his senses. He stopped there on the boardwalk for a few moments to savor the beauty of the morning.

He saw the doors were opened at Gibbs and lamps were on inside, so he crossed the street and went in. There were already several customers shopping. A sales clerk led him to the articles he wanted, which he purchased. He found the bank booth was still closed and locked. When he inquired, he was informed that the bank opened at 8:00. He walked back to the hotel and asked the desk clerk about hot water for a shave. He was told a pan would be sent up to his room right away.

While shaving, he decided he would go to the funeral parlor at seven, and pay for Gersemann's funeral before meeting Mrs. Gersemann for breakfast. After he got cleaned up, he walked the few blocks to the undertaker's parlor. The tall, grim, black-suited undertaker he dealt with looked the part. He told Magruder that Mrs. Gersemann should come by and make arrangements for the time of burial, assuming she wished to be present for that event. He then returned to the hotel, had another cup of coffee, and he was sitting in the lobby reading *The Huntsville Item*, the local newspaper, when Mrs. Gersemann came down. He quickly got up to greet her.

She had on a different dress that accentuated her curvaceous figure, and she looked even more alluring than she had the previous evening. He felt that demon stirring within him again and he forced it down with iron resolve. She held out her hand and greeted him with a pleasant smile. The dark circles that were under her eyes the night before were now gone.

"Good morning, Mr. Magruder. It's good to see you. You have been so kind—I really don't think I could have endured this tragic ordeal without your support."

"It's good to see you too, Mrs. Gersemann. I hope you were able to get some rest. Shall we go in and get some breakfast?"

She smiled and nodded. He took her arm and they went in the dining room, found a table and sat down.

After they had ordered, he said, "Mrs. Gersemann, I'd like to ask some more questions about the outlaws that shot your husband, if you feel up to it. I know this is difficult for you, but if we are to have any hope of catchin' those villains, we must act quickly. We can wait till after breakfast to talk about it, if you'd rather."

"Mr. Magruder, I'm still grieving, of course—but I am also angry. I want to see those bastards caught, and personally witness their execution!" she said emphatically. "So go ahead and ask your questions, Mr. Magruder."

He was surprised by her response, but thought it was a good sign. "Well, first I'd like you to tell me everything you can remember about those men, their dress, their horses, and anything else that you observed or heard during the holdup."

"Alright. The blond man wore rather nondescript clothing—just a rough cotton shirt and denim trousers. He was tall, skinny and had buckteeth. He was quite homely. His horse was a sorrel with three white stocking feet—two in front and one behind. The other man rode a black animal, and his saddle had an unusual large flat saddle horn. He was dressed much like the first man except he wore a vest. Oh, yes! He also wore spurs with very large, uh—I think they're called rowels—they must have been three inches in diameter. Both men appeared to be in their early to mid twenties. And I'm afraid that's all I can recall, Mr. Magruder."

"That's quite a lot, Mrs. Gersemann. That should be enough to identify these bandits. By the way, I went over to the funeral parlor this morning and took care of things, but you need to see them to arrange the time of burial. Would you like to walk over after breakfast?"

After they finished their breakfast, he walked her over to the funeral parlor. It promised to be another beautiful spring day. Arrangements were made for the burial of Mr. Gersemann at ten the following morning.

While returning to the hotel, Mrs. Gersemann said, "Oh, I just remembered another thing about the outlaws. The blond man called the other one by name. His exact words as they were departing were, 'Let's get the hell outta here, Joe!'"

"I'm glad you remembered that, Mrs. Gersemann. There can't be many men named Joe that fit your description of the man."

"By the way, you've said your wagon and team were at Spencer's Livery over on the Lufkin road. What arrangements did you make with Spencer to keep them there? And how did you gain transport for yourself and your luggage from there to the Eutaw House?"

"It was right in front of Spencer's where I stopped the team and the doctor examined Bernie. I suppose my hysterical screaming had attracted the many curious people who gathered around, and Mr. Spencer was one of them. When the doctor told me that Bernie was dead, I went all to pieces. I began crying and telling everyone that the outlaws had taken all our money and I didn't know what to do. Several there expressed sympathy, and a few offered some help. Mr. Spencer said he would take care of my team and wagon a few days until other arrangements could be made. And a man whose name I failed to get, offered to drive me with my personal things to the Eutaw House in his buckboard. He thought they might provide me with temporary accommodations."

When they entered the hotel, he asked if she'd like to go to her room, and she declined. She said she felt more melancholy when alone, and she wanted to sit in

the lobby and read the newspaper for a while. Magruder excused himself, saying he had various errands to run. He invited her to join him for supper at seven, and she accepted.

Chapter IV

The Deputy.

Magruder stepped out on the board sidewalk and stood there a minute undecided what to do first. He wanted to talk to Spencer about buying Mrs. Gersemann's wagon and team, and also speak to the sheriff about apprehending the lady's assailants. The distance to both places is a bit further than I want to walk. So-o, I think I'll go around to the hotel stables and rent a horse.

He turned toward the alley on the north side of the hotel. And when he stepped off the boardwalk, he espied a little barefoot urchin of about ten playing marbles alone in the dirt. Then he had an inspiration. Perhaps he could get the boy to run one of his errands. He entered the alley and spoke to the boy. "Who's winnin', Sonny?"

The little fellow looked up and grinned. "Aw, ain't nobody winnin' cuz I'm jus' playin' by m'self."

"What's your name, Sonny?"

"Timmy...Timmy Waters. Whut's your'n?"

He chuckled. The little fellow wasn't bashful. "I'm Jacob Magruder, Timmy."

Then he asked the boy, "Timmy, would you like to earn two-bits?"

The boy jumped up with a big freckle-faced grin exclaiming, "Yessir, I shore would. Whutta I havta do?"

"Do you know where Spencer's livery stable is located?"

"Shore, I know whur t'is. I know Mr. Spencer too."

"That's good, Timmy. You see, Mr. Spencer has a wagon and a team of horses at his livery that belongs to a lady named Mrs. Gersemann. I would like you to run over there and ask Mr. Spencer if he would consider buyin' Mrs. Gersemann's wagon and team. And then come back here and tell me what he says. When you get back, I'll probably be sitting in front of the Eutaw House on one of the benches outside. But if I'm not, you wait for me there. I won't be long." He took a quarter from his pocket and flipped it to the boy who caught it expertly. "Do you think you can remember all that, Timmy?"

"Shore, I can 'member. I'm s'posed to ask 'im if'n he wants to buy Miz Gersemann's hawses and waggin."

"That's right Timmy. You go ahead now, and I'll meet you in front of the hotel in 30 minutes or so. Okay?" The little boy nodded, then quickly picked up and pocketed his few marbles before running off down the street toward Spencer's.

Magruder headed in another direction to have a talk with the sheriff. He found the house with the big sycamore trees in the front yard, and he knocked on the

door. In a few seconds a short, plump, gray-headed lady of about seventy opened the door.

He removed his hat and said, "Good morning ma'am, I'm Jacob Magruder. I was wonderin' if I might see Sheriff Colson?"

He heard a man's voice from inside shout, "Who is it, Martha?" The lady shouted back, "It's a Mr. Magruder, Charley. He wants to talk to you." The man shouted again, "Well, tell him to come on in." Then the lady said, "Come in, Mr. Magruder."

He found the sheriff half reclining on a day bed with one leg propped on a pillow. On a wall rack above his head was a double-barreled 12-gauge shotgun, and a Henry .44 rifle. A big sheathed pistol hung on the bedpost by a cartridge belt near the Sheriff's right hand. He looked like a man that was all business.

He said, "Mornin', Sheriff, I'm Jacob Magruder. I heard you've been having a little problem with arthritis, and I hope you're feeling some better."

He found himself under the sharp scrutiny of cold gray eyes under furrowed and grizzled brows. The sheriff looked to be about the same age as his wife, with thinning gray hair and a handlebar moustache. The sheriff nodded, but made no reply.

Feeling a little uncomfortable under that piercing gaze, he continued, "Sheriff, I've taken a personal interest in the Gersemann murder case, and since you seemed to be short handed right now, I'd like to offer some help in catchin' the killers."

"I've got a deputy workin' on that already. Whut makes you think I need yore help?" said the sheriff, regarding Magruder with that icy stare.

"Well, Sheriff, no criticism of you intended, but I've been told by a few citizens that your young deputy, Ron Morris, mainly spends his time arrestin' drunks and mindin' the jail. They also say that's about all he's qualified to do. And accordin' to Mrs. Gersemann, his questionin' of her about the crime was cursory at best. He didn't get near all the facts."

The old sheriff sighed. "Well, unfortunately, there's some truth in whut they say about Morris. But I don't know you, Magruder—or anythang about you. Besides, Sam Mason will be back in a coupla days, and I'll put him on the case."

"Sheriff, that may be too late. Half the town already knows Mrs. Gersemann was a hidden witness to the murder, and it's only a matter of time till the outlaws find out. When they do, they may haul freight for parts unknown! What worries me more is they may try to harm Mrs. Gersemann. 'Course there's a possibility they've already heard the killin' was witnessed, but if not, we have a chance to catch them before they can complicate our efforts."

Colson glared at him with those eagle eyes for a full minute. He seemed to be weighing Magruder's argument. Finally he asked, "You got any experience as a lawman, Magruder?"

"Yes, sir, I have. I was a Texas Ranger for six years. I served with Captain John S. Ford in the state's '58 campaign against the Comanche Indians. And I was with him in '59 when he crushed the Mexican banditry along the Rio Grande fomented by the renegade Juan Cortinas. I also served with Ford during the Civil War. He

commanded the paramilitary force known as 'The Cavalry of the West' that fought the Yankees in Texas. I served as his adjutant."

"Hell, boy! I know who John Ford is—and I know whut he done for Texas. So you were a Ranger, huh? And you served under ol' 'Rip' Ford hisself durin' the War?" exclaimed the sheriff, beginning to smile.

"Yes sir, I did. I'm also related to John Ford. He and my mother are first cousins."

Then after a thoughtful pause, the sheriff asked what Magruder assumed to be a question to test his veracity. "Weren't Ford's outfit involved in some kinda scrap with the blue bellies a month or so after Appomattox?"

"That's right, Sheriff, we were. That was the battle of Palmito Hill—down near Brownsville. Word of the surrender hadn't reached the combatants down there, though we all knew the end was imminent. Palmito Hill was more of a slaughter than a battle. When it was over, the Yankees had over 200 dead scattered about the battle field. Though many of our cavalry were wounded, none were killed."

"I find that hard to swaller, Magruder. How could that fight've been so one-sided?"

"It was due to the folly of Union Colonel Theodore Barrett. Barrett hadn't previously seen any combat, and he hoped to make a name for himself with a tellin' victory before the end of hostilities. Ford knew the Confederate cause was lost, and if Barrett had offered reasonable terms of surrender, he would've capitulated. But Barrett was determined to fight, and his intransigence made Ford furious. He swore, shook his fist and shouted, 'If that sonofabitch wants a fight, we'll give him one!'

"When Barrett's battalion moved on Palmito Hill it was met by withering rifle fire from an entrenched Confederate brigade commanded by Colonel George Giddings. During the following fusillade of rifle and canon fire between these two forces, our 300 horsemen made a thunderin' cavalry charge from out of the concealment of the brush into the Federal's right flank. It was a complete rout. Their foot soldiers didn't have a chance."

The old sheriff shook his head muttering, "My God! All those men dyin' fer nuthin'. Whut a shame. I wonder just how many boys on both sides died in that damnable Civil War because of fools like Barrett bein' in command."

"I'm sure there were thousands, Sheriff. Ford claimed that Barrett disobeyed his commanding officer when he moved on Palmito Hill. And if so, he should've been court-martialed, but I never heard anymore about it."

Then Colson said, "Alright, Magruder—so much fer the war. Now tell me whut you happen to be doin' in Huntsville at this time. I know yo're not a native 'cuz I know near ever'body in town."

"The truth is, Sheriff, I just got out of state prison," said Magruder, pulling his pardon paper out of a pocket and unfolding it. "I received this pardon from Governor Richard Coke yesterday." And he handed the document to the sheriff.

Sheriff Colson scrutinized the paper carefully, and then handed it back to him. "How'd you come to be locked up, boy?"

He briefly told him the story, including the part about the trial judge being a Texan-hating carpetbagger.

The sheriff snorted, “Those goddamned carpetbaggers have had their foot on our necks for nine long years—but that’s over now. Since Coke’s election, most of ‘em are leavin’ Texas. And considerin’ whut those bastards did to the people of this state, I’d say it was a prudent move on their part!

“Yo’re probly not aware of it, Magruder—you being locked up at the time—but three years ago Huntsville and Walker County was put under martial law. Limestone an’ Freestone counties got the same treatment. You see, up at Groesbeck, four black State Policemen on a drunken rampage shot down one of the town’s leadin’ citizens—in cold blood. Now this sort of atrocity was not all that uncommon in Texas at the time—jus’ another of many such killin’s at the hands of the bloody State Police. But this particular act seem to strike a spark that spread like wildfire, and there was groundswell of public outrage.

“Bout that same time here in Huntsville, a freed slave that had testified in court that he’d been flogged by whites, was found murdered. Of course, it was assumed that the white men accused had dunnit. Well, the State Police came in led by Leander McNelly, a captain in that nee-farious organization, and four suspects were arrested. At the trial of these men, a gun battle broke out, an’ McNelly and another of his gang were wounded, while two of the suspects escaped. There was even an attempt to assassinate the judge. Oh, it was a hot time in ol’ Huntsville back then.

“All this scared that bastard Edmund Davis, our carpetbagger governor! And it scared me too, for a different reason. I was afraid some of our local hotheads were gonna go out and start lynchin’ State Policemen. Anythang like that would’ve brought in Yankee troops with bayonets. So I rode all over the county warnin’ folks not to take the law into their own hands. And fortunately, even though there were howls of anguish, no more unlawful acts took place. Well, Davis sent in mobs of heavily armed State Police to put down whut he feared would be a major uprisin’. After seein’ everthang was under control, Davis had the gall to impose a punitive tax on whut he called the rebellious counties. The State Police then rode from farm to farm throughout Walker County collecting a fifty-cent tax on every \$100 of assessed property value. I never thought Texans would abide that indignity without a fight, but they had the good sense not to resist. The odds were not in their favor.

“Then last year, jus’ before Richard Coke was elected governor, the Texas Legislature—over Davis’s veto, mind you—voted to rescind the damnable State Police Law. That vote made those murderin’ bastards fair game! And after that, all former State Policemen jus’ seemed to fade away—like a vapor in the breeze. I don’t know whur they went, but I’m shore they were all haulin’ ass for the tall an’ uncut!”

The sheriff paused here, cleared his throat, then said, “Alright, Magruder—gettin’ back to the problem at hand—whut is it you think you can do to catch these yay-hoos that killed Gersemann?”

He told the sheriff what he had in mind. He had already gotten the pertinent facts from Mrs. Gersemann, including a full description of the men and their horses. He figured all that money would be burning a hole in their pockets, and the thieves would be wanting to spend some of it. And though there were other communities in the county where basic goods might be purchased, he felt that

many things the robbers would likely want to buy would not be available in these hamlets. He thought the odds were good they would show up in Huntsville soon—providing they hadn't heard about the witness. He said his plan was to discreetly enlist the aid of several trustworthy saloon owners and storekeepers, since those were the places the outlaws would most likely visit if they came into town. And he would instruct these citizens to notify him or the sheriff immediately if men fitting the description of the killers should enter their establishments. He also expressed that he would probably need some evidence of the sheriff's approval in order to gain the confidence and cooperation of these people.

"Well, that ain't such a bad idee Magruder, but how're you gonna see-lect these trustworthy citizens—havin' been in town only two days?"

"I was hopin' you could help me out there by suggestin' some folks," he answered with a smile.

"Shore, I can do that." And he called to his wife, "Martha how 'bout brangin' me a pencil and some writin' paper?"

In a couple of minutes Mrs. Colson brought the requested items, and she asked, "Can I get you and Mr. Magruder some coffee, Charley?"

"I'd like some, Martha. How 'bout you, Magruder?"

"That sounds fine, Mrs. Colson. I'd love some."

Having noticed that Magruder had been standing all during this exchange, Mrs. Colson indicated a chair and invited Magruder to sit down, which he did, expressing his thanks.

The sheriff began to write some names on the pad, and after a while he handed the list to Magruder. Then he asked, "Whut makes you think these bandits are local, son? We ain't had any similar crimes committed by a pair of young gunmen. Oh, shootin's ain't all that uncommon, mind you, but they're usually over a woman or a game of cards. Our only criminal activity, to speak of, has been two-bit cattle rustlin', an' a hawse stole now an' then. The boys that pulled this job could've been some desperados jus' passin' through, and the Gersemanns presented an opportunity for thievery."

"You may be right, Sheriff, but I don't think so. I've got a hunch that they're from this area. Mrs. Gersemann told me they were shaven, and their clothes reasonably clean. They also carried no canteens, saddlebags, bedrolls or other packs. Outlaws on the move are usually dirty and unshaven, and normally carry their bedrolls, clothes, and other necessities with them as they go. It doesn't appear to me that these men were just traveling through and ran into the Gersemanns by chance. It's my guess these boys are a couple of petty thieves, or maybe some of your cattle rustlers, who aspired to do bigger things. I think this was their first holdup. And I suspect they had been waitin' to hold up the Lufkin stage, but decided on the spur of the moment to rob Gersemann instead. His manner of dress and his whole outfit indicated he was a prosperous merchant. I doubt that murder was part of their plan, however, or they wouldn't have bothered to mask their faces."

The sheriff nodded his agreement, and about that time Mrs. Colson brought in the coffee. Magruder and the sheriff made small talk about Texas politics for a few minutes as they drank their coffee. Finally Colson said, "Say boy, are you any kin

of that Texas Ranger, J.J. Magruder, who made such a name fer hisself as a fast gun back several years ago?"

He replied, somewhat self-consciously, "Sheriff, I am that J.J. Magruder."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Colson. "How come they called you J.J., son, 'stead of by yore regular handle?"

He explained that his given names were John Jacob, and in his first assignment with a Ranger Company, there was already a John and a Jacob in the outfit. So they began calling him by his initials, J.J., and after a while it stuck. That moniker followed him all through his Ranger service.

"That's amazin'! I've heard a lotta tales about you, son, though I 'spect some were a bit 'zaggerated." At length he called to his wife, "Martha, would you brang me that spare deputy sheriff's badge outta my top desk drawer, please?" Mrs. Colson complied, and took their empty cups away.

"Magruder, by the authority of my office, I'm appointin' you temporary Deputy Sheriff of Walker County. I think we can dispense with the formal swearin'," said Colson, and he handed him the badge. "I suggest you keep this in yore pocket and only show it when necessary. I've written half a dozen names on that list of men I trust. You can show 'em the badge when you talk to 'em about helping'. I'm shore they'll go along. An' you better find Morris and send him to see me. I'll explain ever'thang, and tell him yo're in charge till Mason gets back." He paused a moment, then added, "I notice you ain't packin' any hardware, son. You'd best be heeled when you go lookin' fer killers."

Magruder explained he had already bought a gun, and would surely be wearing it when he confronted the outlaws. He asked the sheriff about a good place to practice his marksmanship as he was likely pretty rusty after four years.

"There's an old stone quarry that's commonly used for gun practice," said the sheriff. "Take Cedar Street west. After a ways it becomes the Navasota road. The quarry is about ten miles out."

He stuck out his hand and the old sheriff met it with a firm grip. Colson had a twinkle in his eye as he said, "Magruder, I'm proud to know you, son, and I hope you catch those bastards! Try to take 'em alive if you can, but don't take no chances. Kill 'em if they resist. You've got till Mason comes back to find 'em, then I'll have to turn this over to him."

Magruder walked back to the hotel to find Timmy waiting for him there. "Hi Timmy. Sorry I'm late. Took me a little longer than I figured. Did you see Mr. Spencer?"

"Yessir, I shore did. Mr. Spencer said to tell you that he don't deal in no rollin' stock, and as fer the hawses, he said he's already got too much ain...uh, ain-ventory. Whut's ainventory, Mister? It thet the same as hawses?"

Magruder chuckled. "Yes, Timmy, it sure is. And you did a good job. I might ask you to run some more errands for me sometimes. Would you like that?"

"Yessir, if'n I get twobits ever' time," Timmy said with a grin.

He sat down on the bench beside the boy. "How come you're not in school, Timmy?"

"Cuz our teacher, Miz Pirkins, run off with one of Sher'ff Colson's depidies. And we don't havta go to school no more till they find another teacher. I hope they never find one."

Magruder chided him mildly, "Schoolin' is mighty important, Timmy. You don't want to grow up to be an ignoramus, do you?"

Timmy was non-committal to that query.

"Do you know why the deputy and Miss Pirkins ran off, Timmy? Why didn't they just get married here?"

"Cuz the depidy already had a wife," Timmy quipped with a grin.

Magruder just shook his head at that sally.

"What does your daddy do, Timmy? Does he work in town?"

"I ain't got no daddy. My daddy was kilt in the War when I was little. I don't even 'member whut he looked like," Timmy answered sadly.

"Well, where do you live, Timmy, and who takes care of you?"

"I live with my mama. Our house is north o' town off the Pine Prairie road. My mama does sewin' and mendin' fer folks."

"Doesn't your mother worry about you running loose around town?"

"Naw, she don' kere s'long I stay outta trouble. She says she can't get no work done with me in the house, so she runs me out after breakfas'. But I don' mind---I like foolin' around town."

"Don't you go home at noon to eat?"

"Un-uh. Mama tells me to fill up at breakfas' and don' come back till suppertime. Sometime I put a biscuit or piece of cornbread in my pocket 'fore I leave, but they mostly gets all crumbly 'fore I kin eat 'em."

Magruder looked at his watch and saw it was a quarter past eleven. He wasn't yet hungry himself but decided to treat the little waif to a good meal. "Timmy, if I bought you some dinner down at Nora's Caf , could you eat it?"

The little ragamuffin brightened up, and displayed a wide grin. "Shore I could. I kin always eat sump'n."

He took Timmy to the caf , and after they were seated Magruder handed him a menu. "Can you read the menu, Timmy?"

"Shore, I kin read." He took the menu and began to study it; his lips moving mobilely as he bent serious scrutiny on that document.

The pretty young waitress who had waited on Magruder before came over to take their orders. Magruder winked at her and said to Timmy, "You can order anything you want, Timmy, but you have to eat everthing you order. Understand?"

Timmy nodded vigorously and began to order, "I want ham, butter beans, sweet taters, fried corn bread, apple pie an' sweet milk," he announced.

Magruder and the waitress both smiled at that declaration. Then he said, "Make mine the same, please, except I'd prefer coffee to the milk."

In a short while the food was served, but Magruder didn't begin eating immediately, he just watched Timmy eat. It gave him a lot of pleasure to see the little fellow gobble down the food. While watching the boy, he recalled how insatiable his own appetite was when he was a lad.

While walking back toward the hotel after lunch, Magruder asked, "How come you were playing marbles alone today, Timmy? Where are your playmates?"

"I don't have none no more," he said sadly. "Billy Decker was my bes' fren', but his folks moved to Conroe. The other kids at school are all bigger or littler'n me, so I jus' play by m'self."

He felt a tug at his heartstrings listening to the lonely little fellow. "Timmy, I like you a lot, and I don't have a best friend, either. How about you and I bein' best friends? What do you say to that?"

Timmy looked up with a smile. "Shore, I'd like thet. I like you too."

Magruder extended his right hand. "Shake on it, partner."

Timmy gave him a big grin and stuck out a grubby little paw.

By now, he had decided that Timmy was a bright little boy, even though he wasn't fond of school. And he contemplated enlisting the boy's aid in the quest for the Gerseemann killers. The little fellow commonly ran all about town, and another set of eyes and ears might prove productive.

When they got to the hotel, he said, "Let's sit down here on the bench and talk a bit, Timmy." And after they were seated he asked, "Timmy, did you hear about the outlaws robbing a man and his wife out on the Lufkin road, and shootin' the man?"

"Yessir, I heered. Ever'boday's talkin' 'bout it."

"Where did you hear about it, Timmy?"

"At the feed store. I go by there mos' ever' mornin' cuz Mister Slaughter sometimes gives me a nickel to sweep out. There's always a bunch o' fellers hangin' 'round there 'n talkin'."

"I'd like to help the Sheriff catch those killers, Timmy. Would you like to help too?"

"Shore, if'n I knew how," was the boy's eager response.

"Well, before I can let you help, you have to promise you won't tell anybody about what we're doing. If you talk about this to anyone, then they may tell someone else, and before long the outlaws will hear about it and they'll run away. If that happens, we'll never be able to catch them. Do you understand?"

Timmy nodded. "Shore, I unnerstan'. I promise not to tell."

Magruder then gave Timmy a full description of the bandits and their horses, and cautioned him again that he must say nothing to anyone else, but come and report to him immediately if he should see anyone of that description, or hear any talk about such men. He told Timmy that he should continue "foolin' around town" everyday, like always, and keep his eyes and ears open.

"Timmy, I'm stayin' here at the Eutaw House—in room number 210. That's upstairs on the second floor. Now, if you happen to see anybody that look like the outlaws, or any horses that look like theirs, I want you to come tell me quick. Alright? And if I'm not in my room, you tell Mr. Swartz that you have a message for me—but don't tell him what it is. I'll keep Mr. Swartz posted on where I go and when I'll return, and instruct him he's to tell you, if you ask. That way, you'll know when I'll be back. And if I'm somewhere nearby, like Nora's Café or the Sundown Saloon, you can come find me. Okay?"

Timmy nodded. Then he said, "Mistuh Swartz don' like me comin' in the hotel. I useta go in th' lobby sometime an' sit when I got tired, but he tol' Willy Simms to run me out if'n I ever come in agin'."

"I'll take care of that, Timmy. I'll talk to Mr. Swartz and tell him you're running errands for me, and that he's to let you to come up to my room anytime you ask to."

"Well, you be shore an' tell Willy, too. He'll box my ears if'n he gits a chance."

Magruder didn't like the sound of that. "C'mon, Timmy, we'll go in and talk to Swartz right now."

"I...I don' know—he don' like me."

"Don't worry, Timmy—he'll like you alright after I talk to him."

After talking to Karl Swartz, who reluctantly agreed to his request, Magruder walked back outside with the boy. Then he told him, "Timmy, when two fellows work together, that makes them partners, ya' know? And since we're now partners, you can call me Jake? Alright?"

Timmy smiled and said, "Awright."

He extracted another quarter from his pocket and with a wink, handed the coin to Timmy, and was rewarded with another grin. "Timmy, I've got some business to attend to now. Why don't you run along? But be sure and let me know if you hear or see anything. Okay, partner?"

"Awright, Mister, uh—I mean, Jake." The little fellow gave Magruder another toothy grin, and then jumped up and ran off down the street, his tiny bare feet slapping the hard dirt surface and kicking up little puffs of dust.

First, Magruder went over to Gibbs to see if his money had arrived from Austin. Mr. Collins told him it had. He asked if he could leave it on deposit and just draw on it as needed, and was told that he could. He drew out \$200 and left.

Then he looked up Ron Morris and told him the Sheriff wanted to see him. Morris, who was somewhat impressed with himself, and reveled in being the only active law officer in town, didn't like what he heard. He obviously suspected he was about to get a demotion.

Next, he started making the rounds to talk to the various citizens the Sheriff had recommended. He first went to the Sundown Saloon and spoke with Jerry Malloy, the bartender, who it turned out was joint owner with his brother. Jerry said he'd gladly do anything to help catch those "murderin' bastards!" Magruder had a pleasant visit with Jerry and another shot of his premium booze, and although he tried to pay for it, Jerry insisted that it be on the house as a token of appreciation of what he was doing to catch the outlaws. From there Magruder went to Honaker's Hardware and met Simon Honaker. Then he went to Slaughter's Feed Store, Hume's Blacksmith Shop, the Oasis Saloon, and finally the Globe Tavern. He visited a while at each of these places getting acquainted with the proprietors. All were pleased to learn someone was actively seeking the killers. They felt the outlaws would continue to be a threat to the community until caught, and they were eager to help.

It was past mid-afternoon when he headed back to the hotel. As he entered the lobby, Swartz motioned him over and handed him a note. He said it was brought in by one of the prison supply drivers. It was from Brian Henders, the warden. The note said Henders would be in town Saturday afternoon, and he would like for Magruder to join him for dinner at the Globe Tavern around 6PM.

The shriek of a train whistle startled Magruder as he was reading the note. Toot! Toot! Too-oo-oot! The sound came from the station a quarter-mile away. He

glanced at Swartz questioningly. “The way they blow that whistle sounds like some kind of signal?”

“It is, Mr. Magruder. It means that the train has just arrived from Phelps. It’s tellin’ would-be passengers, and anyone shippin’ or receivin’ freight, that the train is here, and will be pullin’ out again in forty-five minutes. Five minutes before she pulls out, you’ll hear three long blasts on the whistle.”

“Tell me, Karl, why did the railroad construct their line several miles to the east, instead of comin’ through Huntsville?”

Swartz smiled as he replied, “To bring their line through Huntsville, the Houston & Great Northern Railroad wanted right-of-way property to be deeded to them without cost, and in addition wanted a \$25,000 bonus. The city fathers were indignant at the railroad people’s gall. They thought the request for a bonus was outrageous, and that the railroad had no other viable option than coming through Huntsville. They also told them if the H. & G.N. wanted right-of-way property, they could damn well pay for it! Well, as it turned out, the railroad folks were more stubborn than the Huntsville crowd, so in the end, the H. & G.N. ran their line seven miles to the east, though it was probably a poor economic decision.”

“Well, what about the tap line from Phelps—did the railroad build that voluntarily?”

“Not on your life. That cost Huntsville over \$100,000—a lot more’n it woulda cost to have the line brought through here originally.”

Due to this brief exchange with Swartz, he looked at the man with new respect. “Karl, I can tell you’re an educated man, and I hope this question doesn’t offend you, but how is it you’re working as a hotel clerk? Surely there’s more rewarding employment here for a man of your talents.”

Swartz smiled tolerantly. “I’m something more than a clerk, Mr. Magruder. Besides workin’ the desk durin’ the day, I manage the hotel for the owners. I’m in charge of all maintenance, procurement, and personnel.”

He extended his hand and said, “I apologize for thinkin’ otherwise, Karl.”

Swartz shook his hand and displayed a friendly smile. “That’s perfectly understandable, Mr. Magruder.”

He started to step away, then hesitated. “Karl, I noticed the hotel has a surrey for hire. Is that so?”

“Yes we do, Mr. Magruder. If you’d like to rent it, just go to the stables behind the hotel and tell Bobby, the stable boy. He’ll be glad to help you.”

He went on up to his room. On entering he was thinking it was time for him to get serious about his gun practice. He might soon be forced to face Gersemann’s killers in a showdown. He decided he would spend the rest of the afternoon practicing his draw and dry firing technique, and then tomorrow, go to the old quarry for some live-fire target practice. He also decided that beginning the following day, he would start packing his gun whenever he went out.

For the next two hours he stood before the mirror and practiced. Though his draw had become smoother and faster, he wondered, can I ever attain the speed I once had?

But he was confident in his ability to best the amateurish badmen he was seeking. Speed was only one of many faculties that determined the outcome of a gunfight. Most important was the cold nerve to remain calm and in control while facing someone intent on killing you. And a gift which all great gunfighters had was instinctively knowing when their antagonist was going to draw—some tensing of the muscles, shift in stance, or narrowing of the eyes was the signal for action. Moreover, in the heat of a gunfight, many who were exceptionally fast, shot wildly—they didn't have the discipline to hold their fire that extra split-second until certain of their mark. There were not too many who could shoot accurately from the hip, anyway. Again, that ability seemed to be more of a gift than a skill that could be readily learned. And though he hadn't fired a gun in four years, Magruder was satisfied that he still possessed these natural abilities. These were the thoughts going through his mind as he practiced.

During the last thirty minutes of his practice, he began twirling the pistol on his trigger finger two or three revolutions before jabbing it back in its holster. This had nothing to do with gun prowess. It was just the flashy trick of gunman that had been his habit in the old days. He did it mainly to see if he still had the knack, and found that he did.

Although his hands were calloused from long use of the axe and saw, the skin on Magruder's thumb eventually began to burn from cocking the hammer. And his hand had begun to ache, and his arm to tire. So he took off the gunbelt and holster and put them away.

He looked at his watch—it was 6:45. It was time to wash up and go down to meet Mrs. Gersemann for supper.

He was waiting in the lobby when she came down. She looked more alluring than ever. She greeted him warmly, and he took her arm and escorted her to the dining room.

During dinner Mrs. Gersemann said, "Mr. Magruder, I hope you'll forgive me, but I have been so concerned with my own affairs, that I haven't thought to ask about yours. It suddenly occurred to me last night that I know little about you, except that you were once a Texas Ranger. I'm curious to know how you happen to be in Huntsville at just the moment I needed a champion. Surely this is not your home or you wouldn't be staying in the hotel."

He hesitated, then reluctantly told her of his incarceration, and of his recent pardon and release. She listened solemnly as he related the story, with expressions of concern and sympathy evident. Though he tried, he failed miserably to hide the bitterness he felt. The suppressed anger he exhibited as he told her of the injustice and humiliation he had experienced discouraged further conversation, and they ate the balance of their meal in silence.

As they were finishing their dessert and coffee, he said, "I've made arrangements to rent a surrey in order to drive you to Mr. Gersemann's funeral service tomorrow. I hope that meets with your approval."

"Oh, Mr. Magruder—you are so kind and thoughtful. Of course I approve, and thank you. I'll be ready by 9:30."

As they walked out of the dining room, he asked, "Would you like to sit in the lobby and talk a bit?"

She shook her head and gave him a wan smile. "I think not, Mr. Magruder. I think I'd like to be alone for a while—to try to sort things out. I have been so distraught over Bernie's death, that I have given little thought to future plans. Right now, I'm not sure whether I'm going on to Houston or back home to Pittsburgh. But I would like to ask another favor of you. Would you be kind enough to purchase a bottle of brandy for me? I'd prefer not to go into a saloon myself. I'm having trouble sleeping, and I think a little brandy might help."

"Of course. I'll take care of it right away."

"You needn't hurry, Mr. Magruder. I'll not likely retire before ten."

They parted at the foot of the stairs. She went up, and he walked across the lobby and out the door. He stopped on the boardwalk outside and tarried a while. It was about dusk. The street was quiet, and in the distance whippoorwills called. He had always loved that sound. The darkness and the cool breeze seemed to soothe his spirit. He turned in the direction of the Sundown Saloon and slowly strolled along. The first stars were just beginning to twinkle in the sky.

As Magruder walked through the batwings, he saw three poker games in progress, a number of drinkers socializing at other tables, and several customers standing at the bar. Business seemed quite brisk for the evening. Jerry Malloy stood behind the bar with his arms folded while his brother poured drinks for men at the other end of the bar. As he spotted Magruder, he smiled, picked up a bottle of his best and held it aloft. His raised eyebrows asked the question. Magruder smiled back and shook his head. "Not tonight, Jerry. I'd just like to buy a bottle of brandy for a lady. What would you recommend?"

"Well, I've got a very limited selection, Jacob. You have a choice between applejack and blackberry. I think the blackberry is best, myself. And the price is the same. Two bucks a pint."

"Then blackberry it is," said Magruder, placing two dollars on the bar. Malloy retrieved the pint and passed it to him.

"Jerry, I hope to buy a saddle horse soon. Where can I find a good selection of blooded stock? I'm told the local liveries deal mostly in plow horses."

"Well, there're several farms in the area that raise good stock, but I'll tell you where I'd go if I was in the market. Six miles north of town is the little community of Pine Prairie, and a couple of miles beyond you'll find the Cambell Ranch. The Cambell family owns several hundred acres, and they raise some of the finest horseflesh you'll find in Texas. But be prepared to pay an arm and a leg. They place a high value on their livestock."

"Thanks, Jerry. I'll go have a look at these exceptional animals. Tell me, how do I find the road to Pine Prairie?"

"Just go north on Main Street, Jacob—past the Oakwood Cemetery—that'll put you on the Pine Prairie road."

Then extracting a coin from his pocket and placing it on the bar, Magruder said, "I've changed my mind, Jerry. I believe I'll try some of your beer."

Malloy filled a mug from a 30-gallon cask, and passed the foaming brew to Magruder. He took a satisfying swallow of the warm liquid, and then carried his

beer over to watch the gambling at one of the tables. This group was playing small stakes poker with rarely over ten dollars in a pot. One of the players was half drunk and losing steadily. And with the loss of each hand, he became more loud and abrasive. He finally began intimating the game was dishonest. Two of the other players became angry, and began shouting at the drunk. It looked like there might be a fight. None of the players appeared to be armed, but he was not too sure. He decided it was a good time to leave. So he drank the last of his beer, and walked over and placed the empty mug on the bar. "Good beer, Jerry. I'll see you later. Hope those rowdies don't tear the place apart."

"Yeah—me too. Thanks, Jacob. And goodnight."

As he strolled back to the hotel in the cool of the evening, a big yellow full moon was just peeking over a hill. He stopped and watched it for several minutes. Magruder was a man of the outdoors, and had a heartfelt appreciation of God's handiwork. He had spent much of his life camping out and sleeping under the stars, and one of the most hateful things about being imprisoned was being denied this communing with nature. As he watched, the magnificent orb rose above the hilltop, and an overwhelming feeling of contentment came over him. And during those few minutes, the bitterness of the last four years was expunged from his soul.

Magruder entered the hotel, crossed the lobby and went up the stairs. When he knocked on the lady's door, her voice inquired, "Who is it?"

"It's Jacob Magruder, Mrs. Gersemann. I have your brandy."

He heard the bolt withdrawn and the door opened. She had on a light robe open to the waist, beneath which she wore a low cut filmy gown that exposed the upper part of her ample bosom and the deep crevice therein. His eyes were drawn to it automatically, but he glanced up quickly. He saw a faint smile on her lips. "I seem to be continually thanking you, Mr. Magruder. I wish there was something more I could do. Would you like to come in?" Even the scent of her perfume seemed erogenous.

Oh God! If I go in there, I won't be able to keep my hands off her. And this the eve of her husband's funeral. It took almost superhuman will to respond, "Thank you, Mrs. Gersemann, but I'd better not." He handed her the bottle of brandy and said, "I'll see you in the morning at breakfast. Good night."

Chapter V

Shootout.

Magruder entered his room and locked the door. He tried practicing with his gun for a while, but gave it up. He couldn't keep his mind off that beautiful, scantily clad woman, and what seemed to be an invitation to share her bed. But

then he shook his head saying to himself, "Hell, I'm just imaginin' things! She's an overwrought widow and probably completely unaware of how seductive she looks."

He pulled off his boots and picked up a dime novel magazine he had bought about outlaws and lawmen. Then he turned up the lamp and laid back on his pillow.

He had been reading for half an hour when he heard four gunshots fired about a second apart. They sounded like only a few blocks away. He stepped over, opened the shutters and raised his window. Then he stuck his head out. The night air had turned chilly. He listened for a couple of minutes, and as he was closing the window, he heard three more shots fired in rapid succession. He paused a moment thinking, Probably some drunks blowin' off steam. That'll give Ron Morris something to do. He walked back to his bed, laid down, and picked up his magazine and resumed reading.

Ten minutes later he heard running footsteps in the hallway outside his room, and then a loud pounding on his door. He jumped up and opened the door. It was the little man he had seen sweeping up at the Sundown Saloon, and he appeared to be frantic. Through gasps for breath he said that three men were shooting up the saloon, and they had beaten Ron Morris severely. While their attention was on Morris, he had sneaked out the backdoor.

Magruder quickly pulled on his boots and strapped on his gun. Then he pulled a box of cartridges out of a drawer and loaded his weapon. He tied down his holster, grabbed his hat, and bolted out the door. He got a fleeting glimpse of Mrs. Gersemann standing in her doorway as he ran down the hall. He descended the stairs taking the steps two at a time and strode rapidly across the lobby. Before he got to the street he heard two more shots. He then lengthened his stride and hurried toward the Sundown.

He stopped outside the batwing doors and carefully looked in. The room was smoky, mostly from tobacco, but he could smell burnt gunpowder. Morris was immobile, face down on the floor. Jerry Malloy was standing behind the bar with a bloody gash across his forehead, and his hands flat on the bar. Thirty or more customers were sitting at various tables with their hands held where they could be seen. Three obviously drunken men displaying pistols held the others hostage. There was evidence that some lamps and other fixtures had been shot up.

He observed that these men looked nothing like the ones who killed Bernard Gersemann. One of the miscreants was standing at the bar with one hand around a whiskey bottle, and was shaking the index finger of his other in Malloy's face. This man's gun was in his holster. Another of the troublemakers was sitting in a chair with his back partially toward Magruder. He had one leg propped on a table, a bottle of whiskey in his left hand, and a pistol in his right. At the moment, the gun was just pointing at the floor. The man that would prove most troublesome, he figured, was standing in the middle of the floor with a bottle in one hand, and waving a pistol around with the other. He reasoned, These fools are probably just drunken cowpokes, but could be a more dangerous breed. Either way, they've got to be stopped.

He wished he'd had time for that target practice, but it was too late now. He had to hope that he could still shoot reasonably straight. There was a time he would have walked into that barroom with his gun in his holster, and never doubted the outcome. But common sense told him he should go in with the gun in hand. He decided he would try to shoot to maim instead of kill, if a gunfight ensued.

He pinned his badge on his shirt, took a deep breath, and walked through the door with his Colt pistol cocked and leveled. Then he shouted. "Alright, drop those guns. Shootout. You're all under arrest." Quick as a flash the man standing whirled and fired. Magruder's gun and the other one roared almost as one. He felt a sting in his left side just above the belt. He saw that the other man was hard hit and quickly switched his attention to the man at the bar. That man's gun had just cleared leather when Magruder's bullet caught him in the right shoulder. That man's shot went into the floor, and he dropped his weapon. The man sitting at the table had fallen over backward in his haste to get up, and had lost his pistol in the process. Magruder quickly stepped over, kicked the gun out of reach, thrust the smoking Colt in his face, and yelled, "Don't move, you sonuvabitch!" He didn't move.

Malloy came running from behind the bar and shouting for someone to get the doctor. He ran over to Magruder and told him, "Sit down, Jacob. I want to see how bad you're hit."

Magruder was losing a lot of blood, and he began to feel a little light-headed. He sat down as Malloy pulled up the bloody shirttail and ripped it up the side.

Malloy shouted back over his shoulder, "Some of you men check on Morris, and tie up any of those bastards who ain't dead!"

Addressing Magruder, Malloy said, "I was a field hospital orderly durin' the war, Jacob, and I've tended a lot of wounds. I don't think this is too serious. It looks pretty nasty, but appears to be just a flesh wound." He covered the entry and exit wounds with a folded bar towel and indicated for him to hold it there. Then he said, "Now you sit right here till the doctor comes, and I'll get you a drink."

Malloy brought over a bottle of his best and a large glass. He poured the glass half full and handed it to Magruder, who took a long draught of the strong potion.

In a few minutes old Doc Wilson burst through the door—his white hair standing up like a mane. Malloy motioned him over to where Magruder was sitting, but Magruder waved him off.

"I'm doin' alright Doc. Look after Morris and these other men first."

The doctor quickly checked on Morris and said, "This boy's dead. He's gotta cracked skull."

Then he checked the first man Magruder had shot who was sprawled on the floor. "This one's dead, too. Shot right through the breastbone."

Two patrons of the saloon were holding the wounded gunman in a chair. His right shoulder was covered with blood, and his head hung down like he was semi-conscious. The doctor checked his wound and said, "This'n will live till the hangin'."

The doctor confirmed Malloy's diagnosis when he examined Magruder. No vital organs involved.

Then like a buzzard attracted to carrion, the undertaker showed up. The doctor glanced up and shouted at him, "Will, get some of the men to help carry these bodies over to your place."

Then to Malloy the doctor said, "Have some of the boys help these wounded men into my buggy so I can take 'em to my office. I can't clean and dress these wounds properly here. And you'd better come along too, Jerry—I may need your help. Besides, I want to put a patch on that red-topped noggin of yours."

Magruder said, "Jerry, get somebody to search Morris. He should have the keys to the jail on him. Then have the men throw this other bastard in the hoosegow. While they're over there, see if they can find any wanted posters that look like any of these coyotes. And someone better to go tell the Sheriff what came off here." Then he drank the last of his whiskey, set down the glass, and quietly passed out.

Magruder awakened about an hour later as someone waved an ammonia swab under his nose. He was lying on a hard table, and the tight bandages around his waist made breathing difficult. Mrs. Gersemann was rubbing his brow, a concerned look on her face. She turned and said softly, "He's awake."

Old Sheriff Colson limped over with the aid of a cane. He had a wry smile on his face as he said, "Well, you did alright, son. Those three men you braced were bad hombres. All of 'em wanted. Buncha ex-state policemen who turned to outlawry. They're wanted for stage robb'ry and murder. The one you killed was Ira Hawkins. S'posed to've killed over a dozen men, mostly shot in the back or from ambush. He shore wasn't in the same class with Wes Hardin. The other two birds are Ollie Maggert and Stan Braxton.

"Hawkins' younger brother, Henry, sometimes rides with the bunch; and accordin' to reports, was in on the last stage robbery. I'd consider Hank Hawkins the only real gunman of the bunch. He's killed at least four men in shootouts who had reps as fast guns. I'm powerful glad Hank wasn't with the others tonight."

The doctor was presently bandaging up the wounded outlaw, and Magruder heard muttered curses from across the room.

Jerry Malloy came over and grinned at him. He had a bandage on his forehead. "The Doc says you'll be pretty sore for a week or so, Jacob, but in a coupla days you can go about your regular business. Just don't try bustin' any broncs for a while." He paused a moment and then added, "You know, it's a damn good thing I told our swamper 'bout you bein' a lawman. He was the only one that had a chance to slip out tonight after those maniacs started shootin' up the place. Lord knows what woulda happened otherwise."

"Jerry, help me sit up," whispered Magruder. With Malloy's assistance he swung his legs off the table and sat up. Except for the pain in his left side, he felt pretty good. But he was still dizzy from drinking all that whiskey. He smiled weakly at Mrs. Gersemann and she smiled back. "How's that other bird doin'?" he asked, addressing everyone in general.

"Oh, he'll live," answered the sheriff. "That's Maggert. He had a gun rep, too. But even if he don't hang—which is likely—and he gets free somehow, the Doc says his gunslingin' days are over. Yore shot busted his shoulder joint, and it'll probably be stiff when it heals up."

“Sheriff, I never got around to that target practice, and my aim was off. It wasn’t my intent to kill Hawkins. I meant to shoot him in the shoulder.”

“Hell, I’m glad you killed the sonuvabitch!” exclaimed the sheriff. “He was a low-down murderin’ polecat!” Then he remembered a lady was present, and apologized to Mrs. Gersemann. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Forgot my manners. Hope you’ll excuse me.”

She smiled understandingly. “That’s perfectly alright, Sheriff. From what you’ve told us of that vicious killer, your feelings are more than justified.”

Magruder continued, “Sheriff, I’m real sorry about Morris.”

“I am too, son. Morris was inexperienced, but he was a good boy. In time he might’ve made a pretty fair lawman. Now I’ve got the unpleasant duty of tellin’ his mother he’s been killed.”

Malloy said, “Ron came chargin’ into the saloon tonight with his gun sheathed, and threatenin’ to arrest them if they didn’t stop shootin’ up the place. He obviously thought they were some local drunks lettin’ off steam. That big one, Braxton—the one we locked in the jail—came at him from behind and hit him a awful blow on the head with a pistol. Ron dropped like a poleaxed steer. That blow probably killed him, but then Braxton started kickin’ him. I didn’t think he would ever quit. I started to run over to try and pull ‘im off, but Maggert clobbered me across the head with a gun barrel. If they hadn’t bashed in his skull, Ron might’ve died from internal injuries. Hawkins tore Ron’s badge off then stomped on it—like he had a special hate for lawmen.”

“Jerry, don’t you keep a gun behind the bar?” asked Magruder.

“Yeah. I keep a sawed-off scattergun back there, Jacob, but I never got a chance to use it tonight. Those bastards had me covered from the moment they came in!”

Doctor Wilson walked over about that time. “Well, Magruder, how’re you feeling?”

“I’m feelin’ pretty good, Doc. I think I’d like to get on back to the hotel now and get some rest.”

“Alright, but you ought to take it easy for a coupla days. The bullet went clear through the flesh of your side just below your rib cage, and didn’t do any permanent damage. A coupla inches to the left, and it woulda missed ya completely. I cleaned the wound best I could, and applied some medication. I’m hopin’ no infection will set in. Even so, you’ll likely develop some fever over the next twenty-four hours. I know you’ve been through this before ‘cause I found scars from other bullet wounds. But if you experience any complications, come see me at once. If not, I want to see you next Monday or Tuesday to examine the wound and change the dressin’. You lost a good deal of blood, son, so I’d advise you to eat a lot of rare beefsteak for a while.”

“That’s advice I won’t mind takin’, Doc,” he said with a lopsided grin. And he slid off the table and stood up.

The sheriff picked up Magruder’s gunbelt and handed it to him. He buckled it on. Then he was handed his hat.

Magruder asked, “Sheriff, who’s gonna look after the prisoners now that Morris is gone?”

“Don’t worry none about that, son. I gotta ol’ retired peace officer that helps me out thataway when I need him. I’ll jus’ tell Les Willard about Ron gettin’ killed,

and he'll look after the jail till I can hire another hand. When you're feelin' better you oughta stop by the jail and get acquainted with Les. You'll like 'im. He's one of the great ol' time lawmen."

Malloy said, "Jacob, if Doc don't mind, I'll drive you and Mrs. Gersemann back to the hotel in his buggy." He looked at the doctor who nodded.

The doctor said, "This shirt of yours is a mess, Magruder, but you better put it on. It's pretty cool outside."

Magruder put on the torn and bloody shirt leaving the tail hanging outside his trousers. He noticed the deputy badge was still attached. He then expressed his thanks to the doctor and said goodnight to the sheriff.

On the way to the hotel, Malloy stopped the buggy in front of the Sundown Saloon. He jumped out saying, "Y'all wait here—I'll be right back." He was back in half a minute with a bottle of whiskey, which he handed to Magruder. As he climbed aboard, he said, "if my guess is right, Jacob, that wound will be hurtin' like hell before the night's over, and this is just the stuff to take the edge off."

When they arrived at Eutaw House, Magruder had to be assisted in getting out of the buggy. After Malloy had courteously provided a like service for Mrs. Gersemann, he asked, "You sure you don't need some help getting' up the stairs, Jacob?"

"No, Jerry, I'll be alright."

"Well, in that case, I'll say goodnight to you both." As they walked through the lobby, Magruder saw by the hotel clock that it was 10:45 PM. His first full day of freedom had been a busy one indeed.

Magruder had more trouble climbing the stairs than he anticipated. Though he used the right-hand banister to help himself along, he still had to stop at the halfway landing to rest. Pain was shooting through his wounded side, and perspiration was popping out on his forehead. Mrs. Gersemann took the bottle from his left hand, pulled his left arm around her shoulders, and helped him the rest of the way. When they got to his room, he found he had left his door ajar when he ran out.

Mrs. Gersemann helped him to his bed where he sat down heavily. Without being asked, she pulled his boots off and helped him out of his bloody shirt. Then she picked up a glass and poured him a stiff shot of whiskey. He took a big slug and looked up at her and grinned.

He said, "You'd make someone a mighty fine wife, lady." Then he realized how inappropriate that was, and he blurted out, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Gersemann, I don't know what I'm sayin'. I hope you'll forgive me for that unseemly remark."

She smiled warmly. "I appreciate the sentiment, Mr. Magruder, and I consider it a compliment." She placed the whiskey on the nightstand next to his bed, "If you think you'll be alright now, I guess I'll say goodnight. But remember, I'm right across the hall, and I'm a light sleeper. If you should need me during the night, just call out."

Jerry Malloy was right. Later that night the wound began to throb. Magruder had difficulty sitting up, but managed it. He poured himself a half a glass of whiskey and sat there sipping it until the pain began to subside. Then he laid down and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Wednesday:

When Magruder awoke the next morning, sunlight was streaming through the louvered shutters of his window. He found that he felt much better. Although stiff, he experienced little pain until he tried getting out of bed. Then his side did hurt some.

He pulled on his boots and then stood up without much difficulty. He looked at his watch on the nightstand. It was 7:20. He found a clean shirt and put it on, and then looked at himself in the mirror. Except for sorely needing a shave, he decided he didn't look too bad. He also decided this would be a good day for a store-bought shave. As he was combing his hair, there was a light tap on his door. He opened the door to find Hilda Gersemann there, looking as lovely as ever.

"Good morning, Mr. Magruder. I thought I'd check on you before going down to breakfast. How are you feeling today?"

"I feel much better, thank you. Do you mind if I join you? I feel like haven't eaten in a week."

She laughed. "That's supposed to be a good sign. Of course I don't mind. I'd be delighted to have you join me."

As they were eating their breakfast, Magruder asked, "How did you come to be at the doctor's office last night?"

"Well, I heard those first shots last night, which caused me some concern. Then when that little man pounded on your door, and I heard him relating what was happening, I became alarmed. But when I saw you run out carrying a gun, I was really frightened. I grabbed the little man's arm as he was leaving, and made him tell me where the saloon was located.

"Then I got dressed as quickly as I could, and practically ran over there. I was just leaving the hotel when I heard those final shots. By then I was frantic—I was sure you were involved. And when I got there and saw those other men lying on the floor, and you slumped over the table, my heart almost stopped. I just knew you had been killed. I ran over to your table screaming, 'Oh my God—is he dead?' and the doctor said, 'No, ma'am—just passed out—mostly from the booze Malloy poured into him. He's gonna be alright.' I was so relieved to hear those words, I almost collapsed.

"After that, I insisted on going along to the doctor's office to be sure you were properly cared for. The doctor didn't like the idea, but Mr. Malloy prevailed upon him to allow it. I really like that Mr. Malloy. He is such a kind and thoughtful man. And he couldn't praise you highly enough. I told him I was sort of fond of you myself." And she placed her hand over his, and gave him a warm smile.

He was touched, but he didn't know how to respond. He muttered a barely audible, "Thank you." Somewhat embarrassed, he busied himself by looking at his watch. He saw that it was a little past eight.

"I'm goin' out after breakfast and find a barber shop for a much needed shave. Then I plan to go to the stable and pick up the surrey I rented. I'll bring it 'round to the front of the hotel and be ready by 9:30 to drive you to Mr. Gersemann's burial service, as we previously planned."

"Are you sure you're up to that this morning, Mr. Magruder, after that terrible wound you suffered last night?"

He smiled at her saying, "Remember, the doctor's advice was just to take it easy, not to stay in bed. I really feel quite good. My side is sore, of course, but it's not causin' me much pain. It doesn't take a lot of effort to drive a surrey."

He walked the lady back to her door, and then entered his own room. He strapped on his gunbelt, and reloaded the two empty chambers in the cylinder of his weapon. He picked up the deputy badge, placing it in his pocket, put on his hat and went out locking the door behind him.

As he walked out of the hotel, a gust of wind almost took his hat off. The sky was overcast, and dust was blowing along the street. Looking back to the north, he saw dark and ominous thunderclouds. He said to himself, "It's gonna be a rotten day for a funeral."

He found a barber shop in the next block and went in. A bald and voluble barber was relating to the man in his chair—who appeared to be a drummer—some tale he had heard about the shootout at the Sundown Saloon.

"This feller that was there tol' me 'bout it. He was playin' cards with some of the boys when these three owlhoots come a waltzin' in big as brass and starts shootin' up the place. They said they'd heered there weren't no law in Huntsville, so they comes over to find out fer their own selfs. This feller said they was already drunk when they come in, and right away they start guzzlin' more likker. Then when that young depidy tried to arrest 'em, why they beat the poor boy to death. But they shore got whut was comin' to 'em—yesiree! There happen to be a new-ew lawman in town that no-o-body knowed about. And this big lawman busts through the door with sixguns blazin', and he kills two of the skunks 'fore you can bat an eye. Then he crippled the other'n 'fore that polecat can grab a gun. By Gawd, he shore fixed their wagon—yesiree! That's the mos' exciting' thang to happen in Huntsville fer quite a spell, I'll tell ya'."

Magruder shook his head thinking: Every time the story of a gunfight is repeated, the yarn gets bigger and wilder.

When he sat down in the barber chair, the first thing the barber said was, "Do you know about that shootout las' night at the Sundown Saloon?" To which Magruder replied, "Yeah, I heard about it."

When he left the barber shop, he headed for the hotel stable, hanging on to his hat. The wind had not diminished.

Bobby Simmons, the stable boy, recognized him at once.

"I'll have Bessie hitched up in a minnit, Mr. Magruder."

As Bobby led the horse from a stall, Magruder was looking over the surrey.

"How is it that this vehicle only has a front seat, Bobby? Most surreys have a rear seat as well."

“It usta have one, Mr. Magruder, but Mr. Swartz had ‘em take it out. Nobody ever used the back seat, and folks that rent the rig—and that’s mostly drummers—wanted the extra room to haul baggage’n, boxes’n stuff.”

Bessie, it turned out, was a little bay mare—and ten minutes later, Magruder was tying her to a hitching post in front of the hotel. He paused for a moment to study the northern sky where storm clouds gathered, and then he glanced up at the courthouse clock—it read 9:25.

He entered the hotel, crossed the lobby and walked up to the desk. Karl Swartz looked up, smiled, and said, “Good mornin’, Mr. Magruder. Can I help you?”

“Mornin’, Karl. Yes—I’d like to borrow an umbrella, if you have one. Looks like we’re in for a bit of weather.”

“We sure do, Mr. Magruder, just a moment,” and he procured the requested item from a small cloakroom.

As Magruder turned around, he saw Mrs. Gersemann descending the stairway. She had on a dark blue dress and a hat with a veil.

He met her at the foot of the stairs and took her hand.

As they rode toward the Oakwood Cemetery, the sky was darkening, and the rumbling of distant thunder could be heard. The canvas top of the surrey began to flap in the rising wind. Fortunately, they didn’t have far to go. He was hoping the rain would hold off until after the service.

When they arrived at the grave site, the casket had already been lowered into the excavation, and there were six people waiting: The Methodist preacher who had been engaged to conduct the service, along with his wife, Will Tighe the undertaker who had come out of courtesy, being aware Mrs. Gersemann had no kin in Huntsville, and Jerry Malloy. There were also two Negro grave diggers, each of whom stood by reverently with shovel in hand while holding his hat over his heart.

As soon as Magruder and Mrs. Gersemann had joined the circle around the grave, the minister began his litany.

He intoned, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to pay final tribute to this good man, who in life had...,” and he went on to eulogize the deceased, obviously from information provided him, as a good husband, a staunch Christian and a pillar of his community. Then he read a number of appropriate scriptures from the Holy Bible, beginning with Job 14:1 and 2.

“Man that is born of woman is of a few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.”

During the ceremony thunder began to roll and lightning to flash, which drowned out many of the preacher’s words, but the rain held off.

All during the service, Magruder held his arm under that of Mrs. Gersemann, as he was prepared to bear her up in case she might faint. In his close proximity, he could see through her veil, and detected tears on her cheeks. But she did not sob, and she did not falter.

After the reading of several other verses, the preacher closed the Book and said, "Let us pray."

The whole ceremony took less than fifteen minutes, after which all there except for the Negroes expressed their condolences and departed. Magruder stood there beside the lady for a few extra minutes until she evidenced by her movement she was ready to leave.

They had no more than gotten into the surrey when heavy drops of rain began to fall. And in only a few minutes, they were engulfed in a downpour. The canvas top of the surrey provided some protection, but with the wind behind the rain, their lower extremities soon became drenched. However, by the time they reached the hotel, the main body of the storm had passed, and the fading rumble of thunder was now from the south. The wind had died down, and the rain had lessened to only a drizzle. The sky became lighter, and from a crack in the clouds, a ray of sunlight shown.

Magruder escorted the lady back to her room, and invited her to join him later for lunch, but she declined. She said she was not hungry, and she preferred spending the afternoon alone.

He went to his own room and got out of his wet clothing. As he redressed, he was thinking of going to the old stone quarry for some target practice. His wound was not troubling him, and he had the surrey rented for the day. The bright sunlight shining through his window convinced him the foul weather was over. He strapped his gun back on, retrieved the boxes of .45 cartridges from the dresser drawer, and went out.

He had an early lunch at Nora's, and then drove his rig over to the Sundown Saloon. He found Jerry Malloy at his usual station behind the bar even though there were few customers at this hour. Malloy greeted him warmly. He and Magruder had developed a close bond due to the unusual events they had shared.

Malloy offered to buy him a drink, but Magruder declined. He told Malloy he just wanted some empty whiskey bottles to use for target practice. Malloy said there were hundreds in barrels and boxes behind the saloon that he'd like to get rid of. Magruder was to take all he wanted.

He drove Bessie around to the back alley, and loaded two crates of empty bottles onto the surrey's baggage deck. While so engaged, he began thinking how vulnerable he would be to rifle fire while out on the road with only a handgun for protection. He decided right then to purchase a rifle at Gilbert's before going to the quarry.

