

Nelson \ A River of Trouble

The Weight They Carry

By Patrick Nelson © 2017

Book One: A River of Trouble

Chapter One

Saturday May 8, 1880

The Colson Home

West of St. Louis, Missouri

5:48 a.m.

Lord she was tired.

Emma Colson knew if she were to survive to see her seventeenth birthday, she must leave. She bridled her horse in the dark confines of the carriage house, fearing her Uncle Theo would at any minute discover her and give her another helping of his violent rage—or worse. Her hands shook at the prospect.

He slapped her so hard last night she still felt a stabbing pain at the base of her neck. She slid her tongue about inside her mouth, finding the swollen, shredded flesh where her molars had torn into her cheek. The remnants of the hurried breakfast of day-old biscuit and apple butter mingled with the tang of her own blood.

Her nose finally stopped bleeding and she was surprised she could smell the manure and dank wet hay through nostrils clogged and clotted with blood.

She had foolishly thought Theo's depredations had reached some pinnacle, yet last night he unleashed his drunken fury more viciously than ever before. Flashes of his ugly face swam past in her mind, contorted in anger—or rapture—his beard soaked with sweat.

She shook her head. The pain in her skull cleared her thoughts.

At least he was too drunk to remove his trousers this time.

Shot, her agreeable three-year-old colt, was a handsome blue roan, smart, sturdy and fairly fleet—three attributes necessary for the task ahead. He was her favorite over Thunder, a broken-down nag who only drew a carriage or cart if given proper intervals of rest and far too much coaxing.

Any hope of escape rode on one of these two choices, and getting past the house and down the road to St. Louis was a gamble in either saddle, so she bet on the prospect that didn't kick and bite as much.

She felt awful leaving her mother and sister with that loose sack of horseflesh to do the work, but last year, on her fifteenth birthday, her Uncle Theo had whispered that Shot was his gift to her. He had really bought the animal for farm work but built the lie to sway her toward his affections. Of all his lies, she clung to that one and did not hesitate to use his manipulations against him.

The memory of his hot breath in her ear froze her in a brief, icy panic. Theo's ruthless nature pressed doubts upon her, but her anger flared, thawing the moment.

Any other day, she could barely lift the saddle, yet that morning her exodus charged her muscles and she slid it in place easily. While cinching the billet under his belly her ankle turned, causing her to fall hard against the wall. Several old horseshoes came free, narrowly missing her head. The whole rusty mess fell to the brick floor, clanging on the only spot not covered by hay.

She froze as the horrible peal echoed about the stalls.

She pushed herself off the splintered wall and listened a moment but heard nothing other than her own rapid heartbeat, the horse's breathing, and the chirping of

crickets in the dewy grass outside. She prayed the damp fog muted the clamor, keeping it from reaching the house.

Struggling against her fresh panic, she increased her haste and secured her possessions to the saddle. All she took with her was bound in one small oilskin satchel. Shot proved eager and helpful through the whole matter. He too wanted to light out on any trail promising better treatment than the Colson homestead.

Thunder, cantankerous as always, let it be known how he loathed any early morning nonsense. He threw her plans of a stealthy escape into chaos as he whinnied and assaulted the old planks of the stable wall with his hind legs.

Emma's heart fluttered. As dawn was a pale promise through the coach house windows, Emma felt her way across Shot's flanks to find the reins. She ran her hand over his muzzle, drawing upon his warmth for courage. A low nicker rumbled in him, pulsing into her fingers. She groped about to the stable doors, leading the horse. Emma listened beyond, toward freedom, but heard little over Thunder's petty complaints.

"Well, it's gonna be now or never, my boy," she whispered.

She opened the doors slightly. The iron hinges gave a ghastly, dry creak. No cries of alarm came from the house and she recaptured her breath.

Once in the saddle, Emma urged Shot forward. He nosed through the doors as a ship may crest a wave. When the doors scraped against Shot's shoulders, Emma kicked and the young horse bolted.

They tore through the gray mist, closing the gap between the stables and the house, the road barely visible just beyond. Emma spied a lamplight glowing in the window of the second-floor room Emma and her sister Louisa had shared. Louisa was awake.

The notion shocked her and she tightened the reins in panic. Shot responded by slowing fast and then clopping along the hardened earth at a trot.

The sash of the window was thrown up hard, rattling the pane. In the grey morning light, she found the specter of Louisa, face contorted into a sneer, long ratty hair waving wildly. A chilling wail came from the thing that once was her loving little sister.

