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Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory November 1885

victoria Jennings fell to her knees behind the iron potbellied stove and tore open the envelope. With trembling fingers, she spread the letter across her lap and read the words inscribed in a neat black hand:

Dear Miss Jennings,

I take great pleasure in informing you that on this day, October 24, 1885, the Lazy J ranch of Lincoln County, New Mexico Territory, has been sold to the Mesquite Land & Cattle Company of London, England. This transaction discharges all debts incurred by your father, Emil Karl Jennings, during his lifetime. Enclosed, please find the record of liens against Mr. Jennings's estate and the satisfaction thereof. Also, I enclose the balance of his estate, due to you, his daughter and only heir: a cheque for the sum of two dollars.

Sincerely yours,

"Miss Jennings, where have ye got to now?" The shrill voice jangled Victoria's nerves as she leapt to her feet.

"Here, Mrs. O'Neal!"

"Aha!" The red-cheeked Irishwoman set her hands on her

ample hips and glared at her employee. "Hidin' behind the stove, are ye?"

"Please, ma'am, I'll be sweeping ashes just now." As Victoria drew a horsehair brush from behind her back, the letter and its envelope tumbled to the scrubbed wooden floor of the meat market. "Oh, I—"

"Just as I thought. Worthless girl!" Mrs. O'Neal bent and swiped up the letter. She scanned it; then she opened the envelope and took out a check imprinted with the address of the First National Bank of Santa Fe and signed by George T. Beall, attorney for the estate of Emil Jennings.

"Aha, two dollars!" the woman crowed, waving the check. "Well, I'll just be takin' this in exchange for the rent ye owe me. Sign it on the back now before I change my mind and give ye the sack for yer laziness."

"But those funds are all that is left from my father's ranch. And all I have." Victoria blinked back tears as her employer dipped a pen into the inkwell that sat near the ledger on the meat counter. "Please, Mrs. O'Neal, you told me room and board came with the job. I beg you—"

"Beggars can't be choosers now, can they?" She put the pen in Victoria's hand and gave the younger woman a push. "Sign yer name."

Victoria pressed the pen to the back of the check and wrote her signature with the elegant loops and flourishes of the Spencerian script she had practiced under the supervision of Mr. William Graves. She could almost hear her tutor now, praising the perfect slant of the V and the neat triple swirl with which she ended the S.

As she set the pen back in its stand, Victoria brushed away the tears that clung to her eyelashes. "My father would have wanted me to have the money," she said softly as she handed over the check. "I cannot believe he intended me to live in such a condition."

"Yer father was a gambler, and ye be the wastrel he left behind him." Mrs. O'Neal folded the slip of paper and tucked it into her skirt pocket. "And to atone for yer idle ways, ye can just sweep up those ashes and slop the pigs, too. And when yer finished, see that ye pluck those chickens in the back room. The Baptists, God love 'em, are havin' a dinner at the church this Sunday, and we've twenty-three chickens to prepare."

As Mrs. O'Neal waddled away to tend to a customer, her husband emerged from behind the carcass of a sheep that hung from a hook in a ceiling beam. He waggled his eyebrows in sympathy. "Too bad about the check," he said as Victoria swept up the ashes. "Ye'll be needin' a coat soon, Miss Jennings. Santa Fe can be cold in the winter."

Victoria reflected on the coats that once had graced her armoire. Velvet, fur, and wool in brilliant greens and luscious reds, her winter wardrobe now hung in the homes of Santa Fe's wealthy—the donas whose husbands' families had held Spanish land grants there for a century, the wives of bankers and railroad barons, and the debutantes who would wear their former schoolmate's bright coats as they hurried through the snow to their social engagements.

"I'll be all right, Mr. O'Neal," she murmured, setting aside any wistfulness for the past. She picked up the two slop buckets and stepped toward the back door. "I thank you for your concern, sir."

"Let me help ye with those," he offered, reaching out. "People are so wasteful at the restaurant next door. 'Tis a wonder to me that Jack doesn't reduce his portions."

"Please, Mr. O'Neal. I can carry them myself."

Without waiting for his response, she hurried out the door

and down the rickety steps. The last thing she needed was help from the kindly butcher. Loaded with scrapings from diners' plates, the leavings were intended for the pigs that Mr. O'Neal one day would turn into bacon and pork chops. But Victoria lifted a prayer of gratitude as she eyed the crusts of soggy bread and chunks of meat rimmed with fat.