Mr. Gilbert introduced him to the .44-caliber, 12-shot, lever-action, Winchester Carbine Model 1866. Magruder liked it immediately. It was very similar to his old .44-caliber Henry rifle, but was shorter and lighter, and it had a better balance. He bought one with adjustable rear sights, along with fifty rounds of ammunition. Then he went across the street to Creath's saddlery, and bought a leather rifle sheath. Before getting back aboard the buggy, he loaded the rifle, inserted it into the new sheath, and placed it under the seat.

As he was driving out of town, Magruder remembered he had left his deputy badge in the pocket of his other trousers. "Oh, what the hell!" he said aloud, "I won't need it where I'm goin'."

Chapter VI

Strange Tracks.

Magruder enjoyed the leisurely drive out to the quarry. Without any prompting, Bessie trotted along briskly as if she enjoyed it too. The rain had freshened the air and accented the greenery of the trees and shrubs. And there was a pleasant scent of pine and cedar floating on the breeze.

They reached the turnoff to the quarry in less than an hour, and he steered the little mare into it. He recognized the trail by the landmarks Colson had given him—a gnarled old pine tree beside the deep ruts made by heavily laden freight wagons. The northbound trail wound up a gradual slope for about half a mile and then leveled off. When he reached the top of the grade, he pulled Bessie to a halt. He got out of the surrey and put down the folding top. Then he got back aboard and stood up in the buggy to check his back trail. It seemed wise to adopt the wariness of the old days. He had recently spilled blood, and in so doing, had made enemies.

Magruder was blessed with exceptional eyesight, and from his vantage point he could see for miles Strange Tracks to the east toward Huntsville, as well as to the south and west. The surrounding area was mostly open country with only isolated stands of timber and clumps of bush growth. The only living things he saw at the time were cattle dotting the range to the south, and some high flying birds.

Being satisfied now that he had not been followed, he drove the remaining few hundred yards to the quarry. There the trail ended abruptly at a large excavation in the side of the hill. Limestone blocks, large and small, lay around in confusion among piles of smaller stones and gravel debris. There were also the broken remains of glass bottles and some shot-up tin cans giving evidence to the former use of this site as a firing range.

Magruder drove up near the vertical limestone wall and offloaded his boxes of whiskey bottles. Then he turned and drove back fifty yards or so. He pulled his rig off to one side and tied Bessie to a cedar bush.

Pulling the Winchester from its sheath, he jacked a round into the chamber, and walked over to a four-foot boulder nearby. Using the rock as a steady rest, he selected as his target a one-inch drill hole made by stone-cutters in the rock wall. He knew from experience that lead bullets hitting the rock would make a puff of dust, and thereby indicate the point of impact.

Magruder sighted at a crack in the rock about six inches below the target hole and squeezed off a shot. The rifle report echoing in that amphitheater shaped excavation was deafening. He was surprised by the volume of sound even though

he was expecting it. A telltale puff of dust appeared about twelve inches below and six inches to the left of the drill hole.

He was allowing for the trajectory of the bullet by aiming low. He estimated that an impact six inches higher than the aiming point at fifty yards would put his bullets on target at two hundred. He adjusted his rear sight for both vertical and horizontal correction, and then fired again. After a few more shots and adjustments of the sight, his bullets were striking within an inch of the drill hole. He deemed that good enough, so he returned the rifle to its sheath in the surrey.

He checked the cylinder of his handgun. All chambers were loaded except the one below the hammer. From a box of pistol cartridges, he now loaded the sixth chamber. He then inserted a round in each of the empty loops of his cartridge belt. Picking up a full box and placing it in his pocket, he walked up near the rock wall to arrange some bottles for targets.

There was a narrow shelf running more or less horizontally along the face of the wall, which had been formed by the stone cutting. He made use of the shelf to set up his bottles. Broken glass along the shelf indicated its use for this purpose before. He placed a dozen bottles along the rock shelf, separating them about two feet apart, and walked back---stepping off twelve long paces---about thirty feet.

Magruder tied down his holster and resumed a natural standing position. He selected the bottle on the right end of the row as his first target. Then he quickly drew his gun and fired. He missed the bottle by a scant half inch. He twirled the pistol and thrust it back in the holster in one smooth action. After waiting a moment he drew and fired again. The bottle exploded in a spray of glass. He repeated these actions until his weapon was empty. He hit his target with each succeeding shot, with the same impressive results. He reloaded, then blasted the next six bottles without a miss. He repeated this twelve-bottle shooting exercise three times firing from the same position without a single miss.

Magruder was quite pleased with himself, satisfied he now had the "feel" of the Colt .45 Peacemaker. So he decided to try fanning the gun for the next six shots. After setting up twelve more targets, he stepped off about forty feet this time. He reloaded his weapon and dropped it in the holster. Again resuming a natural stance, he swiftly drew and fired, and continued firing by fanning the hammer with his left hand until the gun was empty. All six rounds were expended in less than two seconds with five hits and one near miss. He smiled and exclaimed aloud, "By golly, I believe I'm gettin' back my knack with the ol' hogleg." Now he reloaded, and using the same hammer-fanning technique, he blasted the next six bottles without a miss.

He was really warming to his task now. He placed more bottles along the shelf and walked back to his last firing position. He now stood with his back to his targets. Whipping the Colt from its holster as he whirled around, he fired off six lightning fast shots. He blasted four more bottles into a thousand pieces. But he had felt a pain in his wounded side when he spun around, and he decided he'd best not repeat that maneuver.

Magruder continued his practice until he had used up all except about thirty rounds of his ammunition. By this time he was satisfied he was ready to meet all comers. Then he walked over and untied Bessie who had remained relatively calm

during all the ruckus. He gave the little horse a few pats on the neck, just before stepping up in the buggy and starting back down the trail.

At the top of the grade where he had stopped before, Magruder saw two riders a half-mile away coming up the trail at a gallop. He knew they were coming with a purpose, and he didn't like the looks of it. They had obviously been attracted by the shooting. He pulled Bessie to a stop and stepped out of the buggy. Could these be some friends of Ira Hawkins? He drew the Winchester from its sheath, jacked a round into the chamber, and laid it within easy reach. Then he checked the loads in the cylinder of his pistol and dropped it back in its holster. Finally, he stood there waiting.

In a few moments the riders were pulling their heaving horses to a sliding stop in a flurry of dust and gravel. He had no idea what was about to happen, but he was keyed up and ready for anything. One of the riders was a comely young woman of about twenty-five, while the other was a man a few years older.

The man yelled, "What're you doin' on Wheeler land?" The young lady spoke up, "Wait a minute, Burt," and then said sternly, "I don't know who you are, Mister, but you're on private property, and we don't cotton to trespassers here."

Magruder addressed the young lady in a calm and respectful voice, while at the same time keeping a wary eye on the man called Burt. "I was not aware this was private property, Miss. I was told by Sheriff Colson that this was a place commonly used for gun practice."

Burt blurted out, "Aw, he's lyin', Kim. He don't know the sheriff from Moses. You know yore Dad don't like trespassers. We oughta shoot his laig off."

Kim said, "Be quiet, Burt," and then again addressed Magruder, "It's true this property was once used for shootin' like you say, but no more. My father bought this land from the Bascomb Mining Interest six months ago, and the sheriff knows it. My father and Colson are old friends, and I don't think the sheriff would send anyone up here knowin' how Dad feels about trespassers. So, I kinda think Burt is right Strange Tracks.that you're lyin'."

Burt sneered, "I'm a good mind to bore you, jus' for practice."

Magruder was getting irritated now. "I'll tell you something', bigmouth, it's only out of respect for this lady that I haven't already shot you off that horse. Now if you feel lucky, just step down, and we'll see if there's any substance behind all that wind."

"Talks fancy, don't he? Why should I get down? I can bore you from whur I set."

There was ice in his voice when Magruder responded to Burt's threat, "There never was a man who could beat me to a gun while in the saddle, and damned few who could do it standin' on the ground. Now why don't you just step off, bigmouth, then you won't have so far to fall Strange Tracks.after I bore you." He didn't plan to kill him, but he was damned sure gonna cripple his gun arm.

"Now wait a minute," Kim said nervously. "Y'all calm down." Again addressing Magruder she said, "There's no need for any shootin' if you'll just get off our land."

As she was talking, another rider came galloping up and pulled his big bay horse to a plunging halt. It was an older man of about sixty. "Whut's goin' on hyar?" he shouted.

Burt started to say something, but Kim interrupted, "Shut up, Burt." Then she said, "Dad, we were just telling' this trespasser to get off our property. He claims Sheriff Colson told him he could come up here for gun practice, which we think is a lie. Burt was itchin' to shoot his leg off before you rode up."

The older man glared at Magruder with hawk eyes very much like those of Colson. "Young feller, Ah'm Curtis Wheeler. Ah own this property now, an' the wagon wheel's my brand. Didn'cha see that board at the foot of the grade with a wagon wheel burnt on it?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Wheeler."

"Well, that marker sez ta anybody who's payin' a'tention that this is Wagon Wheel property. And Ah damn shore don't like..." Then he paused, leaned forward and peered intently at Magruder, "Sa-a-ay, aintchu Jake Magruder, that new depidy sheriff?"

"That's right, Mr. Wheeler, I am."

Wheeler threw back his head and let out a loud guffaw. "Haw! Haw! Haw! An' Burt was gonna shoot yore laig off! Haw! Haw! Haw!" He looked at Burt and said, "This is th' gent thet killed Ira Hawkins and crippled Ollie Maggert in that shootout at th' Sundown Saloon las' night. Ah was there an' saw th' whole thang."

Magruder looked at Burt who had turned a little pale.

Burt stammered, "Well, why didn'cha say yo're a depidy?"

Magruder ignored him and addressed Wheeler. "I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble, Mr. Wheeler, but the sheriff did suggest this place for gun practice."

"That's alright, son. Yo're welcome on my land anytime. Ah reckon ol' Charley forgot to tell ya how ornery Ah am about trespassers. By the way, how's that bullet wound ya got las' night?"

"It's all right, thank you. It didn't amount to much."

Wheeler turned to Kim and Burt saying, "C'mon you two, we've got work to do." Then looking at Magruder again he said, "Ah 'preciate yore not shootin' my foreman, Magruder. He ain't very bright but he's kinda handy 'round the cows. Heh, Heh. So long, son. Tell Charley Colson Ah said 'howdy'." And as the three of them rode off down the hill, he heard Wheeler let out another loud guffaw.

After their departure, Magruder worked the lever on the Winchester and removed the live round from the chamber. Then he closed the action and inserted the rifle back in the sheath beneath the seat. Finally, he got back in the buggy, clucked Bessie into motion, and leisurely headed back toward Huntsville.

It was late afternoon when Magruder stopped at the Sundown Saloon to have a drink. But as soon as he entered, Malloy informed him that a little black boy had been in about an hour earlier looking for him. What appeared to be one of Gersemann's killers was at Hume's blacksmith shop having his horse shod. Magruder left immediately. He drove Bessie at a canter although Hume's was only a few blocks away. He slowed to a trot as he approached the shop, and then stopped in front of the store next door. He tied Bessie to the rail and then casually walked over to Hume's shop.

Magruder noticed four barrels setting out in front of the shop that he hadn't seen there before. He wondered about that. He very carefully looked in the open

front of the shop only to see Hume alone busy at the forge. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. As he walked in Hume glanced up and recognizing Magruder he displayed a wide toothy grin.

Stroder Hume was a huge light skinned Negro of about sixty years with massive arms like tree limbs. He was known affectionately to the townfolk as Uncle Stroder. He put down his tools and wiping his big hands on his leather apron, he walked over. "How-do, Mistuh Magruda," he said smiling.

"Howdy, Uncle Stroder. What happened to that fellow who was here having his horse shod?"

"He done gone. He lef' here 'bout thuty minits ago. I think he went ovah to de saddle shop. He ax me 'bout a place to git some holstuhs faw his pistols, an' I tol' him dat Creath's was de place to go. But I got sump'n I wanna show ya heah. Come outside a minit." And he led Magruder out to the street where the purpose of the barrels soon became apparent. Hume had placed them there to preserve some horse tracks made in the dirt of the street.

"Looka heah," said Hume. "Look at dat hawse track. See how dat foot is shaped funny. It's kinda flat 'cross de front 'stead of bein' roun'. Dat track's from one ob de hawse's fore feets. I thought dat funny footprint might hep you track dat killa."

"You're absolutely right, Uncle Stroder. I'm glad you saved it. It could prove to be very important. Now, which of those two outlaws was here?"

"Oh, it was dat yeller haired feller you tol' me 'bout, ridin' dat red hawse. I put new shoes on both de hawse's hind feets. He'd loss one hind shoe, and de otha was loose. I 'tenshunly took a long time on de job, hopin' you'd come 'fore he lef'."

"I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner, Uncle Stroder, but I came soon as I got your message. I'd better get on over to Creath's now. That scoundrel may still be there!"

Magruder hurried over to Creath's, and he tied Bessie in front of the building next door as he had done at Hume's. There was a bay horse and a gray in front of Creath's shop, but he didn't see a sorrel anywhere on the street. Two customers were departing as Magruder walked in. Neither fit the description of the outlaws.

Creath said, "Howdy, Magruder. What can I do for you?"

"Was there a scroungy looking blond-haired man in here a few minutes ago looking to buy some holsters?"

"Sure was, Magruder. Sold him a pair of holsters and two cartridge belts. He left 'bout ten minutes ago. I bet you're lookin' to arrest him for stealin' those pistols."

"No, that's not it. I'm looking' to arrest him for robbery and murder. What was so special about the pistols?"

"Why that was a matched set of silver plated .44 Colts, with gold inlay and all kinds of fancy scroll engravin'. That brace of pistols musta cost \$400, if not more. I doubt a sorry lookin' spectacle like him ever saw that much money all in one pile."

"You may be wrong, Creath. If it's the man I think it is, he's seen \$15,000 all in one pile Strange Tracks.all of it stolen from the man he and his partner murdered."

"Oh, I get it. You think he might be one of the men who killed Gersemann."

"That's right. If he comes in again, try to stall him, and send someone to get me quick. Remember, I'm stayin' at the Eutaw House, and if I'm not there, have 'em

leave a message. Or better yet, tell 'em look for me around town. Try the Sundown Saloon or Nora's Café if it's around mealtime."

"Okay, Magruder. I'll do it."

"Did you see what direction that fella took when he left here?"

"Yeah, he headed east Strange Tracks.ridin' a sorrel hawse."

"Thanks, Creath. I'll see you later."

Before he got in his buggy, Magruder examined the ground around the hitching rail in front of Creath's, and he found a couple of clear prints of that odd shaped hoof.

He drove around the town for a half hour looking for the suspect. He went up one street and down another, but there was no sign of the man or the horse. Finally, he drove back to the hotel and turned the horse and buggy over to the stable boy.

The boy asked, "How'd you and Bessie get along, Mr. Magruder?"

"She's a fine little animal, and I think she deserves an extra bit of grain tonight, Bobby."

Bobby grinned. "I'll see that she gets it."

"I'll want to take her out again in the morning'." said Magruder. "Can you have her and the surrey ready about seven o'clock?"

"Yessir, Mr. Magruder. I'll shore have 'em ready."

He flipped him a silver dollar.

The young fellow snatched it out of the air, and exclaimed, "Tha-a-anks, Mr. Magruder. Thanks a lot."

He got his rifle and ammunition from the buggy, and then walked across the alley toward the hotel. There was an outside stairway going up to the second floor in the rear of the building, so he decided to use it and save a few steps. His wounded side had been bothering him for the last hour, and every step caused him more discomfort. It made him aware he had exerted himself far beyond what the doctor ordered.

He ascended the stairs, and when he reached the top, he found there was no doorknob on the door. He couldn't open it. "Dammit," he griped, "That chaps my butt!" So he retraced his steps, walked around the building and entered through the main doorway. He walked over to the desk and complained to Karl Swartz.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Magruder but the rear stairway is just provided as an emergency fire exit. It can only be opened from inside. And there's a good reason for that. If it were otherwise, we'd have thieves and other kinds of low-life sneakin' in here and annoyin' our guests."

It made sense, so Magruder apologized and headed for his room. He went in, locked the door, and sat down heavily on the bed. He hadn't realized he was so tired. He took off his gun belt, pulled off his boots, and poured himself two-fingers of whiskey in a water glass. He downed it in two gulps and then fell across the bed. He decided he would take a nap till suppertime, which he did.

Magruder awoke at 7:15 PM, and found he felt some better. His side had stopped hurting, and he was ravenously hungry. He pulled on

his boots, and then looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was disheveled and his shirt was wrinkled, and a dark shadow showed on his chin.

“To hell with it! I’m not gonna shave this late.” He washed his hands using water left over from his morning toilet, and used some to wet down his hair. He combed his hair and straightened his kerchief—then standing back and viewing the results, he said aloud, “Well that’s good enough for the gals I go with.”

He decided to invite Mrs. Gersemann to join him for supper, so after leaving his room he tapped on her door. For a few seconds there was silence, and then a faint voice said, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Mrs. Gersemann, Jacob Magruder. Would you like to join me for supper?”

“I just awoke from a nap, Mr. Magruder. Yes, I’d like to. But it will take me a few minutes to get dressed. May I meet you in the lobby in fifteen minutes?”

“Sure. That’ll be fine. I’ll see you downstairs.”

He was sitting in the lobby reading the local newspaper when she came down. He quickly got up and greeted her warmly. She looked ravishing, and he felt a little tug at his heartstrings. He began to wonder if he was falling in love with her.

At dinner, he told her that he had reserved a surrey for the morrow, and he planned to drive a few miles north to the Cambell ranch to look over their thoroughbred horses. If she would like to come along, he’d have Nora’s Café prepare a picnic basket.

“That sounds delightful, Mr. Magruder. I’d love to. What time would we leave?”

“I figured about ten. Will that be alright?”

“Yes, that will be fine. I’ll look forward to it.”

He also explained that he had some business to take care of quite early in the morning before they left, so he could not join her at breakfast. She smiled and said she understood.

After supper, he walked her to her room, and when she had opened the door, she turned and took a half step toward him. She placed her right hand on his breast, and standing very close with her lips parted, she looked deeply into his eyes. There was a pregnant silence of several seconds, during which she seemed to be struggling with some decision. Her nearness and the scent of her perfume excited and aroused him. He could hardly resist taking her in his arms, and yet he hesitated. Finally she turned away saying, “Goodnight, Mr. Magruder,” and she walked into her room and closed the door.

Magruder stood there for a full minute, still entranced by the spell. Finally he turned and entered his own room. He laid awake a long time wondering about the significance of her actions.

Thursday:

Magruder awoke about six. After a shave and his morning toilet, he dressed in his best shirt and trousers, donned his waist-length jacket and tied a new silk scarf about his neck. Then he walked down to Nora’s Café to ask them to prepare a picnic basket. He requested fried chicken, potato salad, biscuits, apple pie, and a gallon jug of lemonade. They were also to provide the basket, necessary utensils,

napkins, and containers of condiments, all of which he would later return. He had his morning coffee and spent some time over the previous day's newspaper while waiting on his breakfast order. After he had eaten, he paid the waitress leaving her a tip, and said he would pick up the basket about 9:30. As he was walking out, he decided he would visit the Sheriff before going by the jail.

Since it was now close to seven, Magruder strolled over to the stable to pick up the surrey. Bobby had Bessie all hitched up and ready to go. He patted the little mare on the neck before getting aboard, and then he headed her toward the Colson residence.

It promised to be another nice day. There were few clouds in the sky. For some strange reason he could not fathom, Magruder had a wonderful feeling of peace and contentment as he drove along in the morning coolness.

Mrs. Colson opened the door before he could knock. She said, "Good morning', Mr. Magruder. I saw you through the window as you were drivin' up."

He removed his hat and said, "Good morning', Mrs. Colson. I was afraid I might be callin' too early."

"Oh, no—we're always up by five. Come in, Mr. Magruder, and I'll tell Charley you're here. He's still out in the kitchen."

About that time the sheriff came limping through the kitchen doorway with the aid of his cane. "I thought I heard you out here, Magruder. How're you doin', son?"

"Fine, Sheriff. I thought I'd come by and report what's been goin' on."

"I'm glad you did. Now that yo're the only active law officer in town, we need to stay in touch. Hey, you look might perky. How's that bullet wound?"

"Alright, Sheriff—I'm doin' fine."

Colson looked at his wife saying, "Martha, would you brang us some coffee in the parlor, please?"

"Sure, Charley. Do you take yours black, Mr. Magruder?"

"Yes ma'am, thank you."

"Well, set down, son, and tell me whut's been happenin'."

Magruder told him about his encounter with Wheeler and his foreman up at the quarry, and the sheriff had a good laugh about that.

"I always thought that foreman of Wheeler's was a smart alec," said Colson with a grin. "I'd like to've seen that little set-to."

Then he informed the sheriff that a man matching the description of one of Gersemann's murderers had had his horse shod at Hume's, and had bought some leather goods at Creath's.

"From the way Uncle Stroder described the man and the horse, Sheriff, I'm certain this was one of the killers."

He further mentioned that he had searched the town for the suspect without success. The man had apparently left town.

"Well, it looks like you were right, Magruder—'bout the killin' bein' the work of local boys instead of some wanderin' riffraff."

After Mrs. Colson brought their coffee, they drank it in silence for a couple of minutes. Colson frowned as he pondered on some weighty matter. Finally he said, "Magruder, I wish I could talk you into stayin' on here perm'nent. The county needs another seasoned lawman like you. Some of our leadin' citizens were at the

Sundown the other night when you blasted those outlaws, and they all had high praise for yore action. When I told 'em you were jus' hired temporary, they all wanted me to try to get you to stay. Doc Wilson tells me this arthritis is jus' gonna get worse, so I'm gonna be forced to resign my office 'fore long. You'd stand a good chance of bein' made Sheriff here if you stayed on here."

"But how about Mason, Sheriff? I hear he's been a deputy here goin' on three years. Seems to me, he'd be the logical choice to take your place."

"Sam Mason is a tolerable lawman, but he's not well liked. He's got an ornery streak that rubs folks the wrong way. They'll never make him Sheriff of Walker County."

"Well, Sheriff, I'm flattered that you'd consider me as a candidate for your job. From what I've heard of your record here, your boots will be hard to fill. But I must decline. I haven't been home in over four years, and my father is in poor health. I must get away soon. I'm torn between wantin' to leave tomorrow and wantin' to stay long enough to catch Gersemann's killers."

"Well, whuther you stay or not, Magruder, you've been wounded in the line of duty, and yore service to the county has gone far beyond whut you volunteered for. I think you oughta get paid for yore help."

"That's good of you Sheriff, but I don't need the money, and besides, I'll likely be leaving here in a week or so. Why don't you use that money to hire another full-time deputy?"

"I'd like to, son, but there's nobody else in town who can handle the job. Oh, there's some willin' youngsters around who can take Ron's place, alright. But I need a seasoned lawman. The only prospect I have right now is a young deputy sheriff down in Montgomery County. He'd like to move to Huntsville and work for me, but he refuses to work with Mason."

Magruder had a feeling the Sheriff wasn't telling all about Mason. He sensed there was an underlying problem here.

It was about eight when Magruder left the Colson residence. He headed toward the jail to check on the prisoners and to get acquainted with Les Willard, the acting jailer.

Willard was a wiry little man of about seventy, no more than five foot six in height, but his stern visage and keen hazel eyes gave the impression that he was not a man to cross. He wore an old Remington Army .44 pistol hanging butt forward in front of his left hip—cross-draw fashion—and the shiny hardwood handle bore evidence of much use.

After Magruder introduced himself, the barest semblance of a smile appeared at one corner of Willard's dour mouth, and he extended his right hand.

"Ah've heerd about you, Magruder. An' Ah'm proud to shake yore hand. Wished Ah'd a been at th' Sundown t'other night when ya croaked Hawkins."

"I'm glad to meet you too, Mr. Willard."

"Hell, call me Les! Ah don' answer to Mr. Willard."

Magruder chuckled. "Alright, Les, I'll do it."

"Ah don't 'spose ya need it, Magruder, but Ah'm gonna give ya some advice anyhow. You'd best keep an eye on yore back trail, son. Ah know a thang or two about the Hawkins boys, and Ira's brother, Henry, is shore to come lookin' fer ya'.

He's got a rep as a fast gun, and he may call ya out. But then agin, he may just try to bushwhack ya."

One of the prisoners yelled out from his cell in the back, "Yeah, Hank's gonna fill yore butt fulla lead, Magruder! Yo're gonna be sorry you killed his brother."

Without turning around or batting an eye Willard shouted back over his shoulder, "Shuttup, you sonuvabitch, or Ah'll bend a pistol bar'l over yore head!"

Willard then said, "In the next few days, the Circuit Judge'll be here to try these skunks—an' after the trial, Ah'm gonna dangle their flea-bitten carcasses from thet big oak out back, an' leave 'em there for the buzzards!"

No other sound was heard from the prisoners following that declaration.

After he left the jail, Magruder drove over to the Gibbs General Store. He went directly to the bank booth in the rear, and told Fred Collins he wished to withdraw \$400 from his account. Though he still had over \$300 in his wallet, he expected to pay that much or more for the kind of horse he wanted to buy. He also needed to purchase a saddle, bridle and various other trappings.

As he was leaving the store, he encountered that uppish lady clerk with that fascinating derriere. He received a much different reception on this occasion. Smiling broadly, she greeted him with, "Oh, Mr. Magruder. It's so delightful to see you again. Is there any way I can be of service today?" He had a lewd thought of a service at which she might excel, but he responded, "Not this mornin' Miss. Thank you very much."

Chapter VII

Brush with a Killer.

Magruder picked up the picnic basket from Nora's at 9:25, and as he drove back to the hotel, he noticed the formation of high cirrus clouds against the blue sky. These clouds—called horsetails by most Indians—indicated an approaching front, and were usually the harbingers of inclement weather. The sun was still bright and warm however, and he figured that if a storm developed it would likely be late in the day. He was not going to allow the possibility of a little rain to spoil his plans, and he quickly dismissed the thought from his mind.

He had only waited in the lobby for a few minutes before Hilda Gersemann came down the stairway. She looked radiant in a form fitting yellow dress, and she carried a matching parasol. He whispered to himself, "Lordy, that is one beautiful woman!"

Magruder greeted her cordially at the foot of the stairs, took her arm and escorted her out to the surrey on which he had previously put up the canvas top.

About two miles north of town they passed a burned out farmhouse. The old barn still stood, though it leaned precariously, and the one remaining door hung at an oblique angle on a single rusty hinge. Fifty yards beyond the barn, a few

stunted corn stalks poked up through the waist-high weeds bearing evidence of a once cultivated field.

“Looks like some poor soul got burned out,” opined Magruder.

“That’s a depressing scene, Mr. Magruder. When I see a sight like that, it makes me a little heartsick. It makes me wonder about the people who lived there—very likely a man and a woman—about how they came to build that house, and what happened to them after the fire—about their dashed hopes and dreams.”

“It affects me like that too, Mrs. Gersemann. I saw a lot of such scenes, during and immediately after the war. But those burnouts didn’t happen by accident. The fires were deliberately set by Union troops or occupation forces. And there were times when the farmer and his family were murdered.”

“How horrible! Such cruelty is incomprehensible to me—and unforgivable.” She was quiet for a while as if weighing her next words. Finally she said, “Mr. Magruder, I was previously married—fourteen years ago just before the war began. My first husband, Jimmy, was killed fighting for the Union. I hate to think he died for a cause that condoned the kind of depravity you described.”

Her admission of another marriage was so unexpected, it took Magruder several seconds to collect his thoughts.

“There were atrocities committed on both sides, Mrs. Gersemann. It’s unlikely the Union or Confederate governments condoned such acts, but they happened. War breeds the kind of hatred that can turn otherwise decent men into vicious animals.”

They rode along in silence for the next quarter hour, with each engrossed in their own private thoughts. Magruder noted a slight increase in the horsetail clouds, and the breeze seemed just a bit cooler. He also noted a faint darkening along the northern horizon. Though the sun was still bright, he predicted rainfall before day’s end.

At length, he said, “I brought along a blanket to spread our picnic on, and if you get too cool, I’ll get it out and wrap it around your shoulders.”

“I’m just fine, Mr. Magruder. I think the cool wind is invigorating.”

Then after another interval of silence, she asked, “Mr. Magruder, do you think it would be indecent for a recently widowed lady and a gentleman friend to call each other by their given names?”

He looked at her and smiled. “Of course not,” he replied.

“Alright, Jacob, when are we going to eat? I didn’t have any breakfast.”

He laughed. “We can eat anytime you say, Hilda, but I had thought we would eat after our visit to the Cambell ranch. I don’t expect it to take long.”

She smiled and said, “In that case, I’ll wait, though I’m dying to know what’s in that basket.”

They were now about five miles north of town and approaching a crossroad. The branch of the crossroad going east was hidden from their view by a hedgerow. When they were about thirty yards from the intersecting road, Bessie’s ears shot up, and a moment later a rider on a black horse rode out from behind the hedgerow. Hilda immediately grasped Magruder’s arm, and exclaimed in an excited whisper, “Jacob, that’s the man who shot Bernie.”

He jerked the mare to a stop, leaped out of the surrey and snatched the Winchester from beneath the seat. As he worked the lever of the rifle, he bellowed at the top of his lungs, "HEY, YOU—STOP!"

He heard the black grunt as it was savagely spurred, and the animal bolted forward with the rider leaning low over the horse's neck. In only a few bounds, the horse was tearing down the road running all-out and kicking up great clods of earth. Magruder took a quick shot at the rider and missed. He decided to shoot the horse. He worked the lever and tried to jack another round in the chamber, but the gun jammed. The extractor had failed to withdraw the spent cartridge case.

"Oh, god-DAMN-it!" he exclaimed loudly.

He was finally able to flick the brass hull out with his fingernail, and load a live round in the chamber. By this time the horse was 200 yards away and running hard. The rider then angled off the road toward a grove of trees. He took another quick shot just as the horse and rider disappeared into the woods.

Magruder was so angry and frustrated, tears came to his eyes, and he stamped his foot while muttering curses. He was sorely tempted to smash the object of his wrath against a nearby tree. He was also embarrassed to have bungled an opportunity to capture the killer while the victim's widow was looking on.

"What happened, Jacob?" Hilda asked in a low voice.

"The rifle jammed," he said. "It failed to eject the spent cartridge case. Can you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand perfectly. I'm not unfamiliar with firearms, Jacob. In fact, I am quite proficient with the 20-gauge. Bird hunting was Bernie's passion, and I often accompanied him on the hunt."

"I hope you'll forgive my profane outburst, Hilda. Due to my frustration, I forgot I was in the presence of a lady."

She smiled tolerantly. "Please don't apologize, Jacob. I sympathize with your disappointment."

Magruder got back aboard and drove the surrey up to the crossroad. He again halted and got down handing the reins to Hilda. "Please hold these a moment—I want to have a look at those tracks."

He walked slowly along the road a few rods in the direction the rider had come from. He carefully studied the horse tracks, occasionally stopping to bend down and scrutinize the impressions in the dirt. After a few minutes he returned, got in the buggy, and then urged Bessie along with a slap of the reins.

"What could you possibly determine by looking at those tracks?" asked Hilda.

"I was looking for any unusual characteristic in those horse tracks whereby I might recognize them if I ever see them again."

"And did you find any?"

"Yes. There was an indentation in the horseshoe of the right fore foot. It was a flaw likely formed when the shoe was forged. I found two clear impressions showin' the same dent."

"How could you tell the impression was from the fore foot? Doesn't one hoof print look just like another?"

“Not quite. Obviously, one can distinguish between the prints made by the left and right hooves of an animal. But one can also tell the difference between tracks made by the fore feet from those made by the rear. The rear hooves step upon the heels of the prints formed by the fore feet, thus a back portion of each front track is stamped out by the following impression made by the rear hoof.”

“That’s fascinating, Jacob. Do such tracks reveal any other things about the animal which made them?”

“Yes they do. For instance, one can tell whether a horse was walkin’, trottin’, or runnin’ at the time the tracks were made. The tracks also indicate something about the animal’s size. When the horse is walkin’, the distance between impressions made by the same foot, is from about two and a half to three feet, depending on the size of the animal. The same animal when runnin’ will leave tracks from eight to ten feet apart. And when trottin’, the tracks will be somewhere between those measurements. Moreover, a good tracker can closely estimate the time when the tracks were laid down, dependin’ on the soil and moisture content.”

“That’s amazing. Where did you learn about such things, Jacob?”

“Most of what I know was learned from an old Apache scout that rode with my Ranger Company. His tracking ability was unbelievable. He could follow the week-old trail of a cricket over solid rock.”

“You are exaggerating, aren’t you?” she asked with a smile.

Grinning, Magruder replied, “Yes, but not by much.”

Fifteen minutes later, they drove up in front of a large two-story house on the Cambell ranch. As Magruder pulled to a stop, a bearded man of questionable years stepped out onto the wide veranda. He was followed by a pleasant looking middle-aged woman who was wiping her hands on a cotton apron. In a hospitable voice, the man said, “Howdy, folks. Y’all git down an’ come in.”

Magruder responded with a pleasant, “Good morning’,” and he quickly stepped off and assisted Hilda to alight. Then, removing his hat, he said, “I’m Jacob Magruder and this is my friend, Hilda Gersemann. We drove out from Huntsville to look over some of your horses. I heard you had some exceptional riding stock.”

The man smiled as he replied, “Well, you heard right. I’m Joel Cambell and this is my wife, Ella.” And they both stepped off the porch toward the visitors. While Magruder shook hands with Cambell, his wife took Hilda by the arm saying, “Come in, dear. We’ll have some tea while the men palaver.”

Cambell escorted Magruder out to his holding pens located a hundred yards from the house near the barn. There, a half a dozen spirited horses whinnied, snorted and pranced around. When they saw the men approaching, the animals stopped moving about, and with upright ears, regarded them with suspicion.

“I have about twenty hawses available right now, Magruder, most of ‘em sired by my gray stallion, Storm Cloud. These in the corral were brought in for gentlin’. We catch up a few at a time, bring ‘em in from the pasture, and work with ‘em a while. Then we turn that bunch out and bring in some more. Thataway, they don’t get so damned wild.”

As he leaned on the top rail of a fence, Magruder saw quite a number of horses grazing with some longhorn cattle in the pasture below. “How is it you only have

twenty animals for sale, Cambell? Looks like fifty head or so out in the pasture with the cattle.”

“Well, it’s more like sixty. But a lot of ‘em are brood mares, colts and yearlings, which ain’t for sale. I don’t sell no stock less than two years old, Magruder.”

All of a sudden, there arose an awful racket like a dozen carpenters all hammering at once. The noise was coming from the big barn nearby.

Cambell grinned. “That’s Stormy raisin’ hell! One of my brood mares is comin’ in season, and he’s tryin’ to kick down the barn to get at her.”

As Magruder looked toward the barn, he noticed two young men come out. One appeared to be about eighteen, and the other a little younger. The younger one turned toward the house, while the older boy sauntered out toward him and Cambell. The boy wore faded jeans, a denim shirt and an old Texas style sombrero; and as he ambled along, Magruder could hear the musical “chink, chink, chink” of his spurs. Magruder seemed to be seeing himself at a time many years past—a tall, lean youth with the lithe step of a rider. As the boy walked up, Cambell asked, “How’s Blue Bonnet comin’ along, Tad?”

“I think she’ll be ready in another day or two, Paw.”

Cambell turned to Magruder. “Blue Bonnet is the mare that the stallion is raisin’ cane to get at.” Then he said, “Tad, this is Mr. Magruder. He and his lady friend drove out from Huntsville to look over our hawses. Magruder, this is my son Theodore, who prefers to be called Tad.”

He shook hands with the young man, and then said, “Tad, I’m lookin’ to buy a special kind of horse, and you look like the kind of fellow who knows his horses.”

Tad grinned, obviously pleased, and replied, “I reckon you could say that, Mr. Magruder.”

“I’m plannin’ on doin’ some travelin’, Tad, and I need a big strong animal that can carry a lot of weight—one that can swim rivers and climb hills, and cover 100 miles a day. I want him to be about 16 hands and 1200 pounds. Do y’all have any stock that’ll fill the bill?”

“We’ve got three or four like that, Mr. Magruder.”

“Now, if you were in my boots, Tad, which one of the lot would you choose?”

“Well, that’s any easy one, I’d take Smoky. He’s a big gray four-year old that looks a lot like his sire. But I shore would hate to see him sold. He’s practically a pet.”

Cambell, who had been listening to this horse-talk with noticeable fatherly pride, spoke up, “Tad and his brother love every hawse on the place, Magruder, and they have a fit every time I try to sell one. If I listened to them, I’d go broke runnin’ a hawse nursery.”

Magruder chuckled. “I understand how they feel. It’s easy to become attached to such beautiful animals.”

Obviously none of the horses in the holding pens were Smoky, as they were all blacks and bays, so he asked, “Cambell, do you reckon Tad could go down to the pasture and bring up Smoky so I could have a look at him?”

“Shore, we can do that, Magruder,” said Cambell. And he just looked at the boy and indicated with a gesture that he should comply. Tad nodded, then scaled the fence of the holding pen and retrieved a coiled lariat hanging from a nearby fencepost. He shook out a loop as he walked toward the horses in the pen, which

had begun to circle. He moved slowly talking to them in a low voice, "Whoa, there—easy now." Suddenly the lasso snaked out like a striking serpent, and the loop fell expertly around the neck of a bay mare. She kept moving until the noose tightened, then stood with muscles quivering as the boy approached. Tad eased up to her keeping the rope taut, all the while speaking softly to calm the animal. Then the young man took a double half hitch around the mare's muzzle, his father opened the gate, and Tad led the horse out.

Magruder exclaimed, "By golly, that was neatly done, Cambell! You should be mighty proud to have sons like that."

Tad led the mare into the barn in order to saddle her, and after a few minutes wait, the horse came cantering out of the barn with the boy astride and holding back on the reins.

"Open the pasture gate, Paw," Tad shouted. "She wants to run." Cambell quickly complied, then Tad slackened the reins and let her go. The animal sprang forward and came pounding by with powerful strides. And as they raced through the open gate and out toward the pasture, Tad let out an exuberant cowboy yell, "Yay-ay ha-ah!"

Magruder smiled and shook his head. "Look at that boy ride."

The younger son came walking up about then, and Cambell introduced him. "Magruder, this is my other son, Edward, who we call Cotton. I reckon you can figger out why." The young man was hatless and displayed a thick thatch of pale blond hair.

Cambell said, "Son, this is Mr. Magruder, who may be interested in buyin' Smoky."

"Aw, Paw—not Smoky! He's my favorite," moaned Cotton.

"Haw! Haw! Haw! Hell, they're all yore favorite!" exclaimed Cambell.

In a little while, Tad and his bay could be seen loping back with the gray in tow. His father opened the pasture gate again, and the boy rode through with his charge. Tad pulled up, leaped off, and handed the lead rope to his father. The big gelding pumped his noble head up and down, and pranced sideways as Cambell tried to calm him.

Magruder was immediately taken with the horse. He was a dark dapple-gray with a flowing black mane and tail, and his lower legs were black up to the knee and hock. The animal's broad chest and muscular hindquarters denoted endurance and strength. Magruder slowly approached the horse and ran his hand along the beautiful arched neck, all the while speaking to him in soft tones.

After a moment, he said, "Cambell, I'd like to put on a saddle and ride him."

"Alright, Magruder. We'll put the saddle on, but it'll be up to you to ride him. Heh, heh!"

The two boys led the gray into the barn to saddle him, and while they were gone, Cambell remarked, "I don't know how good a rider you are, Magruder, so I'm warnin' ya—don't be fooled by what Tad said. This hawse ain't no pet to be rode by kids and womenfolk. He's only been saddled eight or ten times in his whole life, and he's still half wild."

"Well, he may hang me on the fence, Cambell, but this is the only way I know to get acquainted."

Magruder took off his gunbelt and hung it on the top rail of the fence. He then removed his hat placing it on the top of a post. "I don't wanna lose that hat," he said with a smile. "It cost me five bucks."

Ten minutes later Tad and Cotton came out leading Smoky. The horse danced sideways, shaking his head and champing the bit. As one boy on each side held on to the bridle, Magruder walked up to the horse and took the reins.

"You wanna borrow my spurs?" asked Tad.

"I guess not, Tad. I'll try it without 'em."

"Well, you better watch'im. He's gonna buck when you get on," said Tad with a grin.

Magruder glanced sidelong at Cambell just before mounting and noted the man wore a big grin. He knew they expected the horse to pile him in a heap, so he determined to do his damndest to stay on.

With that, he grabbed the reins and a handful of mane with his left hand and the saddle horn with his right, and quickly swung himself into the saddle without use of the stirrup.

The gray half reared before Magruder hit the saddle, then bounded ahead several jumps and began to pitch. He bucked violently several times, almost unseating the rider, then suddenly hurled himself forward and began to run. He headed out the lane toward the Huntsville road. Magruder gave him his head and let him run. Every few seconds, Magruder would kick the horse in the sides and slap him smartly on the withers with the ends of the reins urging him to his utmost.

He thrilled at the swiftness of that wild ride. He had never before been astride such a dynamic engine of strength and energy. The rhythmic thunder of the great hooves, and the sting of the wind, attested to the power and speed of the mighty beast. It seemed they covered the half-mile to the Huntsville road in mere seconds and charged on across the road into an open field beyond.

With great leaps, the gray seemed to fly over the occasional bush and gulley encountered. Magruder let him run straight for perhaps another mile till they began to approach a line of trees, then pulling back on the reins, he forced the animal into a slow turn. After they had traversed a complete turn, still running hard, Magruder headed the horse back toward the ranch house. When within a quarter mile of the ranch house, he hauled back on the reins and pulled the gray into a comfortable lope. And when a hundred yards of the waiting men, he slowed the animal to an easy single-footing trot.

When they were within earshot, Cambell shouted, "We were beginning' to think y'all had left the county."

As he pulled the horse to a stop, Cambell asked, "Well, Magruder, what do you think of my gray hawse?"

Magruder knew enough about horsetrading not to appear overly anxious, so as he dismounted he said, "I might be able to use him, Cambell—what are you askin' for him?"

"Four hunnerd, Magruder."

"That's a lot of money for one horse. A fella ought to be able to buy a team for that."

“Well, I ain’t in this bizness for my health, Magruder,” said Cambell seriously. “I aim to make a profit. Now, you wanna make me an offer?”

He thought about that for half a minute, and finally said, “Seems to me three-fifty would be a fair price.”

Cambell cogitated on that for a while, and finally said, “Awright, Magruder. Three-fifty it is. I hope you got the cash on you, ‘cause I don’t take no markers.”

The two Cambell boys who had stood by and witnessed this deal making, didn’t look too happy; and Magruder thought he saw a tear in the corner of Cotton’s eye.

He pulled out his roll of bills, and while peeling off seven fifty dollar notes, he said, “I’ll want a bill of sale.”

“By Gawd, Magruder! If I’d known you had that wad on you, I’d of held out for the four hunnerd. But a deal’s a deal, I reckon.”

“Do you have an extra saddle and bridle you’d sell me, Cambell? I’d like to ride him back to town so we can get to know each other better.”

“No, I don’t have none to spare, Magruder, but I’ll loan you the ones on the hawse. We’ll be bringin’ a wagon in for supplies tomorrow, and we can pick ‘em up then.”

“Thanks, Cambell. I’ll take you up on that. I’m stayin’ at the Eutaw House, and I’ll leave your stuff at their stable behind the hotel. Do you know where it is?”

“Shore, I know. We’ll be goin’ by the Gibbs store anyhow.”

He retrieved his gun and hat, and the two men walked back to the house with Magruder leading Smoky who followed along without resisting. There they found the two women sitting in a big swing on the veranda.

“Oh, Jacob! That’s the most beautiful horse I ever saw,” Hilda exclaimed. “Did you buy him?”

“I sure did, Hilda. And I plan to ride him back to town if you’ll agree to drive the surrey.”

“Of course, I will,” she replied.

Although the Cambell couple invited them to join their family for the noon meal, Magruder gratefully declined explaining that they had brought along a picnic lunch.

After saying their goodbyes to the family, he helped Hilda into the buggy and handed her the reins. Then he mounted Smoky, who exhibited no resistance, and they were off. He waved as they were departing and Cambell waved back.

As they approached the Huntsville road, Hilda called out, “Where are we going to stop to eat, Jacob? I’m famished.”

“Near that little creek we passed this mornin’—’bout a mile back. There’s a pretty stand of cottonwoods just off the road. It looked like a nice place for a picnic.”

“Yes, I remember. It’s a lovely spot.”

When they reached the chosen place, Hilda guided Bessie into the glade under a canopy of huge cottonwood trees, and pulled up. Dismounting behind the vehicle,

Magruder tied Smoky's reins to the tailgate, and after securing Bessie to a sapling, he took Hilda's hand as she stepped off.

He unfolded the blanket he had brought along, and spread it out on the short grass. Then, removing his hat, coat and gunbelt, he hung them on the brake handle. Retrieving the picnic basket and the jug of lemonade from the buggy, he placed them in the center of the blanket. As he did so, Hilda exclaimed, "Jacob! There's blood on your shirt! You must have torn something loose riding that mettlesome animal."

He looked down to see a hand-size bloody spot on his left side. "Oh, don't be concerned. It can't amount to much—it doesn't hurt. Let's sit down and enjoy our picnic."

He had brought along a satin cushion, borrowed from the hotel, which he invited Hilda to sit on. After she was comfortably seated, he sat down opposite her and poured lemonade in the cups provided. Then he expressed with a smile, "Well, help yourself lady—and I sure hope you like fried chicken."

"I love it, Jacob—and right now, I think I could eat it raw." She gave him a warm smile as she removed the cloth cover from the basket, placed a napkin over her lap, and picked up a drumstick.

They ate mostly in silence, gratefully absorbing the peace of that pastoral setting. The cool breeze waved the grasses of the knoll, and rustled the leaves in the cottonwoods. Squirrels played in the shady zones beneath the trees, heedless to scolding by a pair of jays—and a mockingbird sang in the topmost branches. A melodious gurgle could be heard from the nearby brook as the water flowed over and around the rocks. And occasionally, and very faintly, the mournful sound of a train whistle could be heard from the H&GN railroad miles to the east.

After a while, Hilda said, "Jacob, I have never heard such an exuberant and melodious song as the trill of that bird in the tree above. What kind of bird is that?"

"It's a mockingbird, Hilda. A healthy male no doubt, who serenades to attract his lady love. No other bird sings like the mocker. He can mimic the songs of dozens of other birds, as well makin' sounds like crickets and frogs. I love the songs of the mockingbird. Many a night while on campaigns with the Rangers, and sleepin' under the stars, his song has given me solace and comfort. Yes, the mocker sometimes sings at night. And he is courageous—a real fighter. He will attack animals much larger than himself to defend his progeny or his territory. If any bird can be said to epitomize the spirit of Texas, it's the mockingbird."

When they had finished their meal, Magruder began gathering up the utensils and placing them back in the basket. When he got up to place the basket in the surrey, he saw dark thunderheads abuilding in the northern sky. We're gonna be lucky to get back to the hotel without gettin' wet, he guessed.

Hilda was still sitting and gazing about dreamily as Magruder prepared to fold the blanket. When she began to reminisce, he stopped what he was doing, and knelt down to listen.

“Somehow this spot reminds me of the place where Jimmy and I used to picnic. That was our favorite Sunday afternoon activity. We would drive out of town to a beautiful site overlooking the Allegheny, and there, beneath century-old oaks, we would spread our picnic lunch. And as we ate, Jimmy would quote passages from the classics.

“He especially loved the poems of Tennyson and Longfellow, and he often quoted *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. Jimmy was an idealist—a dreamer. He saw himself as a righter of wrongs—a knight in shining armor. So when the call came, he was one of the first to enlist in the Union Army.”

She was silent for a time, and then brushing a tear from an eye, and with a voice quavering with emotion, she whispered almost inaudibly, “We had been married less than a year when Jimmy went off to war. I had just learned I was pregnant. A few months later, he was killed. He was only 23 years old. I miscarried when I heard of his death. And I have never again been able to conceive since that fateful day.” She hesitated, finally adding, “I was widowed for six years before marrying Bernie, and now he’s gone too.”

Suddenly a strong wind blew through the little park scattering leaves and moaning through the treetops interrupting their reverie. A few seconds later, the ominous rumbling of thunder was heard. The sky was now completely overcast, and Magruder judged that rain was not far off. “We’ve gotta be getting’ back, Hilda, or we’re gonna get wet,” he announced.

He untied the animals and helped Hilda aboard the surrey, while telling her, “Keep Bessie at a fast trot, and we may beat the rain.” Then he mounted the gray, and they were off.

He kept a sharp lookout as they neared the crossroad where Gersemann’s killer had been seen that morning, but there was no sign of the outlaw or anyone else. Several minutes later, as they approached the abandoned barn they had passed earlier, a light rain began to fall. Magruder rode up beside the buggy and shouted, “Let’s pull in that barn up there till the storm passes.”

No sooner were they safely inside, then the heavens opened, and torrents of wind-driven rain began to batter the ancient structure. The old edifice moved and groaned under the assault, and several leaks in the roof soon became evident.

A few seconds after the heavy rain began, they were startled by a deafening clatter of hail on the roof. Watching near the entrance, Magruder saw marble-size hailstones bouncing off the ground outside. The hailing continued for about a minute, then abruptly ceased. After he had the animals calmed down, he tied Smoky inside a rickety horse stall, and climbed aboard the buggy to sit beside Hilda. It was then he saw her exhibit a slight shudder and realized she had become chilled. He immediately unfolded the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Oh, that feels wonderful, Jacob. I didn’t realize I was cold until we stopped. Don’t you want to share the blanket? I think it’s big enough for two.”

“Thanks, but my coat’s quite adequate. But if the temperature drops much further, we’ll be forced to brave the storm and make a run for it. The good news is, we’re only a few miles from the hotel.”

For a time, they sat there quietly just listening to the storm, but finally Magruder queried, "Would it be improper for me to ask how you came to meet Bernard Gersemann?"

"Of course not, Jacob. I don't mind telling you:

"You see, my father owns a factory in Pittsburgh that manufactures farm implements. It's called Schmidt's Foundry and Machine Company. Shortly before the war he placed newspaper ads in various parts of the South in order to recruit distributors for his products. In response to one of the ads, Bernie traveled to Pittsburgh seeking to become a dealer. That's when I first met him. I was the company receptionist, as well as the bookkeeper.

"While waiting in the office to meet my father, Bernie overheard him speaking German to one of the workmen. So when my father came in, I said, 'Father, this is Mr. Gersemann. He has an appointment with you.' Bernie stood up, extended his hand, and said, 'Guten Morgen, Herr Schmidt. Wie geht es ihnen?' My father smiled as they shook hands, and responded, 'Danke, gut, und ihnen?' They liked each other at once, and thereafter conducted all their business in German.

"Bernie was granted a dealership after a brief interview, and stayed on in the city for several days to become familiar with the products. Just before going home, he took me out to dinner one evening. Bernie was exceedingly warm, gracious, and a gentleman in every way; but his romantic gestures forced me to tell him, I was already engaged to be married. He told me several years later that he fell in love with me during those few days in Pittsburgh."

"I can understand that," said Magruder with a warm smile.

Hilda smiled back, briefly placed her hand on his, then continued. "I asked how it was a man of his age wasn't married, and he explained that he had been married, but was now a widower.

"After Bernie returned to Texas, there was regular correspondence back and forth between our business and his. And as I handled all correspondence, there was always a personal note or two between us. I informed him in one of my letters that I had gotten married.

"Soon after that Texas entered the war, and mail between North and South ceased altogether. I got no more mail from Bernie until after the Armistice.

"As soon as regular commerce and mail service was restored at the end of the war, Bernie began writing again to order equipment, and to inquire about my welfare. He explained that he had not been conscripted because of his poor eyesight, and had spent the entire war years at home. When I wrote back that Jimmy had been killed, and I was now a widow, he answered immediately proposing marriage and imploring me to come to Texas.

"But I rejected his overtures at first. I was still grieving for Jimmy. I didn't think anyone could take his place. I thanked Bernie for his proposal, but explained that I was not yet ready to consider remarrying. I told him if that time ever came, I would consider his proposal. Bernie wrote that he would wait no matter how long it took.

"But finally, after a couple of years, I succumbed to loneliness. It was then that I began seriously considering Bernie's supplication. Oh, I had other suitors, but they all seemed immature and shallow. And some repelled me seeming only

interested in sexual gratification. Bernie was mature, intelligent, kind and considerate...and we had much in common: We were both educated, each of us loved the classics, we both enjoyed hunting, we were both of German stock, and both knowledgeable about the farm tool business. It seemed like a very practical alliance. I explained to Bernie that I was not in love with him, but if he still wanted me, I would marry him. He was happy to accept under those conditions, so we were married."

Presently, Hilda said, "Now you tell me about yourself, Jacob. I know little except for your unfortunate incarceration, and that you were once a Texas Ranger. Were you ever married? I can't believe so handsome a man was always a bachelor."

"Yes, I was once married...for a very short time...many years ago. My marriage ended in the tragic death of my wife...only a few months after our wedding."

"I'm so sorry. Would you tell me about it...if it's not too painful?"

He hesitated, but finally said, "Alright. If you wish."

"Six weeks after the Armistice, my cavalry outfit was disbanded near Brownsville. That was in June of '65. The Confederacy was defeated, and nobody knew which way the political winds would blow after that. I arrived home in Nacogdoches about two weeks later after a ride of over 500 miles.

"My folks gave me a 'welcome home' party with several families of neighbors attendin'. That's where I met my wife-to-be, Clara Moore. In a very short time Clara and I became sweethearts, and in August we were married. For a weddin' present, my father gave us a little farm with a large comfortable house located two miles from my parent's home. So we moved in there and set up housekeeping. Clara's widowed mother moved in with us along with a Negro servant girl.

"One mornin' in October, a friend and I departed for Jacksonville in a buckboard to look over some prize beef stock we planned to purchase." He breathed a heavy sigh, then continued, "That same afternoon, Clara and her mother were outside tendin' a little fall garden, when three horsemen rode up. They were a gang of thieves and cutthroats passin' through the area. They attacked the women. Clara's mother struck one villain with a hoe before being shot and killed. Then they all raped Clara...repeatedly."

"Oh, God! How horrible!" Hilda exclaimed.

Magruder exhaled audibly a few times. "The black girl happened to be in the barn when the outlaws rode up, and on hearin' the commotion, she hid there. But she witnessed everything that happened by peerin' through a crack in the wall. A few minutes after the brigands rode off, and quite by chance, my uncle, Cameron Ford, pulled up in his buggy. Clara was hysterical, and he quickly got her into the buggy and raced home to my father, who's a medical doctor. After leavin' her in Dad's care, he went back to the farm and got the complete story out of the Negro girl. Cam, as he is called by the family, is a lawyer and very methodical. He wrote down the description of the men and their horses, and made notes about the tracks and other evidence left by the...the sorry bastards! Then he loaded Clara's dead mother and the black girl into the buggy and carried them back to the family home.

“Cam didn’t bother reportin’ the attack to the local sheriff, who, besides being a political hack, was usually drunk. Cam prepared to track down the killers himself and render his own form of justice.

“Cam is an expert with firearms, and an excellent tracker. So he saddled one of our thoroughbreds, packed provisions for a week, and carryin’ several weapons, he set out.

“He went back to the farm and picked up their trail, which headed southwest. The attack had taken place in late afternoon, and by the time Cam got started, the outlaws had a two hour lead. There was no chance of catchin’ them before nightfall. He camped on their trail that night, and the next day he was off at first light. The nature of the terrain over which the killers traveled, made trackin’ slow and difficult. He lost, and then refound the trail several times over a period of three days. But he finally caught up with them. He surprised them while they were at breakfast one mornin’.

“They were all sittin’ around a campfire when he confronted them. He was holdin’ a sawed-off double-barrell 12 gauge loaded with number four buck. He could have killed them all with one blast. But he didn’t shoot. He made them drop their gunbelts, and forced one man to tie up the other two. Then Cam tied up the third man. After that, he, uh—I’d prefer not to tell what he did. It’s too grisly. His avengement was terrible, but it was exactly what the brutes deserved. Through he didn’t kill them outright, they very likely perished from his retribution.”

“I believe he was justified in doing whatever he did, no matter what,” Hilda said sternly. “Tell me what it was. I want to know.”

“Well, uh, alright—if you must. He castrated them. Then he took their weapons and horses, and left them afoot ten miles from the nearest settlement.”

Hilda closed her eyes and exhibited a shudder. “I think that’s a fitting punishment for such barbarians,” she murmured softly.

A few moments later, she asked, “Did Clara succumb from that barbarous attack?”

“No, not directly. She died six weeks later. She was an emotional wreck for weeks after the attack. She suffered depression and had screaming nightmares. My mother attended her night and day during this period. And then, when it finally appeared there was hope of recovery, Clara discovered she was pregnant. She shot herself a few days later.”

“Oh, Jacob—how awful! That poor girl.”

Magruder’s voice broke as he whispered, “The baby could have been mine...ours...but she obviously assumed the worst.”

While they waited for the weather to improve, Magruder asked if Hilda had made a final decision on what she would do when she left Huntsville.

“No, Jacob, I haven’t. I am still in a quandary about going on to Houston or back to Pittsburgh. I received a return wire from Bernie’s brother, Herman, stating our fifty thousand dollars had already been invested and he could not possibly return it as I had asked. He suggested I come to Houston and assist him in the new enterprise. But I am not comfortable with his proposal. I have never met the man, and know very little about him. Bernie was never close to this younger

brother, and I was dumbfounded when he told me he was going to join him in this questionable business venture.”

He counseled her to take her time, and not make any hasty decisions. In the meantime, he would provide the funds she required while in Huntsville. He silenced her protest with a deprecating hand, and told her he was confident that Bernie’s killers would soon be caught, and at least some of her \$15,000 recovered. Then she could reimburse him if she wished.

They waited another half-hour hoping the weather would improve. By then, the rain had lessened a bit but the wind was still brisk, and the temperature had continued to drop.

“I think we better prepare to get wet,” said Magruder. “It appears we’ve got the makin’s of a late winter norther. We’ll wait a few more minutes in hopes the rain will cease, but if it doesn’t, we must brave the storm.”

He got Smoky out of the stall, and tied his reins to the tailgate of the surrey. Then he got back in the vehicle and prepared to make a dash for it. There were doorways at both ends of the old barn, which facilitated an easy exit.

After a reasonable wait when the rain had not diminished, he said, “Well, hang on, lady—here we go.” Then he slapped Bessie smartly with the reins, and they were off at a canter.

They made the hotel in about ten minutes, and Magruder stopped near the entrance. The rain was now a slow drizzle, but the wind was still gusty. The canvas top on the surrey had shielded them somewhat, but they were wet from the waist down.

They quickly dismounted and dashed inside the foyer. After which Hilda exclaimed, “Br-r-r! I’m frozen! It’ll be great to get in a hot bath.” Then as Magruder excused himself to go care for the animals, she added, “I had a wonderful day, Jacob, even if we did get wet, and I want to thank you for it. Perhaps we could have supper together later?” He smiled and said he’d look forward to it, and they parted.

He turned the care of Smoky over to the stable boy, but decided to keep the surrey long enough to visit the doctor. The sticky wetness beneath the bandage on his side indicated his vigorous activity had caused more bleeding than first thought. He figured old Doc Wilson was going to give him a lecture for not following his orders, but he was unprepared for the tirade that followed.

The doctor glowered at him, as he removed the bloody bandage. “Goddammit, Magruder! I told you to take it easy. You’re a damn fool for ridin’ all over the county with this bullet hole in ya. Yeah, I know ‘bout you’re bein’ up at the quarry yesterday. Kim Wheeler was in this mornin’, an’ told me about it. I can also see you don’t have sense enough to get in outta the rain.” And as the doctor began to clean the bloody wound, he barked, “Well, what’n hell did you do today to start all this bleedin’?”

“I went up to Pine Prairie this mornin’, Doc, to buy a horse. He bucked a little when I first straddled him.”

Wilson threw up his hands. “You idiot! I thought you were s’posed be smart. If you get an infection in this wound, you’ll pay dearly for this stupidity.”

Magruder sought to change the subject. "Miss Wheeler seems like a nice young lady. I hope her ailment is nothing serious."

"Kim's visit was personal," Wilson snapped. "She's my niece. I shouldn't tell you this, but she said she'd like to meet you again—under more favorable circumstances, she said. Humph! I always thought Kim was a smart girl, but now I have my doubts."

Magruder smiled. "That's kinda funny, doc—her wantin' to see me again—considerin' she was ready to shoot my leg off yesterday."

"Well, there's no figgerin' women," Wilson grumbled. "That gal's got a dozen young bucks moon-eyed and pantin' after her. Why she'd be interested in a ...a blockhead like you is beyond me."

When the doctor had finished changing the bandage, he asked, "Whatta I owe you, Doc?"

Wilson was still angry. "I normally charge five dollars, but for fools like you, I charge ten. What's more, though I was gonna waive charges for doctorin' you the first time, since you refuse to follow my advice, it'll be ten dollars for that visit too. Twenty bucks, Magruder."

By this time, Magruder had become rankled by the old doctor's vituperative remarks, so he peeled off a double sawbuck from his roll of bills, slapped it down on a table, and walked out without another word.

Chapter VIII

Gunsmoke in the Afternoon.