”Poppa!” she keened. ”Ems is leaving! Poppa! You got to stop her!”

Hope flickered but did not fade under the sentry call.

Emma knew Louisa was but a simple child, desperate for a father’s love, but she had taken to calling their Uncle Theo ”Poppa.” That burned inside Emma, but never hotter than that moment.

Louisa’s betrayal to their father’s memory made Emma react poorly. She thrashed and dug her heels into Shot’s flanks but was drawing the reins tight at the same time. Though a fine animal, Shot was a harness horse used to pulling either the family carriage or the plow. His confusion at her commands made him stop, stiff-legged. Emma, not being a seasoned horsewoman, was shirked sideways and slipped off the horse onto the wet lawn.

Her breath was knocked from her, but she got to her feet, rounded Shot’s back end and laid her foot in the stirrup while peering over the saddle—not at her sister, but the darkened window beside her.

Inside Theo and her mother’s room, a faint flicker of light grew then blazed.

Groping for the reins with her right hand and gripping the horn with the other, Emma launched herself back into the saddle. The growing shadow of her uncle lumbered to the pane.

The window flew open.

She did not see the Theo's face, only his eyes, which grew from sleepy slits to wide, angry white circles. The bellow that came from deep within his breast reminded Emma of a mad, lowing bull.

No, she thought, he is worse than any animal. A rutting bull does not abuse a resisting cow.

"Emma!" His howl boomed across the farm and echoed back something fearsome, raising the hairs on her arms and neck. "How dare you? I do not know what in the world you are thinking, but you shall get from that saddle this very instant."

She remained silent, intent on righting her horse. Shot turned in a circle and Emma realized, in her haste she had pulled both ends of the reins under his neck. Her sharp tugging made the colt think she wanted him to turn around. She threw the reins forward, and the horse stopped, facing back toward the carriage house.

She glanced at the house but Theo was no longer framed in the window light. Emma wondered if she had time to unhorse, straighten out the reins, and remount before her uncle burst forth into the growing dawn.

Shot wagged his blue-black head and fluttered his ears. An unspoken prayer was answered as he flipped his long nose upward and the reins, as if by witching, floated up and right into Emma's outstretched palms. She was stunned, but rattled back into the here and now when her Uncle Theo exploded through the front door.

He cleared the old porch and warped steps in one bound, his bare feet slapping the front path. Slick with morning dew, the bricks provided poor footing. His feet flew out from under him and he landed square on his backbone.

It was then Emma realized Theo was armed with his old double-barreled shotgun, for when he struck the ground, one of the barrels belched fire and buckshot

zipped through the air inches above Emma's head, sounding like the quick ripping of fabric.

Surely he doesn't mean to kill me? The thought was only a flash—as fast as the buckshot, but she quickly spun the horse, laying her heels once more into his sides.

The gunplay and earnest kicking sent the colt down the cart path faster than Emma had ever known him to move. She did not risk a backward glance, but clods of earth and grass erupting beside her and the report of the shotgun announced Theo had righted himself and was bent on stopping her, dead or alive.

Though her escape wasn't clean, it was an escape. That didn't bar Emma from imagining Theo atop the hellish old horse, eyes ablaze and snot flying, gaining upon her in the other-worldly morn of West Saint Louis.

After a moment, she was compelled against her will to look back, but saw nothing save the falling dust of her own horse travel.

"Good-bye, Momma. Good-bye, Louisa," she whispered against the rush of wind. "And good-riddance to you, you bastard."

She left, carrying her few belongings and Theodore Colson's child.

Chapter Two

Antire Road, West St. Louis

Shot's keen aversion to being fired upon gave the impression he had sprouted wings as he tore away from Emma Colson's past. At first, St. Louis on the horizon could not come fast enough, but she was surprised to find sadness swirling about her as she watched her home shrink away.

Home.

It had not always been so bad there. Her father had passed beyond the veil one and a half years ago. He had died saving a neighbor child trapped in a house fire.

Emma's father had raced in, found and covered the infant's head with his own shirt, and rushed back through the conflagration of crumbling walls and fiery timbers. Once he crossed the threshold of the collapsing home, his hair singed to the scalp and his skin beginning to blister, he delivered the child into the arms of his mother, the widow Estelle Rowland. He let out his final smoke-filled breath and fell dead on the spot.

In her mind, he was a hero—but a failed one, for he left the family to fall in the clutches of his brother, Theo, a twisted, sickening shadow of the great man her father had been. It was as if her father and Theo had shared the one mother, but had Gabriel and Lucifer as their respective sires.

