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Chapter One

Well—well, the least you could do is stay for supper!” Glory choked on dust as Ralph Samuels’s buckboard spun out of the yard on one wheel. Sighing, she glanced toward the shanty, hoping that was squirrel she smelled frying and that Poppy had cooked enough for two.

Bending over, the petite young woman with a boyish frame picked up the knapsack holding her extra pair of denims and shirt. *Poppy isn’t going to be happy about this*, Glory thought. It was the third time in as many months that an almost-husband had brought her back. The eager suitor would call on her proper-like; then Poppy would propose marriage. The besotted swain always agreed, only to go back on his word before vows were spoken. Glory didn’t understand it. This time she’d nearly made it through the whole day before this fickle lout got cold feet.

Men were just too picky. Yes, she'd corrected Ralph a few times this morning—only *corrected* the man. So what? She hadn't said that she knew everything. He was thin-skinned and took her harmless observations for a sign of bossiness. Bossy? Her? She wasn't bossy—just happened to have more knowledge about turnips than Ralph could ever hope to have, and it was his pained expression, not hers, that put a blight on the outing.

She glanced at the shanty again, wondering if Poppy would be upset with her for coming back—or being returned—a third time. He shouldn't be. Seemed to her that she was lucky to have discovered Ralph's headstrong tendencies now rather than later. Wouldn't it have been dandy to be hitched to a man who couldn't discuss *turnips* without blowing up?

"Poppy!" Glory sniffed the late afternoon air, her eyes traveling to the piece of metal pipe stuck through the tin roof. Only a faint waft of smoke curled from the chimney. *Odd*, she thought. That was meat she smelled frying.

Climbing the steps to the porch, she kept a firm grip on the knapsack. Wasn't any need to unpack. When Poppy had gotten it in his mind a few months back that he wasn't going to live much longer, he'd set out like a man possessed to get her married off. No amount of arguing could have convinced him otherwise. She didn't need a husband; she was able to take care of herself. Been doing it since she was knee-high to a grasshopper. But the old hermit had argued—something Poppy didn't do that often. He'd fretted

day and night about how she couldn't live in these parts alone—not these days. He'd contended that if Indians didn't stir up trouble, men with no-good intentions would.

How could Poppy worry? Glory could fire her old Hawkins rifle better than any man; Poppy couldn't dispute that. She could haul water and chop wood and skin a bear in less time than it took to talk about it. She wasn't much on cooking and cleaning, but Poppy did all of that. She knew all she needed to get by. She didn't want any man telling her what to do.

Why, if she hadn't fallen off that wagon when she was a baby and if Poppy hadn't found her lying on the trail, she probably could have raised herself.

Her resolve stiffened. She had to talk Poppy out of this foolish notion of marriage; it wasn't going to work.

“Poppy?” Glory pushed the front door open a crack and peered inside. Late-afternoon sunlight fell across the dirt floor. A remnant of morning fire had turned to white ashes. The iron skillet was on the stove, and the scent of frying meat—and burnt bread—teased her nose.

Squinting, her eyes shifted to Poppy's cot across the room. Poppy, hands across his chest, lay sleeping peacefully between the rumpled blankets.

Shoving the door open, she came inside. Sleeping at this time of the day! Poppy would be up all night. Pausing beside the cot, she smiled down affectionately on the only father she'd ever known. She didn't know her real pa's name, but when she'd fallen off that wagon and nobody had

noticed, Poppy had become her family from that day on. If her real ma or pa had come back looking for their infant daughter, they hadn't found her. Poppy said he'd stayed around the area for over a week, waiting for someone to come back to claim their baby girl. Then bad weather had set in and he'd been forced to bring the infant to his shanty, and that's where she'd lived ever since, with Poppy; Molasses, the old mule; a cow; and a few settin' hens.

For years afterward, every time a wagon rattled by the shanty, the old hermit would flag it down and ask if anyone was looking for a lost child. The weary travelers would shake their heads, saying how sorry they were to hear about the tragedy, but they hadn't known anyone who was missing a young'un. So Glory had stayed, and the years had passed, and now the old man was worried about dying and leaving her all alone.