Friday:

After breakfast next morning, Magruder walked around to the stables to get the surrey he had again reserved. It was a beautiful day. The sky was clear and the wind calm, and the crisp cold air felt good to him. Bobby, the stable boy, already had Bessie hitched up and ready to go.

"Mornin', Bobby. Did you give Smokey that extra grain, like I asked?"

"I shore did, Mister Magruder. And that big sonuvagun went after it like a hawg. He acts like he never had no grain before."

Magruder chuckled. "I'll have to watch that or he'll be gettin' fat. By the way, Bobby, Joel Cambell or one of his boys will likely come by today to pick up that saddle and bridle I borrowed. So see that they get 'em, and thank them for me, will you?" He flipped the boy a silver dollar as he spoke.

Bobby caught it, and grinning from ear to ear, replied, "Yes sir, Mister Magruder, I shore will—and thanks a lot."

He was carrying his sheathed Winchester, and placed under the seat before getting aboard. He stepped up and gained the seat, then clucking to Bessie, they moved off at a trot. He drove directly to Gilbert's Gun Shop.

Gilbert was dismantling a pistol when Magruder walked in. He looked up and smiled, and said, "Howdy, Magruder. Whut can I do fer ya today?"

"Gilbert, this rifle you sold me has a defective extractor. And the damned thing jammed—just when I was trying to shoot an outlaw! And the bastard got away because of it!" He complained angrily.

"Lemme see the gun," Gilbert said calmly.

Magruder handed it over, and Gilbert sat down, adjusted his little bifocals, and opened the action. After examining the weapon a few minutes, he said, "Ain't nuthin' wrong with the extractor, Magruder. But waita minit an' I'll show ya whut prob'ly caused th' trouble."

Gilbert laid the rifle down and began to dig around in a drawer full of small parts. Presently he picked out a spent cartridge case. "Looky here, Magruder. See th' flat side of th' rim on this brass hull. It ain't s'pose to be thet way, ya know? The extractor can't git aholt of th' hull if'n it tries to grab that flat side. Your jam musta been caused by one of these bad ca'tridge cases. I've run acrost a half of dozen hulls like this lately. I'm sorry I didn't tell ya about it before. I raised hell with th' drummer 'thet sells th' stuff. He says the factory's gotta problem in their machin'ry, and they're tryin' to fixit. I can only advise ya ta check your ca'tridges 'fore you load 'em in your rifle."

He wasn't completely mollified, but had to admit it wasn't altogether Gilbert's fault. He said so much before he left the gunshop, and then he crossed the street to enter Creath's Saddle Shop.

"Hi there, Magruder, good to see ya," said Creath.

"Creath, I just bought myself a fine horse, and I want to buy an equally fine saddle."

"You came to the right place, Magruder. Come in the back room and I'll show you our ready-made stock. 'Course we can always make a custom saddle, if you don't see anything you like."

Creath showed Magruder a dozen or more saddles that were displayed on wooden racks. One in particular took his eye. It was shiny black tooled-leather trimmed with silver. It had a silver cap on the horn, silver rim on the cantle, silver straps on the stirrups, and silver conchos on the skirt.

"How much for this fancy rig, Creath?"

"That's our most expensive model, Magruder. Several days of labor went into that saddle, and the materials cost a lot, too."

"Forget the sales pitch, Creath. Just gimme the bad news."

"It's a hunnerd and twenty-five bucks, Magruder. But I'll throw in our best saddle blanket on the deal."

"Alright, have someone load 'em in my buggy outside. Now how about a bridle to match."

"Okay. The bridle, reins, and a curb bit will cost you fifteen."

"Do you have any large-size saddle bags that will match the saddle?"

"No, I don't, Magruder, but we can make some up for ya. You want black tooled leather like the saddle?"

"Yes, of course. What's that gonna cost me?"

“Well, I’ll have to figger it up, but let’s say thirty-five dollars maximum. Does that sound alright?”

“Alright, call it thirty-five. Now, where can I buy a pair of spurs, Creath?”

“Well, if you don’t want somethin’ fancy, I’ve gotta coupla pair around here somewhere. They’re just the plain old ‘OK’ style.”

“That’s what I want, along with some black leather straps for them that matches the saddle?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some already made up. The spurs and straps will cost ya another five.”

“Let’s see, all of that comes to, uh...a hundred and eighty bucks,” said Magruder pulling out his roll. He peeled off the bills and handed them to Creath. “When can I pick up the saddle bags?”

“Give us three days on that, Magruder. Is that okay?”

A few minutes later, Magruder drove away with his purchases. He mused, That big gray devil is gonna be beautiful all dressed up in black leather. By golly, I think I’ll go saddle him and take him out for a little exercise.

When he arrived at the stable, Bobby exclaimed, “Lordy mercy! I ain’t never seen no saddle like that’un b’fore.”

After an hour’s ride, Magruder stopped by the Sundown Saloon. He had a drink with Jerry Malloy, and proudly showed off his horse and trappings. Then he stopped at the jail for a visit with Les Willard. While there, he informed Willard about his encounter with the killer on the previous day. When he returned to the stable, he unsaddled Smoky and gave him a good rubdown. At about eleven, he returned to his room to wash up and rest a bit before inviting Hilda to join him for lunch.

At a quarter to twelve, Magruder left his room, crossed the hall and knocked on Hilda Gersemann’s door. She responded, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Hilda. Will you join me for lunch?”

“Yes, thank you, Jacob. Please wait a moment while I slip on my shoes.”

Hilda had just opened her door, when shouts and loud voices were heard coming from the lobby below—then the sound of someone running up the stairs. It turned out to be the little man from the Sundown Saloon who had brought the message of trouble before. He rushed toward them.

“Mr. Magruder,” he exclaimed breathlessly, “Hank Hawkins is at the saloon. He sent me to find ya’. He said to tell ya’ he’ll be in the street at twelve noon awaitin’ fer ya’. He aims to shoot ya’ fer killin’ his brother.”

Hilda Gersemann grasped Magruder’s arm with both hands. “Oh, Jacob, don’t go. You don’t have to accept this stupid challenge.”

He gently but firmly removed her grip. “You’re wrong, Hilda—I must.”

Then he addressed the little man who seemed to be waiting for a reply, “Tell Hawkins, I’ll be there. And tell him to prepare to meet his brother—in Hell!”

Magruder re-entered his room and strapped on his gunbelt. He pulled out the Colt, and from habit, checked cylinder. All chambers were loaded except the one under the hammer. For safety, he usually carried his pistol with this chamber empty. Now he loaded a sixth cartridge, then unconsciously twirled the pistol and

thrust it back in its holster. He tied the thongs securely around his thigh, and then put on his hat. He picked up his watch to check the time—seven minutes till twelve. He retrieved the deputy badge off the dresser, and pinned it on his left breast pocket. As he did so, he happened to notice his reflection in the mirror, and made a wry smile.

When he left the room, Hilda Gersemann still stood in her doorway. Tears were on her cheeks. Again she exclaimed, “Oh Jacob, must you do this? You might be killed. I couldn’t bear it if you should.”

“Don’t worry—I’ll be alright. I know this kind of gunman. Right now, he’s probably guzzlin’ liquor at the saloon tryin’ to screw up his courage. In a way, this is a relief. I expected him to try to shoot me from ambush. Please stay here...I don’t want you to see this.” He turned and strode down the corridor not waiting for a reply.

When Magruder reached the lobby, he found Karl Swartz and several others standing about talking excitedly. He told Swartz he wanted him and the new janitor to go down the street on opposite sides, and warn everybody they should stay off the street and out of sight. When they got beyond the Sundown Saloon, they were to go into the nearest shop and wait until the shooting was over. He would wait five minutes before coming out. Swartz and the other man hurried out, and Magruder paced back and forth in the lobby.

A couple of minutes later, Hilda Gersemann came down the stairway. Magruder stopped when he saw her, but before he could protest, she said, “It won’t do you any good to object, Jacob. I am not going to sit in my room while you go out there to face that killer.”

He could see she was determined, so he just said, “Please stay inside. Bullets may be flyin’ all over the place.” Then he glanced at the clock in the lobby, and said, “Time for me to go.”

Tears were still in her eyes, and it appeared she was about to embrace him, but he turned and hurried out.

He tugged at the brim of his hat as he walked through the doorway of the Eutaw House and out to the deserted street. A strange silence had settled over the town. There was not a sound of a bird, a dog or a human. Even the normal noonday breeze was absent—as if holding its breath.

Two blocks away, a lone figure stood in the middle of the street. As Magruder started walking toward him, the other man began walking also. A few seconds later, the clock in the courthouse tower began tolling the hour.

His warning to the populace was now being largely ignored. Heads began popping out of doors and windows all along the street. A shootout in the middle of town was a rare occasion for Huntsville.

As the distance between them lessened, Magruder could see that Hawkins wore a big sombrero pulled low over his eyes, and he carried two pistols. He smiled at that revelation while thinking: Most would-be badmen wear two guns. But there were notable exceptions. Bill Longley and Wes Hardin were both deadly two-gun killers.

When the distance between them had been reduced to about thirty yards, Hawkins stopped walking and seemed to crouch, his hands hovering claw-like over the butts of his pistols.

Magruder's eyes were locked on this adversary as he continued walking slowly toward him. His senses were keyed to a fever pitch, and he was ready to draw at the slightest twitch of hostile intent. When the distance between them had been reduce to about twenty yards, Magruder halted. It was then he realized he was facing a smooth-faced youth of less than twenty years. The boy's broad hat brim had concealed his features until he had gotten close.

Magruder desperately wanted to break off the gunfight now. But not being certain he could, he braced himself for it. He planted his feet well apart with his left foot a half step ahead of the right. Then he shouted, "Call it off, Hawkins. Don't throw your life away like this. Submit to arrest and serve your time. Then you can start with a clean slate."

"You killed my brother, Magruder—and I'm here to even the score," was Hawkins' reply.

"Ira forced the play, Henry. I had no choice. Be reasonable. Call it off. I don't wanna kill you."

"You've got it all wrong, Magruder. You're the one that's gonna die."

With no other word, Hawkins jerked both pistols, and as their muzzles came up, Magruder's gun roared twice—shots fired so close together it seemed like one thunderous report. Hawkins convulsively pulled the triggers of both guns, as two red blotches appeared in the middle of his shirt. His bullets went into the ground three feet ahead of where Magruder stood, scattering dirt and gravel over his boots and lower legs.

Though young, Hawkins was big and strong; and he didn't fall immediately, but staggered back a few steps and began to sway—still on his feet. For a moment he struggled to raise the muzzles of his guns for another shot. Then his arms began to relax. As they lowered to his side, his hands slowly opened releasing one gun and then the other. They alternately dropped to the dirt at his feet. Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell forward on his face—dead before he hit the ground.

People came pouring out of all the buildings, shouting and talking excitedly. And old Sheriff Colson limped up to Magruder who stood transfixed in the same spot—the smoking pistol still in his hand. Colson exclaimed, "I got here jus' in time to see the fireworks, Magruder. My Gawd! I was watchin' close, and I still didn't see ya draw."

The sheriff, sensing his anguish, patted him on the back, commiserating, "Son, you tried to talk the boy into givin' up, but he jus' wouldn't have it. It's not your fault."

The undertaker had arrived on the scene, and Magruder watched as four men of the crowd lifted Hank Hawkins' limp young body into the undertaker's cart. He overheard one of them exclaim, "Hey, this feller's just a boy. Couldn't be more'n eighteen." That remark was like an arrow in Magruder's heart.

Jerry Malloy tapped him on the arm. "Come in the saloon, Jacob, and have a drink. It'll relieve the tension."

"That's a good idee, Malloy," said Colson. "C'mon, Magruder, I'll join ya."

Malloy seated Magruder and the Sheriff at a corner table, then brought over a bottle of his best with three glasses. He sat down, poured two fingers in each glass, and proposed a toast. "To General Robert E. Lee and the Confederacy." They clinked glasses and each took a swallow.

Then Colson offered a toast. "To General Sam Houston. May his soul find peace." Again they touched glasses and drank.

After that toast, Magruder sat staring at the drink in his hand, obviously preoccupied. Colson, noting his brooding countenance, asked gently, "That shootin' troublin' you, son?"

"Yeah." He took a deep breath and exhaled audibly. "My God! I didn't realize he was just a kid till it was too late. I should have tried to wing him instead of holdin' dead center."

"That would've been a fool thing to do, Magruder," declared Colson emphatically. "Kid or not, Hawkins meant to kill you. And if you'd only wounded 'im, he might've still been able to shoot. That kid was fast, and if you'd hesitated the merest fraction of a second, he wudda nailed you."

Malloy concurred, "Yeah, his bullets dug the ground right where you stood, Jacob."

The old sheriff regarded him kindly. "It's to yore credit, son, that you haven't become so hardened that you can kill without feelin'. But men like Hawkins and his brother are predators, and they have to be eliminated if law abidin' folks are to have any peace in this country. Hank Hawkins had a chance to surrender, but he chose to shoot it out."

The Sheriff cogitated a few moments, then inquired, "Rumor has it that you killed over two dozen bandits in shootouts when you were with the Rangers. Anything to that?"

"No. The total was thirteen," he answered softly.

"Did you have any similar feelin's of regret about killin' those men?" asked Colson.

"No. But they were men—not boys. They were all hardened criminals and cutthroats who had murdered, raped and pillaged. And I was under orders to take them into custody or neutralize them. So I just did my duty."

"And that's exactly whut you did here today, Magruder—your duty," admonished Colson.

"Perhaps you're right, Sheriff," he mumbled.

After an awkward silence, Jerry Malloy said, "Jacob, when I was helpin' Doc Wilson patch you up the other night, we noticed you had three scars from old bullet wounds. Did you receive those in your Ranger days?"

"Yeah, I did. And got them all in the same gunfight. It happened as I was tryin' to arrest a Mexican bandit at Brownsville. That was durin' the Cortinas uprising in south Texas. This skunk was tryin' to hide among a crowd of people, but I spotted him and called him out. He drew on me, and I put him down. But he had two confederates nearby who opened up on me. When the smoke cleared, one was dead, the other mortally wounded, and I had three bullets in me that put me out

of action for a month. But I was young and cocky in those days and thought I was invincible. That little incident taught me a lesson. I became more circumspect after that.”

About that time, old Doc Wilson walked through the batwing doors. He stopped and looked around, and when he spotted Magruder and the other men, he walked over and sat down at their table uninvited.

Malloy shouted to his bother behind the bar, “Hey, Marty! How ‘bout bringin’ another glass over here?”

The sheriff and Malloy both offered greetings, but Magruder just stared at the old doctor. He still smarted from that reprimand of the previous day.

The glass was delivered and Malloy poured whiskey for the doctor. Wilson held up the glass and said, “To your health, gentlemen,” and he took a swallow. Then addressing Magruder, he said, “Son, I want to apologize for my caustic remarks yesterday. Seems like bein’ cantankerous is one of the afflictions of old age.”

The old doctor took another sip of whiskey, and went on. “I didn’t see your previous gunfight that took place here in the saloon—but I saw what happened outside today. And I am awed by such courage. The citizens of Huntsville are in your debt, Magruder. Your service in eliminatin’ these lawless elements has been invaluable. And as I understand it, you have done so with absolutely no recompense from the county.” The last was said sarcastically while giving the sheriff a scornful look. “So, to personally show my appreciation for your deeds, I want you to know my services are available to you at anytime without charge.” After saying his piece, the doctor extracted a folded twenty-dollar bill from his vest pocket, placed it on the table, and pushed it over to Magruder. Then he took another drink from his glass, and got up saying, “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” and he walked out.

“What th’ hell was that all about?” Colson exclaimed angrily, after the doctor had gone.

Magruder made a wry smile as he pocketed the twenty. Then he related what had happened in the doctor’s office on the previous day.

“Damn him, anyway! He’s mad at me for not payin’ ya,” exclaimed Colson. “The crotchety ol’ bastard don’t know that I tried to!”

Magruder and Malloy both smiled at the sheriff’s discomfiture.

“But Doc Wilson is right about one thing, Magruder,” declared Colson, “people in this town are in your debt. And I personally wanna thank you for all the folks. And now, I guess I’d better be goin’. Pete McNary drove me over in his buggy an’ he’ll be lookin’ for me.”

“Wait, Sheriff,” said Magruder. “Before you go, I want to tell you about spottin’ one of Gersemann’s killers. I took a buggy out to the Cambell ranch yesterday, and Mrs. Gersemann went along. As we were approachin’ that crossroad five miles north of town, that Mex with the black horse rode out from behind a hedgerow. I grabbed my rifle and yelled for him to stop, but he put the spurs to the horse and bolted. I fired a quick shot at the bastard and missed. Then when I tried to lever in another shell, the rifle jammed—damn the luck! By the time I could chamber another round, the killer was high-tailin’ into the woods 200 yards away. I was so

damned frustrated, I wanted to cuss a blue steak—but I couldn't with the lady present."

Colson smiled understandingly. "Well, don't fret too much about that, son. I'm confident you'll catch 'em sooner or later. I reckon that second sightin' pretty well confirms your theory about the killers bein' locals since they're still hangin' around."

Then he got up saying, "Now, I really gotta go. Thanks for the drink, Malloy." He shook hands with both men, and limped out, his cane making little thumping sounds on the board floor.

A growl in his stomach reminded Magruder that he'd had no lunch. But in his present mood, he didn't want to rejoin Hilda Gersemann. Chances are she's already eaten anyway, he thought.

"Jerry, I think I'll go over to Nora's Café and get a bite to eat. Why donchu come along?"

"I'd join you, Jacob, but Marty's leavin' and I've gotta mind the store. By the way, what're your plans for later this afternoon?"

"I was thinkin' about saddlin' my horse and goin' for a long ride in the country. It's a therapy recommended to dispel gloom and restore the spirit," said Magruder with a weak smile.

"Well, in case you're interested, there's gonna be a little game of chance here later on. Around six o'clock, one of your ol' friends will be here to play poker with some of the boys. I'm sure he'd like to get back some of the money you took off him last time." Malloy grinned. "I'm talkin' about George Menefee. He's the gent you put the big britches on in that game Monday night."

"That's interestin', Jerry. Perhaps I'll drop by. I wouldn't mind relievin' Mr. Menfee of another hundred or so." And after a moment's contemplation, he queried, "Whatta you know about this bird Menefee, anyway?"

"He's a hardware drummer from Navasota. Comes to Huntsville on business ever' month or so, an' lays over a few days. And he usually tries to make time for a coupla games while in town. He always plays here—an' he usually wins. I think you hurt his ego as much as his pocketbook when y'all played last time."

Magruder smiled. "Well, I don't mind givin' Mr. Menefee a chance to get even. Does this fellow think the poker pickins are easier here in Huntsville than they are back home?"

Malloy chuckled. "That may be part of it, but I suspect his ol' lady would likely shoot him is she caught him playin' poker. Mrs. Menefee is reported to be the leader of the Navasota Women's Temperance Union. I don't know exactly what they're for, but they're against just about everything men enjoy doin'—such as gamblin', drinkin', and smokin'. I think his wife's got somethin' to do with the fact that George chews his cigars instead of smokin' 'em."

"Sounds like the good ladies of Navasota would also object to games like jacks, marbles and mumbly peg," Magruder said with a smile.

Then he got up, offered his hand, and said, "Thanks for the drink, Jerry. You're a good friend."

Before leaving the saloon, Magruder removed his deputy badge placing it in his pocket, and pulled his hat brim low over his eyes. He hoped that not too many would recognize him on the street. While walking over to the café, however, he encountered several men who hailed him and waved. Magruder just nodded and said nothing. He was determined not to talk to anyone about the shootout. But he couldn't help overhearing remarks exchanged between others as he walked along. A boy of about thirteen exclaimed excitedly to his friend, "Looky there, that's Jake Magruder. He's fastner'n Wes Hardin." And another overheard remark, which he found painful, was, "Those bullet holes in Hawkins' shirt weren't two inches apart." It seemed he had become a celebrity, much to his chagrin.

It was almost one o'clock when he entered the café, and he was pleased to see only a handful of diners still there. He took a table in a near corner, and hoped he wouldn't be recognized. For good reason, he kept his hat on while he ate, though it was a violation of decorum and made him feel uncomfortable to do so. Fortunately, he was able to eat his meal in peace.

While paying his bill, he took stock of his remaining cash. He was still carrying close to two hundred dollars, and he figured that would be adequate for the evening poker game if he decided to participate. As he was about to get up and leave, he sighted Kim Wheeler and Burt Kellums, the Wheeler foreman. They had been sitting at a table across the room with their backs to him, and they had just gotten up and were walking out. He kept his seat and tilted his head forward to shield his face with his hat, hoping he wouldn't be recognized by the pair. But no such luck. Just as they reached the door, Kim spotted him, and a smile appeared on her face. She said something to Burt, obviously telling him to wait, and then walked over to his table.

Removing his hat, he stood up and said solemnly, "Good afternoon Miss Wheeler." She was hatless, and her auburn hair hung down to her shoulders. She had the bluest eyes he'd ever seen, and she was much prettier than he remembered.

She extended her hand, and said with an impish smile, "Hello again, Mr. Magruder. It's good to see you, though it looked very much like you were trying to avoid me."

He took her hand and replied, "To be honest, Miss Wheeler, I was. But I assure you, it was nothin' personal. I am just not in a sociable mood at this time."

She studied his dour expression. "I think I understand," she said seriously. Then after a moment, she went on, "Mr. Magruder, since Burt and I were coming in today for supplies, Dad asked me to look you up to give you a message. He'd like for you to ride out to the ranch when you get a chance. He wants to talk to you about the rustlers who've been running off our stock. And he has some information he thinks might facilitate their capture. Sheriff Colson told Dad of your theory that Gersemann might have been murdered by some of these local cattle thieves. I think Dad wants to hear your views on that, too. Anyway, what shall I tell Dad? When can we expect you, Mr. Magruder?"

"Tell him I'll come soon, Miss Wheeler, maybe tomorrow. I'd like to hear what he has to say about the rustlin' activities."

For several seconds, Kim gazed at Magruder with a look of indecision on her pretty face, but finally she said, "Mr. Magruder, I hope this doesn't offend you, but I just have to tell you. While I was shopping today, a man came into the store shouting for everyone to stay off the street 'cause there was going to be a gunfight. I ran to the window and looked out—and it happened right in front of the store I was in. It was the most thrilling, and at the same time frightening thing I've ever witnessed. Your hand was only a blur when you drew, and when I saw the flame from your gun, and heard that 'boom, boom', I nearly fainted. I've been around guns all my life, and I know how to use them, but I had never witnessed a gunfight or seen a man killed before. It was terrible—and yet fascinating."

He was visibly uncomfortable. "Miss Wheeler, I want you to know I get no pleasure in killin'. On the contrary, it depresses me. That's why I tried to avoid talkin' to you just now. Hawkins was a criminal, but I would have preferred to arrest him, rather than shoot him." Then he put his hat back on and declared, "Now, if you'll excuse me, Miss Wheeler, I really must go." And he walked past her to the door. Burt backed away several steps to let him pass, and Magruder contemptuously ignored him. Then he was out the door and striding purposefully down the boardwalk toward the hotel—a tide of conflicting emotions in his breast.

Kim Wheeler had made him furious. He had been forced to listen to her account of the gunfight, which he hated hearing. Here she was praising his death dealing, while he was still trying to justify the killing to his conscience. But as he strode along, he gradually gained control of his emotions, and his anger began to cool. And then, unbidden, thoughts of Kim Wheeler's femininity began to creep into his mind. She had a curvaceous figure that would excite any man, and she virtually radiated health and vitality. There was little wonder why she had so many "young bucks pantin' after her", as old Doc Wilson had said. Magruder opined that Burt Kellums was probably one of the heaviest panthers.

As he approached the hotel, he decided not to go to his room, but to go directly to the stable. He was afraid he would run into Hilda Gersemann in the hotel, and in his present mental state, he preferred not to see her before the morrow.

When he arrived at the stable, he found the stable boy cleaning out a stall. Magruder called to him, "Bobby, I'm goin' for a little ride in the country, and while I saddle Smoky, I'd like for you to go up to room #210 and retrieve my rifle." He handed the boy the key to his room and a dollar. "It's leanin' behind the door. And be sure and bring the scabbard, too."

Bobby's face broke into a big grin. "Yes sir, Mr. Magruder. An' thanks." And the boy took off at a trot.

He first put on the bridle and then led Smoky out of the stall before throwing on the blanket and saddle. After tightening the cinch, he led the horse out of the barn and tied him to the hitching rail outside. He had left his spurs tied to the horn, and he now took them loose and strapped them on his boots. In a few minutes, Bobby returned with the rifle and sheath.

While he was tying the sheath to the saddle, Bobby stood by, nervously standing on one foot and then the other, his working facial expressions seeming to indicate he was bursting to tell him something but didn't know how.

When Magruder completed his task, he turned to him and asked, "What's botherin' you, Bobby? Is there somethin' on your mind?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Magruder, but I don't know exactly how to say it. I don't wanna make you mad."

Magruder gave him a friendly smile. He had become fond of this courteous, hard-working kid. "Just come right out with it, son. I promise not to get mad."

"Well, what I wanna say is, uh, I heard the gunfire awhile ago, an then a feller come along to get his hawse, an' tol' me what happened. An', uh, I'm shore glad you didn't get hurt, Mr. Magruder, an', uh...I wanna learn how to use a pistol, an' I was wonderin' if you'd show me."

"How old are you, Bobby?"

"I'll be seventeen come June."

"Well, you're old enough. But what would your parents say about your having a gun?"

"I don't have no folks, Mr. Magruder. My paw was kilt in the war, an' I lost my maw last year. Mr. Swartz gimme this job after Maw died. I live here at the stable. I sleep in the loft, an' I take my meals in the hotel kitchen."

"Well, I'll ask Mr. Swartz what he thinks about it, Bobby. We don't want to jeopardize your job. If he says it's alright, I'll teach you what you need to know to get started. Then it'll be up to you. You'll have to spend a lot of hours at practice to become good. Do you have a pistol?"

"No, sir, but I've saved enough money to buy one."

"I'll talk to Swartz and let you know what he says. Alright?"

Bobby nodded enthusiastically and declared, "Thanks, Mr. Magruder, thanks a lot."

But Magruder was thinking, I don't think Swartz is gonna like this idea.

As he untied his horse from the hitching rail, Magruder made a quick decision. By Golly, I think I'll ride on out to the Wagonwheel Ranch right now. He didn't know exactly where the ranch house was, but it had to be somewhere near the quarry, and he was sure he could find it. The distance there and back should be about the distance he had planned for his afternoon ride anyway. And there was another good reason for his going that afternoon: Kim would likely remain in Huntsville a few more hours shopping, and by going right away, he might avoid meeting her again. I doubt my equanimity can stand very many confrontations with that disturbing female.

Magruder held his spirited horse to a canter as they headed out of town on the west road. And a half hour later, they passed the corner post of a newly constructed, three-strand barbed wire fence. The east-west section of the fence ran along the left-hand side of the road, which he was fairly sure enclosed some part of the Wheeler property. A few minutes later he passed the turnoff to the quarry, and a mile beyond, he came to a cattle-gap in the fence with an arched entranceway built of native stone. Hanging from the arch was a pine plank with the name "Wagonwheel Ranch" burned into it in large letters. Below the name in smaller letters was a curt message: "Private Property—Keep Out".

After riding through that portal, Magruder pinned his badge back on his shirt. He hoped that might deter some overly eager Wheeler cowpoke from taking a shot at him. As sensitive as they were about trespassers, and with their recent stock losses, the possibility of being shot at was a real concern.

The terrain was rolling prairie with only occasional scrub trees and bush growth, and Magruder could see a rambling ranch house and numerous out-buildings on a rise about two miles away. As he rode along, he observed longhorn cattle scattered here and there over the property, but his watchful gaze failed to see any punchers. When he was about a quarter mile from the house, two small dogs began barking, and raced out to greet him.

Then, as Magruder's horse trotted into the circular drive in front of the house, the screened door opened and a man stepped out onto the wide veranda with a rifle in hand. Right away, he identified the man as Wheeler, but that man's scowling expression indicated he had not yet recognized his visitor.

Magruder pulled his horse to a prancing stop, pushed back his hat and expressed with a smile, "Howdy, Wheeler. Do you always welcome your guests in such a friendly fashion?"

Wheeler's stern countenance immediately softened, and his big mouth broke into a wide grin. "Well, howdy, Magruder. Ah didn't 'spect you so soon. Oh, Ah'm jus' bein' careful. Ain't been too long ago, that somebody took a shot at me while Ah was settin' out here on the porch. Jus' missed me by a whisker, too. Makes me madder'n hell that Ah can't set on my own goddamn porch without becomin' a target! Well, Git down, boy, and come in the house whur we can palaver."

As Magruder dismounted and tied Smoky to the hitching rail, Wheeler stepped off the porch and began appraising his horse. "That's a damned fine lookin' animal you got there, boy," he said, and he gave Smoky an affectionate slap on the rump.

The living room of the house was large and airy, and colorfully decorated. Stuffed heads of various wild animals hung from the walls, along with the numerous kinds of ranch artifacts.

"Set down there, son," said Wheeler to Magruder, indicating a large skin-covered stuffed chair. Then he hollered out, "Maria!" A fat, middle-aged Mexican woman immediately appeared from a doorway at the rear of the room. "Maria, willya brang us some coffee in here please?" She nodded and hurried off.

Magruder queried, "What's this about someone takin' a shot at you on the porch? How could anyone get close enough for a shot without you or one of your hands seein' 'em?"

"Well, it was almost dark when it happened—jus' when all the boys were at chuck. After the shot, I run in the house an' got mah field glass. An' Ah looked all around from the winder, but Ah couldn't see a damn thang in the pore light. Ya know, the grass is knee high in the nearby pastures, an' there are some shallow washes not too far from th' house. So Ah figger somebody on foot sneaked up within three of four hunnerd yards for that shot, an' then high-tailed it down one of them gullies to whur he'd left his hawse. It was purty cute the way he pulled it off—knowin' the fellers would be eatin' supper, an' figgerin' nobody would be able to see him in the twilight."

"Are you in the habit of sittin' out on the porch in the evenin'?"

“Yeah. Ah usta be. In th’ sprang an’ fall, when the weather’s mild, Ah like to set out there an’ smoke mah pipe after supper. Course, after bein’ shot at, Ah can’t do it no more—an’ that fairly burns mah butt!”

The Mexican maid brought in a silver pitcher and two china cups on an ornate silver tray, and set them on the large handsomely carved hardwood coffee table—then she silently left the room. After she was gone, Wheeler poured their coffee and remarked, “Maria is mute, but she’s not deaf—a strange affliction. She was once a captive of the Apaches, and her son’s a half breed. He’s our hawse wrangler. The kid’s only fifteen, but he can outride any puncher on the place.

“Mah late wife, Abigail—bless her soul—had a big heart. She was always helpin’ folks. She found Maria an’ the boy half starved livin’ in a filthy hovel, so she brought ‘em home to care for. That was seven years ago, an’ they’ve been with us ever since. Abi’s charitable nature eventually caused her death. She insisted on goin’ to Huntsville an’ helpin’ the sick durin’ that yella fever outbreak a few years back. She caught the disease an’ died from it. Kim an’ Ah damned near died too—from grief. She was a wonderful woman.”

Magruder expressed his condolences.

After a bit, while sipping the strong, scalding-hot black coffee, Magruder inquired, “Wheeler, how do you suppose the shooter learned of your habit of sittin’ on the porch in the evenin’? An’ how could he have timed it just when your hands were all at supper?”

Wheeler shook his head. “Damned if Ah know, Magruder! Ah ain’t got no idee.”

“You know what it sounds like to me? It sounds to me like somebody in your employ tipped him off. Have you thought about that?”

“No Ah ain’t. But Ah reckon thet makes sense. Ah shore hate to think one of mah own boys would conspire to kill me.”

“Well, that could be the case, but again maybe not. One of them could have divulged that information innocently, like in idle conversation over a card game in town. If you do have a Judas in your bunch, he may also be tippin’ off the rustlers on the safest place to make their raids. How many men do you employ, anyway?”

“Ah’ve got six riders an’ a cook—an’ then there’s Maria’s kid.”

“Had you taken on any new hands just before bein’ shot at?”

“Well, lemme see—Uhuh, I did—a feller named Burriss. Hired ‘im ‘bout three weeks ‘fore it happened. Hell, Gus seems like such a nice boy—and a hard worker, too. Ah hate to think he’d try to do me in.”

“Let’s not convict him yet, Wheeler. The timin’ may just be a coincidence. But if he wasn’t at chuck with the other boys when the shootin’ occurred, I’d advise keepin’ a close eye on Mr. Burriss.”

Then after a thoughtful pause, Magruder conjectured, “You know, rustlers rarely have a reason to kill the ranchers they’re stealin’ from—so why, do you suppose, this bunch would wanna kill you? Perhaps that attempt on your life was perpetrated by someone other than the cattle thieves. Do you have any enemies?”

“Well, there’s folks aroun’ that don’t like me, Magruder. That’s fer shore. Ah’ve had run-ins with neighbors over boundary lines, water rights, an’ that kinda stuff. But nuthin’ bad enough ta be kilt over.”

“Well, let’s consider another angle. Who inherits your property in event of your death?”

“Why, Kim does, of course. She’s mah only heir. You ain’t suggestin’ my own daughter’d do such a thang, are you?” Wheeler asked stiffly.

“Certainly not, Wheeler, but someone may think if you were dead, they could manipulate your daughter in ways that would benefit them.”

“Hah! A lot you know about mah daughter. Thet gal’s got a haid on her shoulders. They’d have better luck tryin’ to hornswoggle me.”

“Perhaps some romeo thinks he could gain control of your ranch by marryin’ your daughter—if you were out of the way. Does Kim have any suitors who seem overly aggressive?”

“Naw! Not that Ah’ve noticed. There’s a lot of young bulls pawin’ the ground around her, but none that seem forceful. There air sons of a coupla town merchants that air sweet on her—an’ a whole passel of cowboys. An’ Burt Kellums follers her aroun’ like a puppy dog. But Kim ain’t sayin’. She’s the typical mysterious female. At a dance, she don’t play no fav’rites. She dances with all the fellers. Heh, heh! She gets a kick outta makin’ poor Burt squirm by flirtin’ with the other cowhands. Anyways, Ah try to keep out of it. Kim’s a smart girl, an’ in time, she’ll make up her own mind.”

“With this attempt on your life, Wheeler, how is it I wasn’t challenged by some of your hands as I was ridin’ in awhile ago?”

“Well, the punchers are busy with the sprang roundup an’ brandin’. They’re workin’ the range south of here—all ‘cept Burt who’s in town with Kim. But you were seen, Magruder, while ya’ was still a mile off. Ossie was the first to see you, an’ he come told me a rider was comin’—Ossie is Maria’s kid. An’ a coupla minutes later, Crabby, the cook, come in to tell me. When the fellers are away, like today, the rest of us keep a sharp lookout.”

Magruder had to smile as he asked, “Does the name ‘Crabby’ have somethin’ to do with your cook’s disposition?”

Wheeler grinned. “You got that right, Magruder. He’s the orneriest, out-cussin’est sonuvabitch Ah’ve ever seen! Rules his kitchen an’ dinin’ room with an’ iron hand. Heh, heh! He’s not averse to throwin’ a pot at a disrespectful cowboy. Only time Ah ever seen the ol’ bastard smile is when he’s talkin’ to Kim. An’ he’s the only one on the place, ‘cept Kim, that dares give me any back-sass. His last name’s Long—an’ damned if Ah ever heard the first. But he’s known all over southeast Texas as a great cook. Ah’d hate to tell you whut Ah pay ‘im, and if he quit, haffa mah hands would foller ‘im.”

“What was that you called the Indian boy—Ossie?”

“Yeah. He’s got an Apache name, that Ah can’t even pronounce, which means ‘Ocelot’, or ‘Wildcat’. Ah give ‘im that nickname.”

“Tell me, Wheeler, why’d you buy that Bascomb Mining property? I can’t see that it’s suitable for livestock or anything else.”

“Ah bought it so Ah can have some peace and quiet, by Gawd! When that mining operation was goin’ on, they were always settin’ off dynamite charges, so I was damned glad when they went broke and moved out. But then folks started comin’ up here an’ prac-tizin’ their shootin’, like you did. An’ with rustlin’ an’ other thievin’ goin’ on, hearin’ all that gunfire kept our nerves on edge. Kim put a notice

in the Huntsville Item a while back advisin' folks that we'd bought the land, an' that trespassers would not be welcome. An' that stopped most of that shootin' activity. Ah also wanna put up a sign at the turn-off to the quarry tellin' people to stay out, but Ah jus' ain't got aroun' to it."

"Gettin' back to the problem at hand, what was the size of your herd at last count?" queried Magruder.

"Las' summer we tallied near five thousand haid. That was jus' 'fore the thievin' started. Since then, they've been hittin' us ever' month or so. At first it was only five or six cows. Then it was eight or ten. An' now the bastards steal eighteen or twenty at a time. This is been goin' on 'bout nine months, an Ah figger we've lost mebbe a hunnerd'n fifty haid. They've also stole three of mah best cow ponies, an' that really burns mah butt!"

"Have you tried trackin' these rustlers—to see where they're drivin' the stock?"

"No, we ain't. We followed their trail a little ways jus' to see whut direction they're takin'—which's south. But Ah told mah boys not to try trackin' 'em. Men who'd do such brazen things are bound to be armed an' dangerous. Mah boys ain't gunmen, an' Ah don't wanna see any of 'em shot over a few cows. Ah pay taxes, an' Ah expect the law to take care of this problem!"

"You did the right thing. Rustlers will fight like rabid wolves when cornered. They know if captured, they'll likely be hung from the nearest tree. But tell me, how is it that Sam Mason, or the recently departed other deputy, hasn't done something about this before now?"

"Ha! That's a question Ah've been askin' mahself, Magruder.

"Hell, I've complained enough! The Sheriff an' me are old friends, but we've had some hard words over this. A month ago, Ah was over there gripin' to him, an' Colson sent his neighbor to go find Mason. An' when Mason showed up, things really got hot. Charlie accused Mason of layin' down on the job. An' Ah told him he was lazy sonuvabitch that didn't know whut the hell he was doin'! Oh, he really blew up at that. He swore at me an' said Ah was a blind ol' fool that didn't know a cow from a kangaroo. Then he stormed outta the house almost slammin' the door off its hinges. But all mah complainin's done no good. Ah'm still losin' stock."

"You know, it seems like a big risk the rustlers are taking compared to the money to be gained. How much can they expect to get for these cows, anyway?"

"Well, not very damn much, Ah'll tell ya! The bottom's dropped outta the cattle bizness. The market's flooded with beef. Ah usta get 28 or 30 dollars a haid. But with the millions of cattle that've been drove to eastern markets, prices are depressed. Nowadays, Ah'm lucky to get eighteen bucks. Ah'm barely breakin' even. Ah've given thought to buildin' a slaughter house, an' sellin' meat to butchershops. Thataway, Ah' might realize forty or fifty dollars a cow. But that's sucha nasty, smelly bizness. An' Ah'd play hell gettin' cowboys to do such work! They'd all quit.

"Ah've 'bout decided on sellin' off mah herd a little at a time, an' concentrate on raisin' quarter hawses. There'll always be a market for fine hawse flesh in Texas. Hey, you oughtta see mah stud hawse, Banjo. He's the gran'son of that champeen stallion Sam Houston brought from Tennessee. Ah've got some damn nice brood mares, too."

“Well, if the cattle market’s so lousy, how can the rustlers expect to make money on these capers?”

“Only by killin’ the animals an’ sellin’ the meat, Magruder. That’s the only thang that makes sense. Otherwise they’re only makin’ pocket change. Ya’ know, ever’ once in a while, when the winds outta the southwest—‘specially right after a rain—Ah get a faint whiff of a foul odor, like the stink of slaughter house. Ah’ll betchu there’s one down ther somewhur—an’ that may be whur my cows are goin’.”

“By the way, your daughter told me you had some evidence that might help identify the rustlers. What have you found?”

“Well, not very damn much, Magruder. But it’s somethin’, Ah guess. There’s a hill five miles south of hyar that’s called Chalk Mountain—‘bout three hunderd feet high. You likely saw it. It’s the highest point anywhur around. If you’ve gotta field glass, you can see ever’thang fer twenty miles in any direction from up there. Ah never thought nuthin’ ‘bout rustlers watchin’ us from that hill, till las’ week when Ah saw sunlight reflectin’ off somethin’ up there. An’ then it hit me like a kick in the butt. Those damned rustlers have been spyin’ on us from up there! That’s how they know when an’ whur to strike our herd without bein’ caught. Ah guess Ah’m gettin’ addled in mah old age. Ah shoulda thought of that when we lost th’ first cow, but I didn’t. Anyway, to git to the point, after Ah seen that reflection, Ah told Burt an’ one of the boys to ease up there, careful like, an’ check it out. An’ they found a coupla half-smoked cheroots an’ some boot prints an’ hoss tracks. The boot thet made them prints was real small an’ hadda little sharp heel, like a woman’s boot. The boys backtracked that hombre—if it was an hombre—down the far side of th’ hill, but when they came to that rocky ground south of here, they lost the trail. So the spy ‘pears to be a little bitty man, or a woman that smokes cigars. Haw! Haw! Haw!

“Now you tell me somethin’, Magruder. Whut makes you think rustlers had anything to do with the Gersemann killin’?”

“That’s just a wild hunch, Wheeler...might be nothin’ to it. But since there had been no similar holdups or killin’s in the county, it occurred to me that it might be some of the same thieves who’ve been stealin’ cows. I figure a coupla these bastards might’ve gotten impatient with two-bit crime, and decided to try makin’ a big score. Even if it was rustlers, we’ve no reason to believe it’s the same men who’ve been hittin’ you.”

“Well, there ain’t been no rustlin’ in these parts for years, an’ very little other crime, till recent. An’ if it was rustlers thet killed Gersemann, I’d bet on it bein’ some of the same bunch,” opined Wheeler.

“Perhaps so,” stated Magruder. “But please understand this, Wheeler: Any evidence I find that might lead to the capture of your cow thieves, will be turned over to the sheriff for his disposition. It’ll be his responsibility to catch the rustlers. I volunteered for this job for one reason only—and that was to catch Gersmann’s killers and recover the stolen money for his wife. As soon as that’s done, I’ll be on the road to Nacogdoches. My father’s in poor health, an’ I need to be gettin’ home.”

“Well, I shore as hell don’t like hearin’ thet, Magruder! Colson’s already short handed. How’s he gonna do anythang without yore help?”

“I don’t know. He’ll just have to hire others. I’m sorry, but you can’t count on me to solve your problem.”

From where he sat, Magruder had a view of the entrance drive through a large front window, and his sharp eyes suddenly detected movement on that road. Though the object was barely visible, he was satisfied it was a buggy carrying two people. Damn! That's gotta be Kim and Burt. When they get here, Kim's gonna start tellin' Wheeler about the shootout in town. I don't wanna listen to that—I gotta get outta here.

Magruder stood up abruptly saying, "Wheeler, I've got to be goin'. I've got business in town in a coupla hours, but I wanna ride up to your Chalk Mountain and look around first. I wished I'd thought to bring some binoculars with me."

"Ah've gotta extra field glass Ah'll loan you. One of us can pick it up next time we're in town."

Wheeler got up and retrieved the article from a large desk nearby, and handed it to Magruder. The two men shook hands, and then walked out the front door. Magruder donned his hat, untied his horse, and while he was in the act of mounting, Wheeler saw the buggy coming.

"Well, here comes that gallivantin' dotter of mine. Why doncha wait an' say hello, Magruder?"

After gaining the saddle, Magruder replied, "I had a talk with her in town—earlier this afternoon. I'd better run along. If I learn anything about the rustlers, I'll let you know. So long."

Then he touched Smoky with his spurs and the big gray leaped forward, and they were off at a gallop. As he rounded the house and headed south toward Chalk Mountain, he looked back to see Kim standing up in the buggy and waving. He waved back and then turned his attention ahead. But he had difficulty putting that devastating female out of his mind. He had been separated from the fairer sex for four years, and the urges Kim Wheeler aroused in him were hard to ignore.

About half way to the diminutive mountain, he hauled his horse to a standstill, then made use of the field glass. He scanned the whole hill and the terrain on both sides. He saw no life forms other than grazing cattle and a few flying birds. Considering that the rustlers he was seeking might also be killers, circumspection was definitely in order. He then continued on at a trot, stopping every half-mile or so to utilize the field glass to guardedly look about.

As Magruder ascended the north side of the hill, he studied the ground for any tell tale signs, but also kept a prudent watch for any movement above. The hill exhibited several white patches devoid of vegetation that reflected brightly in the sunlight. These limey deposits had obviously given the hill its name.

When he reached the summit, he found nothing more than what the Wagonwheel men had described. So he employed the field glass to carefully study the countryside all around.

It was a beautiful sunny spring afternoon, and Magruder had a magnificent view from the hilltop. Shadows from clouds in the sky moved over the landscape like ships on the ocean. He could easily see Huntsville, and could even make out a train on the H&GN line miles east of the town. But he gave his most careful attention to the south quadrant. That rocky zone Wheeler had talked about stood out clearly. It was a broad white band perhaps a half-mile wide between verdant greenery on either side, and extending several miles to the south. He saw nothing else that offered any clue to the mystery.

He briefly considered riding south past that rocky stretch to see if he could find tracks of the stolen cattle, but he immediately dismissed the idea. That effort could take several hours, and it was too late in the day to start such a venture. Besides, he knew from his Ranger days that tracking rustlers could be dangerous business. They would likely have the trail to their lair staked out by riflemen.

The countryside to the east seemed to hold no impediments that would prevent him from traveling directly to Huntsville from his present location, so Magruder decided to take this route rather than by the way he had come. And he did so, proceeding at a leisurely pace. After a pleasant perambulation in which he gained further familiarization with this part of the county, he arrived back in Huntsville a little after five.

Chapter IX

A Dangerous Game.

Magruder rode directly to the hotel stable, and turned his horse over to Bobby, the stable boy, leaving instructions for the animal to be rubbed down, watered and grained. He also told Bobby to care for his rifle, tipped the boy, and strolled down to Nora's for an early supper.

After he had eaten, Magruder walked over to the Sundown Saloon for an evening of poker. He found Jerry Malloy at his usual station behind the bar. When he saw him enter, Malloy held up a bottle of his best by way of asking if he cared for whiskey. Magruder smiled and nodded as he walked up to the bar.

"Yeah, Jerry, let me have a dollar glass of ol' John Barleycorn." As Malloy poured, Magruder looked around the barroom. There were two poker games in progress. Besides those playing, several men stood about observing the play, and half a dozen drinkers socialized at the bar. But George Menefee was not among those present. "Where is Menefee and his bunch? I thought they'd be here by now."

"I'm sure they'll be along shortly, Jacob," said Malloy, wearing his perpetual half-smile.

Magruder picked up his drink and took a satisfying swallow. "Do you have an old deck of cards around, Jerry? I think I'll play a little sol while I'm waiting."

Jerry produced a much-used deck, and Magruder, taking his drink, walked over and took a seat at an empty table. He shuffled the cards, then laid them out for a game of solitaire.

It wasn't long till George Menefee split the batwings as he walked in chewing on his unlit cigar. He sauntered over to the bar, propped a big foot on the brass rail, and greeted Jerry Malloy cordially. He had a resonant voice that reverberated throughout the establishment. Magruder smiled to himself remembering that Malloy referred to the man as a "loud-mouthed sonuvabitch".

George ordered whiskey, and passed the time talking and laughing with Malloy as he drank. After a bit, Malloy pointed out Magruder, telling Menefee that he had come to play. So when George finished his drink, he walked over to Magruder's table.

"Mind if I set down, Magruder?" He made no offer to shake hands, so Magruder kept his seat.

"Not at all. Have a seat. When're the others gonna get here?"

Menefee sat down across the table from Magruder. "They'll be along soon. I want you to know somethin', Magruder, I aim to win back what I lost to you last time—and that much more again. Haw! Haw! Haw!"

"That don't exactly jibe with my plans, Menefee," Magruder expressed with a smile.

Menefee then noticed the badge on Magruder's shirt. "Say, I didn't know you was a lawman. You ain't gonna arrest me if'n I win yore poke, are ya'?" he asked wearing a big toothy grin.

"No—not if you win it fairly," Magruder responded. That remark seemed to hit a nerve, and George's grin faded.

"Maybe I should take off the badge. I don't want to intimidate anyone. I'm just here as a private citizen to enjoy an evenin' of poker." And Magruder removed and pocketed his shield.

Over the next ten minutes, the other invited players arrived, one after the other. They each in turn spotted Menefee and Magruder, and strolled over, howdyed and sat down. After the last man was seated, Menefee introduced the four to Magruder. Daniel Smith looked like he might actually be a smithy, Gil Thompson had the appearance of a storekeeper. Frank Gillespie looked to be a prosperous farmer. And there wasn't much doubt about young Billy Boyd's line of work. He had the unmistakable attire and demeanor of a cowboy.

Smith and Thompson sat down on either side of Menefee, and Boyd and Gillespie seated themselves on either side of Magruder.

Menefee had brought over a new deck of cards from the bar, which he proceeded to open while saying, "Well, y'all know the rules—one hunnerd dollar buy-in, table-stakes, fifty cent ante, pot limit straight draw poker, an' no wild cards." As he shuffled the deck, he added, "Ever'budy put a hunnerd on th' table, an' we'll cut th' cards for the first deal." The money was produced, cards were cut, and Thompson became the first dealer. Menefee won the first hand, which though small, gave him great pleasure. Then Smith and Boyd won small pots in turn.

As Boyd raked in his winnings, Menefee said, grinning around his big cigar, "You ain't s'posed to win when yo're dealin', Billy."

"Like hell, you ain't!" returned Boyd with a smile.

Smith dealt the next hand, and Menefee opened for three bucks. Thompson and Gillespie both called, making twelve dollars in the pot. Magruder squeezed off his cards. He'd drawn a deuce and a four card straight—nine to the queen. He called and raised ten dollars. Boyd and Smith folded. Menefee and Thompson both called, and Gillespie dropped out. Menefee drew two cards and Thompson drew one. Magruder also drew one card. Menefee studied his cards a minute, finally

saying, "I'll check to the one-card draws." Thompson also checked, indicating he had not improved.

Magruder had decided he'd try to run a bluff if he busted his straight. But he made it. He drew a king to his formerly four-card straight. He figured Menefee for three of a kind, and Thompson for two pair, so he bet the limit—forty-two dollars.

Menefee glowered at him while chewing on his cigar. "I think yo're tryin' to buy it, Magruder. I remember yore tricks from last time. I call." And he threw his money in the pot.

Thompson said, "That beats me," and turned over his hand.

Magruder showed his hand. "King high straight, George."

"Goddammit!" Menefee exclaimed, "An' I had three aces goin' in." And he slammed his cards on the table.

"Next time I bet like that, George, I will be bluffin', but you won't know it," said Magruder with a tantalizing grin.

Menefee had no retort. He just grimaced and chewed on his cigar.

They had been playing over an hour, when a man wearing a black suit with a brocade vest and derby hat came through the doorway. He went to the bar, ordered whiskey, and then turned to survey the room. He spotted George and called out, "Hey, Menefee, have you ever learned how to play that game? Ha! Ha! Ha! How'd you like a chance to win back that two hundred I took off you last February? Heh! Heh!"

Menefee turned and regarded the newcomer with a forced smile. "Well, I'm su'prised to see you here. I figgered you'd be residin' in some coon-ass pokey somewhere, Henri."

"Who's the swarthy, mustachioed sonuvabitch?" whispered Billy Boyd.

Talking out of the side of his mouth, Menefee quietly replied, "That's Henri Beaumont. Claims to be a Louisiana planter. Comes through here ever' coupla months. He's purty slick with the cards. I've lost to him a time or two. Won't play unless five-card stud's permitted. That's his game. I'd sure like to take summa thet bastard's money! How'd y'all feel about playin' a little five-card stud along with our reg'lar game? Make it dealer's choice, but keep the other rules the same. Whatta y'all say?"

"If we're gonna start changin' the rules, George, I wanna raise the ante to a dollar," said Boyd.

"Suits me if the other fellers agree," returned Menefee.

No one at the table offered any objections.

Beaumont sauntered over with his drink, nodded to everyone, and offered, "I'd like to participate in your game, if you'd consider a little five-card stud in the play."

Menefee said, "We just took a vote, Beaumont, and we all decided we'd take ever' dollar you got an' split it b'tween us. Haw! Haw!" Menefee didn't realize how prophetic that remark would turn out to be. "Set down, and I'll outline the rules."

Beaumont pulled up a chair, sat down between Thompson and Gillespie, and put his money on the table. It was Smith's deal. He anted a dollar, as did everyone else, and then he dealt each player five cards face down. The game was draw. Smith also won the hand.

It was around 8:30 when Magruder lost his second good-size pot to Beaumont. Each loss had been at five-card stud on Beaumont's deal. And each time the Frenchman had bested Magruder's high pair with a pair of aces. Magruder became suspicious and began examining the cards for marks during the following hands. Sure enough, every ace he drew had a small, barely visible indentation on the backside in opposite right-hand corners which had likely been made by someone's thumb nail. Magruder's suspicion was confirmed. That sonuvabitch is dealin' seconds!

Dealing seconds was a trick whereby a cheat would furtively mark all aces and other special cards as they passed through his hands. It worked best with five-card stud. When dealing, the cheater would visually examine the backs of the cards as he dealt them, and when he came to a marked card he would cleverly pull that card back with the thumb of the hand holding the deck, and with his other hand, deal the second card to his opponents. Then when it became his turn, the deceiver would deal himself the marked card. With enough practice, a cheat might pull this off undetected.

So Magruder began surreptitiously watching Beaumont very closely. He had already determined Beaumont had a derringer in a vest pocket concealed beneath his coat. Only when in the act of dealing, did Beaumont's coat open sufficiently for him to see the unmistakable bulge of the little gun.

Magruder was the only one at the table who was openly wearing a pistol, but as he had remained seated when Beaumont joined the game, he doubted the Frenchman knew he was armed. He was fairly sure the other players were carrying no firearms. He didn't know if any of the others suspected foul play or not, but he had decided to expose Beaumont in the act, the next time he pulled his sly trick. Magruder inconspicuously moved his chair back a few inches, and casually turned his body slightly to the right. This was done to facilitate the drawing of his pistol. He suspected the Frenchman might go for his derringer when challenged.

During Beaumont's next deal, after he had given three cards to each of the other players, he dealt himself an ace face up. Magruder was about to call him, when Billy Boyd leaped to his feet, pointing an accusing finger, and screamed out, "You're dealin' seconds, you cheatin' bastard!"

Beaumont's dark face blanched, and for a long moment, he was stunned and immobile. Then with violent action, he whipped back his coat with an elbow, and the little derringer appeared in his hand as if by magic, aimed at Boyd. At the same instant, Magruder had drawn, and the big bore of his forty-five was looking Beaumont right in the eye. "Droppit Beaumont, or I'll shoot!" he yelled. "DROPPIT, I SAY!"

There were over forty men in the barroom at the time—talking and laughing with boisterous camaraderie—but the hubbub ceased following these stentorian shouts. Suddenly, one could have heard a pin drop, and all eyes were on Magruder and his fellow gamblers. For a few seconds, the action of the men at that table seemed frozen in time, like a photograph. Then Beaumont's hand slowly opened, and the derringer dropped on the table with a thud.

"Let's hang the crooked dog!" hollered Smith.

There were several assenting shouts from the crowd, who were all on their feet by then. Rude hands took hold of Beaumont and jerked him from his seat. The Frenchman began shaking as if with the ague, and perspiration popped out on his face. "Wait....please! I'll make amends...I've got money," he begged.

Magruder stood up and raised a deprecating left hand—his right still held the Colt. "Hold on, men. We can't hang this man just for cheatin' at poker."

"Who in hell says we can't?" countered Boyd. "That sonuvabitch wudda shot me if it hadn't been for you."

Some men in the crowd echoed Boyd's challenge. "Yeah, who says we can't hang him. Who's to stop us?"

"I say you can't," answered Magruder sternly. "I'm a Deputy Sheriff of Walker County, and I'm not gonna allow this man to be lynched."

"If yo're a depidy, whur's yore badge?" insisted someone else.

Magruder extracted the badge from his shirt pocket, and held it up for all to see.

"Whatta you aim to do with him, Magruder?" asked Menefee quietly.

Magruder wasn't sure the sheriff would approve of what he had in mind, but the sheriff wasn't here. He decided to defuse the situation by letting the gamblers who'd been cheated have a say in Beaumont's punishment.

"Well, I could arrest him, and put him in jail, then take him before the court to be sentenced. But I doubt he'd get over thirty days. The judge might even turn him loose with a fine. I propose that we take what money he's got on him, and split it between the poker players he cheated tonight. Then we'll run him out of town with a warning never to return—unless he wants to be guest of honor at a necktie party. What do y'all think of that?"

A dozen or more men in the crowd all started talking at once—some in protest and others approving. Magruder held up his hand again for silence. "Only the men who were gambling with Beaumont tonight get to vote on this—they're the aggrieved parties. And, other than me, that's Menefee, Thompson, Gillespie, Smith, and Boyd. If any of these men don't like my suggestion, let them propose something else. I'll consider anything reasonable—but me and this pistol says there's not gonna be any hangin'."

"Well, if we ain't gonna stretch his neck, I think he oughtta be horse whipped," grumbled Boyd. "But if he's got enough money on him, I might settle for your terms, Magruder."

The other four men nodded their assent.

"Alright. Somebody search him," ordered Magruder.

Thompson and Gillespie still held Beaumont by his arms, so Menefee got up and began searching the man. A fat wallet was found containing over a thousand dollars in large bills. He also had a gold watch and a few dollars in coin.

Aloud, Menefee counted the money in the wallet plus the coins, and the money Beaumont had on the table. "It all comes to thirteen hundred and forty seven dollars, and fifty cents, Magruder," George said. "He's purty well heeled."

"I figure he took me for about eighty bucks, Menefee," said Magruder. "So I'll take that back out of what's on the table, and then you five men can split the rest. That oughtta be about two fifty apiece. And I suggest that Billy get the gold watch since he had the displeasure of looking down the twin barrels of Mr. Beaumont's

little popgun. And I'd like to keep the derringer, if nobody objects. Whatta y'all think about the divvy?"

"Hell, it's alright with me, Magruder!" replied Menefee. "But it looks to me like yo're getting' the short end."

"I don't have any problem with that," said Boyd.

"I say fine!" echoed Smith.

The others nodded their approval.

Magruder then addressed the Frenchman, "Beaumont, I think you're getting' off light. If I hadn't been here tonight, you'd likely be decoratin' a tree by now. So I'm advisin' you to stay clear of Huntsville and Walker County in the future. If you show up here again, you know what to expect. Now, do you have anything to say?"

Beaumont's voice was low and halting, "I've got to travel...over two hundred miles...to get home...and you took every cent I had. How'm I gonna eat...and take care of my animal?"

Magruder considered the man's plight for a moment, then he took a double sawbuck from the eighty dollars Menefee had handed him, and stuffed it in one of Beaumont's vest pockets.

A howl of protest went up from the crowd. "Let the bastard starve!" someone shouted.

Then Magruder told Thompson and Gillespie, "Get the sonuvabitch out of here before I change my mind!"

These two, who were both big men, jerked the Frenchman around, and practically dragged him to the door. There, Thompson placed a big boot against Beaumont's posterior and violently kicked him out the door.

A roar of approval went up from the crowd, after which everyone, talking noisily, either headed for the bar or back to the tables to resume their former evening activities.

Magruder told Menefee and the others he was no longer interested in poker. He retrieved his money from the table, pocketed the derringer, and went to the bar. He wanted a stiff drink.

The bar was crowded. It seemed like most of the men wanted liquor after the excitement. Jerry was busy serving others, but after a moment, his brother noticed Magruder waiting. Marty picked up a glass, half filled it with their best whiskey, and placed it in front of Magruder saying, "It's on the house, Jacob. Great show!" And before Magruder could protest, Marty had moved away to serve others.

Magruder took his whiskey over to an empty table, and sat down heavily. Several men spoke to him or made comments, but he ignored them. He took a couple of big slugs of the potent liquid, and soon began to feel its effects as it warmed and relaxed him. Then, while taking an occasional swallow, he sat staring at the green felt-covered table while reflecting on the extraordinary events that had evolved during the few short days since his release from prison.

It was after nine when Magruder left the saloon. He was a little drunk, and he found the cool night air refreshing. He was glad to get away from the noise and the smoke of the barroom. And he found the quietude instilled by the silent, dim-

lighted street to be therapeutic. He went directly to his hotel room, removed his boots and outer garments, and crawled into bed without lighting his lamp.

Saturday:

Magruder awoke early the next morning, had not yet gotten out of bed, when someone rapped smartly on his door. It was not a familiar knock. He quickly got up, unlocked the door and opened it a crack. There was a young man standing there who he didn't recognize.

The young man smiled. "Mawnin' Mistah Magrudah. Sawry if Ah waked you up. Sher'ff Colson sent me ovah heah. I'm Pete McNary, the sher'ff's next door neighbah. He wants you to come ovah and join 'im for breakfas' at seven. Sez he's got some impo'tant bizness to talk to you 'bout."

Magruder opened the door a bit wider and extended his right hand, which McNary met with his own. "Nice to meet you, McNary, and thanks for bringin' the message. Please tell the Sheriff I'll be there."