Emma's mother, Elizabeth, did everything in her power to keep the family together, but it weakened her. Due to the family's good fortunes, the bills were mostly paid, but being a widow raising two children was a crushing weight. She also succumbed

to the voices of civilized society that whispered a woman with two young daughters simply had to have a husband.

Eight months after her husband's death, Theo eagerly came to her door and she was too tired to go out and find a better man, so she yielded to his incessant pestering and promises of a blissful marriage. Emma's idyllic life spiraled even more out of control. Her mother grew introverted and melancholy, all but disappearing into her bedroom for days. Sadness gripped Elizabeth firmly, squeezing tighter over time.

Emma was grateful for the help of Estelle, the neighbor woman whose child her father had saved. Estelle tried to serve as Louisa and Emma's mother figure, helping with housework and cooking when she could, but both knew it only illuminated the truth: her mother Elizabeth was a sad shadow of her former self. Without the loving care or attention of their mother, Emma's younger sister Louisa ran amok and became a hell child.

Her Uncle Theo was in the new moon euphoria of his freshly acquired family and took little notice of the waning of his wife. When Elizabeth became but a ghost, he showered Emma with the attentions and intimate lightness a man should only reserve for his spouse. Not having much experience in the manner of men or boys, Emma did not at first recognize what his behavior forecast, but each close brush of his hand across her forehead, every furtive glance and earnest whisper, brought her nerves to a jangle.

Soon he began more unwelcome and lustful advances.

Torturous months passed with the vile nature of her uncle growing as an infection on her life. He pressed on, both physically and emotionally until she knew the only way to survive was to cut herself out.

When she came to that decision, she could not imagine herself feeling lower. She realized she was leaving her sister and mother to the whims of an ogre. She reminded herself that Theo had only obsessed over her and ignored them completely. Though Emma would love her mother forever, the woman's mind was gone with no return on the horizon and for now, Louisa was too young for his attentions. Louisa had Estelle to clothe and feed her, but now that Theo's nature was revealed, the older woman could provide the protection Emma could not find.

Emma and Shot rounded a corner and were confronted with Estelle's house on the roadside, the home where her father died. She could not look upon it. Although it had been rebuilt, Emma always saw it engulfed in flames, smoke billowing thick and high into the Missouri sky, her father dead in the scorched grass nearby, looking as if he were boiled alive.

She raced past, finding relief in thinking she would never have to look upon that house again.

Dashing through the farm land, young cotton and corn leaves reached up from the spring soil, conjuring a syncopated symphony in her periphery, a misty blur of black earth and rows of bright jade.

Antire Road changed the closer she came to town. Homes of brick and mortar loomed nearer each other and the road. She did not take much note, for she was busy helping Shot steer his way past the increased population, who rose like weeds in their path. She tossed anxious glances behind her, for she was terrified Theo might be swallowing up the distance and bearing down upon her any second.

No hell rider in pursuit yet, only the lazy meanderings of those she had passed and the dusty haze of an awakening thoroughfare.

The biting cool wind carried more dust as the traffic increased. She could barely see as she passed the infamous St. Louis Insane Asylum. The distinct cast iron dome rose above a light fog and stood shining against the pale blue sky. Visible throughout the entire city, it served as a steadfast landmark to most and as a subtle warning to a few.

As a ritual, her father would tease Emma as they clopped lazily past the asylum, "You ain't careful, Biscuit, we're gonna have to put you in there with all the other squirrelly people."

She spoke to herself as she passed the asylum for what she hoped was the last time, "Well, Poppa, if I get myself caught, Uncle Theo just may have me locked up there."

Soon a great green expanse of woods and lush lawn unfurled to her left as she came upon Tower Grove Park. The sour-sweet aroma of the flowering dogwoods reached her. A gentle wind plucked the white and red petals from the branches. They swirled in a tight knot above the road, like a small pink cloud. The breeze flung them to the street where they twirled and danced on the ground, laying a small blanket over which she crossed. Such beauty finding her in that troubled moment surprised her.

Farther down, at the park's side entrance, a thick of people had formed around a horse cab that had lost a wheel. As Emma passed the scene, all present stopped and noticed her. It made her uneasy, for whether they truly took note of her or not, she feared it was more breadcrumbs for Theo.

She cleared the mess and quickened her pace.

The feeling of being watched or tracked was heightened by the who-who-ing of an owl somewhere inside the park woods. It was odd to hear the call of the night predator in the morning hours. It struck an ominous tone in her journey.