Setting the buckets on the frozen ground near the sty's fence, she knelt and reached into one with a bare hand. Barely able to contain herself, she shoved a palmful of mashed potatoes into her mouth. How good the food felt as it slid into her empty stomach! Next she tore the skin from a chicken leg, swallowed it, and then broke open the bone to suck out the tender marrow.

By now the pigs had spotted her, and they ran squealing toward the fence, their ears bouncing and their tails stuck straight up into the air. "Wait your turn!" she growled at them as she stuffed the crusty skin of a baked potato into her mouth.

Her stomach filled at last, Victoria staggered to her feet and heaved the rest of the pail's contents over the fence and into the trough. As the swine fell on the leavings, she sorted through the second bucket, finding five more chicken bones and a chunk of bread. After hiding them in her apron pocket for later, she upended the pail.

She was no better off than those pigs, Victoria realized as she wiped the hem of her apron across her wet chin. Worse, in fact. They could always count on their slop, for Mr. O'Neal paid the restaurant owner to deliver it every day. But some evenings Victoria had to watch as the butcher himself carried the pails to the sty, and she went hungry. The pigs had shelter from the wind and storms, they had food to eat, and they had companionship.

Victoria gazed out across the smoking chimneys on the

flat-roofed adobes that made up the town of Santa Fe and fixed her eyes on the purple mountains that rose above it—the Jemez range to the west and the Sangre de Cristos to the east. She had nothing. No home. No family. Not even the two dollars her father had left her at his death.

One of the many Scriptures that Mr. Graves had bade Victoria memorize came to her now. As she surveyed the glowing golden sunset and vivid pink clouds, she whispered the words of King David from the second book of Samuel. "The beauty of Israel is slain upon the high places: how are the mighty fallen!"

Fallen, indeed. At this time last year, Victoria Jennings was the belle of Santa Fe high society's holiday balls—as she had been during the previous three years of her education at Mrs. Redfern's school. With such ardor the gentlemen had courted her, the daughter of a wealthy rancher from Lincoln town! And oh, she had looked lovely in her gowns of pink silk, purple velvet, red brocade. Such a beauty, everyone murmured, with her golden hair piled on her head in braids and ringlets, looped with silk ribbons and pearls. The jewels that dripped from her earlobes and neck might have belonged to a princess. And Victoria, in all her glory, easily could have borne such a title.

News of Emil Jennings's death had stunned his daughter. She had admired her father, but she saw so little of him during her childhood that even now the man was a mystery to her. Not long after the funeral, George Beall, Esq., a lawyer from Lincoln, came to call on her.

Remembering the moment with humiliating clarity, Victoria picked up the buckets and started back to the shop. Mr. Beall had brought bad news, he told her as they sat in the parlor of Mrs. Redfern's Finishing School. It seemed Victoria's

father had been quite a gambler, and he had fallen deeply into debt. His eight hundred head of cattle, the vast acreage of his ranch, and his rambling stone house had all been mortgaged to the bank in Santa Fe.

No further fees could be sent to Mrs. Redfern's school, Mr. Beall had informed Victoria. The Lazy J and all its cattle must go on the auction block in order to satisfy the liens against it. If any money remained, she would receive it in the form of a check. With no living relatives—for her mother had died in childbirth—Victoria was left completely alone.

By the following morning, Mrs. Redfern had instructed Victoria to pack her trunks. Although sympathetic to the girl's plight, Mrs. Redfern asserted that she certainly could not continue housing a student unable to pay the fees. Devastated, Victoria took a room at Herlow's, a second-class hotel on San Francisco Street, and began to peddle her possessions.

Hope mingled with sorrow at the prospect of the sale of the Lazy J. The ranch was all Victoria had ever known until her father sent her to school in Santa Fe. She had expected to return there, marry a wealthy area cattleman or miner, and live at the Lazy J for the rest of her life.

As spring had turned to summer, Victoria waited on the edge of despair. Her wardrobe and jewelry gradually vanished, and she was forced to find employment. Fall arrived with its crisp air smelling of piñon smoke, but still no word from Mr. Beall. Finally, today, the letter had come, dashing her hopes.