"Okay, Mistah Magrudah. Ah'll tell 'im. An' good to meet you, too. See you latah."

As Magruder lit his lamp, the courthouse clock began tolling the hour. It gonged six times. He dressed and went downstairs to retrieve a pan of hot water. After shaving, he buckled on his gunbelt, picked up his hat and walked out, locking his door. He again descended the stairs and entered the hotel dining room, where he had a cup of coffee and read *The Huntsville Item* until 6:45. Then he went out to the stable to saddle Smoky. The big horse whinnied when Magruder spoke and opened his stall.

"Hello there, ol' hawse. How about a little exercise this mornin'?" Smoky stamped a fore foot and nodded his head as if he understood.

Magruder put on the bridle and led Smoky out of the stall. Then he threw on the blanket and saddle, and tightened the cinch. After being led out of the barn, the horse stood quietly as his master mounted. When he nudged him with his spurs, Smoky jumped and broke into a canter. Magruder had to hold a tight rein to keep him from running. After a few minutes however, the animal settled down to his smooth, single-footing trot.

Mrs. Colson opened the door at his knock, and invited him to come in. She called out to her husband, "Charley, Mr. Magruder is here."

The sheriff shouted back, "Come on in the dining room, Magruder." Mrs. Colson took his hat and pointed the way, and Magruder went in. Colson was already sitting at the dining table with a cup of coffee in his hand. He said, "Howdy, son. S'cuse me fer not gettin' up—I'm kinda stiff this mawnin'."

"Mornin', Sheriff. Sorry you're not feelin' pert."

Mrs. Colson said, "Sit there across from Charley, Mr. Magruder, and I'll get you some coffee. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

He expressed his thanks, and sat down. "Pete McNary came by the hotel, and said you needed to see me about somethin', Sheriff."

“That’s right, son. I’ve got a problem—which you can’t do a whole lot about, I reckon, but it’s something you need to know about. Sam Mason got in last night and come by the house. The pris’ner he was s’posed to bring back, escaped---due to his carelessness. I cussed him good for lettin’ that happen. Well, that made him mad. Then I got mad. An’ we had some strong words. Fine’ly, I told him about the Gersemann murder, an’ that I’d engaged you to catch the killers. An’ I told him that yo’re in charge of that case, an’ he was not to interfere. Then he yelled at me, that he was either gonna take charge or quit. An’ I yelled right back he could forget about quittin’, ‘cause he was fired. Then he threw his badge down on the floor and stormed out of the house.”

Magruder was surprised by the turn of events. “What are you gonna do about a full time deputy, Sheriff? You’re already short handed.”

“I’m gonna hire Clint Foster. He’s a young deputy down in Montgomery County. His folks live here, ya know. His daddy told me months ago that Clint would like to move back home an’ work for me, but only if Mason left. He balks at workin’ with Mason. For a while now I’ve been studyin’ ‘bout lettin’ Mason go an’ hirin’ Foster, ‘cause Sam’s been a problem for a long time. The only reason I hadn’t dunnit is ‘cause Clint’s pretty young, and kinda shy on experience. But what happened last night decided ever’thang for me. I’ll get word to the boy through his daddy that he’s hired, an’ for him to get on up here right away.”

“I wasn’t aware that Mason was a problem, Sheriff. What’s he been doin’ that’s caused trouble?”

“Well, he’s the kind that can’t handle authority without abusin’ it. He’s too damn quick with his fists an’ his gun! He’s beat up and pistol whipped a number of men around town for minor infractions like drunkenness and fightin’. Doc Wilson, who patched up these fellers, says Mason’s a menace who sooner or later’s gonna kill somebody with his brutality.”

Colson hesitated, as if weighing his next words, then continued, “Mason was a lawman up in Fort Worth before comin’ to Huntsville. After I’d hired him, I discovered he’d been fired from that job because of his ruthless behavior. I shudda discharged him soon as I found that out—but I didn’t. I needed his help at the time. So I just warned him not to repeat his former mistakes, an’ I kept him on hopin’ ever’thang would work out. An’ he did alright for awhile, but after a few months, he fell back into his ol’ habits.”

Mrs. Colson then entered the room carrying an armload of platters. The savory aroma made Magruder’s mouth water. “Now y’all eat your breakfast before it gets cold—I’ve already had mine,” she said with a warm smile.

“If you go away hungry, son, it’ll be yore own fault,” declared Colson.

There were ample portions of eggs, sausage, grits and hot biscuits, along with fresh-churned butter and wild honey. Both men filled their plates and began eating hungrily.

Talking around a mouthful of food, Colson continued about Mason. “Some of the preachers and the snooty church crowd condone Mason’s tactics. They say reducin’ drunkenness and fightin’ makes the town more respectable. But the merchants an’ saloon keepers don’t like it worth a damn! They think Mason has driven away business. They say some folks avoid Huntsville because of Mason’s mean reputation. Jerry Malloy swears there’re a lotta cowboys an’ farmers who

usta come here to drink an' gamble an' buy their supplies, who now go to Riverside or New Waverly to spend their money."

Magruder contemplated Colson's words. "What do you think Mason will do now, Sheriff?"

"Well, I hope he leaves Huntsville. Mebbe he'll go back to Leon County where he come from—but I really don't know. I jus' hope he don't stay aroun' here an' try to cause any trouble. He's jus' the kind of vengeful bastard to do somethin' like that! If he tries to start anythin' with you, don't let him bait you inta a fistfight. He's six foot four, strong as a bull, and pro'bly outweighs you fifty pounds. Jus' remember, if you get crippled up, you won't be able to ketch those killers and recover Mrs. Gersemann's money."

"Well, I'll try to avoid a fight with him, Sheriff, but if he forces the issue, there's only one other way I know to stop him."

"I know that, son, an' there ain't no doubt about you beatin' him to a gun. I seen him in a gunfight once, an' he ain't nowhere in yore class when it comes to gunplay. But if it comes to that, I hope you can avoid killin' him."

Magruder grimaced. "Damn! Looks like I bit off a lot more than I bargained for when I volunteered for this job. I only wanted to find Gersemann's killers an' recover the stolen money for his wife. Here I've already been involved in two gunfights, an' now I've got to contend with a rogue grizzly like Mason. Seems like every day I'm gettin' more entangled in problems completely unrelated to the Gersemann case."

"Well, I reckon you are, son," Colson expressed seriously, "but since you've come this far, I hope you'll see it through. I'll really be in a bind if you pull out on me now."

"Alright, Sheriff, I agree to stick long enough to catch Gersemann's killers and recover the stolen money, but that's it! Then I'm goin' home. I am determined not to get bogged down in any other matters. You have got to hire more help."

Mrs. Colson came in again and refilled their coffee cups, then asked, "Can I get y'all somethin' else?"

Magruder replied, "No ma'am, not for me. Everything tastes wonderful, Mrs. Colson. It reminds me of home."

Colson responded, "I'm fine too, Martha. Why don't you set down an' join us? We're 'bout through talkin' bizness."

"Thank you, Charley, I will." She sat down and poured a cup of coffee for herself.

Magruder asked, "Does Les Willard know about Mason bein' fired?"

"Yeah, I sent word over by McNary. I don't think Mason's got any personal stuff at the jail, but Les needed to be told anyway."

"Sheriff, how is it McNary is always available when you need someone to run an errand? Doesn't he have some kind of a job?"

"Oh yeah, he does. Pete and his daddy live next door. They're cabinet makers, and they've got a shop behind their house. A coupla years ago, Pete was tryin' to break an ornery hawse, and come near bein' dragged to death when he got his foot caught in a stirrup. I just happened to walk out the front door with my rifle when that hawse come tearin' down the road a'draggin' Pete. I quickly chambered a

round, an' shot the hawse. Pete an' his daddy credit me with savin' the boy's life—an' they insist on helpin' me any way they can. We've got a little bell on our backporch, an' when I need him, Martha just rings the bell. Their help has really been a God-send since I got so stove-up with this arthritis."

As he was taking a sip of coffee, Magruder became aware of Mrs. Colson staring at him with a strange expression on her face. When she realized he had noticed, she smiled self-consciously and looked away. As it had made him feel somewhat uncomfortable, Magruder asked, "Did I say something out of order, Mrs. Colson?"

"Oh no, Mr. Magruder—not at all. Please forgive me for staring. It's just that you favor our son, Chuck, so very much in looks as well as manners. Chuck was killed ten years ago fightin' for the Confederacy."

The sheriff added, "It's true, Magruder. I noticed it the first time I laid eyes on you. If Chuck had lived, he'd be a bit older'n you. But you have his eyes, an' the same quiet way of speakin'."

Chapter X

Assassins.

After leaving the Colsons, Magruder rode back to the hotel stables. As he planned to make his rounds of the stores and saloons on foot he didn't need a mount. He turned Smoky over to the stable boy, and then went back to his room. He wanted a pencil and writing tablet to make notes of his visits.

He was only in his room a few minutes when there came a light tap on his door. He smiled thinking it was Hilda Gersemann. Then he got up quickly and opened the door, and was surprised to find little Timmy Waters standing there.

"Why hi, Timmy. Do you have some news for me?"

"Yessir, I got lotts news."

"Well, come in then and tell me about it, partner."

He invited Timmy to sit in the only chair, while he removed his uncomfortable gunbelt, and sat down on the bed. "Go on, Timmy—tell what you've found out."

"Well, this mornin', I was playin' over in ol' man Johnson's barn, an'..."

Magruder interrupted. "I take it, Mr. Johnson don't mind you playin' in his barn."

"Oh, ol' man...uh, I mean Mistah Johnson's dead. He burnt up in his house a long time ago. Nobody lives at that place no more."

"Timmy, is that the place out on the Pine Prairie road with an old barn near a burned-out cabin?"

"Yessir, that's the place."

"Okay—go on, Timmy. What'd you find out?"

"Awright. Well, this mornin' I was up in the loft wallerin' aroun' in the hay, when I hear somebody comin'. I got up quick an' looked through a knothole in the wall,

an' I see Willy Simms an' Tom Bragg a'comin' a'cross th' yard a'talkin' an' a'laffin'. Well, I laid down an' got real quiet so's they won't hear me up there."

"Why is it you didn't want them to hear you, Timmy?"

"Cuz Willy likes to pull my ears an' twist my nose ever' time he ketches me."

"Well, maybe I can do somethin' about that, Timmy. Go ahead now, tell me the news."

"Well, they come in the barn an' I'm watchin' 'em through a crack in the boards. An' I see 'em start diggin' aroun' in a feed-trough fulla hay. An' Tom pulls out a bottle of likker. Willy's paw makes corn whiskey, ya know? So's they sits down an' start drinkin' that likker. An' Tom's a'raggin' Willy 'bout his big swoll-up nose. Willy's nose is big an' red as a ripe termater. Tom keeps teasin' him 'bout somebody punchin' him in the snoot, but Willy swears he jus' fell down."

Magruder was beginning to believe that Timmy just had an amusing incident to relate rather than any news about the outlaws, but he decided to listen awhile longer to the little tyke's tale.

Timmy went on. "Then they starts talkin' 'bout gurls. Tom ask Willy who he's gonna take to the Sattidy dance, an' Willy sez he don' know. Tom sez he's gonna take Mary Lou Skinner. An' starts tellin' Willy how hot she is an' how he's always gettin' in her drawers. I can't figger out why a feller'd wanna put on girl clothes. Can you?"

Magruder smiled at that, and told Timmy to go on with his story. "Well, ever once in a while, Tom would start raggin' Willy agin 'bout his swoll-up nose. He kept sayin', 'I know somebody poked ya in th' snoot—why doncha tell who done it?' 'Course, all this time they're swiggin' on thet bottle o' likker, an' I ken tell they're gettin' a little drunk. Fine'ly Willy sez, 'Awright, dammit, I'll tell ya. That goddamn cousin o' mine, Cal Hicks, punched me in the nose!' An' Tom sez, 'Why'd he do thet?'. An' Willy starts tellin' him."

Magruder said, "Timmy, I've got to go somewhere in a little while. I thought you had somethin' to tell me about the outlaws."

Timmy exclaimed, "I do! I do! I'm comin' to thet."

"Oh, alright. Go ahead."

"Willy said thet night b'fore las', Cal come by their house after dark to talk to Willy's paw. His paw tol' Willy an' his mama to go to bed 'cause they had bizness to talk about. Willy said he went inta his room an' blowed out the lamp but lef' the door open a crack so's he ken hear. He said his paw got a coupla glasses an' a bottle o' likker, an' they starts drinkin' an' a'talkin. He said they talked about hawses fer awhile, an' fine'ly Cal sez, 'Uncle Bill, I come to buy that brace of pistols you got.'"

Up to that point, Magruder had been half reclining on the bed and only half listening to Timmy's tale, but now he sat up keenly interested. "What about those pistols, Timmy?"

"Well, Willy said his paw tol' Cal, 'I tol' you b'fore thet it'll take \$300 to buy them guns. They're plated with real silver an' gold. I took 'em off a Yankee officer I kilt at the battle of Shiloh. Now, whur's a bum like you gonna get \$300? I bet you ain't got 30 dollars.' Then Willy sez Cal pulled out a roll of bills thet'd choke a cow. An' Willy's paw almost fell outta his chair, an' he yelled, 'Why you sonuvabitch! Yore th' one that robbed an' kilt that rich merchant, aintchu?' An' Cal said, 'Thet damn

greaser did th' shootin', not me.' Then Willy's paw tol' him, 'Don't make no nevermind, they'll stretch yore neck jus' the same.' An' Cal said, 'They gotta ketch me first—'sides, they don't know who dunnit---nobody seen us.' Then Willy's paw tol' him, 'Yore wrong 'bout thet. Thet merchant's wife was in the waggin, and she seen ya'. She's tol' the law whut y'all look like, but they ain't yet figgered who you air.' Then Cal said, 'You ain't gonna tell 'em, air ya?' An' Willy sez his paw tol' him, 'No, I ain't gonna turn in my sister's only kid, even if he is a damn fool. But I'd 'vise ya' to stay clear of Huntsville---they'll be lookin' fer ya'. An' I'll tell ya somethin' else—the price of them pistols just went up. Ever'budy in the county knows the killers got \$15,000 in thet holdup, so now them pistols are gonna cost ya' a flat 1,000 bucks. You ken call it insurance.' Willy said Cal squealed like a pig caught under a gate, but his paw wouldn't budge. So Cal fine'ly forked over the 1,000 bucks, an' Willy said his paw got up an' hobbled over to the closet an' got the guns."

"How come Mr. Simms hobbles—is he crippled?" asked Magruder.

"Yeah, he's got a peg leg 'cause whut happened to him in the war."

Magruder suspected that Timmy might be embellishing this story a bit, so he asked, "Timmy, are you sure you got all this straight? How can you remember everything Willy said?"

"'Cause I gotta good mem'ry," Timmy replied indignantly. "I 'member ever'thang I see an' hear."

"Okay, Timmy, I believe you. Now, tell me the rest of it. You haven't told me why Willy got punched in the nose."

"Awright. Well, Willy said, 'Fore Cal lef', he ast Willy's paw if he knowed whur the woman is that saw the robb'ry an' killin', an' Willy's paw said he don't."

This inquiry by Hicks alarmed Magruder. It bore evil intent. He declared, "Tell me the rest, Timmy."

"Okay, Then Willy tells Tom thet he crawled out a winder an' caught Cal outside 'fore he could get on his hawse an' leave. An' Willy said he tol' Cal thet he knowed whur the merchant's wife was, an' even knowed her name. He toll Cal, 'Fer a hunnerd dollars, I'll tell ya'.' An' Cal sez, 'Okay, tell me an' I'll give you the hunnerd.' So Willy tells Cal her name is Hilda Gersemann, an' she's stayin' at the Eutaw House in room #211. Then Willy said Cal yelled at him, 'You little bastard! You were listenin' to our palaver, wern'cha? If'n you ever breathe anythang 'bout whut you heard tonight, I'll wring yore scrawny neck.' Then Willy said Cal knocked him down, an' called him a buncha more dirty names, an' said, 'An' another thang—if'n you ever try to squeeze me fer money agin, I'll blow whut little brains you got all over th' scen'ry.' Then Cal got on his hawse an' rode off, an' never gave Willy no money.

"Then Willy ast Tom, 'Whut's scen'ry, anyhow?' An' Tom said, 'Gawd, Willy, you shore air dumb. Scen'ry is fields an' trees, an' ever' thang you see whurever you be.' An' Willy said, 'I still don't get it.' An' Tom said, 'Why is it I ain't su'prised?'"

But Magruder didn't hear those last few remarks, he had gotten up, retrieved his gunbelt from the bedpost, and began strapping it on. A fire of rage was burning in his breast. He was going to force Willy Simms to disclose where Cal Hicks could be found, even if he had to beat it out of him.

Magruder inspected the cylinder of the Colt to check the loads, which was his habit when he anticipated action. Timmy sat there wide-eyed and watching as Magruder unconsciously twirled the pistol and shoved the weapon back into the holster.

Timmy asked, "Air you gonna shoot somebody now?"

"It may come to that, Timmy. I don't know. I'll try to arrest 'em first. If that don't work—well, we'll see. Timmy, you did a great job bringin' me that information. What you've told me could save Mrs. Gersemann's life. Now it's very important that you do not tell anyone else what you saw and heard today. Understand?"

Timmy nodded vigorously still looking awed. Then Magruder extracted a silver dollar from his pocket and handed it to Timmy. "Here you are, partner—you've earned it. Now, don't spend all that on candy. And remember what I told you about keepin' this information secret. Alright? Now, you run along, 'cause I've got things to do."

After locking his door, Magruder walked quickly downstairs and over to the hotel desk. Karl Swartz had just finished registering a man and his wife.

As the couple walked away from the desk, Swartz smiled and asked, "Can I do somethin' for you, Mr. Magruder?"

"Yeah. You can tell me where I can find Willy Simms," Magruder said gruffly.

"I don't know, Mr. Magruder. He's no longer employed here. You might find him at his parent's place. They've got a small farm northeast of town—somewhere off the Lufkin road—I don't know just where. I'll ask around, if it's important."

"Thanks, Karl—it is. And please excuse my abruptness—I didn't mean to bite your head off."

As Magruder walked out of the hotel he pondered his problem. Damn! I dismissed Timmy too soon. I'll bet that little rascal knows where the Simms place is.

Magruder decided he might as well go on with his original plan, and then try to locate the Simms place on the following day. So he spent the rest of the morning and all of the afternoon making the rounds of Huntsville's many stores and taverns. He was following Colson's suggestion that he enlist the aid of most of the town merchants and tavern keepers in maintaining a watch for the killers. Whereas he had originally worked undercover, and recruited the help of only a few trusted citizens, the advantage of secrecy had been lost as a result of his gunfights. Most of the townfolk now knew he was a lawman, nevertheless he wore his deputy badge during these contacts to encourage cooperation.

The purpose of his visit was explained to each proprietor. They were given a description of the killers and their mounts, and were requested to notify him or the Sheriff immediately if they saw or heard anything which might be relevant to the Gersemann case. In each case, Magruder carefully observed the reaction of these men to his request for assistance. Judging by their nervous fluster, he concluded that two of these merchants were dishonest themselves, and possibly in cahoots with the rustlers or the killers. He made notes on the ones he distrusted with plans to inform the Sheriff.

The last place he stopped that evening was at the Sundown Saloon. He was tired and he needed a bracer. It was a little after six when Magruder walked through the swinging doors. Being a Saturday, the place was filled with customers

engaged in drinking and gambling, accompanied by boisterous laughter and conversation. Jerry Malloy and his brother were both busy behind the bar. Jerry spotted Magruder almost immediately and motioned him over.

Jerry leaned over the bar and spoke in a low voice, "Jacob, the news spread like wildfire 'bout Mason gettin' fired last night, and most folks are damned glad about it! Anyway, in case you don't know him by sight, that's Mason with one of his cronies over at that corner table to your left. 'Don't look!' His friend is pointing you out to Mason right now. You should be able to see them in the mirror."

The Sundown Saloon consisted of a relatively long room having two rows of tables running parallel to the wall opposite the bar, with an eight-foot wide corridor between the tables and bar. The bar, with its traditional mirror, ran almost the full length of the room.

Without moving his head, Magruder was able to glance in the bar mirror, and see the reflection of a big man sitting with a smaller one at the corner table indicated. "Thanks, Jerry. I wondered when I'd have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Mason."

"Mason's been here about an hour, Jacob, and he's had just enough booze to make him dangerous. You want to keep an eye on him. I know that sonuvabitch, and he'll likely try to beat your head in for takin' his job!" While Jerry talked, he nonchalantly poured a glass of whiskey for Magruder.

He and Malloy chatted about other things while Magruder sipped his whiskey. And every few seconds Magruder would glance in the mirror to see what Mason was doing.

When Magruder had about finished his drink, Malloy whispered, "Uh-oh! Here he comes!"

Mason had gotten up and was walking toward them. However, his eyes seemed to be focused on the entrance doorway that was to Magruder's right. It appeared he might be leaving. As it would be necessary for Mason to pass behind him in order to go out, Magruder surreptitiously watched his movements in the mirror.

Just as Mason passed behind, he suddenly pivoted on his left foot and swung a mighty ham-sized right fist at Magruder's head. Magruder quickly leaned over the bar, and the powerful blow, which might have knocked him senseless, missed his head a scant inch. Having missed his intended target, the momentum behind Mason's blow threw him off balance, affording Magruder the opportunity to stick out a foot and trip him. Mason sprawled so heavily on the board floor, that it shook the room and rattled bottles behind the bar.

Muffled laughter ran through the crowd, adding to Mason's discomfort and infuriating him. He got awkwardly to his feet, his face contorted and purple with rage. His right hand hovered menacingly near the butt of his sixgun. He glared venomously at Magruder and hissed, "I'll kill ya for that!"

Magruder was angry, but he wanted to avoid a gunfight. He made a lightning fast draw and had the ex-deputy covered before he could even touch his weapon. "Drop your gunbelt, Mason! And hurry up about it!" he shouted.

"And what if I don't? You ain't gonna shoot me," he snarled.

"You think not? I'll damn well cripple you, if you don't drop that gunbelt! AND DO IT NOW!" yelled Magruder.

The room was now as quiet as a morgue. Mason grudgingly unbuckled his heavy gunbelt and let it fall to the floor with a thud.

“You can pick up your gun tomorrow at the jail—after you’ve had time to sober up and cool off,” said Magruder.

He went on, “Mason, you’re nothing but a sadistic bully, and a disgrace to the badge you wore. Colson was a fool to keep you on after discovering your rotten reputation. It’s renegades like you that give the law a bad name. Now, since you’ve got no legitimate reason to stay in Huntsville, I’m advisin’ you to get out! Go crawl back under whatever rock you slithered out from. And one more thing—if you ever brace me again—I’ll kill ya! Now, GET!”

Mason’s face was almost black with pent up fury as he stormed out of the saloon almost knocking the batwing doors off their hinges. The previously quiet saloon suddenly exploded with the sound of applause and shouts from the occupants.

Magruder sheathed his weapon, and stepped over and picked up Mason’s gunbelt.

Speaking loudly above all the ruckus, Malloy declared, “You’re gonna have to kill that bastard, Jacob! And I think you made a mistake by not doin’ it just now. He’s not gonna cut an’ run—his pride won’t let him. You’ve just humiliated him before dozens of men who used to fear him. So you’d better walk careful, my friend, or you’ll get shot in the back. Mason will never give you an even break after seein’ you draw.”

Magruder nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind, Jerry. By the way, what happened to Mason’s pal? I see that corner table’s empty.”

“He eased out the back door after Mason left. That was Ike Barlow. He’s a shifty-eyed little bastard! Never liked him. Hails from Mason’s old stompin’ grounds somewhere around Normangee. He’s got a little spread a few mile south of town.”

Magruder glanced at the clock behind the bar and noted it read 6:40. As he was supposed to join Brian Henders for dinner at seven, he said, “I’ve gotta run along, Jerry. The Warden promised to buy me a steak over at the Globe Tavern tonight.” He laid Mason’s gunbelt on the bar. “How about puttin’ this behind the bar, and I’ll pick it up later?”

Jerry made a wry face. “Holdin’ Mason’s gun makes me nervous, Jacob. Tell you what—I’ll have our swamper run it over to the jail, and leave it with Willard.”

“That’s even better. It’ll save me the trouble. Thanks. Now I better run. Don’t wanna miss that steak.”

“Okay—hope you enjoy it. Remember what I said about Mason. Be damned careful, my friend.”

Magruder smiled. “I’ll do that. See ya later.” And he walked out.

When Magruder arrived at the tavern, Henders was already there. He was standing at the bar chatting amiably with the proprietor. There were several other patrons there also eating and drinking. When Henders saw Magruder come in, he smiled and quickly walked over to shake hands. Then he led him over to a table on which there was already a bottle of brandy and two glasses.

“Sit down, Jacob, and have a glass of this good brandy. I prefer it to the hard stuff, myself.”

“Thanks, Warden.”

“Please call me Brian. I prefer not to be addressed as Warden when away from the facility,” he expressed with a smile.

Magruder grinned. “Alright, Brian it is.”

They both sat down and Henders poured brandy in each glass. Then he held his glass aloft and said, “I want to propose a toast to the new deputy sheriff of Walker County. I’ve heard all about your good deeds, Jacob, and I want to congratulate you.”

Magruder picked up his glass and touched it to that of Henders.

“Thanks, Brian, but when I volunteered to help Mrs. Gersemann, I never expected to get mixed up in all these other matters.”

After they had been drinking and making idle conversation for several minutes, Magruder said, “You know, I can tell you’re southern, but your drawl’s not Texan. Where do you hail from, Brian?”

“I’m from Alabama, Jacob. Born and raised in Montgomery. My family was well off before the war, but the damned Yankee carpetbaggers took everything. We owned a bank, two saw mills and several thousand acre of timberland, but it was all confiscated. When I came home after being separated, I found my parents both dead—apparently from natural causes—and soon after learned that my son and my only brother had been killed in the fighting. My wife had died before the war, so I had nothing left. No family...no property...absolutely nothing.”

“I’m sorry, Brian,” he said. “I’ve heard similar stories.” Seeing Henders’ sad expression, he sought to change the subject.

“Well, tell me this, how did you happened to be appointed Warden of the Huntsville Prison?”

“Well, a friend, and a nephew of Governor Coke recommended me. David Coke and I served together in the Confederate Army. We first met shortly before the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, which we both participated in. I was a major serving under General Joseph Johnston, and David was a lieutenant who joined our command as part of a replacement detachment. Later we both ended up as commander and adjutant at Andersonville Prison.”

“Andersonville? I’ve heard about that hell-hole,” exclaimed Magruder. “How’d you happened to draw that duty?”

“Well, it’s kind of a long story, but I’ll try to make it brief.”

“A few months after the Kennesaw fight, David and I were in the Battle of Atlanta---serving under Genereal Hood at that time. Although Johnston had thoroughly trounced Sherman at Kennesaw Mountain, President Davis thought him too cautious, and had replaced him with John Hood. Well, Sherman’s forces drove our outfit south back into Atlanta, where Hood tried to make a stand, but Sherman laid seige to the city and blocked all railroads coming into the city, cutting off our provisions. This left us in an untenable position. So Hood made the decision to vacate the city. On a dark night in a driving rain, our forces slipped out of Atlanta first going south, then turning west. Hood figured he coundn’t beat

Sherman's army under the circumstances, so he planned to outflank him and drive north toward Tennessee making hit-and-run raids on Sherman's railroad supply lines and communications with Chattanooga."

By this time the men had finished their first bottle, so Henders waved at the waiter and ordered more brandy. After it was delivered, he poured more drink in Magruder's glass and his own, then continued his story.

"Before turning north, Hood received intelligence about pro-northern guerrillas raiding towns in southern Georgia killing, looting, and otherwise harrasing the populace. So he ordered me to take thirty men of cavalry and one other officer to locate these brigands and eliminate them. By this time, David had shown himself to be an able officer, so I chose him to accompany me. In camp one night during this search and destroy mission, David revealed that his father had attended the University of Alabama—my old alma mater. This kinda established a bond between us.

"Well, it took us the better part of a month to run the guerrillas down and dispense with them. And by that time, we had ended up close to Andersonville. There, we ran into a supply party from the prison out searching for food. They informed us that the commanding officer had just died of pneumonia, and there was no other officer to take command. The non-coms didn't know what to do. So I made the decision to go to Andersonville and take command until a suitable replacement could be found. Except for David, I sent the rest of my detachment north to join Hood and report what had transpired. God! I didn't have any idea what I was getting into. No replacement ever came, and what followed was seven months of pure hell!"

"I've heard the conditions there were terrible," said Magruder.

"You've got no idea. There were close to 30,000 men packed into a stockade of less than seventeen acres. They were dying like flies, from dysentery, infectious diseases and starvation. And the sanitary conditions were unbelievable. I did what I could to alleviate the agony, but it wasn't much. In a few weeks, I became the most hated man in southern Georgia. I sent search parties out to all farms and towns within a twenty-mile radius appropriating farm animals, food crops, and supplies. And the people hated me for it. They barely had enough to support themselves. And our hunting parties practically wiped out all the wild game in that part of the country. But it made little difference. Prisoners were still starving. In early '65 I received word that the North and South were trying to arrange a prisoner exchange, but it never happened. Too much distrust on both sides. Lord, I don't think I could have maintained my sanity if the war had lasted another month. I still have nightmares about it.

"After Lee's surrender, and my discharge, I went home to Alabama to find nothing left, so I drifted west, settling in New Orleans for a while working in a bank, but finally moving on to Texas. I eventually arrived in Fort Worth where David lived. He had given me his home address before we parted, so I was able to locate him."

"Now you tell me, Jacob, what caused you to join the Ranger service?"

“Well, alright, if you really want to know. Let’s see—where shall I begin?”

“In the fall of ’56 I got booted out of law school, and a year or so later John Ford came to visit us at our home near Nacogdoches. He stayed with us...”

Henders interrupted. “You were expelled from law school?” he asked with a grin.

Magruder smiled. “That’s right, I was. But that’s another story.”

“Pardon my interruption, Jacob. Go on.”

“Okay. Well, John Ford stayed with us a week before goin’ on to Austin. He’d been chosen to head up the Texas Rangers by Hardin Runnels, who had just been elected Governor. Texans on the western frontier had suffered greatly in loss of life and property due to depredations by Comanches; and the previous Governor, Elisha Pease, had fallen into disfavor due to his half-hearted efforts to provide protection from these raiders. Runnels was elected on his promise to thoroughly chastise the hostiles and secure the frontier. And to fulfill his promise, Runnels needed a man of singular experience and ability. He knew of only one man with the qualifications and courage to take on such a formidable task, and that was John Salmon Ford.

“Besides being a medical doctor, lawyer, and journalist, John Ford was a man of immense energy and a born leader. He wasn’t big in stature, standing only five feet eight in his riding boots, but he projected a powerful presence. A typical Celt, he loved a fight, and was quick with knife or gun. He was a Texan of the old school—a legend in his own time.”

“How is it Ford came to visit your folks in Nacogdoches?” inquired Henders.

“He’s a relative. John Ford and my mother are first cousins. And he and my family all moved to Texas from Tennessee the same year. That was in ’36.”

As Magruder paused to take a drink from his glass, Henders poured more brandy in his own while saying, “Please continue, Jacob.”

“Alright. Well, before Ford left for Austin, I had a chance to speak with him alone about joining the Ranger service. I was excited by the idea of fighting wild Indians. Before he’d consider it, I had to demonstrate that I was an expert rider an’ skilled with firearms. I obviously impressed him for he told me what equipment I would need, other than guns an’ a good mount, an’ he said I could expect a letter of appointment in the next few weeks.

“In mid February of ’58, I received the letter I was expectin’. It directed me to meet Ford at his camp on Pecan Bayou in Brown County on or about the first of March. That’s 250 miles, more or less, west of Nacogdoches.”

“Two hundred and fifty miles—that’s quite a ride,” observed Henders.

Magruder nodded and went on. “I had previously acquired an extra .44 caliber Walker-Colt pistol, a bedroll, saddle bags, canteen an’ other equipment an’ had them all hidden away in the barn. Cameron Ford, my uncle—an’ a cousin of John’s—was stayin’ with us at the time, an’ he gave me his .50 caliber Sharps rifle. He was the only other one who knew of my intentions.

“I waited a week before tellin’ my parents about joinin’ the Rangers. Dad accepted it stoically as I knew he would, but my mother broke down and cried. I hated to cause her grief, but I was determined to go. Dad told me I should pack up and leave at once, an’ I left home that afternoon.

“Dad had given me the pick of the horses, and I chose a big black gelding named ‘Sugarfoot’. He had an ornery disposition, but he was the strongest an’

swiftest of all our thoroughbreds. It took me five days gettin' to Brown County and findin' Ford's camp. I arrived there on the third of March."

By this time, the waiter had brought another pint of brandy over and Henders was filling their glasses. Magruder noticed the warden's face had become flushed, and he was still sober enough to realize his own had also. The waiter then asked if they were ready to order supper, and Henders responded in the affirmative.

"Yes. Bring us the two biggest and best steaks in the house, two large baked potatoes, lots of that wonderful home-made bread, and plenty of butter."

Magruder smiled. He hadn't expected Henders to order for the both of them, but he couldn't fault the selection.

"How'd y'all like your steaks cooked, gents?"

"Why, rare of course. Would a Texan eat it any other way?" replied Henders with a lopsided grin.

Magruder chuckled, and nodded to the waiter.

Then Henders said, "Now, Jacob, tell me 'bout...(hic), excuse me...the Indian fighting. That sounds ...uh, really exciting."

Magruder grinned, and took a sip of brandy. "Very well, if you wish."

"As mentioned before, I joined John Ford at his camp on Pecan Bayou on March third. By mid March, 102 Rangers had joined him there. We then struck camp and headed northwest. We carried provisions for a campaign of two months on pack mules and wagons. Each man was armed with two pistols and a rifle with ample ammunition for both. After a trek of about 200 miles, we arrived at the Brazos Reservation in Garza County. Ford sought to recruit more men from the peaceful Indians there. These people came from various tribes who were former enemies of the Comanche's, and their hatred of these marauders made them eager to participate in an expedition bent on punishing their old enemies. With the Indian Agent's blessing, 113 volunteers were recruited, and a dozen Tonkawa spies were immediately sent out to seek out the camps of the Comanche's north of the Red River.

"Our Ranger force encamped near the reservation for about three weeks awaitin' word from the spies. Ford called this base Camp Runnels, named for the governor.

"When the spies returned with the news, our 215-man expedition moved out. We headed due north crossin' the Red River around May first, and we camped there a few days. We ate mostly hardtack and jerky, as Ford allowed few campfires. On leavin' the river, Ford put out point men and flankers to protect the expedition from ambush. The main camp of the Comanche's was finally located on May 11, with them still unaware that a formidable and dangerous foe was nearby. Ford planned his attack for dawn of May 12.

"Just before we were to attack, our presence was discovered by some Comanche hunters, who raced away toward the main encampment. They were pursued, but they escaped and gave the alarm. Our column soon topped a hill where we got our first glimpse of the main village three miles away. It was an impressive sight. There were over two hundred white teepees scattered along the south bank of the Canadian River.

“As our advantage of surprise was lost, a Comanche band of about three hundred warriors were soon mounted and prepared to meet our attack. For three or four minutes, the two forces held their positions, sizin’ one another up. Then, after a shot from Ford’s pistol, there was a simultaneous charge by both sides.

“At the first exchange of gunfire, a half dozen Comanches bit the dust. They were armed mainly with bows an’ lances an’ old muzzle loadin’ rifles, which were no match for our modern rifles an’ pistols.

“There was soon a wild melee of hundreds of fighters on racin’ horses engaged in mortal combat. And there was an ear-splittin’ din of war whoops, shrieks and yells punctuated by the roar of gunfire. This vicious fightin’ continued for over an hour, spreadin’ over an area of several square miles. The battle eventually turned into a rout with the remainder of hostiles runnin’ away as fast as their wornout horses could carry them—some so badly injured they could barely hang on. We were not able to pursue them as by that time our mounts were so expended they could hardly stand. We suffered two Rangers killed an’ about a dozen wounded, while 76 Comanche warriors had been slain. Our red allies—who Ford had armed with weapons similar to our own—suffered light losses as well.

“Ford then gave the order to burn the town an’ destroy all their provisions. When we finished that chore, our men were almost too exhausted to move. But Ford insisted we put 20 miles behind us before makin’ camp for the night. We all slept the clock around, and we remained at that campsite for two more days, as it was essential that both men and animals have needed rest before undertakin’ the long ride home.

“And that pretty well sums up our Comanche campaign of 1858.”

“What an awesome experience. I was in a number of battles during the (hic) Civil War, but nothing compared to that sort of fightin’. A truly faschinating story, Jacob. Well, I guess that put an end to all the mischief caused by the Comanches.”

“It did till that damned Civil War began! Prior to the war, a number of forts had been built in Texas and the Oklahoma territory that were manned by federal troops. But when the war started, these troops were all pulled out, while at the same time some 60,000 Texans were inducted into the Confederate Army. This left the frontier completely undefended. Soon the damned Comanches and their Kiowa allies were at it again—raidin’ and killin’. Settlers in these parts were terrorized, and a wholesale exodus vacated vast portions of the state.

“Of course you wouldn’t know about this, Brian, havin’ only recently come to Texas, but the final campaign against hostile Indians began in ’71 while I was in prison. Guards were good enough to pass newspapers to me so I was able to keep up with events. The U.S. Army finally sent a cavalry force of 600 under Col. R.S. Mackenzie to obliterate the red scourge and force any remnants onto reservations. And with hundreds of buffalo hunters coming into their territory, and slaughterin’ the Indians source of livelihood, it was plain to see the days of wild Indians were numbered.”

Henders held up his glass and Magruder clinked it with his own, and they both took a sip of brandy. Then he said, slurring his words, “Now tell me where you learned your gun skills, Jacob—that Ford required of his recruits?” And with a

lopsided grin, he added, "I also wanta hear (hic), excuse me, the story about your getting' kicked out of law school."

Magruder smiled and said, "Alright. But I'll have to give you a little family history first to explain how it all came about."

"As mentioned before, my parents came out of the Smoky Mountain region of Tennessee in '36, and settled in East Texas. I was born a few months later. In '38, my maternal grandmother died, and my mother's youngest brother, Cameron Ford, came to live with us. Cam, as he's called by the family, was nine years old at the time. He was like my older brother rather than an uncle. It was from this uncle that I later learned my gun skills.

"Cam and I grew up on a 500 acre horse farm. My father is a medical doctor, but loved raisin' and racin' thoroughbred horses. Cam and I practically grew up on horseback."

Then Magruder smiled saying, "I think you're gonna find all this stuff borin', Brian."

"No, no—pleash go on, I think it's most inter'stin'," muttered Henders. And he leaned over and poured more brandy in Magruder's glass.

Magruder grinned at Henders' slurring of his words. He didn't think he himself had yet reached that point.

"Okay. Well, there was a family livin' near us named Mullin, and they had two boys a little older than Cam. The Mullin boys were slick with guns. Rumor had it their old man was a gunfighter out of Kansas. Anyway, Cam took up with the Mullin boys, and they began to teach him their gun skills. Sometimes they'd go down to this little canyon nearby, and bang away for hours with those big six guns. This caused Mother a lot of anxiety, but Dad was more pragmatic. He told her it was necessary for boys in Texas to know about guns. Dad even furnished money for cartridges."

Magruder paused in his narrative to take a sip of brandy, Henders took the occasion to light a cheroot. After puffing the cigar into life, Henders made a rolling motion with his free hand indicating that Magruder should continue. "Pleash go on, Jacob."

"Alright then. Well, when Cam was sixteen, he bought his own .44 caliber pistol. And after that, he'd spend hours out in the barn practicing his fast draw technique, perfectin' the skill taught him by the Mullins.

"When he was seventeen, Cam drove Mother to town one day in the buggy to do some shoppin'. By this time, he'd started packin' his pistol whenever he left the ranch. While in town some ruffian emboldened by liquor, grabbed Mother on the street and tried to kiss her. Cam pushed him away and knocked him down. When the damned fool got up, he tried to pull a gun. Cam outdrew him and shot him dead. Dozens of people witnessed the shootin', and testified it was clearly self-defense."

Henders shook his head and muttered softly, "My God! Killed a man at sheventeen."

"He sure did. Well, Dad had planned to send Cam away to college soon anyway, but after that incident, he thought it imperitive to do so immediately. The man

Cam shot had brothers, and Dad feared they would be seekin' revenge. So Cam was sent away to law school, and I saw him only at brief intervals over the next four years."

"What college did he (hic), 'scuse me, attend?"

"He went to the University of Louisiana at New Orleans."

"Continue, pleash," said Henderson, pouring himself more brandy.

"Okay. While Cam was in college, he picked up another skill—that of playin' poker. It seems he had a bachelor professor who held weekly games in his quarters. Havin' noticed Cam always had plenty of spendin' money, he invited him to join his poker group. Now, Cam was no stranger to a deck of cards havin' been friends with the Mullins. Well, this professor took a shine to Cam, and he began teachin' him the finer points of the game—such as the odds of the draw, and so on. And in a few years time, he became quite skillful."

Magruder paused to take a swallow from his glass. "After graduation, Cam opened a law office in town. Though Dad provided funds to furnish Cam's law office in elaborate fashion, Cam spent little time there. When he wasn't racin' fast horses or chasin' pretty girls, he was playin' poker at one of the taverns."

"Are you sure you want me to go on with this?" asked Magruder. "I get expansive when I talk about my family—especially when I've had a few drinks."

"Yes, pleash do," said Henders. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much since coming to Huntsville. And let's have another bottle of this (hic), 'scuse me, great brandy." He motioned the waiter over, emptied the last of the bottle into Magruder's glass, and ordered another.

"Ho-kay, then." Magruder took a sip of his brandy and continued.

"Cam had livin' quarters in the rear of his office, but he spent his weekends at home with the family. It was on these weekends that he began teachin' me the skills of the gunman. I seemed to have a natural gift for handlin' a sixgun, and by the time I left for college at 17, my gun speed and accuracy rivaled that of Cam's (hic)." Dammit! Now I'm doin' it.

"Well, I followed in Cam's footsteps by attendin' Louisiana U. and studyin' law. But, as mentioned before, I never received a degree." Magruder grinned crookedly, "I was expelled at the beginnin' of my senior year."

"Explain, Jacob. What'd you do that was so bad?" Henders asked with that lopsided grin.

"Well, durin' all those weekends Cam spent at home, he had also taught me the rudiments of poker. And by the time I entered college, I was a fair to middlin' player. At college, I let it be known that I had money and was available for games of chance. And I was often invited to participate in poker games arranged by others. But after my second year, I began holdin' weekly games in my own room. There were seven or eight other students who were regulars in those games, and sometimes the stakes got fairly high for a college crowd. But these fellows were all from well-heeled families, and they could afford to lose a good deal without it causin' any hardship."

"What kinda stakes did y'all play for?"

"Usually two-bit ante with a pot limit."

"Geez! That's kinda steep for collesh boys."

Magruder smiled, nodded, and continued.

“Well, one night we only had four players show up, which doesn’t make a very interestin’ game. So one of the boys went back out and rounded up a student not known to the rest of us. This fellow was a big Swede who must have been six foot six and weighed 240 pounds. It turned out this fellow didn’t know much about poker, and he lost steadily—and I was doin’ most of the winnin’ that night. Finally, the Swede drew a pat flush, and he bet the limit. Everyone else dropped out but me. I had drawn two little pair—eights and tens. Normally, I would have folded with such a weak hand, but since I was ahead, I called his bet and drew one card. Again he bet the limit. Well, as luck would have it, I drew a third ten. Now ordinarily, I would have raised with such a hand, but since the big boy had already lost a lot, I just called. When he saw my full house, he went into a rage. He jumped up, deliberately overturned the table, and he cursed me and accused me of cheatin’. Then when I was only half out of my chair, he slammed one of those big fists into my jaw knocking me for a loop and almost unconscious.”

Henders let out a loud guffaw, “Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” slapped the table with his hand and shook his head.

Magruder chuckled also, then went on, “This big boy was from Minnesota, and knew little of our customs. I’m sure you know, when you accuse a Texan of cheatin’ you’d better be ready to back it up with guns.

“Well, by the time I could clear my head and get to my feet, the Swede was gone. And he had scooped up much of the money that spilled on the floor. The other fellows were just standin’ around with their mouths open and didn’t seem to know what to do.

“I was furious, and I told the kid who had brought in the Swede, to deliver this message to him: He was to meet me the followin’ mornin’ in a nearby park at 7 o’clock armed and ready for a showdown. And he was also to tell him, that if he didn’t show up, I’d come looking for him and I would shoot him on sight. Of course, this threat was made in the heat of the moment, and I was sorry about it as soon as I cooled off.

“I was only nineteen at the time and pretty much of a hot head. But the word got to the Swede and he took it seriously. He packed his bag that night and left New Orleans on the midnight train.

“Well, things went along fine for three or four weeks after that, then one day I was called to the dean’s office. The Swede’s father had lodged a complaint against me. He said my threat to shoot his son had caused his son to abandon his law studies. I coundn’t very well deny makin’ the threat with so many witnesses. So I was expelled.”

“Didn’t you tell them the circum- (hic) –shtances—an’ that those words were uttered in anger and you had recanted?” asked Henders.

“Yes, but they were adamant. Persons of my character were not suitable for the law profession, I was told.”

“What’d your parents have to shay about that?”

“My mother was so upset, she cried. Dad, however, though disappointed in me, was mainly angry at the school for overreactin’. And Cam, as always, took my side.”

The waiter brought their steaks at that time, and they postponed further conversation while they hungrily attacked their food.

After finishing their meal and the fourth bottle of brandy, Henders declared, "Jacob, I can't remember enjoyin' myshelf more'n I have this evenin'. As much as I'd like to hear more 'bout your adventures in the Ranger service, I really must be getting back. Perhapsh we can do this again before you go home to Nacogdoches."

"I enjoyed it too, Brian, and maybe we can. Oh, I almost forgot—I've told you a little about Mrs. Gersemann's plight, but I failed to mention one thing. Her husband's death left her with a wagon and team she needs to sell. That robbery left her penniless. She's got a large freight wagon and a fine matched pair of draft horses that are presently over at Spencer's Livery. Now, I've seen your rickety old carts, and those puny mules that pull 'em. You're gonna be forced to replace them soon anyway, so why don't you buy Mrs. Gersemann's wagon and team?"

"I might do that, Jacob. What do you think they're worth?"

"She told me her husband paid \$1800 for the wagon, harness and animals three months ago."

"I'll send my purchasin' agent (hic) over to Spencer's Monday, Jacob. Perhapsh we can make a deal."

The town was quiet as Magruder strolled back toward the hotel at a little past nine. He was a little drunk and feeling pleasantly relaxed enjoying the cool evening breeze. As he walked along, he came to the alley where he had first met little Timmy Waters. The board sidewalk ended there, and just as he stepped off the walk, a shot rang out and Magruder's hat went flying. He dove into the dirt and rolled over into the darkness of the alley, adrenaline surging through his veins. Back in the shadows, he came to a kneeling position, his cocked pistol in his hand. He faced the dark alley across the street from where the shot had come. He had seen the muzzle flash out of the corner of his eye. Then he heard the faint crunch of running footsteps receding down the other alley. He fired off two rapid shots at the sound. Then all was silent. Along the street, a number of people stepped out of doorways to investigate the ruckus, but seeing nothing, went back inside.

He assumed he had missed the assassin—which might have been Mason, a friend of the Hawkins boys, one of Gersemann's killers, or a confederate of any one of these. He was now cold sober. He cursed himself for being a careless fool. He had made a lot of enemies in the short time he'd been in Huntsville, and if he expected to survive, he must be more vigilant.

Magruder got up, brushed himself off, and retrieved his damaged hat. On examining it, he realized the bullet which made the hole in the crown, would likely have gone through his head had it not been for that fortunate step down into the alley.

As he entered the hotel lobby, Magruder noticed the desk clerk was absent, and then he heard a commotion upstairs and Hilda Gersemann crying. He dashed up the steps taking them two at a time. There he saw three men bent over a prostrate form in the corridor, and Hilda standing there in what appeared to be a state of hysterics. Her dress was torn and her shoulder bloody.

“What happened here?” he shouted.

Hilda ran to him crying. “Oh, Jacob, thank God you’re here! I was attacked, and Mr. Felton was stabbed trying to protect me. I’m afraid he’s dead.”

Magruder gently pushed Hilda aside and knelt down beside the others. One of the men supported Felton’s head, whose shallow breath and blinking eyes indicated he still lived. His chest was bloody from multiple knife-inflicted wounds. Felton’s lips quivered as he spoke in a weak voice, “From Houston...address in suitcase...send money to wife...please.” Then he breathed his last.

Magruder felt for a pulse in Felton’s neck. Then he looked at Baker, the night clerk, and shook his head. “He’s dead. We’ve got to get him over to the undertaker’s somehow.”

One of the other men said, “I’m Keith Brewer and this’s Milt West. We just arrived from Livingston, an’ we were registerin’ downstairs when we heard the lady scream. We ran up the stairs just in time to see the assassin dash out the back door carryin’ a knife. Our hawse and buggy are still hitched out front. I guess one of us could drive the poor feller over to the undertaker if somebody’d show us the way.

“I’ll go with you,” said Baker. “It’s just a short way. They’ll be closed at this time, but they’ll open up if we bang on the door. I’ll leave a note at the desk. Oh, here’s the key to y’all’s room, Mr. West.”

“Before you carry him down, I want to search him,” said Magruder. “And I want y’all to witness.”

He removed the contents from Felton’s pockets. There was a wallet containing a hundred and eighty-six dollars, a watch, and a letter addressed to Julius Felton sent by an Agnes Felton from a Houston address. He called everything out as he counted it, and told the others he would prepare a written report and he wanted their signatures on the document as witnesses.

Magruder pocketed Felton’s possessions, then asked, “What room was he in, Baker?”

“He was in 212, right next to you. He’s been here about a week.”

“I thought he looked familiar,” said Magruder. Then added, “I didn’t find a door key on him. Where’s his key?”

Hilda spoke up, having calmed down somewhat, “His key is still in the lock, Jacob. He was about to enter his room when I screamed.”

“Okay. I’ll lock his room and hold on to the key for the present. Later, I’ll want to examine the contents of the room with two of you as witnesses. Brewer, will you and West be available sometime in the mornin’?”

“Yeah. Anytime after seven will be fine with us, Deputy.”

Felton was a small man, and Brewer and Baker had little trouble carrying his body down the stairway. West went along with them.

After the men had gone, Magruder walked to the end of the corridor to examine the latch of the emergency exit door to see if it had been forced. As expected, he found it had been pried open. In the meantime, Hilda had gone into her room and lit a lamp. When he returned she was sitting on the bed, her face drained of color.

“Let’s have a look at that cut, Hilda.” He examined it and found it to be little more than a scratch. “It’s not bad—a shallow cut—and the bleeding has stopped. But it needs to be cleaned to prevent infection.”

Then he asked, “What happened here tonight, Hilda? And how did Felton get involved?”

Hilda seemed to have gotten her emotions under control, but her voice quavered somewhat as she related the story.

“Well, a little after eight, I went downstairs for a late supper. I found all the tables in the dining room occupied, but Mr. Felton was sitting at a table alone. So I had the waiter ask him if I could share his table. When he was asked, he got up, came over and graciously escorted me back to his table. He was a real gentleman.

“After supper, Mr. Felton walked me back to my room. When we got to my door, he said goodnight and walked on down toward his room. I had just unlocked my door and taken a step inside when I realized something was wrong. It was dark, and I had left a lamp burning. I immediately stopped. Then I heard a rustle of movement and I turned to dash out. And that...that beast grabbed my sleeve! But luckily it tore loose as he tried to stab me. I screamed and ran into the hallway, and Mr. Felton rushed back to my assistance. He intercepted the assassin, and they began to grapple. I ran toward the stairway shouting for help. When I heard the clerk and the other men yelling and running up the stairs, I turned back...just in time to see...that miserable wretch deliver his final thrust with his knife. Mr. Felton groaned and fell to the floor, and the killer ran for the back door. That sweet little man gave his life...protecting me.” Then she began to sob.

Not having other suitable materials, Magruder removed a clean case from one of the pillows, and proceeded to dip one corner into the fuel of the spare coal oil lamp. Then as he cleaned Hilda’s wound with this makeshift liniment, he said, “You haven’t told me what Felton’s killer looked like. Was it one of the men who robbed and killed your husband?”

“Yes. It wasn’t the Mexican. It was the other one. The blond.”

“You said you unlocked your door when you returned from supper—is that right?”

“Yes, that’s what happened.”

“That means the killer had to have a key to get in. And I’ve got a pretty good idea how he came by it. The blond headed killer’s name is Cal Hicks, and he happens to be a cousin of Willy Simms, the kid who was the janitor here until yesterday. Karl Swartz fired him. I just received information today that will provide the means to catch those bastards! And I expect to do so within the next few days. I also expect to reclaim at least part of your money.”

“I’ll never feel safe in this hotel again, Jacob. When a locked door is no protection, what can one do?”

“Hicks is probably miles from here by now. And he’s surely not stupid enough to make another attempt tonight. Look, it’s late, and I’m tired and know you are too. So let’s try to get some sleep, and tomorrow I’ll find you other accommodations where you’ll be safe. I’ll be right across the hall and I’m a light sleeper, so...”

“Jacob, I want you to stay here with me in my room tonight. I’ll not sleep a wink otherwise. Will you do it...for me...please?”

Magruder hardly knew what to say. After a moment's contemplation, he finally said, "Well, alright. I'll drag the mattress from my bed over here and throw it on the floor." Then, attempting a little levity, he added with a wry smile, "If we're discreet, perhaps no one will find out that a man shared your boudoir tonight."

That remark evinced a weak smile from Hilda. "Right now, protecting my virtue is the least of my concerns."

Magruder entered his room, deposited Felton's meager possessions in the drawer of a small vanity, then he moved his mattress to Hilda's room. He returned to his room, retrieved his pillow and a blanket, then locked his door as he came out. On entering her room again, he locked her door; and as he turned about, he saw Hilda had removed her dress, and seemed to be in the act of removing her chemise. He quickly stepped over and blew out the lamp.

As he pulled off his boots and began removing his own outer garments, he said, "I'm sorry you had to endure that ordeal tonight, Hilda, and I hope you'll be able to get some rest. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jacob...my friend...and my protector."

It was a while before Magruder could go to sleep. He couldn't help thinking of that beautiful, scantily clad woman he was sharing the room with. Finally, however, he drifted off.

Sometime in the night, he was awakened by the loud rumble of thunder. And flashes of lightning could be seen through the shuttered window. Then he heard the sound of the rain squall as it struck the building. He lay there for a time listening to the storm, and pondering the strange happenings of the last twenty-four hours.

One thing in particular bothered him. "How did Cal Hicks get that key to Hilda's room?" At first, he had jumped to the conclusion the key came from Willy Simms. But that was unlikely if Timmy Waters had his story straight about Hicks knocking Willy down and leaving the Simms place in a fit of anger. He also doubted Willy would have been allowed entry to the hotel after being fired. I suppose he might have sneaked in late at night when the night clerk was dozin' or away from his desk. But why would he do it? He's probably still mad at Hicks for punchin' him in the nose. It's beginnin' to appear that there's someone else involved...some other person havin' access to the hotel facilities. I'm gonna have a serious talk with Karl Swartz about that possibility in the mornin'.

The sound of the rain was making him drowsy, and he was about to close his eyes when during a brief flash of lightning, he saw the silhouette of a figure standing near his pallet. Immediately he was wide awake. Am I seein' things? But when Hilda Gersemann slipped under his blanket and into his bed, he realized he had not seen an apparition.

"Hold me, Jacob," she pleaded. "This storm frightens me."

And he rolled over and embraced her.

Chapter XI

In Cold Blood.

Sunday:

Magruder overslept the next morning. Dawn was breaking when he woke up. He found Hilda had gone back to her bed sometime in the night. He was sorely tempted to join her there, but he realized time wouldn't allow it. He had to meet Brewer and West at seven so they could witness the search of Felton's room. He guessed it was already past six.

There was enough light to allow him to find his clothes, and in half a minute he was dressed. Since Hilda still slumbered, he decided that taking her key and locking her in was the only alternative to leaving her door unlocked. He strapped on his gun, then quietly slipped out the door and locked it.

He descended the stairway, crossed the foyer and entered the hotel dining room. West and Brewer were already there having breakfast. The men saw him enter and one of them waved him over.

"Mornin', Magruder. Sit down and have some breakfast," said one.

"Good mornin', gents. I'll just have some coffee, thanks. You know, I remember your names, but can't recall which of you is West and which is Brewer."

Both men chuckled, and told him who was who.

Before Magruder finished his coffee, he noticed Karl Swartz at the dining room entrance anxiously looking about as if searching for someone. A second later Swartz spotted him, and frantically motioned for him to come out. He wore a worried frown instead of his usual pleasant expression. Magruder thought, Hell, what now?

He excused himself, then joined Swartz in the lobby. "What's the problem, Karl?"

Swartz whispered, "The boy deliverin' our morning paper just informed me there's a dead man in the alley across the street."

"Okay. Thanks, Karl—I'll go check it out." Hm-m. Maybe I hit the bastard that shot at me last night!

Near the alley, six men stood about engaged in excited conversation. As Magruder crossed the street, one of them recognized him as a lawman.

"Mornin', Deputy. Looks like somebody shot this feller in the back."

The crowd parted allowing him access to the alley. Some attempted to follow him in, but he ordered them to stay back. The body lay sprawled face down about thirty feet from the street. There was a bullet hole just to the right of the spine and below the shoulder blade. The signs in the dirt looked as if the man might have crawled several feet after falling, but it was hard to be certain after the rain and with all the stomping around that had been done by the morbidly curious. He was satisfied this was the would-be assassin of the night before, and that one of his blindly fired bullets had killed him.

From his Ranger training, Magruder could almost write a biography about an unidentified body. The dead man was a horseman—he wore boots and spurs. He

also wore a tied down holster and a near full cartridge belt. He was a gunslinger, or fancied himself to be. His attire was fairly new and of good quality—he was no vagabond.

He turned the dead man over. His body was cold and stiff, meaning he'd been dead for several hours. He appeared about forty years old. His skin was bronzed from wind and sun. He had to be an outdoorsman—perhaps a cowman. Magruder examined the palms of the man's hands. They were too soft for that of a working cowhand. This was probably a hired killer. There was a fine black hat lying nearby, but no sign of a gun.

Magruder shouted at the men still standing about, "You men come here and see if any of you can identify this man!" A half dozen men crowded around. "Who first discovered the body this mornin'?"

A little bald man answered. "I don't know that I was the first, but I saw him when I come walkin' through here 'bout daylight. There weren't nobody else in the alley at the time. Then I come out an' told some folks on the street. That was 'bout thirty minutes ago."

"Did you see a gun near the body?"

"No, I never did."

"Did anyone else see a gun?"

All there shook their heads or answered negatively.

Someone else was here first and stole the gun, Magruder figured.

"Has anyone seen this man before, or does someone here know his name?"

A storekeeper replied, "I don't know his name, Deputy, but I've seen him a coupla times before. He's been in my store to buy tobacco, an' I've seen him at Digger's saloon drinkin' whiskey. Somebody there might know him."

No one else seemed to know the man. Or for some reason they're not talkin', Magruder guessed.

"Will one of you men volunteer to go after the undertaker?"

"It's already been done, Deputy. Oh, there he is now."

A carriage with a dark garbed man had just pulled up at the alleyway. Will Tighe, the undertaker. Magruder recognized the man at once having had the unpleasant experience of meeting him before.

"Howdy, Magruder," Tighe said not uncivilly as he walked up. "I see you've got another customer for me. My business has really picked up since you came to Huntsville."

That remark angered Magruder, and a hot retort was on his lips—but he bit it off. "Before you haul him off, Tighe, I'm gonna search him. You witness."

He knelt down and emptied the dead man's pockets. He found a penknife, two cigars, some change and a fat wallet. He extracted the bills from the wallet, and counted the money out loud so all could hear. Three hundred and sixty nine dollars. That's a lot of walkin' around money for the average guy to be carryin'. I'm surprised it wasn't stolen by whoever grabbed the gun. Maybe that was his payoff for murderin' me, he conjectured.

He handed the money and property over to the undertaker. "Tighe, you take charge of this for now, and I'll report this incident to the sheriff. I'm also gonna place a notice in the newspaper describing this man and his possessions—to see if

someone comes forward to claim the body and property. I'm bettin' no one will." The last was uttered softly as if to himself.

As the men loaded the body in the buggy, Magruder stepped over and picked up the dead man's hat. By damn, he ruined mine, so I'm gonna keep this if it fits!

After the undertaker drove off, the crowd dispersed, and Magruder walked back to the hotel. He carried the gunman's hat with him, which was still damp from the rain. He slapped it against his legs a couple of times to knock off the dirt from the alley. When he got inside, he examined the hat more closely. It was so new the sweatband wasn't even discolored. When he tried it on, he found it a little loose, but figured it would shrink some as it dried out.

West and Brewer were sitting in the lobby waiting for him. Magruder led the two men back up stairs to inspect Felton's room. There wasn't much to see. A small suitcase with a few articles of clothing, a comb, a razor, and another letter from Felton's wife. He had previously made a list of things found on Felton's person the night before, and now added to it the items found in his room. He asked the two men to sign it as witnesses to indicate the list of property was accurate and complete. Magruder then thanked them for their service, shook their hands, and the two men departed. Then he walked out and locked the door.