"Poppy?" She gently shook Poppy's shoulders. "Wake up, sleepyhead. It's gonna be dark soon, and you'll not sleep a wink tonight."

The old man lay deathly still, his blue-veined hands resting lightly across his frail chest, a faint smile on his weathered features. "Poppy?" she repeated, her breath catching as she bent to press her ear to his upper body. Her heart sank when she realized that he wasn't breathing. The beat that was once hearty and strong was silent now.

"Oh, Poppy." Tears smarted in her eyes, and she gathered the kind old man into her arms. "Why did you have to go and leave me?"

Sunbeams stretched across the shanty floor and gradually faded to shadows. Glory sat on the cot and cradled the old man like an infant, rocking him gently back and forth, singing a lullaby that he'd sung to her so many times before: *Sleep my little child, sleep and run no more. Someone who loves you holds you tight and will forever more.*

Poppy was gone. Memories flooded her heart: memories of how the old hermit had taught her to hunt and fish, to track wounded animals to either put them out of their pain or attempt to heal their wounds. He'd taught her to laugh at herself and to care about others, though it was a rare treat when they ever saw another living soul.

They lived deep in the Missouri hills with only animals and each other for company. Poppy's brother, Crazy Amos, came around occasionally looking for a handout. Glory was scared of the ferocious-looking giant. He stood heads taller than Poppy, and his massive hands were as big as the hams Poppy had hanging in the smokehouse. Poppy didn't cotton to his younger brother either. Said he was a freeloader, and Poppy didn't hold with freeloaders. Had "gold" in his eyes, Poppy contended; all Amos ever wanted was money. Poppy said if'en a man was able-bodied but didn't work, then it weren't fittin' he should eat. Amos lived a spell away and came around only once or twice a year, but that was enough to sour Poppy's disposition for days.

Tenderly smoothing her hand over the old man's forehead, Glory buried her face in his hair and cried. "What am I going to do without you?" She was alone now—

completely alone. She'd never had anyone but Poppy, and the cow, the old mule, a few chickens. And now she didn't have Poppy.



It took her two days to dig the grave. Glory washed the old hermit and dressed him in a clean shirt and pants. Afterward, she set his battered hat on his head, tilting it at a rakish angle the way Poppy liked it. Stepping back to survey her work, she smiled. "You look mighty perky, Poppy." Then she dissolved into tears and couldn't do a thing for the next few hours.

She didn't know how to let Amos know about Poppy's passing; the thought brought only relief. The farther away Amos stayed, the better she liked it. He wasn't right in the head, and worse, he was mean. Once she'd seen him hit his mule so hard with one of his big hands, the animal wore the mark a week later. He'd boasted about the men he'd killed and the women he'd mistreated. Glory didn't think he should be proud of his actions, but they seemed to amuse him.

Amos would pin her with a black-eyed stare until she'd squirm in her chair, heat igniting her cheeks. Finally, he'd laugh and look away but not until he was satisfied that she was weak from fright. He was an evil man, and she hoped she'd never have to set eyes on him again.

It took all of her might to get Poppy from the shanty to the graveside. She didn't weigh much, but she was sturdy.

Poppy had been proud of her strength, and today she worked hard to live up to his praise. Grasping him under the arms, she dragged Poppy's lifeless form down the ravine, careful to keep his pants and shirt as clean as possible. The journey to the grave site thirty yards away took most of the afternoon.

She shoveled the last spadeful of dirt onto the grave and mounded it up. Straightening, she listened to the silence. The stillness overwhelmed her. No Poppy's voice calling her to supper, no sounds of him putting the animals down for the night.

Not one other living soul to share the empty days.

"I cain't help but feel like I'm leavin' something undone," she said to no one, pondering what that something might be.