No matter, she thought, pushing the growing bulk of fear aside. *I shall be at the hotel soon. I will meet my guides and we will begin our journey at once.*

As a nervous precaution, Emma bade Shot down a side street. She took the small detour a few blocks out of the way in order her trail might be harder to follow. It was wholly instinctive, yet eased her mind.

Moments later, Emma turned north onto the street where The Hotel Crawford was located. Intent on making her meeting, she picked her way past the lazy confluence of pedestrians and horse-trams, all busy in their own workaday.

Her neighbor Estelle had promised she'd be waiting with her travel guides, but Emma's heart grew heavy as she peered ahead to the sidewalk in front of the hotel and found no sign of her friend.

Estelle had known the full extent of Emma's peril and desire to flee. She was the co-architect of the escape. Emma's father had been savior to Estelle's child, therefore Estelle saw to it Emma was looked out for as best she could.

Estelle worked in the hotel, as did the mystery pathfinders, whom she wholeheartedly vouched for. One fellow was a cook and the other did some work Estelle never described clearly—somewhere between maintenance worker and house detective. Still, the fact remained, none of the three were present. Was her escape to be trampled in the cobblestone streets before it even began?

She wondered how she might fare if she set out to Arizona on her own. Could she find the way? Would she be beset by robbers, Indians, or the elements? How far might she get, if she even knew which direction to point herself?

Some fellow far down the block bellowed and Emma panicked. She looked to find not her Uncle Theo in hot pursuit, but a gentleman who had escaped being struck

while crossing the thoroughfare. He gesticulated wildly as he dusted himself, but was merely given a conciliatory wave from the driver of a flatbed wagon.

She stared at the entrance of the Crawford, locked in indecision and doubt, when the worried, worn face of Estelle emerged through the hotel doors. She wore her pale blue maid uniform streaked about the hem with soot, but to Emma she was a queen in royal regalia.

Emma rose high in her saddle and waved eagerly.

The harried older woman brightened when she spotted Emma in the crowd, but consternation furrowed her brow as she reached back inside through the gleaming brass and glass doors to tug a sorrowful excuse of a man out onto the street.

The man was short and thick, haggard and freshly awakened. He placed a battered hat with a wide, sagging brim upon his wayward mane of grey and brown hair. His jacket was threadbare and a size too small. For trousers, he went in the opposite direction, for they were laughably baggy.

As shabby as his overall attire was, his tall black leather boots were pristine, with a shine so high, morning sunbeams bounced off in all directions.

Considering the attire as a whole, Emma wondered if this man was actually a vagrant who had wandered unwelcome into the hotel and stolen a pair of boots set out to be polished.

Surely Estelle had been tasked with showing this thieving tramp outside. This could not be her guide . . . could it?

Emma was dismayed to see Estelle speaking to him and pointing toward her.

From a distance, his age appeared advanced due to the slight hunch of his torso, his tiny limp and the full, grey beard of steel wool flowing down to his collarbone. This was a misjudgment, however, for as she coaxed Shot closer to the pair, his bright brown

eyes proved he was actually a mid-aged man who had been compressed by life. She watched him gesticulate wildly, noticing his ill-fitting coat being stretched to the seams' limits.

An anvil with a coat stretched over, she thought.

He had no burning interest in Emma, or Estelle's attempts to point her out. Drawing within earshot, Emma was able to snag some of the conversation.

He spoke, but the message was less from a full grown man and more like a high-pitched temper tantrum of a child. "I ain't ready to go, 'Stelle!" He stiffened. "I have not had my breakfast and I am still pocket-poor. The Baron owes me twenty dollars from our game last night, and I'll be dipped in vinegar before I go off without my winnings."

From the look of him, Emma assumed he could not get more sour—even with the vinegar, though she had no idea what on earth that actually meant.

Estelle wheeled him around by his shoulders to face Emma. It was a heavy task indeed.

Estelle hissed sharply, "Shush, now. You need to meet your charge, Emma. She's been waiting for what I'm sure is too long already!"

"Don't you get all wifey, 'Stelle," he said, not focusing on Emma. "You are not my spouse. Until such a time, you reap none of the hen-pecking rewards associated with the institution of matrimony."

Emma noticed a flush grow beneath Estelle's pale, lined face as she reached up to tuck a few tufts of hair beneath the man's hat. Estelle had been a widow for many years, her husband having died in the War, but Emma never pictured her dear old friend as looking for a replacement—especially this muskrat of a man in shiny boots.