Now, Victoria set the two empty buckets inside the door of the meat market and walked to the back room to begin plucking the chickens. The hours wore on, and at last, the O'Neals locked up the shop, leaving Victoria to sweep and mop, shake flies out of the gauze fabric that covered the windows, polish glass counters, scour meat boards, and wash and

sharpen knives. Each time she considered doing anything less than her best work, she recalled Mrs. O'Neal's favorite refrain: "I'll sack ye, Miss Victoria Jennings, and I'll send ye out to sell yerself to the railway men like the other soiled doves in this miserable town."

As Victoria lifted the trapdoor to the root cellar, the very thought of such a future sent shudders down her spine. Though she feared the dark, cold hole in the dirt beneath the meat market, she had learned that if Mrs. O'Neal discovered her sleeping anywhere else, a harsh beating followed. She shivered as she crept onto her pile of moth-eaten blankets, dug the leftover food from her apron pocket, and ate it. Then she took out the letter Mr. Beall had sent from Lincoln.

Though she could see nothing in the darkness that surrounded her, Victoria ran her palm over the page. The Mesquite Land & Cattle Company now owned the Lazy J. She had never heard of the outfit, but she knew that several British-owned ranches dotted Lincoln County. The Carrizozo Land and Cattle Co., the El Capitan Land and Cattle Co., and the Angus V. V. Ranch, all of which abutted the Lazy J, were among them.

How Victoria had loved riding her horse across the miles of endless gray-green grassland dotted with dark mesquite brush, waving to the cowboys working their herds, and at day's end, brushing the dust from her chaps as she walked into the big ranch house. What had become of the Baca family? she wondered, as she had so many times since learning of her father's death. Though she had written them several letters, she had received no response.

Rosa Baca, who had nursed the pale newborn along with her own baby daughter, had been the only mother Victoria ever knew. Rosa's husband, Abe, had managed the ranch employees, and he kept things running smoothly each time Emil Jennings was away. Victoria grew up with the seven little Bacas and had not even been aware of her true heritage until she was almost five years old.

Where were they now, Rosa and Abe? Did they still live in the tidy adobe home a short walk from the big ranch house? What had become of the children? And did they ever think of her?

As had become her custom, Victoria bent over with her forehead to the dirt floor and began to pray. Throughout the twenty-one years of her life, she had gone to church every Sunday morning, read the Bible beside the fire each night, and memorized Scripture at her tutor's bidding. She had considered herself the model of a fine young Christian lady, and she had been prone to congratulate herself—sometimes aloud—on her own purity, virtue, and sinlessness.

At the memory of her pride, Victoria covered her head with her hands in remorse. Her life had been so empty of anything that mattered! For far too many years, all she had cared about was fashion. And boys. And balls. She recalled too well the young men she had flirted with and then cast off. Most painful of all was the memory of Jesse Conroy, the handsome young cowboy, so smart and bold and so deeply in love with her. He had pursued her relentlessly, even though he had nothing but himself to offer. That should have been enough.

And Victoria had loved Jesse Conroy with all the pent-up passion a seventeen-year-old could possess. Everything about him was special and beloved. Almost . . . almost . . . she had given him her hand.

Then Emil Jennings stepped in. He assured his daughter she was meant for a better man—and by that he meant richer. Flattered by her father's unexpected attentions, Victoria denied her love for Jesse and promised herself to William Worthing, a gold-mine owner from White Oaks. But at the opportunity to go to Santa Fe—to attend Mrs. Redfern's Finishing School, to feed her insatiable hunger for prettier clothes and finer hats, and to flirt with young men who might have even more money than William Worthing—Victoria had callously shed him, too.

Never once during all those years had she thought herself precariously balanced on the edge of a precipice. No indeed, for her father was wealthy, and he owned the Lazy J, which one day would belong to her. And everything would continue on as it always had.

How vain! How futile! But she could not blame her father for her misery, for she understood too well that the flaws in her character were of her own making. Oh, God, You have brought me to these depths to show me my sin, she wept. And I see it. I see my insufferable greed. I see my petty selfishness. I see my vanity. Dear Jesus, how well I recall the hours I spent in gossip! Idleness filled my hours. Now You have shown me my sin, and I repent. Oh, God, I beg You to forgive me!

Still weeping, she rocked back and forth in the frigid darkness of the tiny cellar. What was to become of her? She was good for nothing but embroidering fire screens and painting still lifes. And slopping pigs. She could do that. She could sweep and mop, too. And polish glass, build a fire, scrub cutlery, empty ashes, pluck chickens . . .