Magruder entered his own room, sat down at the little desk, and quickly wrote out a message to Felton's wife. Then he retrieved Felton's property from the vanity, and also the little double-barreled Remington derringer he had taken off of Henri Beaumont. And assuring himself the gun was loaded, he went back out locking his door. When he knocked on the door of Hilda's room, he received an anxious response, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Hilda. May I come in?"

Her voice sounded relieved. "Oh, Jacob. It's you. Of course you may. Come in."

He unlocked the door and entered. She was dressed except for being barefoot, and she was standing before the mirror arranging her hair.

"I became frightened when I awoke and found you gone," she said. "I quickly got up and tried the door and found I was locked in." Then she turned and gave him a wicked smile. "I thought perhaps you intended to keep me imprisoned here as your sex slave."

He grinned. "I hadn't thought of that—but that's an interestin' idea."

She laughed aloud, then turned about and resumed working on her hair.

"Hilda, I'm goin' to walk you downstairs to the dinin' room, and after we've had breakfast, I'm gonna leave. I'm goin' to see the Sheriff about a safe place for you to stay, and I should be back within an hour. Then we'll pack your things and get you moved. I'd like you to sit in the lobby and wait for me. You'll be alright with all the people around. And here's something that'll make you feel even safer." He extracted the little gun from his pocket. "It's a .41 caliber double-barrel derringer—small enough to carry in your purse." As he handed it to her, he asked, "Do you think you can handle it?"

"Of course, Jacob. As I said before, I'm familiar with guns." She examined it briefly, opening the action to verify it was loaded, then snapped it shut and placed it in her purse.

After their breakfast, Magruder escorted Hilda out to the lobby, then went over to the desk to have a talk with Karl Swartz.

Looking up from a journal, Swartz smiled. "Can I help you, Mr. Magruder?"

"Yes, Karl—you can. I suppose you're aware of the trouble here at the hotel last night—about Mrs. Gersemann being attacked, and the murder of one of your guests."

"Yes, I am, Mr. Magruder. It's dreadful. Baker told me about it when I came in at six this morning. I am very sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, there is. I have here some personal items taken from Mr. Felton's body last night. This wallet contains a hundred and eighty-six dollars, a watch, and a letter. And here's a list of all his property, including that in his room upstairs. I'd like you to put these things in your hotel safe for now. Also, here's the key to his room. He has a suitcase and few items of clothing up there. Please have someone collect his stuff, and store them for the present. This is his address in Houston—and here's a message I've written to his wife informing the poor lady of her husband's demise. I would like for you to arrange to have this message sent by wire. I've given the lady my name and address here at the hotel so she can reply telling us how she'd like to handle her husband's burial."

"I'll be happy to take care of these things, Mr. Magruder. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. The man who killed Felton is one of the same men that killed Bernard Gersemann. He was recognized by Mrs. Gersemann last night. He tried to kill her because she was a witness to her husband's murder. His name is Cal Hicks, and he's the nephew of Bill Simms—Willy Simms' father. He gained access to Mrs. Gersemann's room last night with a key. Do you have any idea how he might have gotten that key?"

"No, I don't, Mr. Magruder. Just a moment...let me check our spare keys." Swartz unlocked a small chest, and counted the keys. "All the spare keys for room #212 are accounted for, Mr. Magruder."

"How do you replace keys that are lost, Karl?"

"We have a contract with Honaker's Hardware for keys, as well as various other items of hardware used by the hotel. We have dealt with them for years, Mr. Magruder. I can't believe they would duplicate any of our keys for anyone else."

"Well, when was the last time you had a key to Room #212 reported lost?"

"We really don't keep a record of such things, Mr. Magruder. But I'm satisfied it has not happened in a long time. Few of our guests lose their keys."

"Does Simon Honaker always make your keys personally, or does some employee do that?"

"Well, I suppose he might delegate that to one of his employees."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Magruder. "That just might be the answer. I'm gonna have a serious talk with Mr. Honaker about that."

As he started to walk away, he had another thought. "By the way, Karl—to gain access to the hotel last night, Cal Hicks pried open your second floor emergency exit. I suspect it'll require some repairs."

Magruder then went out to the stable. He told Bobby Simmons he would need the surrey in an hour, and to have it ready. Then he quickly saddled Smoky, and headed for the Sheriff's place.

Mrs. Colson answered his first knock. "Good Mornin', Mr. Magruder. Please come in."

He heard Colson call out from another room, "That you Magruder? Come on in the dinin' room, son."

"This way, Mr. Magruder," said Mrs. Colson. And she led him into the dining room. She offered him some breakfast, which he declined. "Please sit down then, and I'll get you some coffee."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, and sat down at the table across from the sheriff.

"What's on yore mind, son? More trouble? Must be sumpthin'—yo're here awful early."

"Yeah. More trouble, Sheriff."

Mrs. Colson returned with the coffee pot, poured a cup for Magruder, then sat down and resumed eating. He had interrupted their breakfast.

"What I've got to tell, Sheriff, is not pleasant. Perhaps I should wait till y'all finish your breakfast."

"Mr. Magruder," said Mrs. Colson firmly, "after being married to a lawman for forty-two years, I've heard just about everything."

"Well, you heard her, son. She says she can handle it, so let's hear yore bad news."

"Alright, Sheriff." He began with his being shot at the past night, and told them almost everything that had transpired up to and including the discovery of the body in the alley this morning. He discreetly left out the part about his having spent the night in Hilda Gersemann's boudoir, and their intimate relations.

While telling of the attack on Hilda Gersemann, and Julius Felton's murder, Magruder got the idea Mrs. Colson's stomach wasn't as strong as she thought. Several times she exclaimed, "Oh my! How horrible!" and similar expressions. He also noticed she paled and didn't finish her breakfast.

"You s'pose that bird in the alley was staked out to stop you from interferin' with the plot to kill the Gersemann woman?" asked Colson.

"That's the way I figure it, Sheriff."

Colson said, "I'll go over to Tighe's parlor later, an' see if I can identify that bushwhacker."

"Sheriff, will the county pay the undertaker's fee for handlin' Felton's burial?" asked Magruder. "He had a few dollars on him, but I have the idea that he and his wife were of very modest means."

"Yes. The county has a fund for such things, Magruder."

"That bird that took a shot at me last night, had three hundred and sixty-nine dollars on him," said Magruder. "So, I'd say, he could pay for his own funeral. And if no one claims that money, I reckon you could put the balance of those ill-gotten gains in your county burial fund."

"By the way, Sheriff, I need to find Mrs. Gersemann a safe place to stay. She can't stay at the hotel after that attempt on her life."

Colson opened his mouth to speak, but his wife cut him off. "You bring her right over here, Mr. Magruder. We've got two extra bedrooms and plenty of space. I'll be delighted havin' the lady here with me. I get lonesome for female company. And

after what that poor girl has endured, she needs the consolation of another woman.”

“Well, you heard the boss, Magruder. Bring Mrs. Gersemann over here. I’ll guarantee she’ll be safe with us.”

Magruder went down the back stairway of the hotel carrying Hilda’s trunk slung across his back. He hoped the killers wouldn’t find out about the move. If they thought Hilda was still in the hotel, maybe they would make another attempt. If they did, he hoped to be there to give them a warm reception.

He loaded Hilda’s things in the surrey, then he and she got aboard and headed Bessie toward the Colson’s residence. Church bells were ringing as they drove along in the morning coolness. When they arrived, the sheriff and his wife were sitting out on the big front porch waiting for them.

As he was tying Bessie to the hitch post, Mrs. Colson quickly came out to meet them. She hugged Hilda as Magruder was making the introductions.

“You poor dear. I’m ashamed of what Huntsville has put you through. Come in now, honey, and I’ll fix you a nice cup of tea. And I’ve got a big comfortable room all fixed up for you.”

The two women went inside, and Magruder sat down in one of the porch rocking chairs to talk further with Colson. He told him about his visit to the Wheeler Ranch, and the information provided by Timmy Waters on Bernard Gersemann’s killers. Then he related the story of his run-in with Mason at the Sundown Saloon.

“That sonuvabitch!” snorted Colson.

“Jerry Malloy thinks I made a big mistake by not killin’ Mason when I had an excuse. And when that guy took a shot at me from the alley last night, my first thought was it was probably Mason. But after learning of the attack on Mrs. Gersemann, I figured it to be some confederate of Cal Hicks.”

“So, Bill Simms’ nephew is one of the killers? Well, well! I don’t know Hicks, but I’ve known Simms for years. Even bought whiskey from him years ago. Usta make better stuff than you could get in the saloons,” related Colson. “And I’m not surprised he refused to turn his kin over to the law. Most folks ‘round here would do the same. Ain’t been too long ago that the law in Texas was wors’n the criminals.”

“Do you know where the Simms place is, Sheriff? I want to ride out there, and talk to Simms and his kid. I’d hoped to catch Willy at the hotel, but Swartz fired him a coupla days ago.”

“I’ve been out there, Magruder, but it was years ago. All I remember is it’s off the Lufkin road somewhere a few miles out.”

“Well, I’m gonna go back to town, and ask around. Somebody’s sure to know the way.”

Magruder retrieved Hilda’s trunk from the surrey, and with some effort, carried it into the house.

“Bring it right in here,” said Mrs. Colson, leading him into a large, airy bedroom. “Set it there next to that cedar chest.”

After performing that duty, he bid his goodbyes to Hilda and the Colsons, then departed.

He drove back to the hotel, and turned the surrey over to the stable boy. And as he walked into the hotel lobby, Karl Swartz called him over and introduced him to Jim Parker, a one-eyed war veteran. Parker had been hired as custodian after the dismissal of Willy Simms. It turned out that this man was a neighbor of the Simms family, and he was able to provide Magruder with directions to their farm.

After having lunch at Nora's, Magruder saddled his horse, and rode out to the Simms place, arriving there in the early afternoon. He was stunned by the gruesome scene that awaited him.

Bill Simms lay sprawled face-up on the porch of the crude structure, while his wife rocked slowly back and forth in a rocking chair nearby. Her blank expression and unfocused stare suggested a state of shock. Simms' unblinking eyes were open and his big mouth twisted in a grotesque grimace. Dried blood covered much of his shirt. He was unquestionably dead, and obviously had been for some time.

Magruder dismounted, stepped up near the porch and removed his hat. "What happened here, Mrs. Simms?" he asked gently.

"Sam Mason killed him," she muttered. "Jus' shot him down like a dawg. There weren't no cause fer him to do thet." She was quiet for a time as she rocked back and forth, then continued, "Mason showed up this mornin' an' wanted to know whur to find Cal Hicks. Bill told him he didn't know. Cal an' his greaser sidekick usta camp out up near the Trinity, but they got skittish after thet killin' an' moved somewhur else. He told Mason all thet, but he didn't believe it. Mason hollered, 'Simms, you're a damn liar! Yo're protectin' thet bastard! Hicks owes me money, an' I aim to git it. Now yo're gonna tell me whur he is or else!' Bill haw-hawed right in his face, an' said, 'Or else what, you crooked lawdog?' Then Mason snarled, 'Or else this, you one-legged sonuvabitch!' An' he jus' pulled his gun an' shot Bill down."

Flies were already buzzing around, and some crawled about on Simms as well as on the bloody porch.

"Mrs. Simms," proposed Magruder, "we've got to get your husband buried. Where's Willy? I'll need his help."

"Willy run off somewhur...right after Mason left. Willy was in the privy when Mason rode up, an' when he heered the argyment, he hid in there." She rocked in silence for a while, and then went on. "After the shootin', Mason started yellin', 'Whur's that no good kid of yores, ol' woman?' I feared he might shoot Willy, too, so I lied. I said Willy had took a job at Roans Prairie. Thet seemed to make him madder...he was cussin' a blue streak. Fer a minit, I thought he was gonna shoot me too. But finally, he turned around an' rode off.

"A few minutes later, Willy come runnin' out. He was so skeered he couldn't hardly talk. He was blabberin' 'bout which way Mason went. I tol' him he headed back to the Lufkin road. Then Willy got Bill's forty-four pistol, put a hackamore on Samson, our ol' gray mule, an' tore out bareback through the corn field yonder." She gestured toward the field west of the house. "I ain't got no idee whur he went."

"Damn! Looks like I'll have to do this alone," Magruder grumbled under his breath. As he began removing his coat, he asked, "Where can I find a shovel, Mrs. Simms—and where do you want your husband buried?"

“There’s a shovel in the tool shed over there—and I’d like him buried back behind the barn. There’s two graves there already...my ol’ pappy an’ my baby dotter.”

While working on the excavation, Magruder was mulling over all the bereaved woman had told him. Simms’ accusation that Mason was a crooked lawman, along with Mason’s claim that Cal Hicks owed him money, could only lead him to one conclusion: Mason was involved in the criminal activity going on in Walker County. Magruder had a hunch Mason might even be orchestrating these activities. He guessed that while Mason was out of town, Hicks and his partner kicked over the traces and pulled the Gersemann job on their own. That’s probably why Hicks moved his camp...he didn’t want to divvy the loot with Mason. But Mason seems determined to get his share. If he feels like he’s been double-crossed, he might try to kill Hicks and his partner, and take it all. Hm-m...the plot thickens!

He speculated about what Mason’s next move would be. Could he be so arrogant or stupid that he would ride boldly back into town as if nothing had happened? Well, when I finish up here, I’ll mosey on back and find out. And I need to tell the sheriff about all this.

As Magruder stopped to wipe the sweat from his brow, he muttered to himself, “Well, whatever the situation, Mason’s a murderer now. And I’m afraid it’s goin’ to be up to yours truly to bring him in. Goddammit, I should’ve left Huntsville the day they turned me loose!”

He moved Simms’ body to the grave in a wheelbarrow, wrapped him in a canvas tarpaulin, and lowered him into the excavation. Then he walked back to the house to ask Mrs. Simms if she would like to get her Bible and read over her husband, or say a few words before he was covered up. She just shook her head and continued rocking.

After completing his grisly task, Magruder put away the tools, and walked back to the house. “Mrs. Simms, do you have any idea where Cal Hicks may be hidin’ out?”

She shook her head. “He’s talked some ‘bout goin’ back to the Big Thicket. The Hicks clan are a buncha Jayhawkers an’ thieves livin’ wild down in the boggy jungle of cypress an’ palmetters. But if’n he went, he won’t stay long. I’ve heard him say he hated them dark woods with all them ‘gators an’ mocc’sins. Cal likes towns an’ whores an’ red likker. Garza—the greaser he runs with—has got kin over in Liberty County somewhur aroun’ Moss Hill. They might be hidin’ out down there.”

“Mrs. Simms, do you have any relatives or friends nearby who can provide help if you need it?”

“I’ll be alright. My sister and her husband will likely come by in the mornin’. They come ever’ few days to bring milk an’ eggs, and to pick up some corn whiskey.”

After Magruder had offered his condolences and mounted his horse, he had an interesting thought: If Willy headed west, that’ll take him toward the Pine Prairie road. He just might be hidin’ in ol’ man Johnson’s barn. I think I’ll check that out before goin’ back to town.

Where he rode out of the woods and onto the Pine Prairie road, the Johnson barn was within sight a half mile to the south. He headed Smoky in that direction, and in a few minutes he was dismounting in front of the old structure. Since the Simms boy was armed and frightened, Magruder figured he might shoot at the first sound. I'd best be careful.

Magruder walked up near one side of the entrance and peeked in. The rump of a gray mule could be seen inside one of the ancient stalls. Willy was obviously there. He also noticed a feed trough inside the barn and hay scattered around it. "That must be the trough Timmy was tellin' me about where the whiskey was hidden," he whispered. "I suppose he's lying in there somewhere gettin' pickled."

He shouted, "Willy! This is Jacob Magruder. I represent the law. I know you're in there, boy, so come on out. I just want to talk to you. I also know you've got a gun, so don't do anything stupid. If you start shootin', I'll have to kill you."

After a minute or so, Magruder heard a rustle in the loft above, then Willy hollered out, "D-don't shoot—I'm c-comin' down."

"Throw your gun down first," yelled Magruder.

Willy threw the pistol down in the dirt floor below and began to climb down the ladder. He quickly stepped over and picked up the gun. From long habit, he checked the cylinder and found all chambers to be empty. Magruder smiled to himself. He doubted Willy knew he had been carrying an unloaded weapon. He stuck the pistol in his belt just as Willy reached the ground.

The boy was a pitiful sight. His nose was still swollen and discolored from the blow received at the hands of Cal Hicks. And he was pale as a ghost and shaking like a leaf. Magruder couldn't help but feel sorry for him. The poor kid had just lost his father, and was afraid for his life.

"Di-Did you know Sam Mason k-killed my Paw?" the boy stammered.

"Yes, Willy, I know. I just buried him back at your farm. Your mother told me you had ridden off in this direction. That's how I was able to find you.

"Willy, I'm goin' to ask you some questions, and it's important you tell me the truth. If you do, I won't arrest you. But if I suspect you're lyin', I'll throw you in jail. Do you understand?"

Willy nodded vigorously.

"Alright. I'm lookin' for Cal Hicks. Do you know where he is?"

"N-No, I don't. He an' Garza usta have a camp near ol' Cincinatti...up on the Trinity River. Paw had me deliver corn whiskey up there to 'em a coupla times. B-But the las' time I went, they had cleared out...t-takin' all their stuff."

"Do you know anything about the cattle rustlin' goin' on in Walker County—and if Hicks and Garza have a hand in it?"

"I only know a little. I heered Paw tell Cal he was a damn fool to get mixed up with rustlers. He told him he'd likely get shot or hung. But Cal did it, anyway. Paw says Mason is boss of that rustlin' outfit."

"What else, Willy?"

"Thet's all I know...honest."

"Alright, then. Did you know that Cal Hicks tried to murder Mrs. Gersemann in her hotel room?"

"N-No. I don't know nuthin' 'bout thet."

“Cal got a key to her room somehow, and was waiting for her when she came back from supper. He tried to stab her but she got away. Did you help him get that key?”

“No, no... I don't know nuthin' about it...I swear!”

“Have you got any idea how he could've gotten a key to her room?”

“Well...I-I know that ever' night after midnight, the night clerk puts a little sign on the desk that says 'Ring bell for service'. An' then he goes into the cloakroom and goes to sleep on the cot. Somebody could sneak in after that and steal a key from behind the desk.”

Yeah, and bribing the night clerk would be another way, Magruder was thinking. “Did you tell Cal about the night clerk sleepin' after midnight?”

“No! I never did. But lotsa folks know about it. It ain't no secret.”

“When is the last time you saw Cal?”

“Uh...uh...a few nights ago he come by our place to see Paw...an' Paw sold him some guns. That's the las' time.”

“Is that the same night Cal told your father that he and Garza had robbed and killed Bernard Gersemann---and the same night he punched you in the nose?”

Willy's mouth dropped open in astonishment. “Ho-How'd you know 'bout that?”

“It came to me in a dream,” Magruder replied, suppressing a smile.

“Tom Bragg musta told you.”

“No, he didn't tell me. But never mind about that. Willy, I'm gonna let you go. I want you to go back home and take care of your mother. And if Cal comes around, don't tell him we had this talk. And if you can get word to me on his whereabouts, it will earn you that \$100 that Cal cheated you out of. By the way, your pistol wasn't loaded. Did you know that?” Magruder had to smile at the expression on Willy's face as he handed him the gun.

He watched Willy ride Samson across the road and into the woods, then he mounted his horse and headed back to town. He rode directly to the Colson residence.

There was a beautiful black horse Magruder had never seen before tied in front of the Sheriff's house. The animal had obviously been traveling, as he was dusty and had a bedroll and bulging saddle bags tied behind the cantle of the saddle.

At his knock, Hilda Gersemann opened the door. He felt a tug at his heart strings when he saw her. She looked so beautiful.

“Why, Jacob! I didn't expect to see you again so soon.” She gave him a warm smile. “Please come in. Mrs. Colson asked me to answer the door. She's busy preparing refreshments for their guest.”

When he entered the Sheriff was sitting on his day bed. Their guest; a tall, broad-shouldered, gray-haired man stood before Colson with his back to Magruder. He was booted and spurred, and a big pistol hung low on his left hip.

When Colson spotted Magruder, he smiled. “Here's my star deputy now. Come on in, son. I was jus' tellin' Captain McElvey about you.”

When the visitor turned about, his stern countenance broke into a broad smile. “Well, I'll be a suck-egg mule! If it ain't J.J. Magruder, the fast gun from Nacogdoches!”

Magruder, grinning from ear to ear, quickly stepped over and shook the man's hand. "Mac! You ol' fire-eater! I'm sure glad to see you. What brings you so far from your regular stompin' grounds?"

The Sheriff answered, "Captain McElvey has a state warrant for the arrest of Sam Mason. Whatta you think of that?"

"What do the Rangers want Mason for, Mac?"

"Conspiring with a fugitive from justice, abetting his escape, receiving stolen state funds, and a couple of other charges," replied McElvey.

Colson spoke up again. "That prisoner Mason went after over at La Grange, didn't escape, Magruder. Mason took a thousand dollar bribe to let him go. But the man was recaptured, and spilled the beans on Mason." The Sheriff shook his head and looked dejected. "I don't know how I could've been such a fool as to hire a...a sidewinder like that fer a deputy."

"Well, there's another crime you can add to the list now, Sheriff," said Magruder. "Sam Mason murdered Bill Simms this mornin'. I just got through burying him up at the Simms farm about an hour ago."

The two women were bringing in fresh-baked pastries and hot coffee for the men as Magruder made that announcement, and Mrs. Colson almost dropped the coffeepot. "Sam Mason, a murderer! Oh, my! And to think I've served him food at our table."

The Sheriff suggested kindly, "Martha, why don't you and Mrs. Gersemann set that stuff on the coffee table, and y'all go in your sewing room for a little while. This talk is apt to be unpleasant. We men can serve ourselves."

The Sheriff's wife responded, "Alright, Charley." Then looking at Magruder and McElvey, she scolded, "Well, for heavens sake! You men sit down. You can't enjoy tea cakes an' coffee standin' up." Then to Hilda, she said, "Put that tray over there, honey, an' come on. Let's leave the men alone." Hilda gave Magruder an anxious look, as she and Mrs. Colson left the room.

"What happened up at the Simms place, Magruder?" asked the Sheriff.

He related the story as told to him by Mrs. Simms, and also the information he had gotten out of Willy.

"My God! I sent Mason ridin' all over the county lookin' fer leads on the rustlin', an all the time, that sonuvabitch was in on the thievin'," grumbled the Sheriff. "No wonder he didn't find no clues!"

Magruder couldn't help smiling a little at the Sheriff's discomfiture.

Giving him a reproving look, Colson snorted, "Grin, you jackass! But I don't think it's very goddamned funny! Makes me look like an idiot."

"Don't feel too badly, Sheriff," offered the Ranger. "You're not the first lawman to make that kinda mistake. You just can't see into a man's heart."

"I reckon Mr. Mason will be makin' himself scarce about now," opined Magruder. "But I don't think he'll go far. He's gonna stick around hopin' to catch Cal Hicks, and get his hands on the Gersemann money. Where's he been hangin' his hat, Sheriff?"

Still scowling, Colson replied, "Mason's been livin' at Sally's boardin' house...on the corner of Lamar and Bell. But after that killin', he prob'ly grabbed his duffel and lit a shuck. Howsomever, you oughtta check it out anyway. He may think we're not yet aware of his evil deed. Sally might know whur he is, but I doubt she'd

tell. I've reason to believe Sally Rosen is Sam Mason's mistress." Colson shook his shaggy head. "But I've got no idee whur that bastard might go to hole up!"

Captain McElvey now cleared his throat noisily, and announced, "Folks, I'm gonna leave Sam Mason to you all. I've got bigger fish to fry. I didn't travel 300 miles just to deliver a warrant for that skunk. I'm on the trail of the Jubal Nighthawk gang. That half-breed and his outlaw band have been robbin', and sometimes killin' on their rampage across Texas. And Governor Coke has given me a mandate to track 'em down, an' capture or kill the sonsabitches! I've been followin' their south-easterly course for three weeks now after pickin' up the trail in Abilene where they robbed a bank."

"What other mischief have they been up to, Mac?" queried Magruder.

"Well, after leavin' Abilene, I came acrost a ranch near Comanche where hawses were stolen and a cowhand shot. Fortunately, the boy survived and was able to identify the Nighthawk bunch as the perpetrators. They also killed a teller while holdin' up a bank at Waco."

"How many's in this gang?" inquired Magruder.

"There's five of 'em. We know the identity of three, but not the other two...just that one's a greaser and the other one's a nigger. Jubal is reported to have kin in Hardin County—so they may be headed for the Big Thicket to hole-up. But there's no tellin' for shore. A storekeeper in Franklin identified them as the bunch that robbed and beat him last Thursday. He said the leader hadda livid scar from his left cheek to his chin. That'd be Nighthawk. I'm kinda expectin' 'em to show up here, since Huntsville sorta lies along the path they've been a'goin'."

"Well, we ain't heard anything that would indicate they're here, McElvey," said Colson. "But I'll see to it that these wanted posters get put up at the courthouse."

"That's good, Sheriff. I appreciate it."

Now there came a knock at the door. "Well, I'll be damned! This must be visitin' day," exclaimed the sheriff. "Magruder, will you do the honors, please?"

Magruder opened the door to be confronted by a little bowlegged, sweat-stained cowpoke.

"Howdy. Ah'm Gus Burris. Ah've got some bad news, an' Ah need to see the sheriff," he said breathlessly.

"Come in Burris. That's the sheriff sittin' on the day bed over there." The cowboy entered removing his dusty old sombrero.

"Sheriff, this man's got some bad news to report," Magruder announced.

"Damn! Just whut I need—more bad news. Alright, let's hear it, young feller."

"Sheriff, Kim Wheeler's been kidnapped, an' Burt Kellums killed. The boss, thet is, Mr. Wheeler's also been shot. Ah'm not shore how bad, but we were afraid to risk haulin' him to town in the buggy. Ah almos' kilt a hawse gettin' here, an' Doc Wilson's on his way out to the ranch right now as fast as he can go."

"Good Lord! How'd this happen, Burris?"

"Well, the Indian kid, Ossie, was the only one thet seen it. He was hunting with his bow not far from the others when it happened. He said they were all a coupla miles west of the ranch, when a rifle shot knocked Burt off his hawse. Then a second shot hit Wheeler. Kim jumped off her pinto an' ran ovah to her paw. An' about thet time, these two hombres come racin' outta the woods ridin' hell bent for

leather! Kim saw 'em comin' too late, an' they caught her. Ossie said she fought 'em like a wildcat, but they fine'ly hit her ovah the haid with somethin', an' knocked her out. Then they tied her on her hawse an' galloped off. Ossie was on foot, an' by the time he got ovah to 'em, he found Kellums daid, an' the boss jus' barely conscious. There was no way the kid could move a big man like Wheeler, so he leaped on Burt's hawse, an' high tailed it for the house. Ah was the only puncher aroun' when Ossie rode in, so Crabby an' Ah decided the best thing to do was fer him an' the kid to go after Wheeler in the buckboard, an' fer me to come after the doctor. Ah don't know how bad off the boss is 'cause Ah ain't seen him yet, but it shore sounds bad. Ossie said he was hit in the left shoulder, an' bleedin' buckets."

"Did the kid give any description of the outlaws?" asked Magruder.

"Only the hawses." He said one was a sorrel an' the other a black."

Magruder slammed a right fist into the palm of the other hand. "That's gotta be that bastard Cal Hicks and his Mexican sidekick."

"It would seem to," said Colson.

Then addressing the Ranger, the Sheriff said, "McElvey, things are poppin' around here so fast it makes my head spin. I guess you'll be leavin' right away on your special assignment."

"No, Sheriff—I plan to lay over a while. I've got a hunch the Nighthawk gang is gonna pay yore town a visit. Besides, I need to grain my hawse an' give him a good rest. I've been pushin' him pretty hard. I've taken a room at the Eutaw House. After sleepin' on the ground for weeks, I'm gonna enjoy sleepin' in a bed for a change. And tomorrow, I'm gonna mosey around town and see if I can pick up any scent of these skunks. I'll hang around for a few days, till they either show up, or I'm satisfied they've bypassed Huntsville."

Gus Burris interrupted, "Sheriff, Ah've told you all Ah know, an' Ah need to be gettin' back to the ranch."

"You go along, young feller, an' we appreciate your bringin' the message. I hope Wheeler's gonna be alright. He's a good friend."

As Burris walked out the door, McElvey continued, "Sheriff, I'll be in room number 216 at the hotel, in case you want to contact me about anything. If the crooks don't show up in Huntsville, I'll be back on their trail, but I'll let you know before I ride out. Please thank yore charmin' wife for the tasty refreshments. And now, folks, I'll take my leave."

Magruder extended his right hand that McElvey met with a firm grip. "So long, Mac. Take care of yourself," he said.

"Same to you, J.J. Catch those bastards that stole that girl, an' bring her back home! If they've harmed her, you know what to do." Then McElvey shook hands with the sheriff, and walked out the door.

After the Ranger left, Colson said, "Magruder, I know what you said about not gettin' mixed up in matters unrelated to the Gersemann case, but I'm hopin' you'll go out to the Wagonwheel, an' try to do somethin' 'bout the abduction of the Wheeler girl."

"I believe the crime is related, Sheriff. I think the kidnappers are the same ones who robbed and killed Gersemann."

“But you can’t be absolutely shore till ya’ catch up to ‘em.”

“You’re wrong, Sheriff. I’ll know as soon as I see the tracks left by their horses. I can identify the hoof prints of both animals.”

“Alright then. How do you plan to tackle the job?”

“I’ll pack enough food an’ supplies for several days, an’ I’ll track the buzzards. They may be hidin’ somewhere closeby, but they’ll likely put a lotta miles behind ‘em after pullin’ a caper like that. But I’ll find ‘em. What troubles me most, though, is why they kidnapped the girl. With most of that \$15,000 they got from Gersemann still in their pockets, it doesn’t seem likely they’d be doin’ this for ransom. I’m hopin’ that’s it, but I doubt those fools are capable of even conceivin’ such a plan. No—though I hate to think of it—I’m afraid they kidnapped Kim Wheeler with rape in mind.”

“Gawd, I hope not!” muttered Colson. “They oughtta know sucha thing would arouse the whole county.”

“Whatever the reason, I’ll catch ‘em. An’ if Hicks has harmed that girl, he’s gonna wish he’d never been born!

“Sheriff, before leavin’ town, I’m goin’ by the jail to pick up some handcuffs. I’ll tell Les Willard about Mason’s latest tricks, and I’ll relay McElvey’s report on the Nighthawk gang. If you’ll let me have those wanted posters, I’ll give ‘em to Les to put up.”

“Here you are, Magruder. By the way, Clint Foster’s daddy sent word that his son had accepted my offer of the deputy job, an’ that Clint would be here Wednesday ready to go to work.”

“That’s good, Sheriff.” Magruder then looked at his watch and said, “It’s almost five o’clock. By the time I rustle up supplies an’ get out to the Wagonwheel, it’ll probably be dark. I’ll check on Wheeler when I get there, and put up in their bunkhouse tonight. Then in the mornin’ I’ll start trackin’ at first light. But right now, I’d like to have a few words with Mrs. Gersemann before I go.”

“Alright, son.” And Colson shouted for his wife, “Martha, would you and Mrs. Gersemann come in here please?”

As the two women came into the parlor, Mrs. Colson scolded, “You don’t have to yell so loud, Charley. We’re not deaf.”

Ignoring the rebuke, Colson said, “There’s some real bad news, ladies. Kim Wheeler’s been kidnapped, an’ Wheeler an’ his foreman shot. Magruder’s goin’ out there now to see what can be done.”

Both women registered shock at that revelation.

“That’s terrible,” exclaimed Hilda.

“That poor girl,” sighed Mrs. Colson.

“Martha, Magruder wants to have a few words with Mrs. Gersemann before he goes.”

“Excuse us, will you folks?” said Magruder. “We’ll step outside a minute.” And he took Hilda’s arm to escort her out.

The Sheriff and his wife smiled and exchanged knowing glances as the young people opened the door and stepped outside.

As soon as the door was closed, Hilda embraced him tightly and whispered in a tremulous voice, “Oh, Jacob—you’re going off on a dangerous mission, and I’m afraid for you.” And tears welled up as she looked intently into his eyes.

He gently touched her face with his hand, and kissed her softly on the lips. But she pressed her mouth to his passionately, while uttering little muffled sobs.

“Oh, Jacob...my love... I wish I could hold you here.”

Chapter XII

The Search.

On leaving the Colson place, Magruder went directly to the jail. He informed Les Willard about the cold-blooded murder of Bill Simms by Sam Mason. He also informed him of his mission to find the Wheeler girl and her captors. He asked to borrow two pairs of handcuffs, and warned him to keep a sharp watch for the Jubal Nighthawk gang.

“Les, the sheriff asked me to go by Sally’s boarding house to confirm that Mason had left town. I’d appreciate your takin’ care of that chore for me so I can get onto this Wheeler case.”

“Shore, Ah’ll do thet fer ya’, son.”

“Please be careful. If he’s still there, he may suspect we know about the Simm’s killin’, and start shootin’ without warnin’.”

“Don’t worry about things here, son,” said Willard with a wry smile. “You go find thet girl. Ah’ll check on Mason. Ah know thet sonuvabitch! He rides a big zebra dun. If he ain’t pulled out, thet hawse’ll be in Sally’s stable. An’ if Ah see thet murderin’ skunk, Ah’ ain’t gonna try to arrest him—Ah’m gonna shoot his lights out—jus’ like he done to Bill Simms.”

Magruder went next to Creath’s saddle shop to inquire about the saddle bags he had ordered.

“We jus’ finished ‘em this mornin’, Magruder.” Creath turned and called to one of his men, “Jasper, bring them saddle bags in you were workin’ on.”

The goods were delivered, and Creath passed the bags to Magruder, who meticulously inspected them.

“Well, whatta you think, Magruder?”

“Damned nice job, Creath! An’ I’ll make good use of ‘em.” Then he picked up his purchase and walked out.

After securing the bags behind his saddle, Magruder mounted his horse, and rode directly to the Gibbs General Store.

Mary Davis, the seductive lady clerk, took notice as soon as Magruder entered the store, and she came toward him with that sensual walk he had observed before. “Hello there again, Mr. Magruder,” she said with an impish smile. “It’s so nice to see you again. How can I be of service today?”

“I need to buy some things, Miss Davis, but not of a dry goods nature.”

“That’s alright. I can serve you. What is it you need?”

“Well, I’m goin’ on a huntin’ trip, and I’ll be campin’ out. So I need one pound of beef jerky, a pound of ground coffee, a box of matches, a small pan, and , uh...about six cans of beans, to start with.”

He followed the young lady around as she bagged the requested items. And he imagined she accentuated her provocative walk for his benefit. Whether intended or not, her sensuous movements quickly aroused him.

“What else can I get you, Mr. Magruder?” she asked with a mischievous smile.

The way that gal moves, and everything she says seems to be an invitation for sex. She might just be a teaser who’d scream bloody murder if some man lifted her skirt, but I’m about ready to lift it and find out. However, for now that bit of pleasure will have to wait.

He had difficulty getting his mind back on his business. “I...uh...need a one-gallon canteen, ten pounds of oats, a couple of blankets, and, uh...a canvas tarpaulin, a 50 foot lariat, and, uh...let’s see...oh, yes, a large size slicker.”

Miss Davis collected these bulky items one at a time, placing them on the service counter.

“Is there anything else, Mr. Magruder?”

“Do you, by chance, have anything like a bowie knife?”

“Yes. We have two models. They’re over here in the display case with the cutlery.”

Magruder selected the smaller of the two knives that had a nine inch blade, then said, “I’ll need a sheath for the knife, Miss Davis—and I think that’ll be all today.”

The young lady added up the cost of the purchases. “That all comes to \$29.50, Mr. Magruder. Do you want to charge that?”

“No, Ma’am. I’ll pay cash.” And he pulled out his wallet and extracted thirty dollars in bills.

Miss Davis returned his change, and with a wicked grin said, “I enjoyed waiting on you, Mr. Magruder. And I hope you’ll come again re-e-al soon.”

As he walked out of the store loaded down with his purchases, Magruder muttered to himself, “That gal sure knows how to wind up my spring.”

After tying his canteen and lariat to the saddle, Magruder made a roll of his blankets and tarpaulin, and tied them behind the cantle. Then he packed his other purchases into his saddlebags.

Leaving Smoky tied to the hitch rail in front of Gibbs, he crossed the street and entered the hotel. Finding Karl Swartz at his usual station, he told him of the latest criminal mischief, and of his present mission. Then he paid another week’s rent for his and Hilda Gersemann’s accommodations. He had considered giving up Hilda’s room, but decided to keep it. By doing so, it would give the appearance that she was still lodged there, and any malefactor wishing to do her harm would not be looking for her elsewhere.

Then he asked, “By the way, Karl, how much do I owe you for the frequent use of the hotel’s surrey? I’d almost forgotten about the rental charge.”

Swartz smiled as he replied, “Mr. Magruder, the hotel is happy to grant you use of our surrey at no charge in consideration for your many services to the community.”

The courthouse clock was tolling six as Magruder cantered out of town on the Navasota Road. When Smoky had warmed up a bit, he slackened the reins, and the horse began to gallop. That gait seemed to be effortless for the big gray, and with his great stride, they covered the miles swiftly. It wasn't long till they were passing through the portal of the Wagonwheel Ranch.

It was twilight and whippoorwills were calling when Magruder rode up to the ranch house. There he found Doc Wilson preparing to board his wheeled conveyance for the trip back to town.

"Hey, Doc," he said as he swung down. "How's Wheeler doin'?"

"Hi there, Magruder. Oh, he'll be alright if he behaves himself. He's strong as an ox. The bullet went plumb through his shoulder, an' fortunately missed his lung. I've got him trussed up pretty tight—an' I ordered Crabby to keep him quiet. But you know Wheeler—he's a headstrong sonuvabitch! He's wantin' to get up an' go after Kim's kidnappers himself."

"I'll talk to him, Doc—an' convince him I can handle the job. By the way, Gus Burris reported that Burt Kellums was killed. Is that what happened?"

"Yeah! Burt's dead alright. That rifle bullet went right through his heart. Poor boy never knew what hit him. Wheeler's distress is partly because of Burt. The boy was like a son to him. They've decided to bury him here on the ranch. You know, Burt was an orphan—an' Wheeler says this ranch was the only home he ever knew. I'm told that one of the Wagonwheel cowhands is a lay preacher, so they plan to hold the funeral service right here sometime tomorrow."

"Well, I'd better go see the old warhorse, an' assure him I'll be goin' after Kim in the mornin'. I'll see you later, Doc,"

"Alright. Good luck, Magruder—I've got to get along, now. See me soon about changing your bandages." Then he slapped the reins, and barked at his horse, "Giddap, Nellie!" And they trotted away.

As he stepped up on the porch, the screen door swung open, and a bearded little man wearing a derby hat and a soiled apron appeared. "Ah reckon you mus' be Magrudah," he vouched, in not too friendly tone.

Magruder smiled. "Yes. And you must be Crabby."

"Tha's right," he snapped. "Come on in—Wheeler's been askin' fer ya." And the cook led him to a room where he found Wheeler propped up in bed.

On seeing him, the rancher exclaimed forcibly, "Magruder—I want you to ketch those murderin' bastards! An' bring 'em back alive—so I can personally cut out their miserable hearts!"

"Don't worry—I'll catch 'em." Then with a show of anguish, he expressed apologetically, "Wheeler, I really hate to think of Kim spendin' the night with those scoundrels, but there's no preventin' it. It's much too dark to do any trackin' now. I'll spend the night here, an' get started early in the mornin'. In the meanwhile, you must take it easy. You sustained a nasty wound."

"Aw, hell—Ah've injured m'self wuss'n this shavin'!"

Crabby spoke up. "Magrudah—the boys hev already had chuck, but Ah can scare up sumpin' fer ya to eat, if'n you want."

"Thanks, Crabby. I'll take you up on that." Then again addressing the rancher, he said, "After I see to my horse, I'm gonna eat a bite, then try to find a spare bunk for the night. Since I'll be leavin' before daylight, I won't see you again till I bring Kim home." The last stated with more confidence than he felt. "You try not to worry. I think your daughter was taken for ransom, so she'll not likely be harmed," he lied, refusing to reveal his true beliefs to the girl's father.

In the bunkhouse dining room, Crabby set a large bowl of beef stew, and a platter of biscuit in front of Magruder, who attacked the food hungrily. While he was eating the Indian boy glided silently into the room on moccasined feet.

As Crabby engaged Ossie in muted conversation about some strayed animals, Magruder quietly appraised the young man. He viewed a short, stocky figure suggesting strength beyond his years. The youth wore fringed buckskin shirt and trousers, and carried a large knife in a beaded sheath suspended from a rawhide belt. The boy's skin color was lighter than the full-blooded Apache, but he had the raven hair and black eyes typical of the breed. He also wore that inscrutable, blank expression characteristic of the aborigine.

"Magruder—this is Ossie," stated Crabby. "He saw the skunks who kilt Burt an' stole the girl. Ah thought mebbe you'd want to talk to 'im."

"Yes, I would. Alright, Ossie—tell me what you saw."

The boy began to describe the events in halting speech, sometimes reverting to Spanish in order to express himself.

"Ossie hunt deer with bow. Not far 'way, Boss, Burt an' Missie look for lost bull. Then gun shoot an' Burt fall off horse. Gun shoot again an' Boss fall off horse. Missie get off horse an' run to Boss. Then...then dos hombres muy malo ride fast outta woods. They get Missie, tie on horse, an'...an' ride 'way!"

"How come they didn't shoot at you, Ossie?"

"Ossie in arroyo—they no see."

"Could you see the men well enough to describe them?" Seeing the boy's confused expression, and getting no response, Magruder rephrased his question. "What did the men look like?"

Ossie shrugged, "Not know...too far 'way."

"But the horses were a black an' a sorrel—is that right?"

Ossie grunted, "Ungh!" Then announced, "Ossie go with you...find mal hombres...tak'em scalp...bring Missie home."

Magruder smiled. "I don't know about that, Ossie. You may be needed around here. Whatta you think, Crabby?"

"Hell—let 'im go! He's a good tracker—an' damned good with the bow!"

"Alright, Ossie. We'll be leavin' before dawn. Crabby, how about fixin' a bag of food for the boy—sufficient for two or three days. I've brought along enough for myself. How early can we get some breakfast?"

"It'll be ready at five, Magrudah."

Monday:

Dawn was a faint streak on the eastern horizon when Magruder and the Indian boy prepared to ride out. Besides the knife, the boy carried a four-foot bow and a

quiver of arrows strung across his shoulders. Ossie led off riding bareback astride a fiery little mustang. Nearby a rooster crowed, and from somewhere far off the weird, cacophonous moan of coyotes floated on the breeze. The morning was clear and cool, and it presaged to be a good day for tracking.

When they arrived at the site of the kidnapping, there was insufficient light to clearly see any of the signs left by the perpetrators. But the dim sky gradually brightened, and soon they were able to detect impressions in the soft earth. Magruder dismounted and kneeling, he carefully scrutinized the hoof prints that had been made by several different animals. But it only took him a few minutes to determine that some of the tracks had been made by Cal Hicks' sorrel and Joe Garza's black. There was now absolutely no question about the identity of the kidnappers.

"Look here, Ossie," said Magruder, pointing. "This funny shaped hoofprint was made by Cal Hicks' sorrel. And see this track here showing a dent in the horseshoe—that was made by Joe Garza's black."

Through clinched teeth Magruder hissed, "If they rape that girl, I'm gonna castrate those slimy bastards."

"Ungh! Me scalp 'em," grunted Ossie with his hand on his knife.

The trail headed north skirting the woods where the assassins had laid in ambush, so the hunters started off at a trot. But as they neared the grove, Magruder decided to have a look at what signs the killers might have left among the trees.

As the Indian boy was riding ahead, Magruder called out, "Wait a minute Ossie—let's have a look in here."

They discovered a little clearing in the woods where Hicks and his partner had evidently camped for some time. Near the remains of an old campfire, they found discarded tin cans, two empty whiskey bottles, and enough horse droppings to indicate a stay of two or three days.

Wearing a long face, Magruder dismounted, and leading his horse, he slowly walked about the campsite. "You know what these signs tell me, Ossie? They tell me that the kidnappin' of Kim Wheeler was not planned ahead of time. Those skunks were just campin' in this thicket—prob'ly drunk—when they heard the men an' the girl nearby. An' when they peeped out, they saw somethin' they were willing to kill for. The girl!" He continued talking, more to himself than to the boy, "There is no way they could know the girl would ride over this way. She was just a target of opportunity." He remounted his horse, muttering curses—then ordered, "Let's go, son—but let's go careful—they may be expectin' pursuit."

Magruder instructed Ossie that he should lead the way, and apply himself to tracking, while he would keep his eyes on the terrain ahead for signs of danger. If they were fired on, they would leap off their horses and take cover.

As they rode along on the trail, he tried to estimate how far, and where the kidnappers might have ridden before making camp the previous night. It must have been around three in the afternoon when the attack took place—an' assumin'

they'd want to put maximum distance between themselves an' the crime scene, they could've covered twenty miles or more before dark. However, they may have had a totally different plan. They may have thought they were clever enough to hide their trail so they couldn't be followed. In that case, they'd likely head for someplace closer—probably some familiar haunt.

A couple of miles from the crime scene, the horse tracks crossed the Navasota road.

Heedful that they might ride into an ambush, he frequently utilized his field glass, giving particular attention to any copse, hedgerow or grove offering concealment.

Then eight or ten miles further on, the tracks crossed a second roadway that Magruder assumed to be the Bedias road.

From there the trail continued north several miles till it intersected a creek. It soon became apparent that the outlaws hadn't crossed the creek, but had ridden along in the water in one direction or the other as a ruse to confuse pursuers. There, the two searchers dismounted, each walking in a different direction along the creek bank. Ossie was the first to make a discovery.

"Hey, 'Grudah!" which seemed to be the best the boy could make out of Magruder's name.

"What have you found, Ossie?"

"Mal hombres no smart. Creek have clay bottom. Water no wash 'way tracks—see."

He returned to where the boy knelt down pointing. Sure enough, faint impressions of horse tracks were visible through the shallow water.

Before going on, the horses were allowed to drink their fill and the men quenched their thirst. Magruder took a healthy pull on his canteen, while the boy flopped down on his belly next to his pony and drank from the creek.

The creek angled to the northeast, the direction the killers had taken, so the trackers began walking along the creek bank leading their animals and following the signs. After about a mile, the tracks in the creek bottom abruptly ceased. Here, the banks were covered with tall grass, which the villains obviously assumed would conceal their exit from the water. But Ossie, crouching and studying the signs, spoke, "Look! Grass bend here—an' there. Horse go this way."

So both men mounted their horses, and began following this new trail. From their elevated position on horseback, they could detect a faint disturbance through the tall grass—the dim trace of which would have been unseen by the untrained eye. The trail now began to swing more to the east, and this fact convinced Magruder the miscreants were heading for familiar territory somewhere north of Huntsville.

After several miles, the grass played out, and gave way to a hard and rocky surface. Trailing here was slow and difficult, but the trackers continued to make progress. About noon, they came upon a dry wash where evidence indicated the kidnapers had camped overnight.

Here, Magruder dismounted, and with a grim face he walked slowly about looking for some sign that would indicate an act of violence had taken place at this site. He was relieved at finding none.

“Ossie, let’s rest here a few minutes, an’ eat a bite,” he said as he tied Smoky to a sapling.

Mid afternoon found the trackers in a forest of giant pines. These ancient trees exceeded a hundred and fifty feet in height with interlocking boughs that excluded most sunlight. Hence, there was little undergrowth to hinder the search. But tracking in this zone was difficult due to the thick carpet of fallen pine needles. Here, Ossie walked along slowly leading his mustang, occasionally kneeling down to examine a disturbance in the leaves. Several times the searchers startled deer and wild turkeys—and once a black bear—as they worked their way through these woodlands. There was an eerie silence in this pristine forest, so in late afternoon, when the light among the pines was beginning to fail, the men were surprised to hear a gunshot from some distance away. They stopped to listen, but heard no more shots. The sound had been the sharp bark of a pistol rather than the boom of a rifle—not the kind of firearm one would expect a hunter to be using.

A little further on, the trees began to thin out, and they could see a clearing up ahead. At this point, the Indian boy halted his pony. “Ossie smell smoke.”

“Yeah—me too, Ossie.” He then dismounted, and leading Smoky, he cautiously approached the edge of the forest. There he stopped, and employing his field glass in the dim twilight, he carefully surveyed the landscape ahead. There was a grove of hardwood about a mile beyond the open field, and Magruder concentrated his attention on this covert. After a minute or so he discerned the roof of a small shack barely visible through the bush growth. While studying this structure, he saw faint wisps of smoke wafting away in the breeze.

“Well, I’ve found your wood smoke, Ossie. And we may have found our killers. Looks like somebody’s cookin’ supper in that hut over there. Let’s hold up here till dark, then we’ll ease over an’ find out who it is.”

There was a half moon shining, and coyotes were barking and howling as the searchers stealthily approached their objective leading their horses. A faint light could be seen coming from a small window. When they were a hundred yards from the shack, a horse whinnied from somewhere nearby. Magruder quickly grabbed Smoky’s muzzle to prevent him from answering. Ossie’s pony nickered softly.

The men stopped and waited a few moments to see if anyone inside would come out to investigate. But nothing happened.

Magruder whispered, “Ossie, hold the horses here a bit while I creep over there and take a peek in that window. There’s someone in there for sure, but it may not be our kidnappers.”

“Ungh!” grunted Ossie.

Magruder stole along silently and carefully approached the window. As he eased up to one side of the opening, he could see a crude fireplace with a low fire and a cook pot steaming over the coals. Then he leaned forward where he could see more into the room. He felt a thrill when he saw Kim Wheeler. She was kneeling down and appeared to be ministering to a man lying on the floor who was apparently

hurt. It was a dark man who Magruder assumed to be Garza. As he couldn't see into other parts of the room from his present position, he ducked under the windowsill to the other side, and again peeped in. Cal Hicks was nowhere in sight.

Then he spoke softly, "Kim, don't be frightened—it's Jacob Magruder."

She jerked, obviously startled. "Oh Jacob, it's you! I'm so relieved you're here."

Magruder walked around the cabin and entered the doorway. "What happened here, Kim?"

"They argued and Cal Hicks shot him. That was about an hour ago."

"Yeah—Ossie and I heard that shot. What'd the two of 'em fight about, Kim?"

"Joe wanted to turn me loose, but Cal refused. Cal was intent on rapin' me, but Joe kept holdin' him off. Hicks was in a vicious mood, and had been guzzlin' whiskey all day. But he finally flopped down in the corner over there and fell asleep.

"While Cal slept, Joe apologized for taking part in my kidnapping. He said he'd have had no part in it if he hadn't been so drunk at the time. Then I told him he could make up for it by turning me loose. He was hesitant, because he knew Cal would be angry. But finally he agreed to. He went outside and saddled my horse, then came back in and began to untie me. That's when Cal woke up.

"Cal jumped up yellin', 'What're you doin', you bastard?' I could tell by his speech he was still drunk. Joe told him he was turning me loose, and tried to reason with him. He said, 'Cal, there's probably a vigilante posse huntin' us right now. If they catch us, they may not hang us for those killin's, but they damn sure will if we rape this girl! I'm lettin' her go!' Cal shouted, 'Like hell you are, you double-crosser!' Then he jerked out his gun and shot him, and Joe crumpled over.

"After that, Cal staggered over and began searchin' him. He took a big roll of bills from Joe's pocket and stuffed it in his own. And he took Joe's handgun and stuck it in his belt. Then he pointed his pistol at me, and gave me a long hateful bleary-eyed look, like he was tryin' to decide whether to shoot me or not. Oh, I've never been so scared in my life! But finally he sheathed his pistol, picked up his bedroll and rifle and stumbled out. A few minutes later, I heard his horse plungin' away through the brush.

"I felt so sorry for Joe. He knew he was dyin' and was wantin' a priest. I told him he didn't need a priest—that God would hear his confessions. I prayed with him, and held his hand as he died. That seemed to give him comfort."

"I'd say you showed an amazin' amount of compassion for someone who tried to murder your father," observed Magruder.

"Joe told me that Hicks shot Dad and Burt—and I believe him. Joe didn't have a rifle. How are they anyway? I saw that Dad was hit in the shoulder before Hicks grabbed me. I don't know about Burt."

"Your Dad's okay—Doc Wilson has already patched him up. He was even rarin' to come after you himself. But I'm sorry to say, Burt was killed."

Kim put her hand to her mouth, and let out a sob, and tears began running down her cheeks. "Oh, God! Burt was like a brother to me."

Then Ossie came in. "You alright, Missie?" he asked.

Kim managed a weak smile. "Yes I'm alright, Little Chief."

"Did Hicks give any indication where he might be going?" asked Magruder.

“Yes. Last night while I pretended to sleep, I overheard him tellin’ Joe that they should go down to the Big Thicket and lay low for a while. He mentioned that his folks had a place near Saratoga, and said neither the law nor Sam Mason would find them down there.”

“Well, you’re alright now Kim, so try to relax. We’ll have to spend the night here, but we’ll have you safely home tomorrow.”

“That’s wonderful news, Jacob.” Then she pleaded, “Oh, I hope you’ve brought some food with you. I haven’t eaten anything but a few bites of beans since Sunday.”

Addressing the boy, Magruder said, “Ossie, fetch the horses and bring in the food.”

While Kim ate, Ossie helped Magruder carry Joe Garza’s body out of the cabin. They placed him on the ground near where the horses were tethered, then covered his body with brush and dead limbs. Although scavengers such as bears or coyotes might be attracted to the body, Magruder knew the horses would snort and kick up a fuss if such critters came around, and that would alert him to their presence.

After Kim had eaten her fill, she told the men, “Now I want to sleep for about 12 hours. I’ve hardly slept a wink the last two days.”

Magruder prepared Garza’s bedroll for Kim, and she had no more than laid down than she was fast asleep.

After he and the boy had eaten their supper, Magruder prepared a pallet for his bed using his blankets and tarp, then he removed his boots. “I’m sorry we don’t have a bedroll for you, Ossie.”

“Ossie no need bedroll,” he grunted contemptuously. “Bedroll for squaws.”

Tuesday:

Magruder awoke at dawn to find Kim still fast asleep. Ossie had slept somewhere outside. He pulled on his boots, and prepared to make coffee. The ashes of the fireplace were cold, but he soon had a small fire going from fagots he had gathered the previous evening. As he had no coffee pot, he filled his cook pan with water from his canteen, placed it on the fire, and added ground roasted coffee to the pot. He smiled to himself remembering his Ranger companions used to complain that his boiled coffee would take the bark off a hickory tree.

After the water had boiled a minute, Magruder set the pan off the fire. A strong aroma of coffee now filled the cabin. Kim Wheeler didn’t stir, but it got Ossie’s attention.

“Ossie smell coffee,” he muttered as he came in.

“You sure do, Ossie. Here’s a tin cup. Help yourself. But watch it—it’s hot.”

“Missie still asleep,” Ossie observed.

“Yeah, the poor kid’s worn out. Let’s not wake her. There’s no particular hurry now. When she wakes up, we’ll prepare some breakfast, then pack up and head home. In the meantime, I’d like you to help me tie that outlaw’s carcass on his horse.”

It was late afternoon when the men and the girl rode up to the Wagonwheel ranch house. Their approach had been seen when they were still afar, and there was a sizeable welcoming committee. Wheeler sat on the porch, one arm in a sling, while Crabby and four of the cowboys stood out in the yard. It was a joyous reunion—the dogs were barking, the hands were all smiling, and Wheeler was waving with his one good arm.

Kim quickly dismounted and ran over to her father and embraced him. It gave all there satisfaction to see the copious tears of joy shed by them both.

“Dad, it breaks my heart that Burt’s been killed. Has he already been buried?”

“Yes, lass. We buried him yesterday—in that little cemetery plot with your mother and Gran’paw. Slim conducted the service—and did a wonderful job—he had us all in tears.”

In the meantime, Magruder had dismounted and was shaking hands with the Wheeler punchers.

Now Wheeler said, “Magruder, Ah can’t thank you enough for brangin’ mah daughter home. Ah’ll be ferever in yore debt. So if’n there is anythang—anythang at all—Ah can possibly do fer you, jus’ ast an it’ll be done.”

“Ossie deserves much of the credit, Wheeler. His help in trackin’ those buzzards saved us a lot of time. But there’s one thing you can do. Tied on the black horse there, is the body of Joe Garza, one of the outlaws. He was killed by his partner, Cal Hicks, who, unfortunately got away. Could you have some of your men bury him? We didn’t have the tools to do it while out on the trail.”

Crabby harrumphed. “We ain’t gonna waste energy diggin’ a grave fer thet polecat. We’ll jus’ dump his carcass in one of them deep washes out on the range, an’ cave the bank in on ‘im.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” said Kim sternly. “He may have been an outlaw, but he wasn’t all bad. Cal Hicks was the one who shot Burt and Dad. Joe Garza didn’t have a rifle. Joe protected me from bein’ raped by Hicks, and Hicks killed him for tryin’ to turn me loose. So we’re going to give him a decent Christian burial.”

Magruder had to smile at Kim’s rebuke. There seemed to be little doubt about who called the shots at Wagonwheel Ranch.

Now he said, “Wheeler, as you know, Garza and Hicks robbed the Gersemanns of several thousand dollars, so I’m claiming Garza’s horse, saddle and other trappin’s for Mrs. Gersemann. I plan to sell them and give the proceeds to the lady. I can probably get \$300 or more for his outfit. Garza’s share of that stolen money was taken off of him by Cal Hicks after he was murdered.”

Kim spoke up, “Dad, I like that black horse and the Mexican saddle too. And I think \$300 is a bargain. So pony up, Dad.”

Wheeler smiled saying, “Whut the hell can Ah do, Magruder? When she takes the bit in her teeth thataway, don’t do no good fer me to say ‘Whoa’.”

Then to Kim he said, “Alright, lass—you know where the money is. Get it an’ pay the man.”

Kim entered the house and was back in half a minute, and handed Magruder six crisp fifty-dollar notes. Then she said, “Y’all please excuse me. Right now I’m gonna have a long soak in a hot bath.” And she went back inside.

Crabby said, “Magrudah, supper’ll be ready in ‘bout an hour. Why doncha stay an’ eat a bite with us. We’re havin’ roast pork, yams an’ blackberry cobbler.”

“Mmm-m! That sounds scrumptious, Crabby. Count me in.”

Addressing the cowboys, Wheeler said, “Gus, you’n Ben take care of these hawses. Give ‘em a good rubdown and feed ‘em some oats.”

“Okay, boss,” said Gus.

“And Jim, you’n Roy throw thet outlaw’s cacass in the toolroom till tomorrer—then we’ll see about thet Christian burial Kim wants. Help Gus’n Ben with the hawses when you get through.”

“Okay, boss,” Jim replied.

“Magruder,” continued Wheeler, “If’n you wanna wash off summa thet trail dust, Ah’ll have the boys fix you a tub of water over at the bath house.”

“Okay, boss,” said Magruder with a smile. And everyone laughed.

Then Wheeler, with some effort, got up from his chair and slowly walked to the door. “When you get cleaned up, Magruder—come on back to the house. Ah want you to have supper with me and Kim.”

Later, when Magruder knocked, Kim answered the door. She looked especially lovely in a pink gingham dress, and smelled of cologne.

“My, don’t you look handsome, all clean shaven and washed,” she expressed with a smile. “Go on in the dining room there. Dad’s waiting for you to join him in a whiskey before supper. And I might just have one with you.”

“Sit down there, boy,” said Wheeler, “and Ah’ll pour you a slugga mah favor-ite booze. This’s seven-year old sour-mash bourbon. Ah order it by the case di-rect from Kain-tucky.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Magruder.

“Pour me a glass too, Dad. I really need somethin’ after my recent ordeal.”

They each had two large whiskeys, and were feeling no pain when Maria served them dinner.

Then after the sumptuous meal, in which Magruder did justice to Crabby’s culinary arts, Wheeler said, “Ah’m kinda tired now, so Ah’m gonna leave you young folks alone. Magruder, as late as it is, you ain’t gonna try to go back to Huntsville tonight, are you? Why doncha sleep over here, and go back in the mawnin’?”

“I believe I will. I’m kinda tired myself. And after all that whiskey, I’d likely fall off my horse.”

“Kim, show him to Burt’s room. It’s gotta comfortable bed.” Then Wheeler got up stiffly, and slowly walked out with a final, “Goodnight, kids. See y’all in the mawnin’.”

After her father had left them, Kim said, “Jacob, it’s nice outside—let’s go sit on the porch for a spell.”

“Well, alright—if you want to.”

The couple walked out to the porch where a cool breeze was blowing, and the pale moonlight revealed a panoramic view of the beautiful surrounding countryside. From somewhere out on the range, came the haunting hoot of an owl, and from a distant hill, the mournful howl of a prairie wolf floated on the wind.

“That old lobo sure sounds lonesome—like he’s all alone in the world, with no sweetheart or friend,” observed Magruder.