She remembered the time Poppy brought home a picture he'd found, saying it'd probably fallen out of a passing wagon. It showed some people standing around an open grave. The women were weeping into their handkerchiefs, and the men held their hats over their hearts, real respectful-like.

"Surely they must have spoken a word or two over whoever was in that hole." Glory thought long and hard. "Well, I reckon I ain't rightly sure one way or the other. . . . I would sure hate to find out later I was supposed to say something and didn't."

She tried to gather her thoughts as she kicked at a rock. Seeing as how she didn't own a handkerchief, she took off her hat and held it over her heart.

For a moment she searched for words. “Don’t rightly know what to say. . . . Poppy, you was a good man, and you sure was good to me. I thank you for pickin’ me up off that trail when I fell out of that wagon. Weren’t something that just any ole body would’ve done . . . well, guess most anyone would’ve picked me up, but not everybody would’ve kept me and loved me the way you did. I’m much obliged, Poppy. I loved you too—a powerful lot—and I’m gonna miss you something fierce.” She had to stop now because tears were choking her.

The cow waited nearby, wanting to be milked. Molasses, the old mule, munched on late summer grass near the lean-to. A couple of hens shook their feathers before flying to the nest to roost. Everything seemed normal, yet nothing would ever be the same.

Sighing, she laid a clump of sunflowers on the fresh dirt, wishing for a proper marker. Rocks would have to do for now, but she fashioned them in the form of a fish. Poppy loved to fish. She’d spent many a day on the riverbank catching catfish with him. She carried the shovel back to the lean-to and stored it before she milked Bess, who by now was looking a mite uncomfortable.

After the burial, days blurred. She got out of bed at the same time, did the same chores, listening for the sound of Poppy’s voice. Every night she visited the grave site and wept from loneliness. It was the first time she’d experienced separation, and the empty feeling deep inside her hurt something awful. She had no one to talk to, no one to explain the hollowness.

“I don’t know what to do, Bess,” she whispered, leaning against the cow’s warm flank while she milked. The fragrant smell of Bess’s coat and the warm milk hitting the cool bucket gave her a measure of comfort. This animal was a friend, someone she knew when the rest of her world was void of anything familiar.

Warm weather gave way to blistering heat. Fireflies kept her company at night. By day, she hunted her food and cared for the animals in silence. At night, when the isolation felt as heavy as an iron blanket, she talked to the mule for companionship, sharing stories of her day.

“Though it don’t seem it, winter will be here in a few months, and I’m afraid,” she whispered to the old mule. “Saw a woolly worm this afternoon. His coat was black and thick; it’s going to be a bad winter.”

Poppy had taken to town a few times, so she knew there was one not more than a couple days’ ride. Should she leave the shanty before the snows came? The thought terrified her. Life in the woods was the only thing she knew. Squirrels and chipmunks were her friends; she wouldn’t know how to live around other people. But she wasn’t sure she could survive a brutal winter alone in the woods, either.



One night Glory sat straight up in bed, reaching for the rifle when she heard someone pounding on the front door and shouting, “Let me in, girl! I know you’re in there!”

Amos! He continued banging on the door with his enormous fists, muttering drunken threats between poundings.

Sliding out of bed, she crouched beside it, her fingers tightening around the gun's stock. When Amos was drinking, he was mean as a wolverine. Poppy had warned her to never let him in when he was in such a state.

The heavy bar across the door rattled. "Come on, Glory girl! Open up the door and let Uncle Amos in! It's hot out here!"

He wasn't her uncle—he was no kin to her, and now that Poppy was dead, she didn't have to pretend that he was. What did he want? Why was he here in the middle of the night pounding on her door? Her heart thumped in her throat. Had he found out that Poppy was dead? How could he know?

Amos's voice dropped to a menacing growl. "Open the door, Glory. I've come for my money." He shoved his weight against the oak, and Glory slid under the bed. Her fingers closed around the trigger, fear choking her.

He knew. Somehow he knew Poppy was dead, and he was here to take the gold Poppy kept hidden in a pouch beneath the floor.