A light flickered on inside Victoria's heart. A small, wavering flame so tiny she almost extinguished it the moment it appeared.

No, she thought. Impossible. Surely not.

But the light grew, and she recognized it as hope. The kindling began to crackle, and then it burst into flame. Surely

the new owner of the Mesquite Land & Cattle Company needed servants. Someone had to clean the ranch house, and who would know its nooks and crannies better than Victoria Jennings? She knew exactly where the silverware was kept and how many candelabras were stored in the big cupboard at the end of the hall. She knew how to plan elegant dinners, and where to plant beans in the kitchen garden, and how to make the fire in the parlor smell of mesquite, piñon, and juniper.

Can I go home, dear God? She clenched her fists tight and squeezed back the tears that threatened. It was too much to hope! She had lost everything—and deserved it. Was it possible that God might give her back a gift she had never once thanked Him for?

Unable to sleep, Victoria lay awake most of the night, praying and planning. When Mrs. O'Neal thumped the broom handle on the trapdoor at dawn, she nearly flew up the rickety ladder into the butchery.

"Ye did a fine job with the chickens, Miss Jennings," Mr. O'Neal murmured as he passed by her on his way to gather his knives. "I believe even the missus must be pleased."

"Thank you, sir." Victoria drew in a deep breath. "Mr. O'Neal, I was wondering if I might have a word with you—"

"The coffee's hot, husband!" Mrs. O'Neal bellowed from the front room. "Customers will be startin' to come in soon. Don't dawdle all day."

At the sound, Mr. O'Neal moved to obey, but Victoria spoke up quickly. "Sir, I should like to be paid my wages now."

The butcher glanced through the doorway into the store. "Have ye not been paid, miss? Not once in the two months?"

"No, sir, and I'm . . ." She squared her shoulders. "Mr.

O'Neal, I have decided to go home. I need to buy a place on the mail coach."

Without a flicker of surprise, he beckoned her to follow him behind the carcass of a large steer that hung from the ceiling. Holding one finger over his lips, he reached into his pocket and drew out a leather wallet.

"She don't know about this," he whispered. He peeled off six dollars, folded them in half, and tucked them into Victoria's apron pocket. "I take a little from the till now and again to keep me in whiskey."

"Coffee's gone!" Mrs. O'Neal sang out from the other room. "Bad luck for ye, husband."

"Nay," he called back. "For I'll send Miss Jennings next door to the restaurant to fetch me a cup."

"I should think not! She'll be steppin' in here and layin' out the meat in the counter, so she will."

"Ye think that, Mrs. O'Neal, do ye?" the man said, giving Victoria a wink and a nudge toward the back door. "Speak to Bill Sims at the drovers store down the street. Tell him I sent ye. He'll get ye a place on a jerky. 'Twill be twice as fast as a goods wagon and more comfortable than the mail coach. Off ye go, then."

Hardly able to believe it, Victoria gave him a quick hug. "Thank you, Mr. O'Neal. God bless you!"

"I could use a dose of His blessin', so I could," he said, rolling his eyes in the direction of the front room.

As Victoria hurried out the back door of the butchery, she heard him calling out. "I've sent Miss Jennings off now, Mrs. O'Neal. And next time ye drink up all the coffee before I have my first cup, I'll be givin' ye what fer!"



LISA HARRIS



Colorado, 1890

bigail Covington stared at the Wanted poster on the wall, a gnawing ache growing in the pit of her stomach. Randall Jackson was the crookedest man alive, and she'd had the gall to fall for him.

"Suckered the whole town if you ask me, Miss Covington." Sheriff Jefferson leaned back in his chair and rubbed his fingers through his short white beard. "Never met a man with such a fine disposition that turned out to be a cold-blooded killer. Even had Mrs. Simmons fooled—and she knows everything about everybody."

Not everybody. Abby winced inwardly then forced a smile. Thankfully, no one except her father knew what a shock Randall's crime and subsequent arrest had been to her.

The last time she'd seen the handsome rogue, he'd asked her to marry him—and she'd almost said yes. The fact that she had hesitated did little to take away the sting of betrayal. She'd loved him. Or at least thought she had.