“That’s the way I’ve felt for a long time, Jacob—before I met you,” Kim responded, reaching for his hand.

Magruder didn’t know what to say.

Taking his hand, Kim said, “Come sit here in Dad’s big rocker, Jacob.”

And as Magruder sat down, Kim proceeded to sit down across his lap. Then slipping one arm around his neck, and holding his chin with her free hand, she kissed him full on the mouth. “I’ve been wantin’ to do that for a long time, mister,” she said with a smile. Then she kissed him again—a longer more passionate kiss.

Involuntarily Magruder became aroused—and Kim was able to detect it.

Looking him directly in the eyes, and with an impish grin, she said, “You seem to be indicatin’ that you didn’t mind that too much, Mister Deputy.”

“Can’t say that I did,” he replied with a smile. “But I must warn you—young ladies that play these kind of games, can get into serious trouble.”

“I was countin’ on that,” she said. And she kissed him again.

Chapter XIII

Robbers.

Wednesday:

When Magruder awoke the next morning it was still dark outside. He wasn’t sure of the time, but guessed it was near dawn. After a few moments, he heard a rooster crow—then heard the low voices of the cowboys outside as they discussed their daily chores. Kim had spent part of the night in his bed, and a faint scent of her cologne still lingered on his pillow.

Someone in the house was already up, as he could see a light under his door when he rolled out of bed and began searching for his clothes. Then he heard the sound of Kim’s voice and the gruff voice of her father. He found the lamp and some matches, and soon had a light. He quickly dressed, and was just pulling on his boots when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said.

Kim opened the door, and gave him a flashing smile. “You gonna sleep all day? Some ranch hand you’d make! I’ve been up for most an hour, and I’ve been waitin’ on you to join me at breakfast.”

She was dressed in boots and jeans, but still looked sexy as hell he thought.

“Well, I’ve led a sheltered life, Miss Wheeler—and I’m not used to gettin’ up in the middle of the night,” he said with a grin.

“C’mon, lazy bones—Maria is puttin’ it on the table. Dad’s already had his, and he’s outside givin’ the cowpokes a lecture.”

After breakfast, Magruder told Kim that he had to be getting back to Huntsville. “I’m hopin’ to get a lead on Cal Hicks’ whereabouts from somebody in town. I found

out the hard way that he's got confederates in Huntsville—one of 'em took a shot at me Saturday night. I think Hicks'll hang around there before he makes a run for the Big Thicket—if he ever does. His aunt told me he hated that place. I'm determined to catch that bastard before I go back to Nacogdoches!"

"I wish you could stay in Huntsville for good," Kim said seriously.

"I'm sorry, Kim, but I can't. But I'll try to see you again before I leave."

Wheeler was sitting on the front porch in his rocking chair when Magruder and Kim walked out. Ossie stood there in the yard holding Magruder's horse. Smoky was saddled, and his bedroll and other gear were attached.

"Magruder, take care of yourself, boy—and come back to see us when you can," said Wheeler.

"I'll try to do that," said Magruder, as he shook hands with the rancher. Then he shook Ossie's hand. "Ossie, you're a good tracker, and I enjoyed your company while we were searching for Kim."

Ossie grinned. "Grudah good friend. Ossie like," he said.

As he prepared to mount, Kim stepped up and inserted a folded envelope in his shirt pocket. "Promise me that you won't open that till you get to Huntsville. Okay?"

He had no idea what it was, but replied, "Alright, Kim. I promise."

Then she said, "Bend down here you big handsome devil, so I can kiss you." And she threw her arms around his neck and gave him a long goodbye kiss. "That's to remember me by, Mister Lawman."

He glanced up to see Wheeler and Ossie grinning. "I'm not likely to forget, Miss Wheeler," he said.

As Magruder approached the outskirts of Huntsville, he decided the first thing he should do was pay a visit to Doc Wilson to have him examine his wounds. So he went directly to the doctor's house, dismounted, tied his horse, then walked up and knocked on the door. After a few moments, the doctor's old Negro housekeeper answered the door. He smiled, removed his hat and said, "Good mornin', Auntie. Is the doctor in?"

"Yassuh, Mistuh Magrudah. He sho' is. Come in, an' Ah'll tell 'im you's heah."

In a moment the doctor entered the room. "Well, hello there, Magruder. I reckon your being back so soon is good news. Did you find Kim, and is she alright?"

"Yes, Doc. She's back home and she's fine. I could tell you the whole story, but I think Kim would enjoy tellin' you herself. You'll be goin' out there to check on Wheeler soon, won't you?"

"Yes. I plan to go out there later today. Well, come on in my treatment room, boy—and take off your shirt. Let's have a look at you."

When Magruder removed his shirt, Wilson asked, "Hey, what happened to your bandage?"

"I took it off, Doc. I got it wet last night while takin' a bath."

"Ahuh!" responded Wilson. Then he turned up the lamp, adjusted his glasses, and began examining the wounds inflicted by Ira Hawkins. After the examination, he proclaimed, "Well, it looks good, Magruder. You seem to be healin' nicely. But I want to apply some of this medicated ointment to the damaged tissue, so we'll

need to put on another bandage. Try to keep this one dry for three or four days, will you? Then if you have no more discomfort, just remove it. You should not have further need of bandages after that.”

As the doctor was applying the bandage, Magruder removed the folded envelope from his shirt pocket, and opened it. It contained two notes, one from Wheeler and one from Kim. It also contained a check for \$1000 written on Wheeler’s account at the Gibbs bank. He read Wheeler’s note first. The writing was crude with some words misspelled but it was decipherable: Magruder, saying thank you is just not enough to express my gratitude for bringing my little girl safely home. So I’m hoping this check will give you some idea of what it means to me. I never had a son, but if I’d had one, I’d want him to be just like you. Your friend, Curtis Wheeler.

When the doctor finished with the bandage, he handed him Wheeler’s note. And while the doctor read it, he proceeded to read Kim’s note: Dearest Jacob, though I tried not to, I’m afraid I’ve fallen in love with you. I know you must go back to Nacogdoches for a time to care for your father, but please—please come back. I’ll be waiting. Love always, Kim.

He didn’t let the doctor read Kim’s note, but folded it and returned it to his shirt pocket. “Doc, the old warhorse has given me this check for \$1,000. I can’t accept this—and I don’t need it. I’m gonna return it.”

“Don’t do it, Magruder. He’ll be offended if you do. Wheeler’s always been a rough and tough, self-sufficient sonuvabitch—and he felt so impotent not being able to go after Kim himself when she was abducted. His pride demands that he express his gratitude—and this is the only way he knows how. Give the money to charity, if you wish, but accept it. Don’t send it back.”

After leaving the doctor, Magruder was riding toward the hotel when he espied little Timmy Waters coming from the opposite direction. Rather than being afoot Timmy was driving a rickety old buckboard pulled by an old crowbar of a horse. On the seat beside him was a workworn looking little woman of middle years wearing a faded sunbonnet that Magruder assumed to be Timmy’s mother. Right then, he decided what he was going to do with a portion of Wheeler’s thousand-dollar gift.

As he neared them, he called out, “Hello there, Timmy. Is this lady with you your mother?”

Timmy pulled the old nag to a stop. “Howdy, Jake,” he said, grinning. “Yessir, this’s my mama.” Then to his mother, he said, “Mama, this’s Jake Magruder—the depidy sher’ff I tol’ you ‘bout.”

Magruder removed his hat saying, “Good mornin’, Mrs. Waters. I’ve been wantin’ to meet you. Your son Timmy is a bright little boy, and he has helped me identify some dangerous criminals—and in doing so, he has earned a sizable reward.”

“Timmy has earned a reward? Could that be?” was Mrs. Waters’ incredulous response.

“It certainly is, Mrs. Waters. At the moment, I’m not sure how much it will be. But when I find out, I’ll bring the money out to your house. Or I could deposit the funds directly into your bank account, if you have an account at Gibbs.”

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Magruder. No, I don't have a bank account. I've never been able to get far enough ahead for that."

"Well, perhaps we should open an account for you. The reward will likely be several hundred dollars. You wouldn't want that much layin' around your house, would you—where it might be stolen?"

"Oh, so much? I never dreamed of such a thing. Yes, perhaps a bank account would be best, Mr. Magruder."

"Well, you'll need to tell me the name you wish to go on your new account. And you'll need to give me directions out to your place, Mrs. Waters—so I can let you know when the money will be available to you."

"Well, for the name, Mr. Magruder...I reckon just Eileen Waters. Is that sufficient? I've never had a bank account before."

"I'm sure it will be. Now, how can I locate you after this is taken care of?"

Timmy spoke up. "Jus' go out the Pine Prairie road 'bout a mile'n half till you see some waggin tracks a' goin' off to the lef'. Our house's jus' a little ways off the road."

"Alright, Timmy. It's good to meet you Mrs. Waters, and I'll let you know when the money has been deposited in your new account. Goodbye." Then to the boy Magruder said, "Timmy, keep your eyes peeled for that outlaw, Cal Hicks...and let me know right away if you see or hear anything. Okay, partner? See you later."

Grinning from ear to ear, Timmy replied, "I shore will, Jake. I'll be watchin'. An' thanks fer the reward. We'uns gotta go pick up some supplies, fer now. So long." Then Timmy slapped the reins and shouted, "Giddup, hawse." And the old cart moved away with a squeak and a rattle.

Magruder had been wearing the same clothing for several days now, and thought it was past time for a change of attire. He decided to do that before making his report to the sheriff. As he dismounted in front of the Eutaw House, and was tying Smoky to the hitch rail, Texas Ranger Captain Luke McElvey stepped out onto the board sidewalk.

"Howdy there, J.J. Glad you're back. Did you find that girl?"

"Hello, Mac. I sure did—and fortunately she wasn't harmed."

McElvey then stepped off the walk and began appraising Magruder's horse. "This's a beautiful animal you've got here, son. But you've obviously forgotten yore Ranger trainin'. With this horse's unusual markin's, an enemy could identify you when you're still a mile off. Lawmen should only ride bays and blacks."

"I remember, Mac. But I wasn't thinkin' of bein' a lawman when I bought the horse. Have you seen anything of that Nighthawk bunch?"

"Yeah, I have. And I want to talk to you 'bout that."

McElvey was rolling a cigarette as he spoke. Then striking a match on the sole of his boot, he lit it. After expelling a cloud of blue smoke, he said, "But this's not the place for such talk, J.J. Come up to my room."

Magruder waved to Karl Swartz as the two men walked through the lobby. They ascended the stairway and proceeded to Room #216. McElvey unlocked the door, and they went in.

"Sit here in the chair, J.J., and I'll pour us a little toddy." Magruder sat down as McElvey retrieved a bottle of whisky and began pouring the drinks. Handing him a

glass, McElvey said, "I spotted a coupla the Nighthawk bandits yesterday. One was Ben Lowery, and the other was Kid Marshall." McElvey stopped and took a drag off his cigarette. Expelling smoke and shaking his head, he said, "I just can't figger it out. Marshall comes from a good family...college educated...father was a judge. Lord only knows why he turned outlaw! Another casualty of that damned war, I s'pose."

McElvey tossed off his whiskey with one gulp, took another drag on his cigarette, then stubbed it out in a glass bowl. Sitting down on the bed, he continued, "I had just stepped out of the hotel around 5:30 when I saw Lowery and the Kid dismounting in front of the Gibbs store. I quickly eased back inside, and watched them from the front window. They chatted at the hitch rail for a minute, and then went in the store. I halfway expected them to come a'runnin' out with a bag of money, an' I was all ready to blast 'em if they did. But they were in there less than five minutes, and came out empty handed. Then they calmly got on their horses, and trotted off. I sure wanted to plug those coyotes, but I passed up the chance on the gamble that I can get the whole damn bunch!"

"Watta you think they're up to, Mac?"

"I think they were casin' the place for a holdup. This sort of ruse was used in Abilene. One of the tellers at the Drovers Bank told me he recognized Lowery as the same man who came in the day before the robbery to get change for a fifty-dollar bill. He was really jus' sizin' the place up. The teller remembered him because he's a tall, lanky cuss and walks with a limp."

"Well, the Gibbs bank surely holds large sums of money," offered Magruder, "and would undoubtedly yield more loot than any other place in Huntsville."

"I agree," said McElvey. "And I think they're gonna strike there. At Abilene, they hit the bank durin' the last few minutes of the business day. They did the same thing in Waco. If they're plannin' a robbery here—and my gut instinct tells me they are—I expect them to use the same ploy. It's a good strategy. By strikin' late in the day, if they can elude pursuers for a coupla hours, they've got the cover of darkness to make good their escape. I'm expectin' them to hit the Gibbs bank late today, an' I want you to join me in a stakeout."

"Now hold on there, Mac! Like I've told the sheriff, I took on this deputy job just to help Mrs. Gersemann recover the money stolen by her husband's murderers. And I don't cotton getting' mixed up in any of your business."

McElvey's mouth tightened, and he glowered at his former lieutenant. "I've got the authority to force you into service," he snapped.

Magruder stared angrily at the Ranger, and considered telling him to go to hell! But finally he decided he should comply. Breathing a sigh, he said, "Alright, Mac. I'll join you, but I don't like it. I've been wantin' to wrap up my work here so I can go home. My dad's health is failin' and he needs me there. You can count me in, but only if we get some others to help. I don't fancy the two of us facin' five outlaws alone. With more men, it's less likely one of us will get shot."

McElvey smiled. "I'm kinda surprised at you, J.J. Not many years ago, you'd have taken on the whole goddamn bunch by yourself!"

"Well, I'm older and wiser now, and I try to avoid such things."

"Okay, then. We can get some others. Who'd you have in mind?"

“Les Willard, for one. And the sheriff probably knows a man or two he can call on in a pinch. We might hide a coupla men in the store, and someone could watch from the hotel lobby. And I guess we could...” Then he hesitated, grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t know, Mac. I’m afraid that sorta plan will involve a shootout, and innocent people could get hurt. I’d like to avoid that, if possible. We need to give more thought on how to handle this. And I want to get the sheriff’s ideas, too.”

“Alright, J.J. Let’s clue the sheriff in on what we’re about. And I don’t want any town folk hurt, either. But frankly, I don’t see how a shootout can be avoided. Facing the rope, they’re not gonna give up easily.”

“Look, I need to change clothes. Then I’m gonna see the sheriff to report on that kidnappin’ ordeal. But I want to take care of some bankin’ business first. How about meetin’ me at the sheriff’s place in 30 minutes or so? No, wait...I’ve got a better idea. I’ll borrow the hotel’s surrey, go over and pickup the sheriff and bring him back here. That way the sheriff’s wife and Mrs. Gersemann won’t have to be upset by our discussion of what might turn out to be a violent confrontation. Does that suit you alright?”

“Yeah, I like that better. If I went over there, I’d have to shave to make m’self presentable.”

When Magruder descended the hotel stairway, Karl Swartz motioned for him to come to the desk.

He sauntered over and asked, “What’s up, Karl?”

“Mr. Magruder, here’s a letter for you from Brian Henders. It was delivered yesterday. I also have a telegraph message for you from Nacogdoches that came Monday. And I have a letter here to Mrs. Gersemann that’s from Pittsburgh. But I haven’t seen the lady lately and she doesn’t answer her door. I suspect she’s staying elsewhere. I thought that you might know where she is.”

Magruder decided it was time to confide in Swartz regarding Hilda’s whereabouts and the reason for the secrecy. In a low voice he whispered, “Mrs. Gersemann is stayin’ with the Colsons, Karl, but no one else is to know. I want that bastard that tried to kill her to think she’s still stayin’ here. That way, him or any of his confederates will not be lookin’ for her elsewhere. Understand? I’ll take the letter to the lady. I’m goin’ over to see the sheriff anyway.”

Magruder then opened the envelope from Henders. It contained a check in the amount of eighteen hundred dollars made out to Hilda Gersemann, including two copies of a bill of sale conveying ownership of Hilda’s freight wagon and team to the state prison system. There was also a note from Henders asking that Hilda sign one copy of the sale document and return it to him. There was a second note stating that there was a large trunk of men’s clothing in the wagon, and asking what should be done with it.

“Warden Henders has agreed to buy Mrs. Gersemann’s wagon and team, Karl. That should make the lady very happy.”

Magruder started to walk away, but hesitated trying to decide if he should tell Swartz about the possibility of a robbery at Gibbs. Finally deciding he should, in a low voice he said, “Karl, Captain McElvey thinks there might be an attempt to rob

the Gibbs bank later today. It may not take place at all, but if it should, people on the street could get caught in a crossfire between the law and the thieves.” And he proceeded to give Swartz a brief account of how the robbers pulled off their bank heist in Abeline. “I’m only tellin’ you this so you can warn your guests if you should see or hear anything suggestin’ such an operation is takin’ place. Otherwise, you mustn’t say anything about it. Understand?”

As he left the hotel, Magruder stopped on the boardwalk outside to read his telegram. He opened the envelope, and found to his surprise and delight the message was from his uncle, Cameron Ford. It read:

“Hey, little brother: Dad wants to know why you haven’t come home after being sprung from the pokey. I told him there had to be a woman involved. You never could keep your pants on when around the fairer sex.

Physically, Dad seems to be holding his own, though that spell of pneumonia took a lot out of him. But he has a degenerative mental disorder affecting his memory. He also suffers from a malady called vertigo according to Doc Simpson, and he falls a lot. He often asks about you, and I believe your being here would relieve his depression. Hope to see you soon.

Love, Cam.”

He was somewhat amused by Cam’s message, though concerned about his Dad’s health. And he was thrilled that he would soon be seeing his father and this uncle who was more like a brother.

Now he crossed the street and entered the Gibbs store. Almost at once, he encountered Mary Davis, the seductive lady clerk.

“Good Mo-or-nin’, Mr. Magruder,” she said sweetly. “How was your huntin’ trip?” she asked with a mischievous smirk.

“Hello again, Miss Davis. It was quite satisfactory, thank you. I bagged everything I was huntin’ for.”

“What can I help you with today, Mr. Magruder?”

“I don’t need to purchase anything today, Miss Davis. I just need to see Mr. Collins about some banking matters.”

“I hope you’ll excuse this god-awful mess, Mr. Magruder. We just received a large freight shipment of goods, and we haven’t had time to properly stock the shelves.”

The interior was congested with numerous barrels and crates stacked about in utter confusion, with some blocking access aisles.

“I believe I can find my way through, Miss Davis. And by the way, you’re lookin’ mighty pretty today,” he offered with a winsome smile.

She didn’t blush, as he expected, but gave him a come-on grin. “Thank you, Mr. Magruder,” she responded. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

He weaved his way through the jumble of boxes, going directly to the banking booth in the rear. Fred Collins was at his usual station busily making entries in a ledger. Collins looked up as Magruder approached.

“Hello, Mr. Magruder. Haven’t seen you around for a while. What can I do for you today?”

“Well, several things, Fred. I have a check here in the amount of \$1800 from the prison system payable to Hilda Gersemann. I have her power of attorney, so I’m going to endorse it for her. I want to open an account for Mrs. Gersemann, and I want to deposit this check along with \$300 cash into Mrs. Gersemann’s new account.”

Collins was making notes as Magruder outlined the transactions. Then looking up, he said, “What else, Mr. Magruder?”

“Also, I have here a thousand dollar check made out to me from Curtis Wheeler. I want to deposit \$500 of this money into my account, and deposit the other \$500 into a new account for Eileen Waters. Do you happen to know Mrs. Waters?”

“I know of her, Mr. Magruder. She’s the seamstress lady, isn’t she?”

“That’s the one.”

“She’s done some sewing for my wife.”

“That’s good. Then Mrs. Waters won’t have any difficulty identifyin’ herself to you when she needs to make a withdrawal. She told me that she’s never had a bank account before, so you’ll probably have to give her some instructions on makin’ deposits and withdrawals, as well as in writin’ checks.”

“That’ll be no problem, Mr. Magruder. I’ll take good care of her.”

Withdrawing several bills from his wallet, Magruder placed them on the counter. “Here’s the \$300 cash for Mrs. Gersemann’s new account. Now, if you’ll give me the receipts for these deposits, I’ll see that they get to the proper parties. And by the way, Fred—there could be an attempt to hold up your bank—possibly later today.”

Collins was a bespectacled little man of middle years who most would assume to be a timid soul, and Magruder expected him to be startled by his revelation. But Collins hardly batted an eye.

“I’ve faced robbers before, Mr. Magruder—in the five years I’ve worked here—and I’ve never lost a dollar.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, Fred. How’d you handle it?”

“I have a .44 caliber pistol right here on a shelf below the counter, and I know how to use it. I was a cavalry officer under Jeb Stuart, Mr. Magruder, and saw my share of action. I’ve shot more than one holdup man. They never see my gun. They just waltz up to my booth and stick a gun in my face, thinkin’ they’ve got an easy touch, and I blast ‘em right through the flimsy partition of this booth.”

Magruder had to smile at the little man’s cool mien. “There are five outlaws in the gang we expect to attempt this robbery, Fred. And they’re a mean bunch of bastards! Captain Luke McElvey of the Rangers and I are goin’ to have a meetin’ with Sheriff Colson shortly after I leave here to plan how to best thwart their efforts. As soon as we work somethin’ out, I’ll come back and tell you our plan, and see if you concur. All of this is just based on a hunch, Fred, but Captain McElvey’s hunches usually turn out as expected. I guess I needn’t tell you to keep all this under your hat.”

Untying Smoky from the hitch rail, Magruder led him around the hotel to the stable in the rear. There he found the stable boy busy with hammer and nails repairing a stall.

“That’s a nice job you’re doin’, Bobby,” he said.

Bobby ceased what he was about, looked up, smiled and removed two nails from between his lips. "Hi there, Mr. Magruder. Ain't seen you 'round here lately. I've been wunderin' whut happened to ya'."

"I had to take a little trip, Bobby, and just got back. Smoky's been doin' a lot of travelin', and he needs a good rest. I'd like you to take care of him for me. Unsaddle him, give him a good rubdown and feed him some grain. And I'd like you to store my bedroll and saddlebags in one of your empty stalls temporarily. I'll pick 'em up later."

Magruder contemplated leaving his rifle also, but decided against it. Better safe than sorry. Untying his sheathed rifle from the saddle, Magruder continued, "Right now I need Bessie and your surrey for a little errand. I'll hitch her up myself, if that's alright with you." And he extracted a silver dollar from his pocket, and flipped it to the boy.

Bobby, grinning from ear to ear said, "Tha-anks, Mr. Magruder. I'll take care of Smoky an' yore thangs right away. An' shore, it's okay if you wanna do the hitchin'."

There was a big rangy blue roan tied in front of the sheriff's house when Magruder drove up in the surrey. Looks like the sheriff has another visitor, he mused.

The door opened before he could knock, and Hilda rushed out to greet him. "Oh Jacob! I'm so glad you're back. I saw you through the window as you drove up."

"I'm happy to be back. It was a tirin' trip but it turned out well. The Wheeler girl is safely back home. By the way, I've brought you a little gift that I think you'll like." And he removed the bank receipt from his pocket and placed it in her hand.

She read it, then exclaimed excitedly, "A bank reciept for \$2100 made out to me. How can that be?"

"Warden Henders paid \$1800 for your wagon and team, and Kim Wheeler gave me \$300 for Joe Garza's horse, which you're entitled to since he and his partner stole your money. So you're not penniless anymore, lady," he expressed with a grin.

She was smiling though there were tears in her eyes. She looked so beautiful, he was tempted to kiss her. But at that moment Mrs. Colson opened the door and stepped out.

"Welcome back, Mr. Magruder," she said. "Charley was just talking about you. He and Clint Foster were discussin' your mission to find Kimberly Wheeler."

"Is that you out there, Magruder?" yelled Sheriff Colson from inside the house. "Get in here, boy, an' gimme your report."

As he walked in, Colson said, "Shake hands with Clint Foster, Magruder. You'n him will likely to be workin' together soon."

Foster was a strapping big young fellow, with powerful shoulders, and even taller than Sam Mason. He had a shiny new badge pinned on his shirt. Foster smiled in a friendly fashion and extended his hand. "Howdy, Mr. Magruder. I've heard a lot about you."

"Hello, Clint," said Magruder, while shaking hands. "The Sheriff has told me about you, too. Please drop the 'Mister', and call me Jake. And we may be workin' together a lot sooner than the Sheriff implied."

“Whutta ya’ mean about that?” Colson asked stiffly.

Mrs. Colson and Hilda had come back into the parlor, and were listening to their exchange. Magruder realized he’d made a slip of the tongue, and wanted to conceal his meaning with the ladies present.

“Well, I’ll explain that later, Sheriff. Right now, I wanna report good news. Kim Wheeler is safely back home, sufferin’ no harm worse than the stress of being in the clutches of the kidnapppers for two days. Cal Hicks killed his partner in a drunken rage, and unfortunately got away with the stolen money.”

“I’m so glad you found her, Mr. Magruder,” exclaimed the sheriff’s wife, “and that she wasn’t harmed. But the poor girl will likely be emotionally scarred from that horrible experience. She is such a sweet, delicate little thing.”

Magruder couldn’t resist smiling a bit at Mrs. Colson’s characterization of Kim Wheeler. “That little lady is a lot tougher than she looks,” he replied. “Oh! I almost forgot. Here’s a letter for you, Hilda—from Pittsburgh.” And he passed the envelope to her.

“Thank you, Jacob. It must be from my mother. Oh, it is.”

Turning back to Colson, he said, “Sheriff, Captain McElvey has some news of the Nighthawk gang, and he’d like you to come over to the Eutaw House to discuss it—right away, if that’s possible. I’ve brought the hotel’s surrey. And Clint, it might be a good idea if you came along too.”

Sheriff Colson scowled, and exclaimed angrily, “Well, why in tarnation didn’t the old coot...” Then seeing Magruder’s dour expression, he stopped in mid-sentence and said, “Alright, son. Let me get my boots on. Martha, would you get my walking stick please?”

“Charley, it’s after eleven,” said Mrs. Colson. “Are you goin’ to be back by dinner time? I’ve got a roast in the oven and I’m makin’ a pie for dessert.”

“I hope so—but I dunno, Martha. If I’m not, you and Mrs. Gerseman go ahead. I’ll eat later.”

“We’ll wait, Charley. And Mr. Magruder, you and Clint are invited to eat with us when you bring Charley back.”

Magruder helped the sheriff get aboard the surrey, and suggested to Clint Foster that he follow. As they started off toward the hotel, Colson asked, “Whut’s that damned Ranger got up his sleeve, Magruder?”

“McElvey recognized two of the Nighthawk gang yesterday as they were going in the Gibbs store.” And he proceeded to tell the sheriff what he and McElvey had discussed, as well as his talk with Collins.

“Well, I guess we oughtta be prepared—justa make shore. But McElvey’s gonna look mighty foolish if those owlhoots don’t show up, since he hadda chance to bore two of ‘em, and let ‘em get away.

“Hey, while you were gone, they hadda trial for those two sidewinders that killed Ron Morris. You know the ones—Braxton and Maggert. I think the bastards shudda been hung, but the judge let ‘em off with 20 years hard labor. The procedin’s took less than an hour, then they carted their sorry asses off to the state prison!

“Let’s stop by the jail, son. I wanna invite Willard to our little party with McElvey.”

Arriving at the jail, they found Willard sitting outside smoking his pipe and enjoying the mild weather.

“Sittin’ down on the job, eh?” the sheriff said sternly. “I’m gonna hafta cut yore pay.”

Willard removed the pipe from his mouth and grinned. “Why you ol’ skinflint, you ain’t never paid me nuthin’ yet!”

Then he and Colson both laughed heartily. It was obvious these two had a close bond of friendship.

“Les, Captain McElvey of the Rangers wants us all at the hotel for a little meetin’. It’s got somethin’ to do with that Nighthawk outfit. Why doncha lock up the jail, and mosey on over?”

“Awright, Charley. I’ll do thet.”

Arriving at the hotel, Magruder hopped out and was tying Bessie to the hitchrail while the sheriff eased himself out of the conveyance. When Colson stepped down, he winced. Foster noticed the sheriff’s pained expression while tying his horse, and asked kindly, “Can I help you, Sheriff?”

Colson replied, “No, I’m alright, son. C’mon let’s get on with this bizness with McElvey. I wanna get back home.” And he limped toward the hotel entrance.

As soon as they entered the hotel, Karl Swartz motioned to Magruder. Asking the sheriff and Foster to wait a moment, he went over to the desk.

Swartz reported, “Mr. Magruder, Captain McElvey has reserved our conference room for your meeting. That’s #100 on the first floor. And the Captain is waiting there now.”

He thanked Swartz, and told him to direct Les Willard to the meeting room when he arrived. Then rejoining the sheriff and Foster, he said, “Come this way. McElvey’s waiting in Room 100. Let’s go hear what the old codger has to say.”

Magruder knocked on the door, and McElvey’s gruff voice said, “Come in.”

The three men entered, and after Foster was introduced, they were invited by the Ranger to sit down. The room held a long table and a dozen chairs. On the table was a bottle of whiskey and several glasses. Magruder had to smile remembering that McElvey seldom held a pow-wow without some spirits to liven up the discussion.

“How about a drink, gents?” offered McElvey picking up the bottle and beginning to pour one in a glass.

“I pass,” replied the sheriff stiffly.

“Thank you, Captain, but I will too,” said Foster.

Magruder knew the captain was going to have a drink, and he didn’t want him to drink alone. “Pour me a short one, Mac,” he said.

As McElvey poured the drinks, Les Willard entered without knocking. Quickly seizing the opportunity, he said, “Keep pourin’, Cap’n. Ah wouldn’t mind wettin’ my whistle a bit.”

McElvey handed the drinks to Magruder and Willard, then poured another for himself.

“McElvey, give us yore angle on this mebbe-so bank heist,” said Colson impatiently.

And McElvey proceeded to give them a brief account of the bank robberies in Abeline and Waco committed by the Nighthawk bunch, and how he was convinced the outlaws planned the same thing for Huntsville. “Yore usta-be-ranger deputy thinks we might capture this gang without a shootout, Sheriff. But I fail to see how.”

“Mac,” said Magruder, “suppose you tell everyone about the clever way the robbers worked that holdup in Abeline.”

“Alright,” said Captain McElvey as he fished a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and began rolling a cigarette. “Well, here’s the whole story, gents. When the news of that robbery was received in Austin, Governor Coke commissioned me to go after the perpetrators. In the governor’s words, I was to ‘find the sonsabitches and illiminate them’. It seems much of the money lost in that bank heist was state funds, and that made the Governor furious. I arrived in Abeline four days after the robbery. And with the help of the local sheriff, I was able to round up and question most of the witnesses. They all pretty much agreed on what transpired. From start to finish, it was thisaway: Three of the gang approached the bank from one direction, and the other two rode in from the opposite direction. I suppose they thought it’d look less conspicuous than if they all rode in together. Anyway, the first three dismounted and went in the bank. Then the other two—a nigger and a greaser—got off their hawses and took up positions on either side of the doorway. They were the lookouts. On the inside, one of the men walked up to the teller—that was Nighthawk—while Ben Lowery and Kid Marshall went to opposite corners in the rear of the lobby where they could cover ever’body with their guns. Soon as Nighthawk yelled it was a stickup, Lowery and Marshall jerked their pistols and shouted for everybody to raise their hands and stay put. Everyone there did as they were told. Then there was a brief argument between Nighthawk and the teller about the amount of money in the till. There was some \$7000 in the cash drawer, but it was clear the robber chief expected a lot more. Jubal was screamin’ and threatenin’, and the poor clerk was cowerin’ and swearin’ he didn’t have the combination to the safe. But finally the bastard decided to settle for what was in the till, and he grabbed the money and they all ran out. Then they leaped on their hawses and skedaddled. And they were long gone before the local lawmen knew what happened. That’s the only robbery by this bunch that I know of where people weren’t abused or killed. They followed a similar plan in Waco, but Nighthawk killed a bank teller there who tried to pull a gun.”

“You think they might try the same stunt here, Captain?” asked Foster.

“Kinda looks thataway, don’t it?” offered Willard.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” said the sheriff, “if they happen to be plannin’ a robbery at all.”

“I’m bettin’ they are,” snapped McElvey.

“Well, their old tricks may not work so well here,” said Magruder. “Due to its large size and the clutter of goods, the Gibbs store presents a different challenge than a regular bank.”

“Okay, J.J., let’s hear your angle on that,” said McElvey.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door, and Karl Swartz stuck his head in. “Gentlemen,” he announced, “I believe your anticipated robbery is takin’ place right now.”

“Whut the hell!” expressed McElvey, as everyone got to their feet.

“What’d you see, Karl?” Magruder asked quickly.

“Not a minute ago, five men rode up to Gibbs, and three of them went inside. One was a tall man with a limp. The other two are outside holding the horses.”

Magruder was a take-charge individual capable of split-second decisions in a crisis. And while the others there seemed indecisive, he quickly formulated a plan of action. “Karl, do you have a vacant room upstairs facing the street?”

“Yes, number 201 is empty.”

“My rifle’s in the surrey out front,” stated Magruder, “but we can’t retrieve it without arousin’ suspicions. Mac, I saw a rifle in your room. How about goin’ to Room 201 and cover the street with your rifle.”

“Hell, no! I’m goin’ out to the street and face’em with my sixgun.”

“I’ll take that window spot with the rifle,” said Willard.

“Alright. Give Les the key to your room so he can get the rifle. Is it loaded?”

“Hell yes, it’s loaded!” exclaimed McElvey, passing the key to Willard.

“Clint, come with me. We’re goin’ out the back door, and take up positions on either side of the hotel.” Then looking at the others, he ordered, “Don’t anybody start anything till I open the ball.”

“Whatta ya’ gonna do, Magruder?” asked the sheriff.

“No time to explain, Sheriff. Alright, let’s move. We don’t have a minute to spare.” And he ran out the door followed by Foster.

As they left the building, Magruder said, “Clint, go around the hotel on the Cedar Street side, then ease up to Jackson stayin’ close to the wall. Stop there and wait for my signal. I’m goin’ around the other side through the alley.”

Foster replied, “Okay, Jake.” And he took off at a trot.

Magruder had just started around the building when he saw Bobby Simmons come out of the stable. That gave him an idea how the boy might help. He motioned to the boy. “Bobby, wanna help me catch some bandits?”

“Damn betcha!” said the boy with a big grin.

“Follow me, son, and stay close to the building.”

When they got up to the street, Magruder removed his hat then peeked around the corner. He saw two men in front of Gibbs holding the reins of five horses. One was black and the other had dark skin like a Mexican. The guns of the outlaws were still in their holsters. He had the boy take a peek too.

There was a freight wagon passing by, and a number of pedestrians on the street, all going about their business completely unaware of what was happening.

“Now Bobby, I’m going to mosey over there, innocent like, and try to hold up those bastards. If any shootin’ starts, you stay outta the way. Hear? But if I’m successful, I’ll signal to you. And I want you to run over there, grab the reins of those horses, and lead ‘em around behind the hotel as quickly as possible. Get it? I wanna take their horses so they can’t escape.”

“I got it, Mr. Magruder,” said the boy excitedly.

Now Magruder removed his badge and pocketed it, then loaded another round in the empty chamber of his revolver. Twirling his pistol and thrusting it back in its holster, he pushed his hat back on his head to assume a casual air, then he coolly sauntered out toward the Gibbs store just like an ordinary citizen might do who had business there. He strolled along whistling a tune, and he waved to a

horseman riding by. Though his narrowed eyes never veered from the robbers, he would occasionally turn his head slightly from one side and then the other, to give the appearance that he was just looking about and was completely oblivious to the mischief taking place at the store.

The lookouts watched him suspiciously and shuffled their feet nervously. They seemed indecisive, and had yet to draw their weapons. But when the deputy was about 20 yards from these men, the Mexican grasped the handle of his pistol. Magruder then whipped out his Colt, and had the startled robbers covered before they could react.

“Hands up or die!” he shouted.

Both men slowly raised their hands.

“Now turn around and face the building,” he ordered.

They both complied.

Since each outlaw carried his gun on his right hip, Magruder ordered, “Alright, both of you—keep your right hand in the air, and reach down with your left hand, unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop to the ground.”

As the two dropped their gunbelts, Magruder signaled to Bobby and Foster.

“Now, you bastards, walk up to that building and put your noses against the wall!” he ordered. “One false move, and I’ll let daylight through ya’.”

Bobby and Foster ran up about at the same time.

“Bobby, get these horses around behind the hotel. Then stay out of sight so you won’t get hurt.”

Bobby grabbed their reins, and led the five horses away as fast as he could go.

“Clint, stand to one side of the doorway here, and keep these bastards covered. If either of ‘em so much as farts, shoot ‘em!”

“Okay, Jake,” replied Foster with a grin.

Magruder pinned his badge back on, then picked up one of the outlaw’s pistol. It was a short-barrelled Colt .45 just like his own. He rotated the cylinder to verify it was loaded, then stuck the gun in his belt.

Picking up the other outlaw’s weapon, he passed it to Foster.

“Hang on to this, Clint. You might need it. I’m gonna try to sneak inside without bein’ seen.”

At that moment, there were three gunshots fired in rapid succession inside the store.

“Don’t know what’s happenin’, Clint, but I’m goin’ in.”

With a gun in each hand, Magruder rushed through the doorway of the Gibbs General Store and then stopped. He heard men yelling and the sound of women sobbing in the rear of the store, but he was prevented from seeing what was happening by shipping crates blocking his view.

Then he heard cursing. “Help me, Kid. That sonuvabitch shot me,” cried one voice. “Hell, you’re a goner, Jubal! He bored you dead center,” responded another voice. “Lowery, put that damned money in the bag, and let’s get outta here. We can’t take time to drag Nighthawk along. Is that teller dead?”

“Yeah, I put two slugs in him after he shot Jubal.” Then after a moment, he said, “Okay, I’ve got the money. Let’s go.”

Then there was another shot and a scream, followed by two more shots.

“Jubal shot me in the back,” a voice cried out.

“Well, I killed the bastard! But it looks like yo’re a goner too, Kid. What a shame. I won’t have anybudy to share this money with. Haw! Haw! Haw! I’ll get rid of the nigger and the greaser, then it’ll all be mine. Hey! You people stay down over there if you don’t wanna get shot,” he yelled.

Following that rude shout, Magruder heard the loud wail of a woman as if in agony.

He then heard the heavy footsteps coming, and he quickly ducked behind one of the tall merchandise shelves near the front of the store. An open barrel nearby held several axe handles. Magruder quickly put away his guns and grabbed one of them. Gripping the axe handle with both hands, he held it poised over his right shoulder prepared to strike. As Lowery walked by with a gun in his hand, Magruder struck his forearm a powerful blow with the axe handle. Lowery yelped and dropped the gun at the same time.

Then he jabbed Lowery in the side with a pistol and shouted, “Drop that money, you sonuvabitch!”

Lowery dropped the bag, and whined, “You broke my damned arm!”

“That won’t be a problem after they stretch your neck,” snapped Magruder. “Walk on out the door.”

As he walked his prisoner out the door, Magruder saw McElvey running from the hotel, and the sheriff limping along after him.

“Somebody get the doctor, quickly,” ordered Magruder. “And get the undertaker, too. I’m afraid Fred Collins is dead, and Jubal Nighthawk as well. Kid Marshall could still be alive.”

A small crowd of curious people had gathered around attracted by the commotion, among them a man on horseback. “I’ll get the doctor,” he said. And he turned his animal, put the spurs to him, and galloped away.

“Get the undertaker, too,” Magruder shouted after him.

Willard stuck his head out of the upstairs window of the hotel, and yelled, “Hey! No fair, Magruder. You had all the fun!”

“Throw down the keys to the jailhouse, Les,” shouted Magruder.

“No, I’ll bring ‘em,” hollered Willard, and his head disappeared from the window.

“Clint, when Willard gets here, y’all march these skunks over to the jail. Then come back here after they’re locked up. Alright?”

“Will do, Jake,” he said.

Sheriff Colson walked up and said, “Magruder, you are the goldarnedest, most quick-witted lawman I ever saw.”

“He got all that from my trainin’,” said McElvey with a big grin.

At that moment, Mary Davis walked out of the store. She was shaking and as white as a sheet. “Is it all over?” she asked in a tremulous voice.

“Yes, it’s over, Miss Davis,” Magruder said kindly. “I heard some women cryin’ in there. How many others are inside?”

“There are seven or eight women, and an elderly gentleman back there. And from the way he reacted, I think the man may have had a heart attack. The robbers herded all of the clerks and customers to a back of the store near the bank booth, and made us all lie on the floor. The others are still in there afraid to move.”

“Shouldn’t someone try to find Sanford Gibbs, or someone else in charge to let ‘em know what’s happened here?” asked Magruder. “If Fred Collins is dead, the store’s gonna need a new banker.”

“I’ll take care of those things, Mr. Magruder,” muttered Miss Davis. “I’m the assistant manager. God! I hope Fred survives. Danny Magee’s the relief banker — an’ he can take over if...oh, I can’t bring myself to say it.”

Captain McElvey said, “Let’s go in, J.J., and see what the crime scene looks like.”

“I’m coming, too,” said the sheriff.

“If you feel up to it, Miss Davis, how about going inside with us to escort those people out? They may assume we’re some of the robbers if we go in alone.”

“Alright, Mr. Magruder. I think I can manage that.”

“And oughten we post a sign or something to keep the public out of the store,” Magruder suggested.

“I’ll take care of that.”

As Willard walked up, Magruder asked, “Les, can you and Clint herd this riff-raff over to the jail without any help?”

“These amy-toors? Why hail yes! Ah was dealin’ with real hardcases, boy, when you were still suckin’ on a sugar tit!”

The men all laughed.

“Be sure you search ‘em, Les—when you get ‘em over there,” ordered the sheriff.

“Charley, you nag wus’n an’ old woman. Doncha think Ah know thet?”

The sheriff chuckled and shook his head.

“C’mon, Clint,” said Willard, “let’s do’er.” Then to the outlaws he barked, “Awright you mangy dawgs, git agoin’ thataway, and if’n you make any trouble, Ah’ll fill yore butts fulla lead!”

Magruder now spotted Bobby Simmons among the crowd of onlookers, so he called to him. “Bobby, come here—I’ve got another job for you. For the next 30 minutes or so, I want you to stand here by the door, and tell any customers trying to enter that the Gibbs store is temporarily closed for inventory. Alright? And please direct the doctor and undertaker to come inside when they arrive. Will you do that?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Magruder. I shore will.”

Mary Davis led the three lawmen inside. Magruder picked up the moneybag dropped by Ben Lowery as they all walked toward the rear of the store. Miss Davis immediately went to the corner where the hostages were huddled, and began to console them. They were still lying there in a state of shock. The lawmen concentrated on the crime scene. They found Fred Collins and Jubal Nighthawk both dead. Kid Marshall still clung to life, but his shallow breath and the bloody froth on his lips suggested he might have sustained a mortal wound.

“We can thank Fred Collins for the outcome here,” said Magruder. “The brave action taken by that little man triggered the demise of the Nighthawk gang. No pun intended. I want Fred’s widow to receive all of that reward money...and someone’s gonna have to tell the poor lady about her husband’s death.”

As Mary Davis began escorting the women hostages out, she mentioned in passing, “I think that elderly gentleman over there is dead. I’m afraid the excitement was too much for him.”

Magruder then knelt down, and supporting Kid Marshall's head, he said, "Hang on, Kid. The doctor's coming."

The Kid smiled and whispered through bloody froth on his lips, "Hell, I'd rather go this way than to hang."

Marshall had a youthful handsome face, and it was easy to see how he acquired his nickname. Magruder guessed his age to be little more than 20.

"Where's the loot y'all got from those other robberies, Kid?" asked Magruder.

"Most of it (cough) is in Jubal's saddle bags," whispered Marshall. "The rest (cough, cough), what hasn't been spent or gambled away, is in the pockets of the gang."

"Kid, you're an educated man—why'd you turn to outlawry?"

A grin this time. "It's a long, sad story, Deputy."

"Why'd y'all decide to pull this heist at noon, instead of in the evenin', like before?"

"Jubal's stupid idea (cough). I spotted that Ranger McElvey yesterday when Lowery and I was here at the store. An' I told Jubal they were on to us (cough), an' we should forget this job and ride out. But he wouldn't hear of it. He said the law wouldn't be expectin' us (cough) to hit the bank at noon." Then a wince and a groan.

Doc Wilson and Will Tighe then came in together.

They each spoke to McElvey and the sheriff who, at the moment, were just standing about.

The doctor quickly knelt down beside Magruder and Marshall.

"Looks like that bullet nicked his lung, Doc," said Magruder.

"Yeah. It don't look too good, young feller," said the doctor.

"Will, is Collins dead?" shouted Wilson over his shoulder.

Tighe, who had gone back behind the bank booth answered, "Yeah, Doc. Fred's had it. Damn shame! Good man. That thief there in front of the booth has also cut his last caper."

"Someone be sure and search that man," ordered Magruder. "He's likely packin' summa the stolen money."

Captain McElvey went over to Jubal Nighthawk's body, and began to search him.

"And someone oughtta check on that old man in the corner. Miss Davis thinks he's dead."

Will Tighe complied, after which he commented, "Yep! He croaked."

"Sheriff," the undertaker asked, "would you help me round up some men outside to carry these bodies out to my buggy? Not too many wanna cooperate with me."

"Sure, Tighe." And the sheriff and the undertaker walked out.

The doctor asked, "Magruder, is anybody else in here injured?"

"No. This man's the only one, Doc."

Then Wilson said, "I wanna rig up a stretcher, an' carry him over to the hotel. We need to put him in a bed. It's too risky transporting him to my office in a buggy. Do you know how to rig a stretcher, Magruder?"

"Yeah, Doc, I've dunnit before. I'll get a coupla long shovel handles and some men's coats. That'll do it."

As Clint Foster walked up, Magruder said, "Clint, I'd like you to help me rig a stretcher, and carry this man over to the hotel."

"Sure will, Jake," responded Huntsville's newest deputy sheriff.

Doc Wilson commandeered a ground floor room at the Eutaw House for treating Kid Marshall. After they laid him on the bed, Magruder and Foster removed Marshall's boots and trousers, and helped the doctor cut off his shirt, then they supported him while Wilson cleaned, medicated, and bound his wounds. Marshall was only semi-conscious during this process, occasionally letting out a groan.

"That bullet's lodged in his chest—and I'm afraid it'll have to stay there. Except for nickin' his lung, it seems to have done no damage to other organs. I've seen men recover from such wounds, and he's young and otherwise healthy. I'd say he's got a 50-50 chance—if infection don't kill him. That's my big worry."

"Who's gonna care for him while he's recoverin', Doc?" asked Magruder.

"I've sent for Mrs. Greer, the Baptist preacher's wife. She'll tend him. Mrs. Greer was a nurse in the service of the Confederacy. She's always willin' to help out. Now, y'all help me prop him up so he stays in a halfway sittin' position. He'll get pneumonia if we lay him down flat."

After that chore was accomplished, Wilson said, "I need to go now. Got things to do. Mrs. Greer will be here shortly."

"Doc, when you get time, will you go by the jail?" asked Magruder. "I think I broke Ben Lowery's arm awhile ago."

As the doctor walked out, Magruder began searching Kid Marshall's coat. He recovered something over \$500 in large bills and gold coin.

"I assume all the others were carrying a similar amount," he told Foster.

"Clint, I'd like you to take possession of this money, then go out to the stable behind the hotel and search the saddle bags on the outlaws' horses. The Kid told me that Jubal Nighthawk was carryin' most of the loot from their other robberies in his saddlebags. After that, haul whatever you find over to the jail and pool it with the money Les finds on those other three crooks. I'll have a talk with Ranger Captain McElvey in the meantime, to see what he wants to do with these funds."

It suddenly occurred to Magruder that he'd been ordering Clint Foster around as if he was a subordinate, and that it might be resented.

"Clint, I just realized that I've been throwin' my weight around like I was your superior officer, which I'm not. That's a bad habit of mine, and I apologize. Please accept everything I've said as if it were a suggestion, and if you have a different idea, please say so."

Foster smiled. "I didn't take offense, Jake. You're much more experienced than I am, and I gladly accept your bein' in charge."

"Are you gonna accept Mrs. Colson's invitation for lunch, Clint?"

"No. Please thank her for me, but my mother's expectin' me to eat with her and Dad. After dinner, I plan to mosey around town to get acquainted with folks and visit a few old friends. The sheriff suggested I do that to let it be known that Huntsville now has another peace officer. He says he's been criticized for not hirin' enough lawmen to protect the town."

Chapter XIV

Poetic Justice.

Magruder walked out to the hotel lobby, to find Sheriff Colson and Captain McElvey engaged in a heated discussion.

“To hell with the state’s jurisdiction!” the sheriff was saying. “That gang committed crimes here, and murdered one of our finest citizens. And by God they’re gonna be tried and hung here!”

Magruder smiled as he interrupted. “Excuse me, gents. I’ve asked Clint Foster to collect the stolen funds from Jubal Nighthawk’s saddle bags, and to take all the loot over to the jail to pool it with whatever Willard collects from those other three. I reckon it’ll be up to you, Mac, to sort out this mess. If you’ve got a different idea, you can probably catch Clint out back at the stables.”

“Naw, that sounds alright to me, J.J. Say, I just had the pleasure of wirin’ the governor, and tellin’ him that the Nighthawk gang had pulled their last job.”

“That’s good, Mac. Doc Wilson has done everything he can for Kid Marshall, and it’ll just take time to see if he survives. Ironic, isn’t it? Going to so much trouble to save his life, so he can be executed later.”

“Well, a trial will determine that, J.J. If he lives, he might get off with jail time.”

“Magruder,” said Colson, “I want to commend you, on the way you handled yoreself today. Huntsville is really gonna miss you when you go back home.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. But you’ve got a good man in Clint Foster. I think he can handle things. And if you’re about ready to go, I’ll drive you home.”

“Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s go, son.”

“See you later, Mac.”

“Okay, J.J. You did yourself proud today, boy. Just like always.”

On the return trip back to the Colson residence, the sheriff said, “Let’s not say anythin’ to the ladies about that trouble at Gibbs today—alright? They’ll find out about it soon enough, but there’s no need in upsettin’ them now. I’ll jus’ tell ‘em we hadda pow-wow with McElvey about outlaws—which we did.”

When the men entered the Colson residence, they found the women setting food on the dinner table. The savory aroma of roast beef with all the trimmings made Magruder’s mouth water.

“I’m glad y’all got back when you did,” said the sheriff’s wife. “Hilda and I were about to start eatin’ without you. Y’all sit down now, and I’ll carve the meat.”

During the meal, Mrs. Colson was disposed to be talkative. She seemed eager to relate facts about certain recent events, likely gleaned from over-the-fence gossip.

“I heard the most shockin’ news yesterday from Kay Wallace. Just imagine what Minerva Jones discovered about that new minister of the New Jerusalem Church. He’s rentin’ a cottage from her, you know—right next door to where she lives. Well, she noticed that a certain woman of the congregation has often been bringin’ him

food for his supper, and sometimes stayin' till after dark. Well, naturally she became suspicious of what they were about."

Unseen by his wife, the sheriff looked at Magruder with an expression of distaste, and shook his head.

"Well, after this strange activity had been goin' on a while," continued Mrs. Colson, "Minerva sneaked over there one night and put her ear up to the wall, and can you believe it—she heard the unmistakable sounds of an intimate affaire—if you get my meaning. Well—as you might guess—she was outraged. And she quickly reported this affair to Milford Jackson of the Huntsville Item. But—can you believe it—Milford told her, 'I'm aware of all this, and I know the minister and the lady involved. He's a bachelor, and she's a war widow. And regardless of your moral outrage—even if you're right about what they were doin'—it is not illegal. What's more, I will not print a word about it. You didn't actually see anything, and I'd advise you to keep quiet about what you think you heard. Otherwise, you might find yourself in a lawsuit for making libelous charges.'

"Well—I guess you know—Minerva was just furious that she couldn't do anything about this immoral conduct."

"The meddlesome ol' biddy was probably jus' mad 'cause she wasn't invited to the party," snorted the sheriff.

Magruder almost choked on some food in his effort to suppress a laugh, as Hilda covered her mouth with a hand to conceal a grin.

"CHARLEY!" exclaimed his wife. "That's an awful thing to say!"

"Well, that's whut I think about gossipmongers like her. Jackson warned her not to blab about that. But she jus' couldn't keep her big yap shut. How else would that Wallace woman know about it?"

Mrs. Colson seemed peeved, and ate the rest of her food in silence.

After the satisfying meal, Magruder complimented the food, thanked Mrs. Colson for the invitation, then asked if he might be excused stating he had several errands to run.

"I need to take a bank deposit receipt over to Mrs. Eilene Waters. And want to go by the livery stable to leave a copy of that bill of sale for Hilda's wagon and team with Spencer. He can give it to the prison folks when they pick up the outfit. That'll save me a trip out to that miserable place—a place I'd like to forget."

"Jacob, please wait till I help Mrs. Colson clean up. I'd like to go with you. I haven't been out of the house in days."

"You go along, child," said Mrs. Colson. "I'll straighten up here. You've done more than your share of the work since you've been here."

"No—I want to help. Jacob, will you wait?"

"Of course," he replied.

"Magruder, how 'bout joinin' me outside on the porch," said Colson. "I'd like to get some fresh air."

"Alright, Sheriff. I'll be waitin' on the porch, Hilda."

After the two men were seated outside, Colson removed a pouch of tobacco from a shirt pocket, filled the bowl of his pipe, then tamping it down, he put a match to it. He puffed on it several times to get it going, then expelling a cloud of blue smoke, he said,

"I hadda visitor yesterday from a feller named Catlin. He has a little farm near Pine Hill, a small community four or five miles south of here. It was the first time he'd been in town in a month. Sam Mason beat him up pretty bad one night for bein' drunk an' disorderly, and he's avoided Huntsville ever since. But after readin' in the Huntsville Item that Mason had been fired, and was now wanted by the law, Catlin felt safe in comin' back to town. Well, Catlin tol' me he was in Ed Garret's store in Pine Hill the day before—that would've been Tuesday—and in walked Sam Mason big as brass. He said Mason didn't seem to recognize him—he jus' bought some coffee an' tobacco, and walked out.

"After Mason had gone, Catlin asked Garret if he knew 'bout Mason bein' wanted by the law, and he said Garret seemed surprised to hear about it. Then he asked him how often Mason had come aroun', and Garret said he'd been in the store once or twice before. So Catlin reasoned that since Mason had visited Garret's store more'n one time, he wasn't jus' passin' through, but was holed up some place nearby. Catlin was anxious to report all that to me, 'cause he hates Mason, and he'd love to see him locked up."

"Well, I've been wonderin' about Mason—whether he might have hauled freight for parts unknown—which any prudent man would do after murderin' someone. But since he hasn't, he's obviously hangin' around hopin' to catch Cal Hicks and steal the Gersemann money. You know, Jerry Malloy told me that Ike Barlow, one of Mason's friends, had a little spread a few miles south of here. Perhaps that's where Mason's hangin' out."

"Mebbe so, Magruder. Mebbe so."

"How can I find Pine Hill, Sheriff? I just might decide to go down there and snoop around. Hicks could have decided to make peace with Mason, and split the Gersemann money with him. If he did that, he might be hidin' out down around Pine Hill also."

"I can't imagine that happenin', Magruder. Knowin' Mason, I think he'd kill Hicks and take all the money if Hicks was foolish enough to try to make such a deal. But to answer yore question, Burton Street is three blocks west of here, and if you go south on Burton, that'll put you on the Pine Hill road."

When Hilda walked out, she was wearing the same pretty yellow dress she had worn out to the Cambell ranch.

"I'm ready, Jacob. And isn't it a glorious day to go for a drive?"

"It surely is, Hilda. Sheriff, I guess we'll run along now. I assume McElvey will check in with you before he leaves town, since it's still undecided where those bank robbers will be prosecuted."

"He damned well better!" exclaimed the sheriff.

As they were riding away from the Colson residence in the surrey, Hilda asked, "What was that bank robber business all about?"

"Well, that was a slip of the tongue. The sheriff and I agreed not to say anything about that in front of you and Mrs. Colson, because we didn't want you to be alarmed. But there was an attempt to rob the Gibbs store earlier today. Fred Collins, the banker, and one of the outlaws were killed."

"How terrible, Jacob."

"Yes, it is. But it could've been worse. There were five robbers in that gang. The gang leader was killed, and one of them—a handsome young fellow not much more

than a boy—was seriously wounded. The other three are in jail. The Gibbs bank lost no money, thanks to Fred Collins, but he gave his life protecting his charge. Most of the money from previous robberies that the thieves pulled in Abeline and Waco is expected to be recovered. Ranger Captain McElvey will have the fun of sorting all that out—to get those funds back to their rightful owners.”

Reaching for Magruder’s hand, Hilda said, “Jacob, I told Mrs. Colson that you and I would have supper at the Eutaw House tonight. And after that, rather than disturb them, I’d probably spend the night in my hotel room. I brought along a nightgown and robe, just in case. I explained that I felt safer now that Cal Hicks was on the run. And I knew I’d be protected with you in a room nearby. Is that all right with you?” she asked sweetly, giving him a warm smile and squeezing his hand. “Furthermore, since I am now a lady of means, I intend to buy our supper.”

He smiled. “Well, how could a fellow refuse an offer like that?”

On their leisurely drive out the Lufkin road, Hilda explained, “Jacob, I plan to give Bernie’s clothes to charity. They’re quality garments, and I wish you could use them, but I know they wouldn’t fit. Bernie was much shorter than you, and rather stout.”

When they arrived at Spencer’s Livery Stables, Magruder stepped down from the carriage, tied Bessie to the rail, then assisted Hilda as she stepped off. As they walked through the big double doorway of the livery, they heard the loud voices of uncouth men laughing and talking while discussing horseflesh in crude terms. The moment Spencer spotted Hilda, he yelled at the men, “Hey, you men back there! Shut your traps an’ mind your manners! There’s a lady comin’ in.”

“Hello, Mr. Spencer,” said Hilda. “Do you remember me? I’m Hilda Gersemann.” And she extended her hand. “You’ve been caring for my horses and wagon since that fateful day my husband was killed by bandits.”

Spencer was a tall, slender, slightly stoop-shouldered gray-haired man of about sixty years with a kindly face. “Yes ma’am, I remember you well,” he responded, taking her hand. “How have you been, Mrs. Gersemann?”

“Very well, Sir, thanks to the kindness shown me by the many good people of Huntsville, of which you were the first. I want to thank you, Mr. Spencer, for your charitable act. I was truly a lady in distress. And now I want to pay you for your service. What are your charges for caring for my wagon and team?”

“Not a dime, Mrs. Gersemann. It was my Christian duty to help. And it was no trouble at all caring for your animals—they’re as tame as kittens. I hear they’ve been sold to the prison. Is that right?”

“Yes, Sir, they have. Also, there’s a trunk full of my late husband’s clothes in the wagon. I have no more need for them, and I’d like to donate them to some charity. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Yes, ma’am, I surely do. The church I attend has a committee that distributes food and clothing to the needy. They’ll be happy to receive your gift.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spencer. Your handling that is a big relief to me. I hated to think of just discarding his things.” Then looking past Spencer, she opined, “Mr. Spencer, that white haired gentleman back there looks very much like the doctor that examined my husband the day he was shot.”

"It's the same man, Mrs. Gersemann. That's Alex Huffmier. He's a doctor of veterinary medicine. But Alex doctors 'bout as many folks as he does livestock---there being only one other doctor in town. Doctor Wilson is not always around when folks have a need."

"I see. My husband was examined by a horse doctor," she said with a smile. "Bernie would have gotten a good laugh out of that. Oh, please forgive me for not introducing my friend. This is Jacob Magruder."

"I haven't had the pleasure, but I know who he is," replied Spencer, smiling and offering his hand.

"Good to know you, Spencer," said Magruder, as they gripped hands. Then extracting a folded paper from his pocket, he continued, "I have here a copy of a bill of sale signed by Mrs. Gersemann. It acknowledges Mrs. Gersemann's acceptance of the prison's offer to buy her outfit." He passed the document to Spencer. "A crew from the prison will likely be comin' by soon to pick up the rig. I'd appreciate your givin' them this paper when they arrive."

As the couple walked out of Spencer's, the Lufkin Stage went tearing by in a swirl of dust. It was headed north. The old driver was swinging his long whip around and around, and when he popped it above the heads of his four-horse team, it sounded like a pistol shot.

"Jacob...surely that driver doesn't beat those beautiful animals with that whip?" expressed Hilda with concern.

Magruder smiled. "No, no, Hilda...he just pops it over their heads to urge them along."

As they were driving away from the livery stable, Hilda said, "Jacob, I'd like to stop at the Oakwood Cemetery. Could we do that? I want to visit Bernie's gravesite. This may be the last chance I have, as I'll be going home to Pittsburgh soon."

"Oh, you've made up your mind, have you?"

"Yes. That letter from my mother said my father had suffered a debilitating stroke, and could no longer run the foundry business."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Hilda."

"Mother is frantic. She says they have orders for various things, and she's having difficulty handling them. She has no head for business. At present, the shop foreman is trying to fill in for Dad. He knows the products, but he's confused by such things as costs, mark-ups and billing. I have a younger brother, but he's no help at all. He's a boozier and a gambler, and he never bothered to learn the business."

"That's too bad. Sure—we can stop at the cemetery. We have to pass right by there anyway on our way out to the Waters place."