”Don’t let’s get started on that when you have a whole other thing to start on right here,” Estelle replied, brushing off his hopelessly soiled lapels. ”I’ll get your money from the Baron, but if he says you cheated him like last time—”

”Why do you insist on calling it cheating?” he said, stomping up and down in another fit. ”It’s cheating if there’s only the one person doing it! I told you I saw him slip a card from his sleeve first! I only did the same so as to level the playing field. Don’t you go sayin’ I was the cheater. I was justified and I won’t be discussing this again.” He folded his arms and turned away petulantly, an injured heart. ”Besides, how you gonna get me the money if we’re away in the manger out West, babysittin’ some spoiled— ”

Estelle’s gentle brushing on the back of his jacket became a sharp smack.

”Ow-wee. Why’d you go and . . .”

Estelle turned him round once more and nodded up to Emma.

”Oh,” he stammered. ”I am truly sorry, Miss.” He removed his tired hat with a flourish and bent into a deep bow. He swept his arm across his big belly.

This was too great a shift in his cargo, for he listed forward. Emma wondered if the man were drunk. Estelle, quick and strong despite her years, got herself under him enough to keep him from capsizing.

He swatted away her aid, addressing the young rider once more. ”I suppose introductions are in order and, seeing as how the Lady Estelle is so unmannered . . . I am Hercules Bennet, Esquire.”

He approached Emma, wiped his palm across his trousers and extended his hand to her. She took it and shook it, feeling at first a near bone-grinding squeeze that lessened as Herc adjusted his strength. She waited for Hercules to glance at Estelle before she wagged her pain away.

”It is nice to meet you, Mister Bennet—”

”Now please, call me ’Herc’,” he said with a smile. ”It is only polite since we are to spend so many miles together.”

His eyes twinkled and shone, and his wide smile was warm and disarming despite his missing a few key teeth. It was all Emma could do to not stare at the one gleaming gold crown on an upper tooth. By the way he cleared his lips of it and pointed it directly at her, she got the impression it was a treasure the man was greatly proud of.

Nothing was said for a moment. Emma only glanced at him briefly and then surveyed the neighborhood awkwardly. Herc fidgeted with his hat, placed it on his head and absently cleared his throat.

It fell on Estelle to break the silence and bring them to the topic at hand. ”So, Emma, dear, have you wired ahead to let your grandfather know you’re coming to Arizona to live with him?”

”Well, actually . . .” Emma said, unable to look at Estelle, instead keeping her gaze toward the street behind her.

The older woman’s harsh tone snagged her full attention. ”Emma! How in the world is that a proper way to treat your own grandfather? If he is to prepare for you, he needs to know you are coming. For heaven’s sake, girl! Surely you told him of what you were enduring here?”

A horrified glance from Emma set Estelle on the defensive.

Herc looked questioningly from one to the other. He was not being told some nugget of information, but it wouldn’t be the first time women were a secretive lot to him.

Emma said, eyes intent on Estelle, "It is more important I begin the journey. I will notify Grandfather when a better time presents itself. As you mentioned, I need to be on the road soon."

Concern crossed Estelle's face and then understanding welled up inside her, culminating in a slow nod. "I'm sure you'll find the time, but don't forget . . ."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I believe before we embark," Herc interjected, "there is the matter of the agreed-upon wages of our services. I believe twenty dollars each out front and—"

"Yes, I am aware of the terms," Emma said, straightening her back and tilting her head up, jaw set firmly, "but there is a hitch in those plans."

She gripped the saddle horn so tightly, her knuckles shined white. She prepared for Herc's reaction as if he would try to unhorse her.

Herc's eyes narrowed to wary, calculating slits. The corner of his mouth twitched, sending a subtle ripple through his bushy beard. "Hitch? Miss, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to elucidate."

Chapter Three

Despite the clamor and bustle, the silence hung like a slow-burning bridge between them. The smoldering creep of mistrust would soon dissolve any connection across the chasm.

"I have the money," the young girl said defiantly, but then the defiance ebbed. "It's simply that I don't have all of it in my possession."

"I'm listening," Herc said. He had not moved. Hands on hips and standing on the tips of his toes, his future teetered on her response.

"Though I trust Estelle and her judgement," she explained, "The fact remains I do not know you, and I therefore felt it safer to wire the money ahead to Houston. I need not explain to you of all people, sir, what kind of criminal element may be out to set a young traveling woman apart from her money."

"'Criminal element?'" Herc asked, his face puckered up incredulously. "What do you mean by that? Are you trying to insinuate I am some sort of—"

"If the card up the sleeve fits . . ." she replied.