"'Wanted, dead or alive, for the robbery of the Meadow Springs Bank and the murder of Deputy Miles Baker.'" Abby read the poster aloud, hoping the cold words would extinguish any feelings that remained. Anger mounted at her inability to have seen Randall for who he was. Ripping the poster off the wall, she crumpled it into a tight wad and threw it into the waste bin beside the sheriff's desk. "You won't be needing this anymore."

Randall Jackson would hang in the morning.

Taking a deep breath of renewed resolution, Abby set her shoulders back, then smoothed down the narrow pleats of her wool coat. "I need to get back to the ranch before dark, Sheriff, and I have one more stop. Thanks again for sending the carved horses for the boys at the orphans home."

"It's the least I could do. I'm looking forward to the Christmas Eve party you're planning." The sheriff stood and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his vest. "As long as the children don't mind an old codger like me showing up."

Abby laughed despite her somber mood. At least she had something productive to take her mind off Randall's hanging. "The children will love you."

"Give my regards to your father."

Abby stepped out of the sheriff's office and headed toward the mercantile along Meadow Springs's narrow boardwalk. The cold December air nipped at her face while narrow rays of sunlight glimmered across patches of white snow. She'd met Randall for the first time outside the sheriff's office. He'd made their accidental meeting into a romantic encounter. But the truth was, as the daughter of the wealthiest man in the area, she'd been nothing more than another conquest on his list.

She hadn't been the only one taken in by his subtle charm. Randall had captivated the entire town, enamoring the women and proposing business deals that had the men turning over their bank accounts faster than a bullet shot from the barrel of a Winchester.

He'd even graced the doors of the church every Sunday. Almost too late, she'd realized his songs of praise were nothing more than empty words of show. The reality of where his soul would go without a Savior haunted her.

Jolted out of the past, Abby collided into the broad chest of a stranger.

The cowboy took a booted step back and lifted his Stetson an inch, revealing a patch of blond hair. "Excuse me, ma'am. I must not have been looking where I was going."

He reached out and took her elbow to steady her. Her jaw tensed as she looked up into a pair of pale, sky blue eyes. "I am sorry, ma'am."

Irritation over the infraction flared. In the back of her mind, Randall's last words of apology resounded as a dissonant refrain. She eyed the clean-shaven face before her, and the anger she'd tried to suppress only minutes ago resurfaced like a bubbling pot of water on hot coals.

"Sorry?" she demanded. Her hands balled into fists against her sides. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Ma'am, I—"

"Do you know what the problem is with men like you?" He closed his mouth as the procession of words she'd been holding inside demanded escape. "You come into town with your fancy clothes and pockets full of cons, wooing the hearts of women with stories of adventure and fortune. Then, before they can count what's left of their meager savings, you're gone with nothing more than an I'm sorry—if even that."

The cowboy took off his hat and held it in front of him. "Ma'am, I don't know what to say, except I hope you're not

includin' all men in your assessment. I believe there just might be one or two good ones left."

Abby looked into the face of the stranger she'd just confronted and stopped cold, realizing what a fool she'd made of herself. She watched in horror as his lips curled into a grin, revealing a dimple on his left cheek.

"I..." Seldom was she at a loss for words, but the blueeyed stranger's sympathetic gaze did little to dissolve the embarrassment of the situation.

"If you'll excuse me," he said. "I was on my way to the livery."

"Of course." Abby swallowed hard, chastising herself inwardly for losing her temper. "But first, I'm the one who owes you an apology."

"No need, ma'am." He tipped his hat and stepped aside to let her pass.



Cole Ramsey watched the young woman with dark auburn hair turn and stride down the boardwalk. His training as a Pinkerton operative had taught him there was more than met the eye in most situations. Discovering the truth behind the secrets behind a person's façade had become not only a challenge but a way of life for him.

He headed toward the livery, recalling the set of cinnamon brown eyes that had flashed at him. Her smile, while lovely, had held of touch of sadness. Anger? Hurt? Betrayal? If he weren't here on assignment from his home office in Chicago, he would have enjoyed finding out more about this woman.

He turned for one last look, but she'd vanished into the

crowd mingling in front of the mercantile. Maybe someday, when he'd retired from the profession and bought himself a piece of land, he'd have time to pursue something other than horse rustlers and train robbers.

His work as an operative had brought a dozen years of undercover assignments, but at thirty-six years old with a leg that ached in the cold from an old gunshot wound, his days of fieldwork would soon come to an end—and a life behind the desk was not an option for him.