Amos slammed his bulk against the door, trying to break it down. Glory closed her eyes, silently praising Poppy for building the shanty out of strong oak. Trembling, she listened to Amos's repeated attempts to enter. Over and over, he threw his weight against the door. She could hear him swearing violently under his breath, threatening her with unimaginable, vile acts.

Trembling, she gripped the Hawkins until her hands hurt. Other than hunting food, she'd never shot another living, breathing thing, but she intended to shoot Amos if he broke that door down. She could hear her own breath coming in ragged gasps as his threats became more threatening and vile now.

She kept her eyes shut and waited. If he gained entrance, he would kill her and take the gold. Images raced through her mind—images of the rage burning in his dark eyes, corn liquor coursing through his veins, his big hands doubled and ready to hit, greed spurring him to madness.

“I want that gold, Glory! It’s mine and I mean to have it!”

She kept quiet, refusing to answer. *Give up and go away, Amos. You’re not coming in!*

Then there was silence, and the night seemed endless. It sounded as if Amos had left, and then she knew he was back. She could hear him chopping at the door with something, but the oak still held. A bottle shattered on the porch, and he bellowed in rage. The stench of corn liquor drifted under the crack beneath the door.

Fueled by whiskey, Amos slammed against the door—over and over until Glory was certain he would come flying into the room at any moment.

Getting out from under the bed and standing up, she positioned herself a few feet away from the doorway, waiting for him. She hefted the loaded rifle to her shoulder, squinted, and took aim. The room was dark. She couldn’t see a thing, but she knew where to point, and there weren’t

many better with a gun than she. If Amos came through that door, she'd drop him like a hot rock.

Suddenly silence fell over the cabin again. The pounding stopped. Straining to hear, Glory eased closer to the door. Had he given up and left? Long seconds passed while she waited, conscious only of her frayed breathing.

The windowpane behind her shattered. Whirling, she fired, aware of the sound of more breaking glass. Her heart threatened to leap out of her chest as she dropped to her knees and crawled toward the front door. He was at the back of the house now; she had to escape. If he trapped her in the cabin, she wouldn't have a chance.

Bounding to her feet, she lifted the bar, threw open the door, and bolted outside. The night was pitch black, a heavy cloud cover obscuring the moon. Racing toward the lean-to, she bent low, her bare feet covering the ground silently. He wouldn't be able to see her, not in this blackness.

The smell of hay and cow dung rushed over her when she slipped inside the crudely built shelter and threaded her way to the back of the stall. When she was a child, she'd hidden here from Poppy many a time when they were playing hide-and-seek. She could hear Amos shouting her name, cursing as he staggered about in the dark searching for her. The hunt went on for hours. Toward dawn, he finally staggered onto the front porch and collapsed from drunken exhaustion.

Seizing her chance, Glory shot from the lean-to and raced to the back of the cabin. She climbed through the broken

window and hurriedly gathered her knapsack with her extra pair of pants and shirt, a jacket, some bacon and a few cold biscuits, and the pouch of gold that she took from beneath the shanty floor. She quickly pulled on her scuffed leather boots.

Amos's besotted snores filled the cabin as she carefully eased the front door open and gingerly stepped over his sprawled form.

His right hand snaked out and latched onto her ankle. "You're not going anywhere, girlie."

Bringing the butt of the gun down on his hand, Glory broke his hold. Howling, he struggled to sit up, but Glory swung the rifle a second time and knocked him cold. With a moan, he slumped to his side and lay lifeless, blood seeping from a wound on his head.

Scrambling off the porch, Glory raced to the lean-to and swung open the door. "Shoo!" she yelled at Bess.

The chickens started on their nests, squawking as she raced through the coop and opened the back door. She drove the cow out, making a clear passage for the hens' freedom.

A moment later, she fastened a bedroll and her knapsack on back of the mule and swung aboard. The last she saw of Amos, he was sprawled on the front porch, lying amid the remains of a shattered whiskey bottle.

She didn't know if she had killed him or not. But by now, she didn't rightly care.