At the Oakwood Cemetery, they had little trouble finding the earthen mound that was Bernard Gersemann's final resting place. The two stood there in silence for a few minutes and then brushing a tear from her eye, Hilda murmured softly, "I want to arrange for a headstone for Bernie before I go home. That's the least I can do for the good man I shared my life with for seven years."

They drove out the Pine Prairie road a ways, and found the turn-off to the Waters place. As they approached the humble abode, they saw Timmy outside playing with a baby goat. Timmy spotted them, waved, then ran in the house to call his mother. Mrs. Waters came out right away and greeted them cordially.

“Won’t y’all come in for some coffee, Mr. Magruder?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Waters, but we can’t today.”

He called Timmy over to the surrey. “Timmy, I want you to give this deposit slip to your Mother.” Then addressing Mrs. Waters, he said, “That receipt confirms that you have five hundred dollars on deposit in your account at the Gibbs Bank. When you wish to withdraw some money, just go to the store and see Miss Mary Davis. She’s the Assistant Manager. She will guide you in getting cash from your account. And when you need to buy food or other supplies at Gibbs, Miss Davis can show you how by writing a check for those things, you will not require any cash.”

“As mentioned, Mr. Magruder, I’ve never had a bank account before, and what you’re tellin’ me sounds so confusin’.”

“It’s really not, Mrs. Waters. You just see Miss Davis when you go by the store, and she will explain everything clearly.”

Mrs. Waters looked at the \$500 deposit receipt with an expression of disbelief, murmuring, “So much money—I never dreamed of having so much.”

Turning Bessie around, Magruder said, “We’re gonna leave now, folks. Timmy, you remember to keep your eyes peeled for any sign of Cal Hicks. And let me know right away if you see him. Okay, partner?”

Grinning from ear to ear, Timmy replied, “I shore will, Jake. An’ thanks fer the reward. Maybe Mama will buy me thet pony now thet I’ve been a’wantin’.”

As they began driving back to town, Magruder looked at his watch. “It’s now a little past three—what would you like to do with the rest of the afternoon? Would you like to stop at Nora’s for coffee?”

“No, I’d rather not. It’s such a beautiful day---I want to continue driving. I want to make the most of this time with you, Jacob. Our time together is quickly running out, and it breaks my heart. I must return to Pittsburgh, and you have to go back to Nacogdoches. Let’s drive somewhere out in the country—somewhere where we can be alone.”

“Alright, if you wish.” Then after a thoughtful pause, he said, “Crabb’s Prairie is a little hamlet a few miles west, and I’ve heard it’s a pretty drive through the piney woods. How does that sound?”

“It sounds nice, Jacob.”

A little north of the Oakwood Cemetery was a crossroad where a small sign pointed the way to Crabb’s Praire. Magruder turned there. And they traveled along this unfamiliar roadway for a quarter hour or so not speaking, but just enjoying the scenery and the pleasant weather. Bessie trotted along briskly without any urging, and Hilda sat close to Magruder holding his free hand.

Looking at the fleecy clouds above, she asked in a dreamy voice, “Did you ever notice how clouds sometime take the shape of animals or people? My mother used to say clouds were pictures painted in the heavens by the finger of God.”

“Yes, I’ve often noticed that. But clouds are also indicators of imminent weather, if we know how to read the signs.”

“You are so practical, Jacob. Do you not marvel at the beauty and wonders of nature?”

“I certainly do. I’ve spent much of my life in the outdoors—often sleepin’ under the stars. How could I not appreciate those things? I’ve often given thanks in my heart for that privilege. And I appreciate them even more after bein’ confined in prison.”

“Forgive me, Jacob—I should’ve known that.” Then after a pause she said, “Alright, Mr. Weatherman, what do the clouds tell you today?”

“You just had to call my hand on that, didn’t you?” he asked with a grin. “Fair enough. Those fluffy white clouds indicate we’ll have fair weather—at least for the next day or two. But since they’re drifting from the southeast—blowing in from the ocean—I’d say they’re bringing in warm, moist air. If this moist air should encounter a cold front—as often happens this time of year—we’ll have rain showers, and possibly a real thunder-boomer!”

“I hope it happens sometime when we’re together, like the last rainstorm,” whispered Hilda, squeezing his hand.

Soon they entered the pine forest, and the gravelly roadbed gradually changed to that of soft sand absorbing most of the sound made by the horse and carriage.

Several minutes later, Hilda expressed with a grimace, “Jacob, I’m embarrassed to tell you this, but I’ve got a rather insistent call of nature. Would you stop the surrey please?”

“Yes of course. One must not ignore a call of nature,” he replied with a smile. And he pulled Bessie to a halt.

As Hilda began to step out, she said, “Keep your seat, Jacob. I can get down by myself.” After she reached the ground, she started to step away, but stopped. “I’ll need some things from my purse,” she explained, then retrieved her bag from the floorboard and walked away.

There was very little undergrowth on the right side of the road, whereas the yaupon bushes were quite thick on the left, so Hilda chose to enter the woods on that side.

As he sat there waiting, a pair of ivory-billed woodpeckers flew by emitting their shrill cries. Then, one after the other, they landed on the side of pine trees off to Magruder’s right. These huge birds measured a foot and a half in length from red crest to tip of tail, and as they went to work on the trees with their powerful three-inch beaks, they made the pine bark fly. Soon the forest rang with the sounds of the big birds’ rapid-fire pecking.

While engrossed in watching the woodpeckers, the sound of a cantering horse suddenly intruded on Magruder’s consciousness. He quickly turned around to see horse and rider bearing down on him already within thirty yards. The rider had a pistol out pointing at Magruder as he began to pull his horse in.

“Git yore hands up!” shouted the horseman.

Magruder was in an awkward position to draw his gun, so he had to play along. He raised his hands, while taking note of the man and horse. The rider was a skinny culprit with buckteeth and scraggly blond hair, and his horse was a sorrel

with three white stocking feet. There could be no doubt but this was Cal Hicks—thief and killer.

Then the man ordered, “Turn aroun’ there now and face frontways—and keep yore hands up.”

Magruder complied. Then he heard the sound of saddle leather creaking, and he knew Hicks was dismounting. He was glad he wasn’t wearing his badge.

When Hicks walked up on the left side of the carriage, he had both of his pistols out.

“Whutta ya’ doin’ settin’ here in the middle of the road?”

“Well, I just stopped to relieve myself.”

“Looked to me like you was waitin’ fer somebody.”

“No—after gettin’ back in the buggy, I just paused to admire those woodpeckers.”

“A bird fancier, eh?” Hicks asked with a sneer. “Who’n hell air you, anyway? You look kinda familiar.”

“I’m a rancher from Navasota—down here visiting friends.”

“Uh-huh! Well, Ah jus’ don’ believe you Mr. Rancher. Ah thank yore thet lawman thet killed Hank Hawkins. Ah was in the town the day thet happened. Ah was a ways off, but Ah seen it.”

Magruder was concerned now that Hicks might shoot at any moment, and he stealthily leaned a little to his left and straitened his right leg a bit to facilitate drawing his pistol. He carefully watched Hicks’ eyes for that almost imperceptible squint gunmen unconsciously exhibit at the instant of decision to shoot. If he saw any such sign, he planned to go for his pistol, though he was at a serious disadvantage.

“You’re mistaken. That wasn’t me.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hilda emerging from the woods, but he dared not glance in her direction.

“Well, Ah don’ thank Ah’m gonna take no chances. Ah thank Ah’ll jus’ bore you to make shore.”

Hilda spoke, “Not today, Mr. Hicks.” Then “POW-POW”. Hicks staggered and jerked the triggers of both his guns. One bullet sang harmlessly over Magruder’s head, but the other nicked his left ear.

He had his pistol out in an instant, but it wasn’t necessary to shoot. Hicks slowly crumpled over muttering, “Whut was thet?”

Magruder leaped out of the surrey, and knelt down to check Hicks’ pulse. His eyelids fluttered and heart beat weakly for a few seconds, then ceased. He looked up at Hilda who still stood there with the smoking derringer in her hand.

“Is he dead?” she asked.

“He sure is, lady. And you couldn’t have arrived at a better time.”

Hicks was lying on his back, so Magruder rolled him over. There were two bullet holes in his back—one on either side of his spine. One hole was about six inches above his waist, and the other a couple of inches higher.

“You nailed the bastard good, Hilda!”

He saw she had lowered her gun, and was surprised to see how calm and composed she was. She didn’t seem the least bit nervous.

“I’m glad. That was for Bernie. I had often fantasized about killing that son of a bitch, but I never expected to have the chance!”

Magruder turned to see Hicks' sorrel standing there calmly ground tethered. And he noticed a bedroll and saddlebags tied behind the saddle.

"I hope Hicks was still carrying the loot," he said, as he walked slowly toward the sorrel. "Whoa there. Whoa there, boy."

The horse stood quietly at his approach. "If he buried your money we'll never find it."

He grasped the horse's reins, patted him a few times on the neck, then led him over to the surrey and tied the reins to the tailgate. Then he began exploring the contents of the saddlebags. He first pulled out several items of dirty clothing, and then a sheathed knife. I'll wager that's the pig-sticker used to kill Feldman. But then he found Bernard Gersemann's money belt.

"Look here Hilda," he said excitedly. "It's the money belt, and there seems to be a lot of money still in it."

He laid Gersemann's money belt out on the baggage deck of the surrey, and began counting the bills as he extracted them from the six pockets. He counted a total of one hundred and twenty-one \$100 bills.

"There's over twelve thousand dollars here, Hilda," he exclaimed. And as he turned to look at her, he perceived she was about to faint. She was pale and shaking, and the derringer lay at her feet. He dropped the money belt and rushed to her side. She was trembling as with the ague. When he embraced her, she clung to him for support.

"Let me help you over to the buggy, Hilda."

After she was seated in the surrey, he asked, "You gonna be alright, now?"

She nodded.

He retrieved her purse and the derringer where she had dropped them in the road, and brought them over. "Your reaction after that shooting is not uncommon, Hilda. Few people can kill someone and not become upset about it. You rest now. I've gotta try to pick Hicks up and throw his carcass across the saddle of his horse."

"Jacob, your ear's all bloody."

"Yeah, one of his shots nicked my ear," he said, as he wiped the injury with his kerchief. "It'll be alright."

Magruder rolled Hicks over on his back, knelt down and unbuckled his gun belt. Then he went through his pockets. He found eight dollars, a few coins, a sack of tobacco, and a key. He suddenly realized it was the key...the key to Hilda's room at the Eutaw House! All these he placed in his own pockets, before grasping Hicks by the wrists, and dragging his body over to the sorrel. After that, he lifted Hicks into a sitting position, again knelt down, then slipping his arms under that of Hicks he managed to stand up supporting the body. Then with considerable effort, he hoisted the body up and across the saddle. He rested a moment before uncoiling Hicks' lasso, and tying the body securely in place. It was then he noticed the stock of Hicks' rifle protruding from its sheath. He pulled it out to have a look at it. It was a model 1860 Henry .44, one of the first successful lever-action rifles ever made. It was clean and oiled, and appeared in excellent condition. He operated the lever to see if it was loaded. It was.

Well, Cal Hicks might've been a slovenly, low-down murderin' skunk, but he took good care of the tools of his trade. But then, most men who live by the gun do that.

Sliding the rifle back in the sheath, Magruder walked over to where Hicks had fallen and retrieved the outlaw's pistols and gun belt. He knocked the dirt off the pistols against his boot and examined them closely. He could see why Hicks was so taken with them—they were a real work of art. The pistols were .44-caliber 1860 Colts, silver-plated and scroll-engraved with gold inlay. The engraving was masterful, and they had intricately carved ivory handles. He carried them over to show Hilda, who seemed to have somewhat regained her composure.

"Look at these pistols, Hilda—a matched pair. Aren't they beautiful. They have to be worth \$300. I'll sell them along with Hick's horse, rifle and other trappings, and deposit the funds to your bank account at Gibbs. His complete outfit will fetch \$700 easily."

"No, Jacob. I don't want to do that, I want you to have those pistols—to remember me by," she offered with a weak smile.

After placing Hicks' pistols and gun belt in one of the saddlebags, Magruder got back aboard the surrey. "I guess we better go back to town now." Then he slapped the reins. "Giddup, Bessie," he said, and as the little horse started off, he pulled on the left line to turn her around. Soon they were on their way back to Huntsville.

"Cal Hicks kinda spoiled our afternoon drive. But I'm glad that we found your money."

"I am too, Jacob. But I'm saddened at the same time. Now that you've fulfilled your promise to recover my money, you'll be leaving for Nacogdoches, won't you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say—I'll have to be goin'. But neither of us can deny our families the help they need. It saddens me too, Hilda, but it seems our brief time together must come to an end."

As they drove back into town, pedestrians on the street began to stop and stare at the strange procession: a well dressed man and woman driving along in a surrey followed by a dead man thrown across the saddle of a horse.

"We seem to be attracting a lot of attention," observed Magruder. "I think we better take the late Cal Hicks to the funeral parlor before attending to any other matters."

Pulling up in front of the funeral parlor, he handed the reins to Hilda. "Hold these a moment please, while I call someone out to get Hicks." He stepped down, walked to the door, opened it and looked inside. There he saw the undertaker and an assistant on the far side of the big parlor engaged in what appeared to be the clothing of a corpse.

Magruder yelled, "Hey, Tighe. I've gotta another customer for you out here. Come out and get him, will you?"

When Tighe came out pushing a gurney, Magruder said quietly, "Tighe, this is the body of Cal Hicks, the outlaw. I want you to give him a John Doe identity for the present. I don't want anyone else to know that Hicks has been killed. Understand?"

"Shore, I understand, Magruder. But why?"

“As you know, Hicks and his partner murdered and robbed Mrs. Gersemann’s husband of \$15,000. What you may not know is, prior to the robbery, Sam Mason was a secret accomplice of Cal Hicks in the local cattle rustling activity. Since that robbery, Hicks has been on the run trying to elude Mason to avoid sharing the money with him. Did you know about Mason murderin’ Bill Simms up at the Simms farm last Sunday?”

“Yeah, I know about that. There was a piece in The Huntsville Item about it.”

“Well, if Mason’s unaware of Hicks’ death, the sheriff and I believe he’ll remain in this area tryin’ to catch Hicks and steal the Gersemann money. Hopefully, that’ll give the law sufficient time to catch that skunk.”

“I see. Tell me, Magruder, how did Mr. Hicks get to be dead?”

“Mrs. Gersemann shot that sonuvabitch, just as Hicks was about to shoot me! Whatta you think of that?”

Will Tighe assisted Magruder in untying the rope bonds that secured the outlaw’s corpse to the sorrel, then together, they lifted Cal Hicks’ body from the horse and placed it on the gurney.

Then Hilda spoke. “Mr. Tighe, I want to purchase a headstone for my husband’s grave. Can you advise me where to get one?”

“Yes Ma’am—you can order it from me. Just give me your requirements, and I can quote you a price.”

“I don’t want anything ornate—just a small, simple stone. And I’d want it engraved, of course.”

“Such a stone, engraved with the usual name, dates and a sentiment, plus the installation at the gravesite, would be one hundred dollars, Mrs. Gersemann. If that’s acceptable, I’ll take care of everything. Let me carry this corpse inside, then I’ll return with the writing material to take down your engravin’ information.”

As they drove away from the undertaker, Magruder said, “Let’s go by the gunshop before goin’ to the bank. I wanna buy you a few loads for your derringer. An unloaded gun is of damn little use. He pulled up at Gilbert’s, hopped out and went in. He was back in two minutes, and handed Hilda a half dozen .41 caliber cartridges.

“Don’t forget to reload,” he said.

At Gibbs, he had no difficulty in escorting Hilda directly to the bank booth in the rear of the store, as most of aisles previously clogged with crates and boxes had been cleared. Mary Davis saw him come in, but didn’t approach him this time. The sign above the bank booth now read Daniel Magee, Cashier.

Offering a friendly smile, the young man in the booth asked, “May I help you folks today?”

“Yes. I’m Jacob Magruder, and this lady is Hilda Gersemann. Mrs. Gersemann has an account here, and she wishes to deposit a sizable sum—twelve thousand, one hundred dollars to be exact. These are the funds stolen from her and her late husband by outlaws several days ago. You probably heard about it.”

“Yes, I sure did, Mr. Magruder,” said Magee. “Let me get a deposit slip,” he said.

As they walked out of the store, Magruder explained, "I need to take Hicks' sorrel around to the hotel stable, and then report the news to the sheriff." Looking at his watch, he continued, "It's near five o'clock, would you like to go up to your room, or go back to the Colson's?"

"I'm tired, Jacob, and I'd like to go up to my room and rest awhile. Let's plan to have supper here at seven thirty or eight. Would that be alright?"

"Yes, of course."

"Perhaps you could pick up a bottle of brandy, and we could enjoy a drink before supper," she suggested.

"I'll look forward to it," he replied with a smile.

Leaving Bessie tied to the rail at Gibbs, and leading Hicks' sorrel, Magruder escorted Hilda across Jackson Street to the entrance of the Eutaw House. "I'll see you a little later," he said. Hilda smiled, and walked through the hotel doorway.

When he got to the stable, he didn't see the stable boy around, but he found an empty stall and led the sorrel into it. As he was removing the saddle, the boy came in.

"Hi there, Mr. Magruder," said Bobby.

"Bobby, I've taken over one of your stalls for this horse. Is that alright?"

"Shore, Mr. Magruder. Mr. Swartz says you're to have anythang you ast for."

"That's good. Can I trust you to keep a secret, Bobby?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Magruder. You shore can."

"Okay, then. What if I told you that this pretty sorrel was Cal Hicks' horse?"

"Was you talkin' 'bout Cal Hicks, the outlaw?" Bobby queried, wide-eyed.

"Yes, I sure was. Hicks was shot and killed today by Mrs. Gersemann—the lady he tried to murder here in the hotel Saturday night."

"No foolin'? The lady really shot'im?" he asked incredulously.

"She sure did, Bobby. Now how about givin' the sorrel a good rub down, and feed him some grain? He looks like he needs it. And you be sure not tell anyone what I've told you. I'll explain the reason for the secrecy later. Okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Magruder. I won't tell a soul."

Magruder fished a silver dollar out of his pocket and handed it to the boy. "I'm going to see the sheriff right now, Bobby, and I'll have your surrey back here in an hour or so. In the meantime, keep an eye on those saddlebags. They've got some valuable pistols in 'em that belonged to the outlaw. You can take a look at 'em if you like, but be sure to put 'em back."

"I shore will, Mr. Magruder. And thanks fer the tip."

When he arrived at the Colson residence, he found the sheriff again sitting outside smoking his pipe.

"I hope yo're not brangin' more bad news, Magruder," shouted the sheriff.

Tying Bessie to the hitching post, he shouted back, "Not today, Sheriff. I've got good news."

"Well, come set down and tell me about it, boy. I could damn shore stand some good news for a change!"

He walked up on the porch and sat down in a rocking chair. Then he related the story about the chance run-in with Cal Hicks, Hilda shooting him, and the recovery of the Gersemann money.

The sheriff smiled and shook his head on hearing that news. "By damn, I think that's whut they call poetic justice! And I'm glad Hilda was the one who got to shoot that sonuvabitch. It must'a given her great satisfaction."

"Yes, I believe it did. Sheriff, I want to you know that I'll be leaving Huntsville sometime in the next few days. I've fulfilled my promise to recover Hilda's money, and if I stay any longer, I'm sure to get embroiled in more of your problems."

"I hate to hear of yore leavin', son. I'm shore gonna miss you. Yo're 'bout the savviest lawman I ever knew. I wish you could stay on here perm'nent, but I know that's not possible. But I wanna tell ya' this, Magruder—this is a day I'll long remember—Jubal Nighthawk killed and his gang captured, and Cal Hicks shot dead, all in the same day. The only fly in the gravy now is Sam Mason. That bastard is still on the loose. I was hopin' you might have the pleasure of arrestin' Mason before you left town."

"Sheriff, since Mason might skedaddle when he hears of Hicks' death and the recovery of the Gersemann money, I think we should keep that a secret, for now. That'll give you a chance to catch the skunk before he quits the territory. I told the undertaker to hang a John Doe tag on Hicks' big toe---so the word of his death won't get in the newspapers. Why don't you try doublin' the reward for Mason. That might loosen some tongues. I'm satisfied there are people in Huntsville that have knowledge of the Mason gang and their shady deals. I recall a butcher over on 12th Street that got real nervous when I was tellin' him about Hicks and his partner being wanted for murder. By the way, have you had any luck in hirin' another deputy?"

"It so happens, I have. Got a wire today. He's a friend of Clint Foster and another Conroe man. Name is Hiram Roebuck. It seems that Hi Roebuck is not happy in his deputy job down in Montgomery County. He doesn't get along well with the sheriff—and I can shore understand that. I know Morgan, the sheriff. He's an ornery, ill-tempered sonuvabitch! Foster and Roebuck worked together for three years down there, and Clint thinks very highly of him. This man is also older and more experienced than Clint, which's good. I expect him to be here sometime early next week."

"That's good news, Sheriff. Have you thought anymore about hirin' another youngster to replace Ron Morris, or is Willard gonna stay on as jailer?"

"Yeah, I've thought about it, but that's about all. I'm gonna have to do somethin' about that pretty soon. Howsomever, Les is kinda enjoyin' bein' jailer. He said he was bored with retirement and stayin' home doin' nuthin'. But I don't think his wife likes him workin', and I suspect she wears the pants in that family. You be shore and stop by the jail and visit Les fer a spell before you leave town, Magruder. He really took a shine to you."

"I'll sure do that, Sheriff. I like him, too. I assume you know that Hilda will also be leaving soon. I'm not sure just when. That letter she received from her mother today said her father had suffered stroke, and her family needs her to come home to take over the reins of their foundry business. Hilda wanted me to tell y'all that

she's going to stay at the hotel tonight. But she'll probably come back here tomorrow."

The sheriff had a hint of a smile on his face before responding. "I understand, son. You can tell Hilda she's welcome to stay with us as long as she wants to. Martha and I have grown quite fond of her. She's quite a woman, and just as smart as she is pretty."

Then Magruder got up saying, "I'm gonna run along now, Sheriff, but I'll likely see you sometime tomorrow."

He drove the surrey back to the hotel, returned it to the stable boy, then headed for the Sundown Saloon. Several people on the street waved and greeted him while he strode along.

As Magruder neared the saloon, he observed four horses tied to the hitch rail out front. This was not unusual, but one of these animals caught his eye. It was a beautiful black with long wavy mane and tail, and it carried a silver-trimmed black saddle much like his own. It also carried a bedroll and a pair of bulging saddlebags, indicating its rider was a traveler.

When he approached the saloon doorway, a youth burst through the swinging doors and ran smack into him. It was Cotton Cambell. He grabbed hold of the boy and stopped him. "Whoa there, Cotton! What's your hurry, boy? Is your shirt-tail on fire?" he asked with a grin.

"Mr. Magruder! Oh, I'm glad you're here," he said breathlessly. "I was goin' to try and get help. Dad's somewhere down the street. Tad's got hisself in some awful trouble in there."

"Well, let's see about that," he said, gently pushing the boy aside. He stepped up to the swinging doors and looked in. Facing toward him about 25 feet away—standing next to the bar—was a tall, dark-haired, handsome young man with a neatly trimmed mustache. And he was wearing a pair of tied-down pearl-handled pistols. Magruder recognized him at once having seen wanted posters with his picture and description. It was Bill Longley—a notorious gunfighter—reported to have killed over twenty men. With his back to him, confronting Longley, was Tad Cambell. About fifteen feet separated the two. They were having an exchange of words just as Magruder looked in.

"...but...but I ain't got a gun," said Tad. He sounded scared, and his words were slurred like he'd been drinking.

"Somebody give this kid a gun," said Longley with a smile. "Anyone who calls another fellow a clumsy bastard ought to be ready to back up his words with a gun!"

A man at a nearby table, quickly got up, stepped over and shoved a pistol under Tad's belt, then returned to his seat.

"Now then, Sonny, you've gotta gun. Let's see what you can do with it," taunted Longley.

Magruder thought of pinning on his badge, but immediately rejected the idea. Since Longley was a fugitive from justice, he might instantly fire on any law officer. He made a quick decision on how he might defuse this dangerous situation. Telling Cotton to stay outside, he rushed into the room behind Tad, jerked out his pistol, and clubbed him over the head, knocking him to his knees. He quickly

holstered his gun and held up his hands so Longley wouldn't view his action as a threat.

"Who in the hell are you?" shouted Longley angrily, with his hands gripping his pistols.

"I'm a friend of this boy, and I don't wanna see him murdered," responded Magruder.

"Well, friend...you damn near got yourself shot. You took a helluva chance runnin' in here like you did. I reckon you don't know who I am."

"Oh, I know. You're Bill Longley. And I know you've killed a lot of men. But I heard you always gave them an even break. It would sure sully your reputation if you killed this eighteen year-old drunken cowboy."

"Aw, I had no intentions of killin' him," said Longley, smiling and removing his hands from his pistols. "I just wanted to give him a good scare. I didn't think he'd go for that gun, but if he did, I was just gonna wing him. What's your name, anyway?"

"It's Jacob Magruder."

Longley hesitated before asking, "Could you possibly be J.J. Magruder, the former Texas Ranger?"

"Yes...I'm known by that name also."

"I heard you were in prison."

"I was till a few days ago. I received a pardon from the governor."

All during this exchange, Tad had been trying to get up, but Magruder had held him down with a hand on his shoulder. But now he released him and helped him to his feet.

"Tad, get out of here now. And let this be a lesson to you," admonished Magruder. "And I can imagine what your Dad'll say to you when he hears about this."

Tad then picked his hat up off the floor, and stumbled out rubbing his head.

Tad's "borrowed" pistol lay on the floor, and Magruder picked it up by the barrel and placed it on the bar.

"How about havin' a drink with me, Magruder?" Longley asked with a friendly smile.

"Alright. I think I could use a bracer right now," he responded, and he quietly breathed a sigh of relief being thankful that a potentially dangerous situation had ended peaceably.

Longley then pounded on the bar and shouted, "Let's have some service here, barkeep!"

Jerry Malloy jumped to comply. He and his brother had been standing stock still behind the bar all during the former tense episode. And saloon customers at the tables, who had previously sat frozen in their seats, began to move about and talk a bit.

"What'll you have, Magruder?" asked Longley with a smile. "I'm buyin'."

"Very well. I'll have a dollar glass of your very best whiskey...barkeep," said Magruder with a smile.

"I'll have the same. And hurry it up," demanded Longley, and he tossed two silver dollars on the bar.

Jerry Malloy poured the drinks, and Magruder noticed that his usual half-smile was lacking.

“Let’s go sit at a table,” suggested Longley.

“Suits me,” responded Magruder.

Longley picked a corner table, well isolated from the other bar customers, and chose to sit with his back to the wall—a common practice of gunfighters.

After they were seated, Magruder asked, “How’d your dispute with that boy get started?”

Longley chuckled. “Well, when I came in the saloon a few minutes ago, there were some other fellows comin’ out, and when I passed between them and the kid, who was standin’ at the bar, I jostled him a bit and made him spill his whiskey. He turned around and yelled at me, ‘Watch where you’re goin’, you clumsy bastard!’ I was just havin’ some fun with him...which was meant to teach him a lesson. And it’s a lesson that boy should learn well. I know men who would’ve killed him over that insult.”

“Tell me—how’d you happen to know about my nickname of J.J.?”

“Why, you were one of my heroes when I was growin’ up,” said Longley with a grin. “I read newspaper accounts of your exploits with the Rangers when I was just a wet-nosed kid. And I loved the stories of John Ford’s excursion against the Comanches, and his Cavalry of the West fighting the damned Yankees in Texas. I’ll bet you could tell some interestin’ tales about that. I’m aware you were with Ford on those campaigns.” He laughed before adding, “I wanted to run away from home and join Ford’s Cavalry when he put out the call for recruits at San Antone, but I was only thirteen at the time.” He stopped and took a healthy swallow of his whiskey.

“You are more knowledgeable than most about those matters,” observed Magruder. “And your manner of speakin’ indicates an exceptional education. Did you attend college?”

“No, no college. My mother was a school teacher and my father a preacher. They taught me to read before I was five...and I learned the pleasure of readin’. By seven, I had read Aesop’s Fables, and the stories by Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. The Grimm tales were written by two brothers, one of whom was named Jacob. Did you know that, Jacob Magruder?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“By the time I was nine, I had read the works of Milton, Bacon, Browne and others. And by ten, I had read the Holy Bible from Genesis to Revelations. I didn’t understand much of it, of course, but I read the scriptures aloud, while Dad listened and explained their meanin’. And I continue to read to this day. I pickup newspapers wherever I go, and read most every word.” He smiled and added, “That’s one of the ways I stay two jumps ahead of the law. And that, my friend, is the extent of my education.”

“Well, it is much better than most, I’d say. Would you mind tellin’ me what caused an obviously intelligent fellow like yourself to become an outlaw?”

“It was that goddamned Civil War!” Longley exclaimed angrily—then tossed off the last of his whiskey.

“My daddy fought with Sam Houston at San Jacinto, and he stood with Houston against secession, mind you. But Texas seceded, and Dad was conscripted into the

Confederate Army. I was only ten when the Civil War started, and my mother and I damn near starved while Dad was gone. I did a man's work around our little farm durin' the war, and when it was over, my daddy came home a broken man...all shot up. Then we had to endure the Yankee Army occupation with their nigger troops, along with thievin' carpetbaggers and scalawags. And after that, we had to tolerate Edmond Davis' nigger State Police. Four of those black bastards came to our farm one day, stole our only horse, and damn near beat my daddy to death when he tried to stop 'em. That's when I swore to get even and took up the gun. Well, I got even with a who-ole buncha those sonsabitches! Reckon I got more'n even," he added with a grim smile. "That's what made me an outlaw, Jacob Magruder.

"Hey, I apologize for runnin' off at the mouth like that," he offered with a grin. "Whiskey tends to loosen my tongue."

"That's quite alright. I've had some unpleasant experiences with carpetbagger justice, myself. That's what put me in prison for four years. Let's see now, if you were ten years old when the war started, then that'd make you..."

"I'm twenty-three now, Magruder," stated Bill Longley.

"You look older, and you act more mature than most others that age."

Longley smiled. "Burnin' the candles at both ends tends to have that effect, Magruder."

"Tell me, Bill, why do you happen to be in Huntsville at this time?"

He responded in a lowered voice, indicating he didn't want to be overheard. "Just passin' through. Spent the past week with relatives over near Bellville, and I'm headed for Apple Springs up in Trinity County. Got ken up there, too. Can't afford to spend much time in one place. Bein' a wanted man is a lonely life, Magruder," he expressed sadly. "No time for a sweetheart. I was thinkin' about spendin' the night in Huntsville, but haven't decided."

"I'd take it as a favor if you'd ride on, Bill. Captain Luke McElvey of the Texas Rangers is in town. If he sees you, he'll try to arrest you for sure. And you'd likely put up a fight. That could be bad for both of you. McElvey's can't match you with a sixgun, I know. But if you killed him, every Ranger in the state would be on your trail. Cap McElvey's also an old friend of mine, and I don't want to see him shot."

"If you're a friend of McElvey's, how do I know you won't tell him where I'm goin'?" Longley asked seriously.

"Because I give you my word that I won't. I wasn't gonna tell you this, but I think I should. If you hear it from others, then you wouldn't trust me. It so happens, after I got out of the pen, I took a deputy sheriff's job here temporarily to help a lady recover money that'd been stolen from her by some local two-bit thieves. The money has now been recovered, and both thieves are dead. So I'm turnin' in my badge, and leavin' Huntsville in a coupla days."

"I'll bet you're the one who did away with those pole cats."

"No, I didn't. A few days ago, the two robbers got in an argument, and one of them shot the other. Then the lady, whose money was stolen, had the pleasure of shootin' the other bastard. And she saved my bacon at the same time, as that skunk had the drop on me."

"That lady sounds like some woman," opined Longley. "Alright, Magruder. I'll move on, as you suggest. It'd be risky to lay over here anyway. 'Reckon I'd better

get started then. I'd like to get up the road a piece and find a decent place to camp before dark."

As Longley arose from his chair, Magruder got up as well. The outlaw extended his right hand. "Jacob Magruder, I'm glad I finally got to meet you. After all the tales I heard about you, I'd 'bout decided you were just a legend," he offered with a winsome smile.

Magruder gave the offered hand a firm grip. "I'm pleased to have met you too, Bill. Try to resist that inclination you have to use those deadly guns, and the law may lose interest in you. I think John Wesley Hardin's at the top of the Ranger's 'most wanted' list right now. Say, I'll bet that beautiful black out front is your horse."

"You're right, Magruder. Finest horse I ever owned, though blind in one eye. Named him Spades. Won him in a poker game out in Fredericksburg. My opponent—who was about broke—called my \$100 raise with that horse. He was so sure he had a winner with aces full, but I happened to be holdin' four deuces. Well, so long, friend. Perhaps we'll meet again someday." Then Bill Longley turned and walked toward the front door—a remarkably handsome, though tragic figure.

As Magruder watched him go, he thought of the many young men like Longley who were emotionally scarred and lives ruined by the hateful Civil War.

Magruder then looked at his watch, and was surprised to see it was after seven. I'd better buy that bottle of brandy and get on over to the hotel or Hilda will go to supper without me.

At the bar, he had to wait while Jerry Malloy and his brother served others. It seemed that many of the saloon customers wanted whiskey after the departure of Bill Longley. After a minute, Malloy came over to serve him.

"Jacob, that gunman who was in here scared the hell outta me. I thought he was gonna shoot that kid for sure. I was powerful glad when you came in."

"Well, fortunately, everything worked out alright, Jerry. Right now, I'd like to buy a bottle of your blackberry brandy."

"I'm sorry, Jacob, but I'm sold out of brandy. But I have some good red wine."

"No. I think I'll pass on that...and I need to go now. I've got a supper date with a beautiful woman and I don't want to keep her waitin'."

"I know of whom you speak," said Jerry with a smile. "Please give that nice lady my regards."

Whippoorwills were calling, and a faint scent of magnolia blossoms wafted on the evening breeze as Magruder strolled along. As he was crossing Fannin Street, a block north of the Eutaw House, he heard three shots fired. The reports sounded like they came from the hotel. A few seconds later, he saw a man dash out of the hotel, leap on a horse, and gallop away—first heading south on Jackson, and then turning east on Cedar Street where he disappeared from view as he rounded the Gibbs building. He couldn't imagine what might have happened, but concern for Hilda Gersemann's safety caused him to hurry.

When he entered the hotel lobby, he saw a number of people wearing anxious expressions standing about the doorway to the dining room engaged in quiet

conversation. Their supper had obviously been interrupted by the shooting. The night clerk was speaking to two men at the desk when Magruder walked up. "What happened here, Baker?" he demanded.

"It was Freddie Collins, Mr. Magruder," answered Baker, shaking his head. "He just ran in here a few minutes ago and shot Kid Marshall, then ran back out."

"Was this a relative of the banker killed earlier?"

"Yes, sir. It was his son."

"Is Marshall dead?"

"Mrs. Greer says he is."

"My God! As if Collins' widow didn't have enough grief," Magruder muttered, "her husband killed, and her son a murderer—all in the same day."

"That disheveled lookin' gray-haired lady sittin' over there is Mrs. Greer," explained Baker. "She came out of Marshall's room a coupla minutes ago, and announced the Kid had been murdered. She was tendin' to him when Freddie ran in. She said she tried to stop 'im, but he just shoved her aside and pumped three shots into the Kid."

"What was a low-down, cowardly act," grumbled Magruder. "If you haven't sent someone for the undertaker, Baker, you'd better take care of that right away...and I think I'll go have a few words with Mrs. Greer."

He walked over to where she sat. The lady was pale and shaken. Removing his hat, he introduced himself.

"I know...who you are...Mr. Magruder."

"Would you mind tellin' me what happened here, Mrs. Greer?"

"I...I'll try to...Mr. Magruder," she said in a tremulous voice. "Well, uh...the boy...that is, Lee...his first name is Lee...thought he was gonna die, and...and after I'd given him some laudanum...as instructed by the doctor...he began talkin'...and he said I reminded him of his dead mother. I held his hand...as he told me the heartbreakin' story of his family...how they were well off before the war...and how the carpetbaggers took their home near Waco...and most everything they owned. He said they had to live in an old barn...where, in the winter of '67, his twin sister, Lisa, contracted pneumonia and died...and his mother lost her mind, and committed suicide."

What Mrs. Greer was telling him wasn't what Magruder wished to know, but out of respect, he patiently listened to the story she was relating.

She continued: "He said his father—who'd been a lawyer and judge before the war—was reduced to workin' as a stable hand carin' for the horses of occupation forces. Though they had little money, his father insisted that Lee continue his college studies. Then, in 1870, his father died unexpectedly...on Lee's seventeenth birthday. That's when he joined a band of rebel outlaws makin' raids on Yankee payrolls. And..."

"Mrs. Greer," interrupted Magruder. "I need to know what just happened. How Lee Marshall was murdered, and who did it. Baker, the hotel clerk says Freddie Collins was the shooter. Is that true?"

"Yes...it was Freddie. I know him well. He used to be in my Sunday school class. I never believed he could do anything like this. He forced his way into the room shoutin', 'That bastard killed my daddy, and I'm gonna kill him!' Then he started shootin'. And he smelled like he'd fallen in a barrel of whiskey."

At that moment, Captain Luke McElvey of the Texas Rangers strode purposefully through the doorway of the Eutaw House. And spotting Magruder, he marched over demanding in his gruff voice, "What'n hell's goin' on here, J.J.? I was down at the jail visitin' Willard, and I heard shots." Then he noticed Mrs. Greer sitting there. He quickly removed his hat, and apologized. "Please forgive me, ma'am. I didn't notice right away there was a lady present."

"That's alright, sir. I was just tellin' Mr. Magruder what had happened."

"Mrs. Greer, this is Captain McElvey of the Texas Rangers," explained Magruder. "Mac, she just told me what happened. She was carin' for Kid Marshall a few minutes ago, when a man ran into his room, and shot him three times. The boy's dead, Mac."

"Ah, hell! Well, let's go in and see about it, son. Please excuse us, Mrs. Greer."

When they got to Marshall's room, the two seasoned lawmen, whose emotions had been hardened by witnessing many deaths, were struck dumb by the callousness of the crime. Kid Marshall's upper body and head, as well as his bed, was covered with blood.

After staring in silence for a full minute, McElvey hissed, "This's about the most cold blooded murder I've ever seen. For someone to come in here and shoot that poor, helpless boy like that..."

"I agree, Mac," said Magruder. "This dastardly deed was done by the son of Fred Collins, the banker killed earlier today. The killer's a local boy, known by many, and shouldn't be hard to find. Seems to me, Clint Foster's the best man to catch the culprit. Clint was raised in Huntsville and probably knows the perpetrator. I assure you of one thing, ol' friend: I'm not gettin' involved. I'm turnin' in my badge tomorrow, and plannin' to be on the road to Nacogdoches in a coupla days."

When the two lawmen returned to the hotel lobby a few minutes later, Mrs. Greer had gone, and the other parties had apparently resumed their evening activities. Baker, the night clerk, was talking to Will Tighe, the undertaker, and pointing the way to Marshall's room. Tighe's assistant was standing by with a gurney.

"He's back here, Tighe," announced Magruder, "in Room 112. And I want that boy to have a decent burial with an engraved headstone. I'll compose an epitaph, and get it to you later. Your fee can be deducted from the cash we took off that bushwhacker who tried to shoot me from the alley across the street."

Clint Foster, Walker County's newest deputy sheriff, then entered the hotel, and seeing the other lawmen, he waved and walked over, "Hey there, Jake! Hi, Captain McElvey! I just returned from Riverside, and ran into a fellow down the street who said Kid Marshall had been shot and killed. Is that what happened?"

"Unfortunately, yes, Clint," confirmed Magruder. "It seems Freddie Collins was the perpetrator. Do you happen to know him?"

"Oh yes. I know Freddie...went to school with that rascal. He's the black sheep of the Collins clan."

“Well then Clint, it appears you’re the best man suited to make the arrest,” suggested Magruder.

“Alright, Jake. I’ll take care of that. I think I can locate him easily.”

“Very well, boy, we’ll leave this little chore in yore capable hands,” said Captain McElvey.

Foster nodded, and he wore a grim expression as he turned and strode out of the hotel.

Addressing the Ranger, Magruder explained, “Mac, I promised to take Hilda Gersemann to dinner this evenin’, so if you’ll excuse me now. I’ll say goodnight.”

“Alright, J.J. You go along and join your lady friend, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As he began climbing the stairway to the second floor, he was thinking how to best break the news to Hilda about the violence that had just occurred. He was sure it would upset her and likely spoil their evening. He considered deceiving her by making up a false story to explain the gunfire, but finally decided it would be best to just tell what actually happened.

A couple of minutes later, he was knocking on Hilda Gersemann’s door.

“Who’s there?” was her anxious inquiry.

“It’s me, Hilda. Jacob.”

“Oh, Jacob—just a moment till I unlock the door.”

When she opened the door, she looked frightened. He noted she had the derringer in her hand. “What were those shots?”

“Kid Marshall, the boy who was wounded attempting to rob the Gibb’s Bank earlier today, was just shot and killed. The bank cashier’s son was the shooter.”

Hilda paled, and covered her mouth with a hand. “My God! How awful.”

“Yes, it is,” agreed Magruder with a sigh. “I couldn’t bring the brandy tonight as promised. Jerry Malloy was sold out. I know the events of Marshall’s death are upsettin’, and under the circumstances you may not want to think about supper right away. But the Globe Tavern has some good brandy, and it’s only a few blocks away. Suppose we just walk over there and enjoy a bottle of brandy. Then we can have supper later, if you feel like it.”

“You’re right. I’d rather not think of food at this time. However, some brandy would be comforting.”

The Globe Tavern had a small bar, but the serving of food was their primary business. On entering the tavern, the couple was pleased to find only few customers present. The waiter who had previously served Magruder and Henders, saw them come in, walked over and greeted them cordially.

“Good evening, folks. How can I help you tonight.”

“We’d like a table in the corner please,” requested Magruder. “Then bring us a bottle of that excellent peach brandy I enjoyed here last Saturday night. We may order dinner later.”

“Very good...right this way, folks,” said the waiter, and led them over to a corner table.

After they were seated, Magruder apologized. “Forgive me, Hilda. It was thoughtless of me to order the peach brandy without asking your preference. Would you like another kind?”

"I'm sure it will be satisfactory, Jacob," she responded with a weak smile.

Magruder surmised that the tragic episode at the hotel was still on her mind, and he wished to get her thoughts off that unpleasant event. The brandy was delivered, and while filling their glasses, he inquired, "I've been meaning to ask you about your family home in Pittsburgh. I know the city is an industrial center, and that it's located at the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers; but I know little else. I'm sure it's different from any place I've ever been. Tell me about it, won't you?"

Her smile indicated she knew well what he was about. "Alright, Jacob, if you wish. I am certain it is a place you would not like. It is a smoky, dirty city---with hundreds of factories burning thousands of tons of coal. My father's factory is one of them. I'm not looking forward to going back there, after breathing clean Texas air for seven years. You're probably aware that much of the iron materials and armaments produced for the Union Army during the late war were manufactured in the factories of Pittsburgh."

Hilda paused here in her narrative to taste her brandy. "This is quite good, Jacob. I like it." Then she continued:

"In 1845, when I was seven, a devastating fire destroyed much of the city. My family was fortunate in that our home on the outskirts wasn't consumed. But the city rebuilt after that terrible conflagration.

"At the beginning of the Civil War, the population of the city was about 50,000, many of whom were of German extraction, like my family. The town grew quite rapidly during the war, and when I married Bernie in 1867 and moved to Crocket, the population was over 70,000. Now, I hear, there are several thousand more people living there."

"That's far too many folks for this country boy," he expressed with a smile.

"Another thing you wouldn't like about Pittsburg, Jacob, is the weather. Because of its proximity to the Great Lakes and the Allegheny mountains, it is often overcast and rainy. And unlike the mild winters you enjoy here in southeast Texas, the winters in that part of Pennsylvania are fierce, with strong winds and heavy snow falls."

"You're sure right. I wouldn't like such a place. I can't understand why people choose to live there."

Hilda smiled tolerantly. "Well, I suppose it's because most of us were born there, Jacob."

By this time Magruder had finished his glass of brandy, and when he picked up the bottle for a refill, he noticed Hilda's goblet was still half full.

"Hey! The house rule here is you have to drink two glasses of brandy before you can order supper, " he said with a grin. "So drink up."

"I'm beginning to suspect, sir, that you have an ulterior motive," Hilda responded with a smile.

"Shucks! I thought I was being clever, and you saw right through me."

"You don't have to try such tricks on me, cowboy. You should know that," she whispered with a wicked grin. And she emptied her glass and pushed it over for a refill.

When the couple had finished their first bottle of brandy, Magruder signaled to the waiter. He came right over. "Would you folks like to order supper now?"

"What do you say, Hilda? Are you about ready to think about supper?"

"I suppose so. What would you recommend, waiter?"

"Well, Madam, we are famous for our beef steaks. But our special tonight is roast pork with candied yams. Then you have your choice of other vegetables—we have green beans, black-eyed peas, fried okra and shelled corn. Also, if you'd like desert, we have blackberry cobbler and apple pie. And with any entrée, you always get our fresh-baked sour-dough bread and freshly churned butter."

"My! It all sounds delicious," exclaimed Hilda. "I believe I'll have tonight's special with black-eyed peas and okra. And I'll pass on the deserts."

"Make mine the same," said Magruder. "And bring us another bottle of brandy while we're waiting."

As he refilled their glasses, Hilda asked, "Jacob, you've told me a bit about the Texas Rangers' campaign against the Comanche Indians. But do you know the story of the white woman who was captured by the Comanches as a child, and raised by them. There was a brief reference about her in the newspaper recently that piqued my curiosity."

"Yes, I know her tragic story well. Her name was Cynthia Ann Parker. It was during a raid on Parker's Fort in 1836 that she was captured by the Quahadis Comanches. She was nine years old at the time. She was raised by them, and eventually became a Comanche in every way except blood. Ten years after her abduction, she became the wife of Peta Nocona, a minor chief. A year later she gave birth to Quanah, who later became the greatest chief of all the Comanches. Cynthia Ann also gave birth to two other children, a boy and a girl."

"In the fall of 1860, Peta Nocona made the mistake of leading another war party back into Parker County. During this raid, several people were killed, and guns and other property stolen. This attack incurred the wrath of Ranger Captain Sul Ross. And soon after the Indians had departed, Ross recruited a group of citizens, along with a few troopers and a handful of Tonkawa scouts to pursue the raiders and exact vengeance. Ross was determined to find the marauders, kill them all, and destroy their village."

"Sometime in December, the Tonkawa scouts located Peta Nocona's village, but Peta and the men were off hunting somewhere. Ross and his men rode down on the camp through dust clouds stirred up by a howling norther, and the killin' began. They shot women and children indiscriminately, includin' some Mexican slaves."

"Oh, Jacob! How could they callously kill those helpless women and children?"

"I know how difficult this is for you to comprehend, having been raised in a civilized society, but it is a case of fighting fire with fire. To have done less would've been considered a sign of weakness by the Comanches, for this is exactly what they do to all they consider enemies, whether Mexican, Indian, or white. The severity of this retaliation, would cause Peta Nocona's band to consider the dire consequences before repeating their dastardly deed."

"Well, it was during this murderous activity, that one of Ross' men recognized Cynthia Ann as Caucasian, and yelled, "Don't shoot her—she's white." She was taken captive along with her 18-month old daughter, and brought back to

civilization by force. The Parker family took her back and tried to rehabilitate her, but to no avail. She had been an Indian for 25 years. She often tried to escape and had to be put under guard. Her little girl died 4 year later. She never adjusted to the new way of life. In her grief, Cynthia Ann reacted like other Indian mothers. She mutilated her body, and finally starved herself to death.”

“What a sad, sad story,” muttered Hilda.

“Here,” said Magruder smiling, as he poured more drink in her glass, “let’s speak no more of such things. Let’s drink this good brandy and think of happier days.”

The couple were feeling quite mellow as they strolled back to the hotel. And when they arrived at Hilda’s door, Magruder asked with a grin, “Are you going to invite me in tonight, lady?”

Hilda opened the door, took a step inside and grasped him by the arm. “You just try to escape, cowboy, and I’ll scream!”

Chapter XV

Stagecoach.

Thursday:

When Magruder awoke the next morning, he could see the dim light of dawn through slits of the closed shutters. He heard a rooster crow and a few seconds later the courthouse clock tolled the hour. It gonged six times. He eased himself out of Hilda’s bed so as not to disturb her, then found his clothes and quickly dressed. He strapped on his gun, then unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway. Again he locked Hilda in. Then he unlocked and entered his own room.

He had no more than closed his door, when there was a knock. He quickly opened the door to find the stable boy standing there.

“Mornin’, Mr. Magruder,” said Bobby. “Willy Simms is down at the stable an’ he’s wantin’ to talk to you. He says he’s got some really important news. Mr. Swartz won’t let him to come in the hotel no more, so he sent me to getchu.”

“Alright, Bobby. Let’s go hear what Willy has to say.”

At the stable, Willy’s face stilled showed signs of the blow he had suffered at the hands of Cal Hicks. “What’s on your mind this mornin’, Willy?” asked the lawman.

“Mister Magruder, I heered ‘bout thet reward fer Sam Mason, an’ I got some news thet might hep you catch‘im.”

“Alright, Willy. Let’s hear your news. If it leads to the capture of Mason, I’ll see that you and your mother get the \$400 reward.”

“Okay, then. Well, uh...yesterday, I was fishin’ in my favorite spot over on Turkey Creek—thet’s ‘bout a mile east of the Lufkin road. An’, uh...after I’d been

sittin' there 'bout an hour—an' I'm tryin' to catch this big ol' granddaddy catfish I been after most a year—then I hear a hawse a'comin' through the woods. Well, uh...there's a great big yaupon thicket right next to my fishin' spot, an' on the other side of them bushes, there's an old broken-down shack where me an' my friends camp out sometimes. Well, uh...I heered saddle leather squeakin', and I knowed thet rider was gettin' off his hawse over there by thet cabin. An' this feller was a'talking to his hawse jus' like it was somebody. I heerd him say, 'Now, donchu go wanderin' off, you lop-eared buzzard-bait!' Ain't thet funny?"

"Get on with your story, Willy," said Magruder impatiently. "What's the news about Mason."

"Alright. Well, uh...I'm stayin' real quiet, 'cause I don't know whut this feller might be up to. An' 'bout a half hour later, I hear another hawse a'comin'. When the other feller gets there, he says, 'Howdy, Ben.' An' Ben says, 'Glad you could come, Dugin.' Then this Dugin feller says, 'Whut's this important news you wired me 'bout?' An', uh...Ben says, 'It's sumpin' Mason'll be glad to hear. Wells Fargo's bringin' in a hunnerd thousand dollars in gold on the Lufkin stage. It'll be goin' to the Gibbs bank, an' it's s'pose to be there 'bout seven-thirty or eight Friday mornin'. An' Ben said, 'Sumpin' else you better tell 'im—there'll be a shotgun guard ridin' on top, and two armed guards inside with the strongbox.' Then, uh...this Dugin feller says, 'How'd you hear 'bout this?' An' Ben said, 'My brother-in-law works for Wells Fargo as a hawse-wrangler, an' he heerd a coupla guards talkin' 'bout it. Soon as he told me, I sent thet wire to you, then straddled my hawse an' made tracks.' Then this Dugin says, 'Why didn'chu ride on into Huntsville, 'stead of askin' me to meet you out here?' An' Ben says, 'I didn't wanna chanc'it. There's folks in Huntsville thet know me, an' know 'bout my prison record. If I'm seen in Huntsville jus' before the Lufkin stagecoach is robbed, the law might think I had a hand in it.'

"By this time, I'm almos' too skeered to breathe, Mr. Magruder. After hearin' all thet stuff, I figgered these guys would kill me for shore if they caught me there. Then real careful like I pulled my line outta the water, a'fearin' I might get a strike an' thet it'd make a noise."

"You were right to play it careful, Willy" said the lawman. Then half to himself, he muttered, "I wonder how Ben was able to direct Dugin to that out-of-the-way place in the woods when he sent that wire?"

"Well, I heered him say, 'This place ain't changed much since we was kids.' Mebbe thet means sumpin'."

"Yeah, Willy! I think that does mean sumpin'," said the lawman with a smile. "Ben's telegraph message probably told Dugin to meet him at their old childhood campsite on Turkey Creek. Now Willy, tell me what else was said about Mason."

"Okay. Well, uh...this Dugin tells Ben thet Mason got a camp a coupla miles from Pine Hill south of Huntsville. An he said, 'I'll have to ride out there right away with this news, 'cause Mason ain't got a lotta time to plan the holdup if'n he wants to get thet gold.'"

The stable boy interrupted here. "Mr. Magruder, that Dugin feller that Willy's talkin' about might be Dugin Purdy. He runs a butcher shop over on 12th Street. He's the only Dugin I know of in Huntsville."

“You may very well be right, Bobby,” said the lawman. “I suspected that butcher was crooked the first time I met him.”

Again addressing the Simms boy, Magruder asked, “What time did the meetin’ of these men take place yesterday?”

“I ain’t shore, but it musta been after five, ‘cause it was already getting’ kinda dark there in them woods.”

“What happened after that, Willy? Did these guys leave?”

“Only one of ‘em did. Ben told Dugin he was gonna camp right there at the cabin, an’ wait fer orders from Mason. If he didn’t hear anythin’ soon, he was headin’ back to Lufkin. Then Dugin rode off.

“For a while, I was too skeered to move. I jus’ stayed right there till after dark. Skeeters were a’chewin’ on me, but I didn’t dare slap ‘em. I heerd Ben a’stompin’ around over there for awhile, an’ after a bit I saw the glow of a campfire through the brush. But finally it got quiet, an’ I figgered he’d gone to sleep. Then real careful like, I sneaked away from there, a’goin’ south a good ways ‘fore turnin’ west to get home.”

“Willy, I want you to go home now and take care of your mother,” said the lawman. “And if you want that reward, don’t tell another soul what you just told me. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Magruder. I shore won’t,” he said. Then Willy left.

“Bobby, the same goes for you. Don’t tell anyone about this. I’m trustin’ you, Bobby. And if you keep your mouth shut, I’ll see that you’re rewarded in some way, too. Okay?”

“Okay, Mr. Magruder,” said the boy, smiling. “I won’t tell nobody.”

“Another thing Bobby, I’ve thought over your request about my teachin’ you gun skills and how to shoot, and decided it’d be a mistake. With your workin’ seven days a week, you wouldn’t have time to practice anyway. I haven’t spoken to Swartz about it as I know he wouldn’t approve. I hope you understand, Bobby. I think it’s for your own good.”

“Shore, I understan’, Mr. Magruder. I’d ‘bout decided it was a pore idea anyway.”

As Magruder walked through the doorway of the Eutaw House, he was cogitating on methods that might be employed to thwart the efforts of the Mason gang. He thought the first order of business was to inform Captain McElvey and Sheriff Colson of the plot, before sending a warning telegraph message to Wells Fargo in Lufkin. Then he thought of Hilda locked in her room. By golly, I forgot about that extra key in my room. It really wasn’t necessary to lock her in. He quickly consulted his watch and found it to be 6:45. He smiled thinking she might be peeved, but he was first going to have a cup of coffee before unlocking her door.

When he entered the dining room, he was pleased to find Captain McElvey sitting at the counter drinking coffee and reading the morning newspaper. He walked in and sat down beside him.

“Good mornin’ Mac. Glad I found you here. I need to bend your ear about an important matter. Let me get myself a cup of coffee, then let’s go sit at a table where we can speak with a measure of privacy.”

Glancing sideways at his former lieutenant, McElvey asked, "Whatchu got on your mind this mornin', boy?"

After they were seated well apart from the other diners, Magruder quietly related to the Ranger all that Willy Simms had told him.

"Well, well," remarked McElvey. "Looks like we might get a chance to nab that crooked sonuvabitch, don't it? As you well know, J.J., I hate a dishonest lawman wuss'n a dog hates a snake. It tarnishes the image of us all."

"I figure we ought to send a wire to Wells Fargo in Lufkin to warn them—don't you?"

After considering that query for a few seconds, McElvey said, "No—I'm not sure that's best. There could be other leaks in their security there at the Lufkin office. If Wells Fargo postpones that delivery, word may get back to Mason, and that'd spoil our chance to catch that varmint.

"I'm thinkin' we oughtta let the delivery of the money take place as planned. Then we can set a trap for Mason and his gang. With that a hundred thousand in gold as bait, an' knowin' about the extra guards, Mason will likely have all his sordid crew in on this caper."

"We've got less than 24 hours to set this up, Cap, so we better get crackin'," opined Magruder.

"Well now, it sounds like you wanna be dealt a hand in this game, J.J.," quipped McElvey with a grin. "I thought you'd washed yore hands of any other law business here in Huntsville."

"Yes, so I said. But I just can't pass up a chance to help nail that bastard Mason. By the way, Mac, have you already had breakfast?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I haven't. And I promised to take Hilda to breakfast this mornin'. Why don't you go on over to the sheriff's house and break the news, and I'll join y'all shortly?"

McElvey cogitated on that suggestion a bit, then said, "No, I don't think that's a good idea, J.J. We need to get all the law officers together for this pow-wow—like before the Nighthawk raid. It'd be infringin' on Mrs. Colson's hospitality if we had the meetin' over there. An' besides—we need absolute secrecy about the plan we decide on. With all due respects to the sheriff's good wife, women have been known to gossip. I think we ought to hold the meetin' right here in the hotel like before. We'll impose on Swartz's good nature again for use of his conference room."

Magruder was forced to agree with McElvey's arguments.

"Alright, Mac. But one of us will have to pick up the sheriff in the hotel surrey. He can't mount a horse anymore."

"I'll take care of that, J.J. You go ahead and breakfast with your lady friend. I'll round up ever'body and bring 'em back here."

"Very well. In the meantime, I'll arrange things with Swartz."

When he knocked on Hilda's door, she responded half-angrily. "Who is it?"

"It's Jacob, Hilda. May I come in?"

"How can I possibly stop you? You've got the key."

He opened the door a bit and stuck his head in. "Please don't throw the chamber pot." he begged with a grin.

"I ought to. You're very inconsiderate leaving me trapped in here when I'm starving." She was dressed but having difficulty buttoning the fasteners on her dress that were in the back.

"Let me do that for you," he said, and quickly stepped over.

After the chore was completed, she turned about and put her arms around him. Looking deeply into his eyes, she whispered, "Oh, Jacob, how am I going to live with out your strong arms to protect me."

He embraced her then, and kissed her soft lips.

He walked her back to her room after their breakfast, and explained he had an important meeting to attend, but would join her for lunch. She didn't ask about the nature of his business, but she had a request:

"Jacob, I really must go back to the Colson's today. I only brought a few articles of clothing with me to the hotel."

"Very well. I'll drive you back right after we have lunch."

Their kiss at parting was prolonged.

When he got to the lobby, he went directly to the desk. Swartz was writing in a ledger, but looked up at his approach. He smiled. "Good Morning, Mr. Magruder," he said.

"How can I be of service today?"

"Karl, us lawmen need to use your conference room again for an important meetin'. Captain McElvey has gone to pick up Sheriff Colson and should be back shortly. Will that create a problem for you?"

"Absolutely not, Mr. Magruder. You are welcome to it. Would you like for me to have some glasses and a pitcher of water sent over?"

"That would be much appreciated, Karl. And by the way, durin' our meetin', we are not to be disturbed. That is...unless someone's robbin' the bank," he added with a smile. "Oh...one other thing, here's the extra key Cal Hicks used to gain access to Mrs. Gersemann's room the night she was attacked. I recommend you have a serious talk with that hardware merchant that makes your keys."

Magruder was sitting in the conference room reading the Huntsville Item when McElvey and the other lawmen arrived. In addition to McElvey, there was Colson, Willard and Foster, as well as fifth man that came in.

As Sheriff Colson limped in, he said, "Magruder, I want you to shake hands with Hiram Roebuck, late of Montgomery County. He is Walker County's newest deputy sheriff. He reported in early—and considerin' what McElvey told me on the way over here, it's none too soon."

Roebuck was a tall slender man with sandy hair and a full mustache. He appeared to be about thirty, had nice gray eyes and friendly smile. Magruder quickly got up from his chair and shook hands with the new deputy.

Then addressing Foster, Magruder said, "Clint, were you able to apprehend Kid Marshall's killer?"

Willard answered for him. "He damn shore did! Thet sorry cuss is now locked up in mah jail."

After everyone was seated, Captain McElvey said, "J.J., since you got the report from the Simms boy first hand, why don't you repeat everything you told me so everyone will have the whole story. Then we'll all put our heads together, and decide on the best course of action."

Magruder related what he had learned from Willy Simms, plus the suggestion from Bobby Simmons that Dugin Purdy might've been one of the conspirators at that meeting in the woods.

McElvey then said, "Well gents, that's all we know at this time, but it looks like we'll be dealin' with stagecoach robbers. For those that don't know, thieves experienced in this sorta crime, often attempt their holdup somewhur along the stage line whur the coach is forced to slowdown—like the top of a grade, at a stream crossin', or a sharp bend in the road. And in most cases, masked robbers with rifles will stand in the middle of the road, and order the driver to pull up and throw down the strongbox. Usually, the strongbox is carried in the front boot under the drivers seat, but accordin' to what the Simms boy heard, it seems they'll be carryin' this one inside with the extra guards.