He missed the mountains and had done everything but beg to get this job. His former partner, Dirk, had discouraged him from taking the assignment, but he knew enough about the land and cattle from growing up in Montana to more than make up for his loss of agility.

Cole secured a horse from the livery, relishing the feel of the smooth leather saddle beneath him as he rode out of town. Scanning the horizon, he made a mental note of the layout of the land. High peaks formed majestic, craggy lines to the west. The Rocky Mountains were a sight of beauty that never ceased to amaze him. To the east, the terrain lay flat with gentle rolling hills as far as the eye could see. Tall grass blew in the breeze amongst a sparse scattering of trees.

The border of Covington Ranch began five miles past town and stretched across fifteen hundred acres of prime land. Before his arrival Cole had learned the basic facts about the ranch owner accused of sabotaging the surrounding properties. He'd picked up additional information from a waitress named Betsy at the hotel dining room between sips of black coffee and bites of apple pie.

Aaron Covington had been injured nearly thirty years ago when a gunfight left him crippled. His wife passed away last winter, and he had one daughter who helped run the ranch. Abigail Covington, he'd been told, was not only beautiful but intelligent.

He planned to secure a position as a ranch hand and discover if there was any truth to the rumor that Aaron Covington was indeed rustling cattle and sabotaging the land. He'd been hired by two of the victims, but Cole preferred to not only work undercover, but without the knowledge of the men who hired him. He'd found anonymity his best ally and more akin to his nature.

The sun began its descent behind the mountains, leaving an explosive trail of pink, orange, and yellow. He pulled his coat around his neck to block the cold and nudged the horse to pick up its pace. If he was lucky, he'd arrive at the ranch in time for chow—and a job. If not, he'd have to find another way inside.



Abby flicked the reins of the buggy, urging her horse to hurry across the flat plain. The sun had already slipped behind the grandeur of the Rockies. If she didn't make it home before dark, her father would be furious. How many times, with the recent string of problems in the area, had he attempted to persuade her not to go into town by herself? And how many times had she assured him she would be fine?

As chairwoman for the Meadow Springs's Orphan Committee, she was responsible to collect not only gifts for the upcoming Christmas party but coats, blankets, clothes, and schoolbooks throughout the year. She couldn't wait for one of the ranch hands to escort her into town every time she had a function to attend. They had enough work to do riding the lines, mending the barbed fences, and taking care of the cattle.

A splintering crack of wood snapped beneath her. Abby felt a sharp jolt as the buggy plunged forward. Trying unsuccessfully to maintain her balance, she tumbled from the seat and onto the cold ground.



LINDA GOODNIGHT



Oklahoma Territory October 1888

Patterson took aim at the big red dog and fired one shot. A pair of trusting brown eyes stared at her, puzzled, then glazed over as the old hound crumpled to the bed of dry autumn leaves.

"You killed him! You killed him!" Twelve-year-old Fanny flung herself out the front door of the cabin and flew over the yard toward the grove of bare oak trees fifty paces away, her calico dress whipping around her bare legs as she came. Quickly, Raven lowered the gun and whirled toward the screaming voice. With sure, no-nonsense steps she strode toward her younger sister, taking the brunt of her anger head-on, shielding her from the dead animal.

"I hate you." Fanny's pale, narrow face twisted in pain. "You are the meanest person on earth. You don't care about nothing anymore, not even poor old Red."

Raven swallowed back the heavy, sick despair that lay on her shoulders day and night. Fanny was so wrong. She cared all right, but caring hurt too much to let on most of the time. Since the day Ma and Pa died of the fever, leaving her with a younger sister and brother to raise on this lonely patch of Oklahoma prairie, all she'd done was care.

"He was old, Fanny. And suffering. I can't abide suffering."

Goodness knows she'd seen enough of it.

"You killed him 'cause he ate too much. You'll be killing one of us next."

Raven sighed. Fanny had her own way of seeing things. "Go back to the house. Joshua will be upset."

Grief-stricken and furious, Fanny stomped back to the cabin, her wail ebbing to a sustained moan.

Raven turned her attention to the fallen dog, shutting out the sound of her crying siblings. Old Red had been a good buddy, and she'd miss him. He was the only one she could talk to most times. Talking to Fanny or little Joshua only scared them and made her load heavier to bear. Only Red and the Lord had listened without fear. What would she do without that faithful old dog?

She pulled herself up tight at the notion. No use getting sloppy and weepy. People died. Dogs died. All leaving you with nothing but an empty hole inside to fill with work and worry.

Stiffening her resolve, Raven went to work. Pa's shovel made feeble scraping sounds against the stubborn Oklahoma earth. Thanks to the lack of rain, the ground was hard and dry and unforgiving. Twice daily she'd hauled buckets of water from the creek to water the withering peas and squash—bucket after bucket until she thought her back would break right in two. Now with winter just over the horizon, the pitiful joke they'd called a fall garden hadn't produced enough food to last a month, much less all winter.

She heaved a weary sigh—heartsick, tired, lonely, and scared, though she hated admitting the last one. Nine months of trying to keep things together with hungry mouths crying for their ma and she herself wanting to do the same was enough to scare anyone.

She looked skyward, where the gray November clouds obscured the sun. "Lord, if You're not too busy, I sure could use some help right now."

She poked at the ground again. As if dead set against taking in the gentle old dog, the hard earth refused to budge.

"Ah, Red." What if she couldn't dig the hole? Raven glanced over to see a swarm of insects already buzzing around her old friend. She shooed them away and dragged a broken tree branch over to cover his lifeless body until she could scrape out enough dirt to make a grave. She had to do it. Had to for Red.

The hound had been a gift from the man she'd always called Pa. She'd never known for certain who her real father was, but she'd been proud to call Benjamin Patterson her pa. She'd been ten when Ma had married Ben and come west. Along the way, they'd picked up the fat, wiggling puppy at a stagecoach station, and she'd immediately christened him Red.

"Good hunting dogs, they are," the stationmaster had promised Pa when he'd asked about the litter of squirming pups. And he hadn't been lying about that. Red had treed more than his share of possums and coons, and been a fine rabbit hunter to boot, putting food on the table in those first lean years before the land started to yield strong fertile crops. No one could ever say the old hound hadn't earned his keep.

Raven jabbed harder at the rigid soil, dismayed to see only a shallow indentation in the ground for all her effort. Tears prickled the back of her eyes. She jabbed the shovel a little harder, determined not to cry. Crying over Ma and Pa hadn't made the past months a bit easier.

"You deserve a proper burying, Red, and I aim to give it to you if it kills me."

Frustration mounted higher than the pitiful scoops of dirt. After twenty minutes of digging, the grave was only deep enough to bury a bird—if it was skinny.

A squawking cry overhead drew her eyes upward. Buzzards.

"No, you don't." She gritted her teeth in anger. "Not Red. You'll not get Red."

As if to mock her, a hungry vulture swept from the over-cast sky, black wings *flap*, *flapp*ing as he landed on the protective branch covering the dog.

With a cry, Raven rushed toward it, shovel swinging. Squawking in protest, the bird lifted off but remained overhead, circling, biding its time.

She went back to shoveling. In seconds, the vulture returned and this time jabbed his beak at the fallen animal before Raven could reach his side. With a wail of despair, she threw herself over the dog, shielding his body with her own. The stench of blood and death assailed her. She clenched her teeth and gulped, swallowing the saliva that pooled beneath her tongue.

"I won't be sick. I won't," she declared only seconds before the spasms racked her body, spilling the contents of her meager breakfast.

When the awful moment passed, Raven spat and wiped a shaky hand across her mouth. With a trembling sigh, she closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the brittle leaves covering the dog's lifeless body, wishing she'd died instead of Ma and Pa.

"Have you thought of burying the animal closer to the creek? Ground might be softer there."

At the unfamiliar masculine voice, Raven's head snapped up, heart thudding wildly. Other than her four-year-old brother, there wasn't a male within three miles.

Less than six feet away stood a lean, duster-clad cowboy holding a big bay horse by the reins. She hadn't heard his approach, but then she'd been busy . . . and old Red hadn't been able to warn her this time.

Jumping up, Raven straightened her skirts, eyeing the stranger with distrust. How long had he been there? Had he witnessed her humiliating sickness? And where had he come from? She knew all the homesteaders round about, and he wasn't one of them. Granted, cowboys, drifters, and new settlers came through occasionally, stopping to rest a spell or to fill canteens from her spring. Maybe he was one of those.

His sun-darkened face was friendly enough, set off by eyes as green as elm buds in the springtime. Something she recognized as pity lurked in their depths.