Another trick used to stop the stage, is placin' obstacles in road forcing the driver to pull up. They may use a big log, a freight wagon or even a small herd of livestock. And on some occasions they've been known to shoot one of the lead stage coach hawses. I know we're dealin' with amateurs here, but I'm sure they're smart enough to figger summa this out. Now y'all know the country around here better'n me, so where do you think the robbers might try to pull this off?"

Sheriff Colson responded, "I think they'll pick a spot between Huntsville and Riverside. As for natural obstacles that'd slow 'em down, I can't think of any."

Even if we knew where the thieves would be waitin', how're we gonna stop them?" asked Clint Foster.

"That's one of the things to be worked out here today, son," answered Captain McElvey.

Les Willard spoke up. "Well, Ah gotta different idée—'fore we spend a lotta time a'worryin' about them kinda thangs, Ah suggest we consider another angle. If this Dugin feller at that secret meetin' in the woods yesterdy happens to be Dugin Purdy of Purdy's Meat Market, it shouldn't take a lotta squeezin' to make the skunk show his hand. Mebbe we could make him lead us to Mason's hideout, then we could nip their little robbery party in the bud."

Then Magruder said, "Men, I believe Purdy was the Dugin at that meetin'. When I was canvassin' the town merchants to watch out for Cal Hicks and his partner, I recall that the guy at the meat market was a shifty-eyed little weasel that I instinctively mistrusted. And I believe Willard's idea has merit. It sure beats tryin' to intercept the robbers out there on the road."

Captain," said Clint Foster, "What do you think of the idea of getting an undercover officer inside Mason's gang—with Dugin's cooperation, of course. I read an account recently where Pinkerton Detectives, using that ploy, were successful in arresting a big gang of train robber that had been harassing the railroads. That way we might round up Mason's whole sordid crew."

"Yore idea ain't a bad one, son, but it just ain't realistic on such short notice," said McElvey.

"I wouldn't mind takin' a crack at it", said Roebuck.

“Not a good idea. Mason would be highly suspicious of any stranger wantin’ to join his outfit prior to a caper like this,” said Magruder.

“It’s good of you to volunteer, Roebuck,” said the sheriff. “But I forbid it. It’s too dangerous. And with the stage comin’ in tomorrow, there ain’t enough time to pull off a trick like that.”

“I have to agree with the sheriff,” said the Ranger. “Let’s not go off half-cocked, and get one of our men killed.”

“I’m not concerned about Mason’s underlings,” continued the sheriff. “It’s Mason I want. He’s the brains of the outfit. And if you cut off a snake’s head.....”

Magruder nodded saying, “I think Willard’s idea is the best course.”

“Alright,” said McElvey, “If there’s no more objections, let’s go with that plan. “Now, who’s gonna do the squeezin’ that Willard recommends?”

“I’ll take care of that,” offered Magruder. “But before we break up our meetin’ here, we’d better decide what we’ll do if Dugin Purdy turns out to be the wrong Dugin.”

“Magruder,” said the sheriff, “why don’t you go over to the meat market right now and arrest Purdy—if you feel he’s the right man—then haul him back over here while the rest of us wait. Then we’ll all get to hear what he has to say. Hopefully, you’ll find him there. Take the hotel’s surrey. It’s tied out front.”

Magruder drove the surrey over to Purdy’s Meat Market, tied Bessie to the hitch rail, and walked in the front door. Purdy was there and busy waiting on a customer, so Magruder hung back. As the customer left, Purdy recognized Magruder as a lawman, and immediately indicated signs of nervousness. Magruder thought to himself, that sonuvabitch is our man, alright.

There was a man in the back of the shop cutting beefsteaks off a haunch, so Magruder made “come closer” signals to Purdy as he approached the counter. When they were face to face, Magruder whispered to him, “Purdy, you’re under arrest for conspirin’ to hold up the Lufkin stage. If you cooperate with the law, we’ll make it easy on you. But if you don’t, you could be facing the rope.”

Magruder’s threat of that kind of punishment was highly unlikely, but he was counting on Purdy’s ignorance of the law to frighten him.

“Tell your man in the back that you have some outside business to attend to, then come with me.”

“When he and Purdy entered the conference room, Magruder introduced him.

“Gentlemen, this is Dugin Purdy of Purdy’s Meat Market, and as we now know, a confederate of the outlaw, Sam Mason. Purdy, this is Captain McElvey of the Texas Rangers. I think you know the sheriff sittin’ over there, and all the others here are deputies of Walker County.”

The butcher was visably shaken. He just stood there pale-faced in a cold sweat.

Sheriff Colson then addressed him, “Purdy, we know about your meeting with your friend, Ben, out in the woods yesterday, and the plan to rob the Lufkin stage. I advise you to cooperate fully. Tell us everything you know about such plans, and guide us to Mason’s hideout, and you’ll probably get off with minimum jail time.”

Purdy licked his lips, and began speaking in a weak and hesitant voice. “Well...uh, Mason plans to stop the stage five or six miles north of Huntsville,

where...uh, a recent rain storm washed out part of the road. He...uh, figgers the stage'll havta slow down there. He plans to have five others with'im. Ben Mehan will be one of 'em...and, uh...Bud Jenkins another. And he didn't tell who the others would be.

"Are you gonna be in on the holdup?" asked the sheriff.

"No, Sheriff....I'm not."

"And why'n hell not?" asked the Ranger angrily.

Purdy hesitated, and licked his lips. "Mason don't want to risk me getting' hurt...uh...'cause my market's an important outlet for his rustled beef."

"Now we're getting' somewhere," declared Magruder emphatically. "Who delivers your beef Purdy?"

"Well, there's different ones drivin' the wagons, but they're all men workin' for Frank Gillory. Gillory's market in Conroe is the main outlet for the stolen beef."

The Ranger started to say something, but Magruder cut him off. "Wait a minute, Mac, I want to get the rest of the story on this rustled beef operation. Purdy, is there a slaughterhouse down there in northwest Montgomery County where this rustled beef is bein' killed and butchered?"

"There's a slaughterhouse, alright, but it ain't in Montgomery County. It's across the line in Grimes County."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Magruder. "Sheriff, Curtis Wheeler says that all the livestock that've been rustled off his ranch, have been driven south. And he's suspected for sometime that there's an outlaw slaughterhouse down there somewhere."

"Okay, Mac. You've got the floor," said Magruder with a smile.

"I'd like to say somethin' first," said the sheriff. "Roebuck, do you and Foster know anything about this slaughterhouse they're talkin' about?"

"Yeah, Sheriff," responded Roebuck. "It's run by the Seller brothers. It's suppose to be a legitimate operation, but there have been rumors for some time that they're dealin' in stolen beef. Of course, it bein' in Grimes County, there wasn't anything we could do about it."

"Well, I can damn shore do somethin' about it!" declared Texas Ranger Captain McElvey angrily.

"Roebuck—did you have any suspicions of this Gillory when on your former job in Montgomery County?" pursued the sheriff.

"Yes, sir—Foster and I both did. But Sheriff Morgan ordered us to lay off. Gillory was a big contributor to the sheriff's re-election campaign. I'm not suggestin' Morgan is crooked, mind you. He's just not very bright."

"Alright!" declared Captain McElvey emphatically. "Enough about this cattle rustlin' business! Let's get back to the reason for this meetin. Purdy, you haven't told us much yet about the stage holdup. Where is the gang goin' to assemble? And what time are they gonna be at their chosen place to wait for the stagecoach?"

Again Purdy licked his lips and hesitated. "Well, uh...as soon as I delivered Ben Mehan's message to Mason, he got all excited. And he had me ride right back out there last night and bring Ben back to his camp. Bud Jenkins was the only other man there at the time. He and Jenkins had already pretty much worked out a plan before Ben and me got there. His plan is, uh...all his men are supposed to be at his camp before nine tonight. They'll sleep there, and Mason will wakeup everybody at three in the mornin'. Then after breakfast, they'll ride out about 4:30.

Mason wants everybody in place before six. He plans, uh... to have two men hidden in the brush on each side, and two men will stand in the road. They'll all be masked and armed with rifles. The two in the road will order the stage to stop. If the shotgun guard raises his weapon, he'll be shot off his seat. If the driver fails to pull up, they'll shoot the lead horses. And if the Wells Fargo guards inside start shootin', Mason wants all his riflemen to pour hot lead into the coach. Bud Jenkins protested against that, sayin' there could be passengers in the coach who might be killed. But Mason said he didn't give a damn about any passengers—he meant to do whatever it took to get that gold!"

"That's pretty damned cold-blooded!" commented Roebuck.

"That just shows whut kinda lowdown polecats we're dealin' with," spat out Willard.

"Clint, how about you takin' Mr. Purdy out to the hotel dining room," suggested Captain McElvey. "Ya'll have a cup of coffee, while the rest of us kick around some options."

Foster nodded, got up from his seat, and signaled to the butcher. "Come on, Purdy. Let's go have some coffee." And the two men left the room.

After they had gone, McElvey said, "Okay, men...let's hear some ideas on how we should go about this.

"Well, one thing we oughtta do," offered the sheriff, "is send someone out the Lufkin road to find that washout Purdy mentioned. Then we'd know where the stickup suppose to come off."

"That's not a bad idea, Sheriff," said Magruder. "But I believe the ideal plan—if we could pull it off—would be to capture the whole gang out there at Mason's camp."

"I agree," said McElvey. "Let's work on perfectin' that plan."

"Well, they'll have guard, fer shore, while the rest of 'em are nappin'." said Willard. "Somebody'll hafta sneak in there like an injun, and knock'im on the haid."

"Gentlemen," said Hiram Roebuck, "If you'd allow me—I'd like to volunteer for the Indian job Mr. Willard suggests. I grew up on a farm near a Coushatta Indian village, and as a boy played with Indian children. I learned a lot of Indian lore, and at twelve, killed my first deer with a bow and arrow. I assure you, I can slip in there and neutralize any sleepy guard without arousin' the camp."

"Roebuck, with those kinda qualifications, I'd say yo're elected!" exclaimed the Ranger."

"I agree," said Sheriff Colson.

"Hiram, looks like you've got the job," confirmed Magruder. "But I think there's a better way than knockin' the guard on the head. Let's capture him and bring him away from the camp where we can question him about where the others are sleepin'—especially Mason. Then we can tie him up and gag him while we capture the others. Whatta y'all think about that?"

"Good idea. I think that's what we should do," affirmed Captain McElvey. "Now, there's one other thing to decide on. Whatta we gonna do with Dugin Purdy in the meantime. I wanted us to decide on that without his presence. If we put him jail now, that might tip off the gang that their plan has been compromised. But we can't very well turn him loose. Any ideas about that?"

"I've got another suggestion," offered Roebuck.

"Let's hear it, son. Don't be bashful," said the sheriff.

"Alright. Suppose I go back to his shop with Purdy, and we'll instruct him to tell his other employees that I'm a new hire. And we'll also warn him he's not to make any attempt to get out of my sight or hearin'. He can assign me some menial tasks, and perhaps the other worker or workers won't get wise. Then at the end of the day, when he normally closes, we can lock him in jail until it's time for him to guide us out to Mason's camp."

"That's a good idea, Roebuck," approved Magruder. "Think you can you fake at bein' a butcher?"

"Well, I've cut up a lot of deer, and I've helped my dad butcher hogs."

"Good," said the Ranger. "Let's plan on that. But you can't go in there with that big hogleg strapped to yore hip, son. I've got a little hide-out gun I'll loan you. It's a Sharps 4-barrel .32 with a bird-head grip. It's small enough to slip in yore pocket."

"I think it'd be a good idea," offered the sheriff, "to have Clint Foster station himself across the road from Purdy's market while Roebuck's in there—as backup in case sumpin' goes wrong. There's a small grocery store across the street that'd be ideal fer that. And the grocer's a good friend. I know he'll cooperate."

"Okay, let's get Foster and Purdy back in here," said McElvey, "and fill them in on our plans. J.J., would you do the honors, please?"

At ten o'clock Thursday night, five lawmen and their prisoner rode south out of Huntsville on the Pine Hill road headed for the stagecoach robbers' camp. Because of his infirmity, the sheriff was not among them. They rode quietly, walking their horses. All unnecessary trappings that might make any kind of noise had been removed from their attire and their mounts.

Dugin Purdy guided the lawmen to a secure place off the Pine Hill road, a half-mile from the outlaw's hideout. There they dismounted and tied their horses. Purdy had drawn the lawmen a diagram of Mason's campsite, illustrating where the outlaws would likely be sleeping, and his best guess at where a guard might be stationed.

Hiram Roebuck was wearing buckskins and moccasins. And without a word, he gave a departing wave to the others then disappeared into the woods. A half hour later, he emerged from the forest alone.

"Nobody there," announced Roebuck. "They were there, but they've all cleared out. And not too long ago because the charred wood from their fire is still warm. Evidently, they didn't fill Purdy in on their change of plans. Either that, or he's lied to us."

"No, no," Purdy denied fearfully. "I told you the truth—I swear! I didn't know nuthin' about any change of plans."

"Alright, men," said Captain McElvey. "Let's get back to town, lock Purdy in the clink, and makes some new plans ourselves—and quickly. We haven't got a lot of time."

Friday:

During their ride back to town, it began drizzling rain. And on their arrival at jail, Willard locked Purdy in a cell. Then he built a fire in the little pot-bellied stove, and put on a pot of coffee. Meanwhile, the other lawmen sat around the office desk discussing their problem.

“Men, let’s have some ideas,” said the Ranger. “We’ve got to work out something in a hurry. What time is it, J.J.? That damn clock on the wall has stopped.”

Magruder pulled out his watch. “It’s half past midnight, Mac.” Then addressing Foster, he said, “Clint, you went over to Riverside recently. Do you recall the place where the road’s washed out?”

“Yeah, Jake. It’s about a mile north of the little community of Arizona.”

McElvey then conjectured, “It appears Mason decided to take his gang up to their holdup spot early so there’d be no chance of being late for the stage. Now it seems our only option is to go around that holdup place—and on up to Riverside to stop the stage there in town. We’ve gotta warn ’em. We can’t let ’em ride into that ambush. And how we stop ’em could be tricky. Carryin’ all that money, they might think that we’re attemptin’ a holdup ourselves. Y’all got any ideas?”

“Captain, I’ve got an uncle in Riverside,” said Foster. “And I know others there too. I think we can borrow a wagon or two from them, block the main street in the middle of town, and force the stage to stop there. With a bunch of unarmed town folks out there on the street with lanterns, I don’t think they’ll take it as a robbery.”

“That sounds reasonable, Clint,” said the McElvey.

“Okay, men—what shall we do after we stop the stage in Riverside? I think the driver’s gonna wantta come on through. Most stage drivers I know are tough old birds that’ll drive their stagecoach right through the gates of hell,”

Magruder said, “Mac, let’s get all the passengers off the coach there in Riverside—if there are any—then some of us get aboard the stage to back up the guards. Two could ride on top, and two men ride inside with the guards. And since Willard’s a small man—no offense, Les—he could sit in the front boot, if he’s willin’. And I think we should all be armed with shotguns. Any exchange of gunfire between us and the robbers is gonna be at close range in poor light—conditions not suitable for rifles.”

“Not a bad idea, J.J.,” said the Captain. “Willard, how do you feel about Magruder’s suggestion?”

“Ah like it. Ridin’ in the boot’ll put me out front whur Ah can get first shot at them buzzards. The robbers will be expectin’ easy pickin’s, but if me an’ thet shotgun guard have our guns ready, soon as those masked hombres step out in the road, we can cut ’em down.”

Clint Foster spoke up, “Captain, there’s an old road that connects Arizona to Riverside that runs west of—and more or less parallel to—the main road. It bypasses the place where the outlaws will be waitin’. Our men can use that road to circle around the ambush site on our way up to Riverside. And the old road is probably passable for a stagecoach. If the stage driver chooses to avoid the robbers, he can take that road too.”

“I’m gonna propose to the stagecoach driver,” said the Ranger, “that he proceed on the main road as planned with our men going along as extra guards. I think he’ll want to anyway. He’ll readily see the advantage of wipin’ out a vicious band of

thieves that'll continue to be a threat otherwise. And I'm gonna suggest that he pull-up when ordered to by the robbers. At that time, Willard and the shotgun guard can blast the two robbers standin' in the road. Then the rest of us, along with the Wells Fargo guards, can take out any shooters on the sides. I've a hunch that Mason's gonna be one of the men standin' in the road, and if we're able to nail that bastard, the others may surrender or tuck tail and run."

"Captain," said Roebuck, I assume you'll be using the bypass road on our way up to Riverside. I propose that I leave you there, and continue on the main road until near the ambush site. Then I'll conceal my horse in the woods, and sneak along on foot. That way I'll be behind the robbers when the action starts."

"I think that's a good idea, Hiram," said Magruder. "Mac, when the rest of us get aboard the stagecoach, I propose that I alone ride on top, and that you and Clint ride inside. We'll have the stage driver slow his horses to a trot as he approaches the ambush site, and I'll drop off over the rear boot when about a hundred yards short of the washout. Then I'll steal along the side of the road on foot. With Roebuck below their location, and me above, we could get them in a deadly cross fire if comes to a shootout."

"That a good idea, J.J. How do you feel about that, Clint?"

"Suits me fine, Captain."

"Alright, men. We've got a good plan as far as procedures. Now let's nail down the timing. What time is it now, J.J.?"

"It's a quarter past one, Mac."

"Well, the stage is suppose to arrive in Huntsville about 7:30 this morning—and the ten mile run between Riverside and here would probably take them about 30 minutes. That means the arrival time for the stage in Riverside will likely be about seven. Let's call it 6:30 to be safe. Our ride up to Riverside will also take about 30 minutes, meaning we have to leave here no later than six. Better make that 5:30. So we could get ourselves three and half or four-hours shut-eye before we leave here. Whatta y'all say to that?"

"Cap," said Magruder, "let's all go over to the Hotel's stable. We can tie our horses to the rail outside, then find a couple of empty stalls with clean hay where we can rest reasonably comfortable. The courthouse clock will toll the hours, and I'm a light sleeper. After the five o'clock gong, I'll wake everyone, and we can mount up and ride out."

When the Lufkin Stagecoach rolled south out of Riverside that morning, the weather was dreary, with a fine cold mist falling and thunder rumbling in the distance. A formidable force of seven heavily armed men were on board the coach. No passengers had been carried on this special run. The driver turned out to be a crusty old, tobacco-chewing character similar to what Captain McElvey had described. And his shotgun guard looked like he might have been his twin. The two Wells Fargo guards riding inside with McElvey and Foster were younger men, but well seasoned.

The driver drove his four-horse team at a brisk canter, and in a very few minutes the washout in the road was within sight. No one was yet seen standing in the road, but the driver hauled back on his reins slowing the team to a fast trot. Here Magruder dropped off the rear of the vehicle and ran quickly to one side of

the road, where he began creeping along the edge of the forest with his shotgun at the ready.

When the stagecoach was within thirty yards of the washout, two masked men with rifles walked into the road. One held up his hand and shouted, "Halt, or we'll shoot!"

The driver pulled his team to a stop, just as two shotguns roared, and the two masked men dropped in their tracks. An instant later, there was rifle fire from out of the brush on the left side of the road, but no one was hit. The guards inside the coach responded with a fusillade of shotgun blasts toward the shooters. After that all was quiet.

Then McElvey shouted in his stentorian voice, "This is Captain McElvey of the Texas Rangers. I order you robbers to surrender! Drop yore guns and come out with yore hands up. We know there are two men on each side of the road. So come out now if you value yore lives."

A horse was then heard plunging away through the brush on the right side of the road. A minute later, from each side of the road, one man walked out with his hands held high.

McElvey and Foster quickly got out on opposite sides of the coach with their handguns covering the robbers.

On the left side, the Captain asked the surrendering robber, "Where's yore partner. I know there were two of you?"

The man replied, "I think he's dead. He was struck by summa your buckshot."

Roebuck and Magruder both walked up at that time. "That was short and sweet, Mac. Me and Hiram never even got a shot," expressed Magruder with a grin.

"Never mind that, J.J.," said the Captain sternly. "Go in the brush there, and see if that man is dead or alive. Drag'im out, either way. Roebuck, how about roundin' up the hawses of these would-be stagecoach robbers."

Foster had similarly questioned his prisoner, and was told the second man on his side had leaped on his horse and galloped away. The escaped man's name was given as Ben Mehan. Les Willard had gotten down from the stagecoach in the meantime, and was checking on the fallen robbers shot down in the road. He found them both to be dead, attesting to the devastating power of double-ought buckshot fired at close range. He removed both their masks, and found, as expected, one of the men was the rustler chief, Sam Mason. The other man was unknown to Willard.

"Hey, Cap'n! Willard shouted. Mason has pulled his last caper. He's daid. We won't hafta worry about this sonuvabitch no-o-o more!"

"Hey, McElvey, yelled the stagecoach driver. Y'all hurry it up! I've gotta schedule, ya' know."

"Okay, Duncan. Just a coupla more minutes."

"Alright, you lawmen, let's get crackin'. Willard, put cuffs on these two birds we captured, and put'em on board the stage. I want you to ride into Huntsville with'em, and lock'em in the hoosegow. Duncan's agreed to carry you. We'll bring yore hawse. Roebuck, straddle one of these outlaws' hawses, and go fetch your animal. Foster, take a hawse and ride back to Riverside, and bring back our mounts. J.J., help me drag Mason and this other bird outta the road. As soon as

Hiram gets back to help, we'll throw their carcasses across saddles for their last ride."

Willard was soon on board with his charges, and McElvey gave the "go ahead" signal to the stagecoach driver. "Thanks for yore help, Duncan...and good luck," he shouted with a wave.

The driver then released his brake, and shouted, "Giddap!" and his team leaned into their collars. He held a tight rein as the vehicle was towed over the roughness of washout. Then the old driver yelled, "Hey-yah! Hey-yah!" and began popping his whip. And in no time at all, the Lufkin Stagecoach was barreling down the road toward Huntsville, its treasure still in tact.

Chapter XVI

Sweet Sorrows.

On their ride back to Huntsville from the holdup site, the four exhausted lawmen led six horses. Three of the animals carried the bodies of dead men, and one was Les Willard's piebald mare. Coming into town, two of the unburdened horses were dropped off at Spencer's Stables, where arrangements were made to board them plus three others to be returned after the outlaws' bodies were delivered to the mortuary.

The four riders stopped again when they came to the jailhouse on Cedar Street. There, Magruder swung down and tied the piebald to the hitch rail out front. Then he checked the door. It was locked. Well, I reckon ol' Les is home getting' some well deserved shuteye, he mused.

On leaving there, McElvey addressed the two younger men. "Clint, how about you and Roebuck haulin' these bodies on over to the funeral parlor, then return the hawses to Spencer? Okay? Y'all are both spry young bucks, and my old carcass is kinda frayed around the edges."

"That goes for me, too, boys," offered Magruder with a smile. "And tell the undertaker, we'll settle up with him later."

"Okay Jake...and Captain. We'll take care of everything. See y'all later."

"Whew! I'm wore out," exclaimed McElvey as he and Magruder wearily dismounted at the Eutaw House stable. "I'm gonna grab a bite of breakfast now, then sleep the clock around."

Magruder checked his watch. "It's five minutes of ten, Mac. We'd best hurry. They don't serve breakfast here after ten o'clock. I'll join you for coffee, then I'm goin' on over to the sheriff's house and make my report. I know he'll be anxious for news."

"Suit yourself, son."

At that moment, Bobby Simmons came out of the stable. "Hello there, Mr. Magruder... and howdy, Captain," the boy said with a smile. "I was over at Gibb's awhile ago when the stage rolled in, and the driver was tellin' ever'body around

how y'all stopped that holdup out on the Lufkin road. And he said Sam Mason was killed. Did that really happen?"

"Yes, son, that's what happened," said the Ranger. "Now how about you unsaddlin' my ol' cayuse there, and giv'im a good rubdown. He's about tuckered out. Will'ya do that?"

"Yes sir, I shore will. How about your hawse, Mr. Magruder?"

"Yeah, I'd appreciate it if you'd take care of him Bobby. And I'm gonna need Bessie and your surrey again, but I'll hitch her up myself."

The sky had cleared and the sun was shining brightly as Magruder drove along enjoying the pleasant weather. And while doing so, he pondered on the remarkable events of the past few days in Huntsville. It's hard to believe that so much happened in only two weeks? Then his thoughts began to dwell on the fact he would soon be leaving this lovely little town and its many fine people. It saddened him somewhat. I've made some dear friends here, and chances are, I'll never see the town or any of these good folks again. But he was satisfied to have had a hand at reducing the lawless element that had been a threat to the good citizens of Huntsville.

At the house with the big sycamore trees, Magruder tied the little bay mare to the rail, and casually looked about wishing to capture the peaceful scene in his memory. This may be my last time to see this place, too. Then, as he strolled up the path toward the house, the door opened and old Sheriff Colson limped out with the aid of his cane.

"Well, howdy there, Magruder. Didn't know you were here. I'm glad to see you, boy. And I shore hope you're bringin' some good news."

"Good mornin', Sheriff. Yes sir, I've got good news."

"Well, come sit down here and tell me all about it, son."

He seated himself in one of the rocking chairs. "I thought Willard might've already told you, but I suppose he was too weary to come by."

Magruder then related the whole story of the lawmen's various activities leading up to the shootout on the Lufkin road. "With Mason's demise, the criminal activity in Walker County should be reduced considerably."

"I'm shore it will, Magruder. It may be a harsh thing to say, but I'm glad that two-faced sonuvabitch is dead. He was an evil man, and a great embarrassment to me."

"Those three other prisoners y'all brought in is gonna be kinda be crowdin' the jail facilities. That old jailhouse was only built to accommodate six prisoners, an' there was five in there already. Looks like a coupla of 'em will have to sleep on the floor. Heh, heh! An' feedin' that many might prove troublesome for Ma Bishop and her son who provide that service. Fortunately, the circuit judge will be here in a coupla days. That oughtta take care of the problem."

"McElvey had a telegraph message waitin' for him when we got back to the hotel, said Magruder. "He received orders from the governor's office to send the stolen money salvaged from the Nighthawk gang to Ranger headquarters in Austin. The state's auditors will determined the rightful ownership of those funds. And Mac tells me he's gonna head for Montgomery County as soon as he rests up

a spell. He plans to clean up that marketing of stolen beef goin' on down there. Hopefully, with Mason's demise, the rustlin' of Wheeler's stock will now cease."

"And that oughtta make Curtis Wheeler very happy," opined the sheriff.

"I plan to be on my way to Nacogdoches in a coupla days, Sheriff, but there are some things I need to take care first."

"Whut kinda things you talkin' about, boy?" asked the sheriff, as he loaded his pipe.

"For one thing, the sellin' of Cal Hicks' horse, guns and other gear. They're over at the hotel stable. Since Hicks stole her money, Hilda deserves whatever the sale will bring. I wish that could be done quickly, as Hilda's anxious to return home as well."

"That'll likely take a while, son. But I'll tell you whut: suppose you leave Hicks' stuff in my charge, and I'll arrange to get'em sold. Though it might take a week or two, when I receive the money, I'll send it to Hilda up in Pittsburgh. Now whut else's on yore mind?"

"Well, I promised Willy Simms that \$400 reward if the information he provided led to the capture of Sam Mason, which it did. But since Cal Hicks gave Willy's daddy \$1,000 of Hilda's money for a pair of fancy pistols, that kinda muddies the water. I assume Willy and his mama still have that money... and we now have the pistols. We might tell Mrs. Simms, 'We'll give you the \$400 reward and return your husband's pistols, if you return the \$1,000 Hicks paid Bill Simms for the guns.' I hate to do that for it'll seem like we're renegin' on our reward promise. How do you think we oughtta handle that, Sheriff?"

"We should go ahead and give the reward to the Simms, and forget about the other. Bill Simms may have already spent Hilda's money, gambled it away, or even buried it somewhur. So trouble yoreself no more about that. I'll have Clint Foster deliver the reward money it out to the Simms' place.

"Now, as for as Hilda's loss: she is due a \$400 reward for shooting Cal Hicks. And puttin' that with the money Hick's hawse and other stuff will bring, oughtta make up for her loss. I'll include her reward money along with that gained from sellin' Hicks' hawse, and send it all on up to Hilda in Pittsburgh."

"Very good. I think that's fair, Sheriff."

"Hey, I almost forgot. There was a reward offered for Joe Garza, too. Even though Hicks is the one who did him in, you deserve the reward, Magruder."

"No, Sheriff. I'd prefer that Kim Wheeler got that money—for the traumatic ordeal she had to endure at the hands of those two bastards!"

"Well, alright, son—if that is your wish."

Mrs. Colson opened the door and stepped out at that moment. "Well, hello there Mr. Magruder. I didn't realize you were here. I just came out to invite Charlie to come in and join me and Hilda for some coffee and fresh baked cookies? Please come in and join us, won't you?"

When Magruder walked in with the sheriff, Hilda exclaimed, "Jacob! I didn't know you were back. I'm so relieved. When the sheriff told us about the dangerous mission you and the other lawmen were on, I was worried."

"Everything worked out just fine, Hilda. None of our men were injured, and the robbers who survived the shootout are now in jail."

“Enough of this kinda talk,” scolded Mrs. Colson. “Let’s all sit down and enjoy these wonderful oatmeal cookies that Hilda made. I’ve already sampled one, and they are delicious.”

While the foursome were enjoying their refreshments and coffee, Magruder mentioned, “Hilda, I brought the surrey along as you requested. So we can get you moved back to the hotel whenever you’re ready.”

“Why are you moving back there, Hilda?” asked Mrs. Colson with concern. “Why not stay here with us till you’re ready to board the train to go home?”

“Oh, Martha—there are several things I need to purchase for that long trip back. And there’s banking and other business I must attend to that I couldn’t conveniently deal with from here.”

“Well, alright, honey, if you must. But I have already planned today’s dinner, and I insist that you and Mr. Magruder stay and eat with us. Call it a farewell dinner. We’re gonna have chicken an’ dumplin’s, and peach cobbler. And I’ll also share some of my homemade blackberry wine. Now, y’all wouldn’t want to miss out on that, would you?”

Hilda looked at Magruder for his approval, and he nodded, so she replied, “That sounds wonderful, Martha. Alright, we’ll stay, but only if you’ll allow me assist with the preparations.”

Later, during their noon meal, Mrs. Colson inquired, “Hilda, honey; what do you plan to do when you get back to that big city? I’ll bet you’re gonna miss our small town atmosphere.”

“I know I will, Martha. But to answer your question, the first thing I must do after seeing to the care of my parents, is to go over all the records of my father’s farm tool business. My mother has no head for business, and with my father’s incapacitation, I anticipate a frustrating jumble of unpaid bills and invoices. As soon as some order is established, I plan to contact our competitors there in Pittsburgh, and try to negotiate the sale the business. I feel sure one of them will offer to buy us out. I can’t possibly manage such an operation alone, and have no desire to try. I doubt my father will live long in his present state, as Mother described it, and when he passes on, I’m going to persuade her to leave that dirty overcrowded city, and move to a small town, preferably one here in Texas. Perhaps I’ll come back to Huntsville,”

“Oh, I do hope you’ll come back here, Hilda. And I want you to be sure and write us regularly to let Charley and me know how you’re faring up there.

“And what are your plans, Mr. Magruder, when you return to Nacogdoches?” she asked.

“Mainly, to be a companion to my father—and try to lift his spirits. My uncle, Cameron Ford, tries to look in on him often, but the ranch is six miles from town where Cam has a busy law practice. There’s a housekeeper there that prepares his meals, and a hired hand that maintains the property, but Dad is depressed and lonely. I expect to spend a lot of time playin’ chess...if Dad is still able to play the game. That’s always been one of my father’s favorite diversions. But Cam claims Dad’s degenerative mental state is gettin’ worse. He says neighbors he has known for years, occasionally stop by to visit, and Dad doesn’t seem to know them.”

“That is so sad,” said Mrs. Colson. “I know a maiden lady school teacher who is so afflicted. Teaching was her life for forty years, but now she can no longer teach.”

After their meal, the women began clearing the remaining food away, while Magruder accompanied the sheriff as he again sought the front porch where he could enjoy his after dinner smoke.

As the sheriff loaded his pipe, he asked, “Whut else you gonna do, when you get back to Nacogdoches, Magruder—other than carin’ your unwell father? I can’t see you sittin’ around and gatherin’ moss.”

“I really don’t know, Sheriff. I haven’t thought a lot about it. My uncle wants me to join him in his law practice. He thinks I know enough law to assist him with some of his cases. But I can’t see myself sittin’ at a desk readin’ a lot of legal stuff. I’d go nuts! I’m an outdoor man. Hell, I may run for sheriff! The man holdin’ that office up there now is reported to be a fat buffoon.”

“That’s whut you should do, Magruder. Yo’re a natural as a lawman. And as Sheriff, you’d be doin’ a service to yore community.”

It was then Magruder remembered the deputy badge pinned to his shirt. Removing it, he said, “Here, Sheriff. I almost forgot to turn in my badge.”

After a thoughtful pause, Colson responded, “Why don’t you hang on to that badge, son, just in case. You never can tell whut might come up in the next coupla days. If you should happen to get into a scrape with some troublemaker, I’d want you to have the law backin’ you up. Leave the badge with Swartz when you check out of the hotel.”

Hilda stepped out on the porch at that time. “Jacob, I’m about ready to go. Will you bring my trunk out, please?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, as he got up. “Show me where it is, and I’ll carry it out.”

After Magruder secured the trunk in the surrey, he returned to the front porch where Mrs. Colson and Hilda were saying their tearful goodbyes.

As they two women embraced, Mrs. Colson said, “Oh, Hilda, you dear girl—I’m going to miss you so very much. I can’t tell you how much your being here has gladdened my old heart. The house is going to seem so empty with you gone.”

“I’ll miss you, too, Martha,” said Hilda. “You and the sheriff have been so generous and kind. I’ll never forget you. And I promise to write regularly.”

The sheriff had gotten up from his rocker, and as the two women parted, he asked with a smile, “Don’t I get a hug, too, Hilda?”

“You sure do, Sheriff,” said Hilda, as she stepped over and gave him a warm embrace and a kiss on the cheek.

Magruder noticed the sheriff also had a tear in his eye as Hilda released him. Then as he shook hands with the sheriff for the last time, Colson said, “You be sure and write us too, son, when you get home. Let us know how you’re doing up there. Alright?”

“I’ll sure do that, Sheriff,” Magruder replied.

On their arrival at the entrance of the Eutaw House, he pulled Bessie to a halt, hopped out, then while assisting Hilda as she stepped off, he said, “When you get

upstairs, before you go to your room, please go to the fire exit at the end of the hallway, open it and leave it ajar. Meantime, I'll drive around to the rear of the hotel, and get the stable boy to help me carry your trunk up the stairs. You really should buy a couple of suitcases to replace this heavy trunk, before you go home. You'll find them much easier to deal with."

When Magruder arrived at the stable, he didn't see the stable boy around, so he called out. A minute later, Bobby Simmons came out the backdoor of the hotel. Immediately he noticed a large welt on the boy's left cheek, and his left eye was almost swollen shut.

"What the hell happened to you, Bobby? Did somebody sock you?"

"Yes sir, somebody did. There was a man here a little while ago, and he hit me. Then he took Cal Hick's hawse. Said it was stolen from his brother. I tried to stop him, but he knocked me down and told me, 'Don't get in my way, boy, or you'll be sorry.' He took the saddle and bridle, too. But he didn't get Hicks' rifle and saddle bags—I've got them safely hidden away."

While Bobby was explaining what had transpired, Magruder's anger was mounting. He had taken a paternal interest in this orphan boy, and it made him furious that someone would assault this friendly, well-mannered kid.

"What else did this man have to say, Bobby?"

"Well, he said a lot, Mr. Magruder. First he said he wanted to rent a hawse, but I told him we didn't have none to rent. Then he said, 'The sign on the door in my room said you did.' And I told him somebody had already taken out our only rent hawse. Then he said 'How about this gray and the sorrel?' And I told him they belong to you, Mr. Magruder. Then he went in the sorrel's stall, and after a minute, I heard him holler, 'Hello, Red.' An' he said, 'Boy, I know this hawse. He was stole from my brother in Houston six months ago, an' I'm takin' him.' Then he threw on Hicks' saddle, an' put on the bridle. I told him he was makin' a big mistake, that the hawse belong to a deputy sheriff of Walker County. But he said, 'I'm a Pinkerton Detective from Houston, boy, and I'm on the trail of some train robbers. An' I'll not be, hin...uh...hindered by some tin-star lawman in a two-bit town like Huntsville.' When he led the sorrel out, I grabbed the bridle and tried to stop him. That's when he hit me."

"What did this man look like, Bobby?"

"Well, he was 'bout tall as you, but some heavier. He had a short beard, an' he was wearin' a funny lookin' little hat with a round top and a skinny brim."

"Did you see which way went when he left here?"

"Yessir. He rode up this alley to Jackson, an' turned left."

Magruder lifted Hilda's trunk from the surrey and placed it on the ground. "Bobby, I want you to go up the rear stairway there. You'll find the door ajar. Go in and knock on Mrs. Gerserman's door. She's in room #211. Then tell her I've been delayed and will bring her trunk up in a half hour or so. Okay?"

"Alright, Mr. Magruder," said the boy.

Magruder then entered the rear door of the hotel, and marched straight to the reservation desk in the lobby. Karl Swartz saw his approach and smiled. "I'll bet you're gonna ask me about that man who struck Bobby".

"That's right, Karl. What's that bastard's name?"

“He calls himself Caleb Hooker. Claims to be a Pinkerton Detective. Came in on the mornin’ train from Phelps. He’s the most arrogant man I’ve ever met, and he speaks with the accent of a Yankee carpetbagger. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he wasn’t sailin’ under false colors.”

Magruder quickly retraced his steps, exiting the backdoor of the building, then leaped aboard the surrey and slapped Bessie smartly with the whip. She jumped and broke into a canter. Magruder pulled her to the left as they raced into Jackson Street, where they almost collided with a freight wagon. The driver jerked his team to a stop, shook his fist and yelled, “Hey! look whur you’re goin’, you fool!” Ignoring the rebuke, Magruder hurried on. He was hopeful of finding the man he sought before he left town.

Shortly after crossing Fannin Street, he spotted Hick’s sorrel tied at the rail in front of the Sundown Saloon. He pulled up there, jumped out of the buggy, and tied Bessie to the rail. Then, while walking toward the doorway, he pinned the deputy badge back on his shirt.

When he burst through the batwings, Magruder immediately recognized the man he sought from the stable boy’s description. A big man with a beard, wearing a bowler hat was bellied up to the bar. He had a boot propped on the brass rail, and was holding a large whiskey while conversing with Jerry Malloy.

Magruder stopped a dozen feet short of his quarry, and yelled loudly, “Hey you! Are you Caleb Hooker?”

Two drinkers at the bar beyond Hooker, sensing a confrontation from the tone of that shout, hurriedly moved away from the bar out of the line of possible gunfire. Malloy paled and backed away from the bar, and the idle chatter from the saloon customers sitting at tables suddenly ceased.

For many seconds silence hung heavily in the room as Hooker looked down his nose at his inquirer. Finally he spoke in an insolent manner, “Yes. I’m Hooker. Who the hell are you? And you’d best speak with a civil tongue.”

“I’m one of the tin-star lawmen who presides in this two-bit town,” snarled Magruder. You just assaulted one of our citizens, a mere boy---and you stole a horse. Know what we do to horse thieves in these parts? We string’em up to the nearest tree.”

“You can’t bluff me,” responded Hooker in a haughty manner. “I’m a Pinkerton Detective. I know how to deal with your kind.” As he spoke, he pushed back his hip-length coat with an elbow exposing a big pistol on his right hip.

“Touch that pistol, and it’ll be the last act of your life,” warned Magruder with ice in his voice.

Seeing his threat didn’t work, Hooker released his coat, and began to show some signs of nervousness.

“If our jail wasn’t packed with other lawbreakers right now, I’d throw your fat ass in the pokey for a few days to teach you some manners. But I’ll just have to deal with you otherwise.”

Magruder whipped out his pistol and fired off two quick shots. The first shot sent Hooker’s derby hat flying, and the second shot the heel off the boot propped on the rail. The force of that heavy bullet almost jerked the man off balance.

Hooker turned white as a sheet, and his lower lip began to quiver. “Th...this is an outrage,” he declared. “I...I’ll report you to the Attorney General for this injustice.”

Magruder holstered his pistol as he took four quick strides toward Hooker, and planted a powerful right fist into Hooker’s left eye—the identical spot on his anatomy where Bobby Simmons was injured. A lot of pent-up rage went into that blow, which knocked the man down. Hooker laid where he had fallen, immobile for several seconds, then he rolled over and began trying and get up.

“That’s a little somethin’ for you to remember this two-bit town by,” spat out Magruder. “Now I’m takin’ that sorrel back to the hotel stable. And you’d better not touch him or that boy again, you pious sonuvabitch.”

Magruder tied the reins of the sorrel to the tailgate of the surrey, then got aboard, turned the rig around, and headed back to the hotel. He grinned to himself as he drove along thinking, that pompous bastard is really gonna look ridiculous hobbling back to the hotel on a heelless boot wearing that shot-up derby hat. Then he began to consider Hooker’s charge that the sorrel was stolen property. I suppose Hicks or someone else might have stolen that horse. But with no identifying brand on the animal, there’s no way for a former owner to prove his claim. To hell with it! I’m not gonna worry about it.

Arriving back at the stable, Magruder told Bobby, “That big shot Pinkerton Detective is now sporting a black eye just like the one he hung on you, son.”

Bobby laughed. “I’d sure like to’ve seen that.”

“Now, how about putting the sorrel back in his stall, and throwing the saddle, while I unhitch Bessie?”

Bobby helped Magruder carry Hilda’s heavy trunk up the back stairway of the hotel. When Hilda answered his knock, he smiled and asked, “Where’d you like me to put this thing, lady?”

“Place it there by the armoire, Jacob.”

“Armoire? What the hell is an armoire?” he asked with a grin.

She laughed. “That’s a wardrobe to you, cowboy.”

After performing that little chore, Magruder declared, “Dear Lady, I only got about three hours sleep in the last twenty four, and if I don’t get a bit more soon, I’m gonna fall flat on my face. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go nap for a few hours, after which I’d like to buy your supper. Will you pay me the honor of dinin’ with me tonight, Madam?” he asked, removing his hat with a flourish and offering a bow.

“With pleasure, Sir Knight,” she replied with a grin and a curtsy. “I think I shall do some shopping while you get some rest. But I’ll be ready to dine by seven.”

Magruder retired to his quarters, locked his door, and sailed his hat across the room. Then removing his gunbelt, he sat down heavily on the bed. There was a bit of whiskey remaining in the bottle next to his bed. He picked it up, poured two fingers in a water glass, and downed it in a single gulp. Then he pulled off his boots, laid back on his bed and immediately fell asleep.

While he slept, he dreamed of riding Smoky through beautiful hills and forests on his trip back to his family home. And there was a shadowy figure riding a red horse traveling along with him. For a while he couldn't identify his mysterious accomplice. But after a time, in his dream, the two of them stopped to make camp. That's when he realized his riding companion was Bobby Simmons, the stable boy.

Magruder awoke a few minutes before the courthouse clock announced the hour of seven. It was dark in his room, but he lay there on his bed several minutes thinking about his dream. During those minutes, he decided to offer the orphan boy a permanent home on the Magruder ranch. This thought had crossed his mind before, but now he'd made the decision. He was reasonably sure the boy would jump at the opportunity. If he accepts the offer, I'll buy Cal Hicks' sorrel for him to ride on our trip---and I'll deposit the \$700 in Hilda's account at Gibbs. And I'll just tell her a buyer had been found when I give her the \$700 deposit receipt.

He got up, lit his lamp, and looked at himself in the mirror. He was sorely in need of a shave. He pulled on his boots, went down to the kitchen and retrieved a pan of hot water. After shaving, he put on a clean shirt, wet and combed his hair, straightened his kerchief and checked his reflection in the mirror. "Well, hopefully that'll pass muster," he said aloud.

Then he retrieved his hat, strapped on his gun, and stepped into the hallway. After locking his room, he rapped on Hilda's door.

"Who's there," was her immediate response.

"It's me, Hilda. Would you like to go to supper now?"

"Yes I would," she replied as she opened her door. "I was about to knock on your door, cowboy. I'm hungry."

"Would you like to go back to the Globe Tavern tonight? He asked with a smile"

"Yes, I would. I like the atmosphere there, as well as the food."

As they entered the tavern, a party of four was just vacating the corner table they had occupied on their previous visit. When the waiter came over to greet them, Magruder told him they wished to have the corner table. "Right away, sir. Please give me a minute to clear away the dishes."

After the waiter seated them, Magruder ordered brandy.

While waiting for their brandy, Magruder told Hilda of his dream, and the fact he had made the decision to offer the stable boy a permanent home on the Magruder ranch. He didn't tell her of his plan to buy Cal Hicks' sorrel, and deposit the money into her account.

Hilda placed her hand over his, smiled and said, "I think that is wonderful, Jacob. I believe that will be good for both of you. Do you plan to legally adopt him later?"

"Very likely, if Bobby is willing. I don't have any heirs, and at my age, I'm not likely to sire any children. As far as I know, Bobby has no living relatives. But I need to verify that before we leave Huntsville."

Their brandy was delivered, and the waiter asked, "You folks wanna order supper now?"

"Not now, waiter. We'll order later," responded Magruder.

He poured their drinks, then held up his glass to offer a toast. Looking into her pretty green eyes, he whispered softly, "Here's to the most beautiful woman in Texas."

Hilda smiled, and tears began forming. "Oh, Jacob. The thought that I may never see you again is more than I can bear." Then she began to weep.

He took her hand, and kissed it. "Don't think like that, my love. After you take care of your business in Pittsburgh, I want you to come to Nacogdoches...and bring your mother if she'll come. I'll be waiting for you...and we can be married there."

"Do you mean that, Jacob? You'd consider marrying the much married widow?"

"Your damn well tootin'," he said with a grin. Then soberly he said, "I love you, Hilda, and I want you to be my wife. Will you have me?"

"Oh yes, yes, Jacob. I want to be your wife. I've loved you since the first day we met. And this makes our parting even more sorrowful. In the morning, I'll be leaving on the ten o'clock train to Houston...the first leg of my journey."

Magruder was stunned. "So soon? When did you make those plans?"

"A few days ago, I asked Karl Swartz to obtain a schedule from the railroad station master for a trip to Pittsburgh. The Eutaw House provides this service for its guests, you know. He gave me that information this afternoon while you slept. If I leave tomorrow, I'll be able make more favorable connections than I'll be able to get for another two weeks. I've already made my reservations."

"Somehow I thought we might have a coupla more days."

"I'm so sorry we don't," she sobbed.

Magruder still held her hand...now he kissed it again. "Well, let's make the most of the time we have left. Drink up, sweetheart." And they touched glasses and drank.

"Tell me all about your itinerary, won't you?" he requested.

"Alright. It will be pretty much the reverse of the route I took seven years ago when I came down from Pittsburgh to marry Bernie. I'll be taking the H&GN train to Houston, where I'll transfer to the Louisville, New Orleans & Texas railroad. This will take me to Baton Rouge. I'll have a two-day layover in Baton Rouge, staying in the Lafayette Hotel. Then I'll board the fabled Robert E. Lee steamboat as it comes up river from New Orleans. From there, it's a six-day boat trip north to East St. Louis. But I'll enjoy the riverboat trip. I remember the scenic beauty along the Mississippi—and the accommodations and gourmet food on the riverboats are fit for a king. I wish you were making the journey with me, Jacob."

"Me too, honey. Later, I'll tell you an interesting story about the Robert E. Lee."

Hilda paused in her narrative to take another swallow from her goblet. She smiled saying, "I'm really beginning to feel this.

"I'll have a one day delay at East St. Louis, then catch the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati & St. Louis Railroad for the final leg of my journey."

"Have you made arrangements with the express people to send your money to Pittsburgh? Surely you're not goin' to try to carry all your money on your person."

"No, I'm only going to carry a few hundred dollars. The balance, I've consigned to Wells Fargo. I was pleased to learn that the Gibbs bank is an agent of Wells Fargo, and they will guarantee delivery of my money to Pittsburgh for fee of only

one percent. I thought that a most reasonable charge. I don't see how they can transport money that far for such a pittance, can you?"

Magruder smiled. "They don't really transport your money, Hilda. Besides their express services, Wells Fargo provides nation wide banking. They just deposit your funds in their local account here, then wire their Pittsburgh office to release those funds to you from their reserves there."

"That's very interesting. You are so knowledgeable about such things, Jacob. You make me feel like a child. Now, please tell me the story about the Robert E. Lee that you mentioned previously."

"Alright. During my last two years in prison, I shared a cell with a professional riverboat gambler named George Ellis. He did most of his gambling aboard the Robert E. Lee, and was a personal friend of the captain, John Cannon. Ellis was on the Lee during its famous 1200 mile race with the riverboat Natchez from New Orleans to St. Louis. That was in 1870. Accordin' to Ellis, John Cannon and Tom Leathers, the master of the Natchez, were bitter rivals, and both did their utmost to win. The race was highly advertised, and thousands of spectators lined the banks along the way in river towns like Natchez, Vicksburg and Memphis. And millions of dollars were wagered on the outcome. Ellis said Cannon stripped his boat of all excess weight except fuel, and carried no passengers except for a few friends. And the Robert E. Lee made the trip a few hours short of four days, bestin' the Natchez by six hours.

"This Ellis was a real interestin' character. A coupla years after that race, he traveled to Galveston to claim an inheritance from a deceased relative, and while there he was convicted of murder as a result of a gunfight over a poker game. He said he only shot in self defense. But, him bein' a stranger in town, and the gunfight bein' witnessed by friends of the deceased, Ellis was buckin' a stacked deck. He was handed a ten-year sentence.

Magruder paused to take a swallow of his brandy before continuing.

"The man he shot was named Cook, who, accordin' to Ellis, was a clumsy cheater. He had overlooked several of this man's sly card tricks. But in a final hand of five-card stud, with several hundred dollars in the pot, when Cook dealt himself an ace off the bottom of the deck, Ellis called him on it. He said the fool immediately jumped up and jerked at his pistol. But he was as clumsy a gunman as he was a card sharp. Ellis drew his own gun and attempted to wing the cheater, but Cook dodged to one side, just as Ellis pulled the trigger, causin' his bullet to penetrate the heart. Bad luck. However, Ellis had a cavalier attitude about his conviction. He said he narrowly escaped bein' lynched. 'Prison was definitely preferable to the alternative,' he'd say with a grin.

"I've heard other stories similar to Ellis's over the years," stated Magruder solemnly. "Playin' poker in saloons can be a risky indulgence."

"Well, cowboy, I know that you play," Hilda expressed with a grin. "When you do, is it for the money, or for the thrill of the game?"

He smiled. "I guess it's a little of both."

As they finished their bottle of brandy, Magruder signaled to the waiter, who quickly came over.

"Would you folks like to order supper, now?" he asked.

“Yes,” Hilda replied. “What is your special this evening?”

“It’s prime rib of beef with baked potato, Madam. Of course, we have other vegetables, if you prefer.”

“The prime rib with potato sounds good to me,” she said. “And I’ll have mine medium rare.”

“Make it two like that, waiter,” said Magruder. “And bring us another bottle of this good brandy while we wait for our food.”

“Right away, Sir.”

Saturday:

A clap of thunder awakened Magruder. It was pitch dark in the room. A minute later, he heard the rain begin to lash the building. He thought it was near dawn, but wasn’t sure. He was lying on his back with Hilda’s head resting on his left arm. Her left arm lay across his chest. Her regular breathing indicated she slept soundly. After a few minutes, the courthouse clock announced the hour of five. He was now wide awake, and, though he wished not to disturb Hilda, he wanted to get up.

He slowly moved her arm off his chest, then very carefully slipped his arm from beneath her head. She moaned and mumbled something incoherent, but did not awaken. He slipped out of bed, found his clothes, and was soon dressed. Again, he eased out the door and locked the door behind him.

He unlocked and entered his room, lit the lamp, then sat down on the bed. He needed to think. This will be my last day in Huntsville, and I’d better make a list of things I must do so I don’t overlook something. He moved to the little desk, picked up a pencil and began to write.

(1) First, I need to talk to Bobby Simmons about becoming my ward, and moving to Nacogdoches. (2) If he agrees, I’ll buy Cal Hicks’ horse and gear by depositing the money into Hilda’s account at the Gibbs bank. (3) And I must verify this money will be included with Hilda’s transfer of funds to Pittsburgh. (4) Then I must withdraw the balance of my money and close my Gibbs account. (5) Let’s see...I need to leave a note with Karl Swartz informing the sheriff that the sale of Cal Hicks’ sorrel and other property had been accomplished. (6) And I must inform Swartz about Bobby Simmons resigning his job as stable boy, and going with me to Nacogdoches. (7) Also, I need settle with Swartz for any charges owed on my hotel bill---then leave my badge with him as instructed by Sheriff Colson. That oughtta pretty well cover everything.

Well, I’ll start by waking Bobby, and talk to him about going home with me. He walked out and locked his door, descended the stairway, waved to the sleepy night clerk, then headed toward the back door. He noticed the dining room was still closed, but he smelled coffee brewing. The rain had lessened to a slow drizzle when he left the building. Magruder entered the stable, located the only lamp, struck a match and lit it. Then he called out. “Hey, Bobby.”

“Uh...Who’s there?” was his sleepy response from above.

“Bobby...it’s Jacob Magruder. Get dressed and come down here, boy. I have somethin’ important to talk to you about.”

“Oh...Alright, Mr. Magruder. Just give me a coupla minutes.”

When the boy climbed down, Magruder said, “Sit there on that bale of hay, Bobby, and let’s talk a bit. How long have you been workin’ here at the hotel?”

“Uh...I don’t know exactly...six or eight months, I reckon.”

“How’d you like to work for me on a 500 acre ranch up in Nacogdoches?”

A slow smile began to brighten Bobby’s face. “Gosh...I’d love that, Mr. Magruder.”

“Bobby, do you have any relatives that you know of?”

“No, sir. None that I know about. My mama and daddy moved here from somewhere in central Texas when I was a baby. I remember them talkin’ ‘bout Coleman County, but that’s all I know.”

“Alright. I’ll talk to Swartz, and tell him you’re resignin’, and he’ll have to find a replacement.

“Do you like that sorrel horse, Bobby?”

“Yeah. I think he’s a beauty. He seems to like me, too.”

“I’m gonna buy him for you. Whatta you think of that?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. I never dreamed of havin’ a hawse so fine.”

“Okay...whatta you gonna name him?”

“Uh...I don’t know. ‘Red’ seems like a fittin’ name. Does that sound alright?”

“Yeah, that sounds just fine, Bobby.”

“When will we be goin’ up to your ranch, Mr. Magruder?”

“Today, Bobby...if that’s alright with you.”

“Oh, Mr. Magruder...this is a dream come true.”

“There’s one thing you’re gonna have to change, son. If you’re gonna be my sidekick, you’ve gotta start callin’ me Jake,” Magruder expressed with a grin.

“That’ll be kinda hard to do after callin’ you Mr. Magruder so long. But I’ll try to remember...Jake.”

Tell you what we’re gonna do, Bobby: Mrs. Gersemann is gonna leave Huntsville on the ten o’clock train this mawnin’. And I’m gonna arrange it with Swartz, to borrow the surrey to carry her and her luggage to the station. I want you to drive Mrs. Gersemann and me to the station. I’ll get off there with her to say goodbye, while you to come back here, unhitch Bessie and put away the surrey. But before we go to the station, we’ll have Smoky and Red saddled, and have all our clothes and other stuff packed in our saddlebags so we’re ready to leave Huntsville. Are you with me, so far?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Magruder...uh, I mean Jake,” Bobby answered with a nervous smile.

“Alright. After you put away the surrey, you’ll return to the train station ridin’ Red and leadin’ Smoky. Then, after the train pulls out, you and I will leave from there and head out the Lufkin Road for our home in Nacogdoches.”

At that moment, the courthouse clock again tolled the hour. It was now six o’clock.

I’d better get upstairs and unlock Hilda’s door or she’ll be mad as a wet hen, he thought.

“Bobby, you can go ahead and start packin’ your stuff, and be sure to have both horses saddled and the surrey ready to go by nine o’clock. I’ll come by later to make sure you haven’t forgotten somethin’. Okay?”

“Okay, Mr. Magru....uh, I mean ‘Jake’,” he replied with a grin.

When Magruder passed through the lobby on the way to the stairs, he saw the dining room had opened, but Karl Swartz had not yet arrived. The night clerk still sat at the reservation desk half asleep.

Magruder tapped lightly on the door to Hilda’s room. As there was no response, he unlocked the door and peeped in. The room was still quite dark. He went in, locking the door, and quietly approached her bed. He could barely make out her form in the dim light, but her regular breathing proved she still slept. He sat down on the edge of the bed, leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled. She reached up for him.

“My Sir Galahad,” she whispered with a smile. “Kiss me again.”

He kissed her—more passionately this time.

When he released her, she asked, “What time is it, my love?”

“It’s a little past six, darlin’. Would you like to get dressed, and go down for breakfast?”

“No...I want you to come back to bed with me,” she expressed with a grin.

Smiling, he shook head. “You are insatiable,” he claimed.

“Yes, I am...now come back to bed.”

In less than five seconds, he had shed his clothes and slipped into bed beside her.

Magruder awoke a second time as the courthouse clock was tolling seven. He had gone back to sleep, and Hilda had also. He shook her gently. “Hey, sleepy head...you better wake up or you’re gonna miss your train.”

She stirred and said sleepily, “Right now, I don’t care.”

“Come on. Get up and dress, and let’s go gets some breakfast.”

Later, while at breakfast, he told Hilda of his plans for the day. “And you need to be dressed and have your luggage packed by nine. I’ll come up to get your bags and escort you down to the surrey.”

Tears began forming in her eyes again, as she whispered, “I don’t want to go.”

He took her hand and caressed it. “I don’t want you to go either, sweetheart, but you must.”

After their breakfast, he walked Hilda back to her room, kissed her, and said he’d return around nine. Then he descended the stairs, and walked over to the desk to talk with Karl Swartz.

Swartz greeted him with his usual warmth. “Good mornin’, Mr. Magruder.”

“Good mornin’, Karl. I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you this mornin’. I’m plannin’ to take Bobby Simmons to live with me up in Nacogdoches. I’ve already spoken with him about it, and he is anxious to go. I hope this will not be too much of an inconvenience for you. I’ve grown fond of the boy, and he doesn’t have much of a future here in Huntsville. I’ll see that he receives a good education, and is properly cared for.”

Karl continued to smile. "I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Magruder. I'm fond of that boy too. I've done what I could for Bobby here, but I know he'll be better off with you. I'll have no trouble finding a replacement, though I doubt I'll find one as efficient as him. By the way, your Pinkerton Detective friend left town last evening on the Navasota stage. And I noticed he was sporting a black eye when he checked out," he said with a grin.

Magruder smiled. "Well, Huntsville won't miss that sonuvabitch!" Then he explained his need to borrow the surrey for the morning, and Swartz had no objections. He also gave Swartz the note addressed to the sheriff explaining the purchase of Cal Hicks horse. And he left the deputy badge with him per the sheriff's instructions. When asked, Swartz replied, "Your's and Mrs. Gersemann's accounts are both paid up through Sunday, Mr. Magruder—and there are no other charges."

He then crossed the street to take care of his business with the Gibbs banker. Mary Davis, the seductive lady clerk, was there, but at the moment, appeared to be working her wiles on a handsome stranger. She took no notice of Magruder this time. Reckon I missed my opportunity to partake of that forbidden fruit, he mused with a smile. He concluded his banking business quickly there, and left the store.

At 9:15AM that Saturday morning, the little switch engine from Phelps came chugging slowly up to the stop barrier. There was a noisy groan of the brakes, then a loud hissing release of steam. And the citizens of Huntsville once again heard the familiar Toot! Toot! Too-o-oot! announcing the train's arrival. It was on time.

The Phelps train was a shuttle that ran the eight mile distance back and forth from Huntsville to Phelps in sequence with schedules of larger trains on the H&GN line. It consisted of an engine, a tender, baggage car, and a passenger car on the end. For the convenience of passengers, the engine pushed, rather than pulled the cars, into the station at Huntsville, so the passenger car was presented first. During its brief time there, the little locomotive huffed and hissed as if anxious to depart. Forty minutes later, there were three long blasts from the whistle indicating it was about ready to leave.

Magruder and Hilda stood on the station platform saying their tearful goodbyes as the conductor shouted his final "All Abo-oard".

He kissed her for the last time, and she stepped up the ladder as the train began to move. She stood on the little observation deck at the rear of the car waving to her lover and dabbing at her eyes with a kerchief as the train slowly moved away.

Magruder had a lump in his throat, and tears in his eyes. And he stood there and continued to wave until the little train rounded a bend and was swallowed up by the piney wood forest. Then reluctantly, he left the platform.

Bobby Simmons was waiting there mounted on the sorrel while holding Smoky's reins.

As Magruder swung into the saddle, he said, "Come on, son. Let's go home."