Raven stiffened. She wasn't having pity from anybody. "I'll manage," she declared, waiting for him to either state his business or disappear as quickly as he'd come.

He did neither. Without another word the stranger removed his long duster and tossed it across his saddle. Then he fetched the shovel from where she'd flung it, walked to a spot nearer the creek, and started digging.

"Didn't you hear me?" Raven followed, indignant.

"Keep the buzzards away."

Though it raised her hackles to be bossed by some stranger, the request made sense. She certainly wasn't making any progress on the grave. With a huff of self-disgust, Raven went to stand guard beside the fallen dog. The man

went to work, his back to her, giving Raven ample time to study him.

He wasn't too old. A little older than she, but less than thirty she'd say, though his surprisingly clean-shaven face made him look much younger. If he were a woman she'd have called him pretty, so clear and defined were his features. Beneath a wide-brimmed hat, his sandy hair was long enough to pull into a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. It was tied with a strip of rawhide.

He was simply dressed like a dozen other wandering cowboys who'd passed this way in the years gone by. His trousers were heavy denim, worn and faded. His blue shirt stretched across his back as he wrestled the soil from its confines. Lean, hard muscles bunched in the arms driving the shovel deep into the earth. He wasn't oversized, but he was as strong as a young mule, and Raven knew a moment of envy. Why hadn't God given her the strength of a man? She had a man's work to do. Why not the strength to do it with?

"You got anything to wrap him in?" he asked without turning. "Or you just want me to toss him in and cover him up?"

"There's some old feed sacks."

"Get one." When she hesitated, he glanced over one shoulder and said, "I'll watch out for the buzzards."

In short order, old Red was wrapped and buried beneath a mound of fertile Oklahoma dirt. The north wind kicked up, as it always did out here on the prairie, and Raven pulled her father's old work coat a little tighter, the chill in her heart more pronounced than that of the autumn weather. Overhead the barren tree branches clacked against one another as wind hummed through them.

The young cowboy turned from the grave, wiping a sleeve across his now sweating brow. "You want to mark the spot?"

"No." She'd never forget where Red lay buried. Never. "But we need to pray over him."

The man hesitated. "Go ahead then," he said gruffly, then walked a little distance away. He propped the shovel beside the tree, retrieved his duster, and leaned his broad back against the rough post oak. One booted foot propped behind him, he crossed his arms and waited.

"Don't you pray?" Raven called after him.

"No." His expression was distant.

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Don't figure it does any good to talk to somebody that never listens."

Wondering about the wounded expression in the stranger's green, green eyes, Raven bowed her head. "Lord," she said, self-conscious to know the man must be staring and listening. She cleared her throat. "Lord," she started again, "old Red's been a good friend. I don't know if dogs go to heaven, but I know You'll take care of him for me. And I thank You for it."

Keeping her eyes squeezed tight, she silently offered a prayer for the rambling cowboy who'd come to her aid. Something had hurt him, and she knew for certain only the Holy Spirit could penetrate that kind of desolation. No matter how difficult times might be, she couldn't imagine life without hope in the Lord.

When she raised her head, the man had disappeared. Whirling, she saw him amble toward the house, his loose duster making *pop-pop* noises above the spurs on the back of his worn boots.

Her stomach lurched. She didn't know this cowboy and didn't want him anywhere near her little brother and sister. Grabbing the Henry repeater, she hurried after him. "Hey!"

Her shout turned him around. Standing with one hip lower than the other and the pearl handle of a six-gun riding on one thigh, he looked relaxed and dangerous.

"Who are you?"

"Name's Seth Blackstone." His green gaze moved to the rifle in her hands. "Can a man get a drink of water?"

She lowered the gun, feeling foolish. Of course, he was thirsty. No matter that the wind was chill and the sun only a weak glare behind gray clouds, the man had just dug a grave in very hard soil. What was wrong with her, getting all nervous this way? He had done her a kindness. She owed him the courtesy of a cool drink of water and a few minutes' rest before he continued his journey.

Torn between the hospitality spoken of in the Bible and the safety of her family, she considered sending him to the creek. "Some have entertained angels unawares." The familiar Scripture played through her mind.

The man's duster blew open and again Raven caught a flash of the six-gun. She scoffed at her fanciful thoughts. Angel, indeed.

"I'm Raven Patterson," she said. Then attributing her sudden shiver to the cold wind, she led the stranger up the wooden steps and into her house.