"Oh, *well!*" Herc moaned loudly. His eyes rolled about and Emma held back a laugh at his comic over-reaction. "You come tromping up here all high and mighty, expecting me to wipe your nose and save your scalp all the way out to Arizona, and the first thing you do is try to cheat me, then slander my character in one swift swipe, why—"

Estelle was once again the beacon of civility. "Hold on, Herc. She has a point. She did not know you, but now she does and I'm sure she has some of the money, so you all can at least get moving."

She turned and looked up to Emma, caution in her gaze. "How much advance money *did* you bring them?"

A bit of silence and then, "Five each."

This brought another stomping fit from Herc. "Five *each*? Why, that ain't enough to feed our horses for five miles—let alone us!" He wagged his head and walked a small full circle.

"You do not look as if being well-fed has been a concern, sir," Emma let slip.

"Now hold on there," Herc said. He looked down at his prodigious girth and attempted to suck in his gut with negligible results.

"*You* hold on, Hercules," Estelle calmed him. "I reckon if you're gonna get paid in full at the end, you could probably back her pot till then. She needs to get a move on *now*. And Emma," she turned her matronly gaze, "you need to hold a civil tongue when speaking to your elders. You forget your predicament and place. You haven't the luxury of forging hard feelings when you are in such a hurry and need of help."

Estelle's words brought back a chill in the thought of her pursuing uncle. She looked again down both directions of the avenue, but saw no unnatural action. Though sure her efforts to conceal her path thus far were adequate, sitting here atop a horse in the middle of the street was not fair concealment. Urgency arose in her once more.

"How much you got?" Estelle questioned Herc.

"I told you, I'm as broke as a dollar mule," he said. "That's why I wanted to get my kale from the Baron . . ."

"Forget about the Baron," Estelle said. "I will get your money from him and send it on to you. How much do you think Silas has?"

This was the first mention of the other guide, and it prompted Emma to ask, "Yes, I thought there were to be two of you."

If Herc was the leader, she could only imagine the nightmarish possibilities of his partner.

"Silas will be along soon enough." Herc's tone was threatening. He then spoke to Estelle, "You know he's always squirrelish with his fortunes. I reckon he's probably got at least fifteen dollars, maybe twenty. Hard to know, really, for he don't let me in on the finances. You ask him when he gets here, but I bet he will be as close-mouthed with you as he is with me."

"But, where *is* your partner?" Emma asked Herc.

His face screwed up as if he had bit a lemon. "As I said, Miss, he'll be along shortly. He's over at the livery getting our horses and gear. He ain't gonna be real happy about these developments, I'm gonna tell you right now."

The warning hung thick for Emma. She had not even yet met this Silas, and she was already on his bad side. Still, it was not enough for her to abandon her escape. She may have to endure a few nights of his icy company, but abiding Theo and his hellish confinement of her body and spirit was worse.

The hairy guide once again set to lamenting his predicament and grumbling under his breath that Emma was, "no better than a common highwayman herself."

There was a stir at the far end of the avenue Emma had travelled from. She could not pick out the source of the commotion, but the echoes of fresh shouts rippled toward them in a slow wave. Soon the crowd parted in haste. Women, men and children alike dove for safety ahead of what Emma easily mistook as the end of days.

There, in the dust and motion, emerged the horseman of her personal apocalypse, her Uncle Theo. She regretted the route she took which left her so easily

observed and wondered how he found her so quickly in light of her circuitous route. Those inconsequential thoughts were soon swept away by stark fear.

Both horse and rider were oblivious to the humanity before their path of righteousness. The old horse, Thunder, appeared as angered as the rider. A poor mangy dog, too slow to react to the onslaught, had his forepaw crushed by a front hoof then was kicked high in the air by a back leg.

The carnage did not slow rider and mount. Soon Theo was close enough Emma saw the hate in his eyes. The whites were swallowed by fiery red veins. There was no lust or longing left. If he dragged her back at that point, surely her punishment would be severe beyond her imagining.

He rode like hot hell, people leaping from his path for their lives. As he arrived astride Emma on her horse, he halted his nag. Thunder's legs straightened and strained, his hooves scraping the bricks.

Without notice or warning, Theo swung a hard palm, slapping the side of Emma's face so brutally, many in the crowd gasped. Her head snapped, saliva and blood streamed in pink ribbons from her mouth. The flesh inside her mouth that had begun to heal was once again ripped open.

"Get down from my horse this minute, you ungrateful witch!" her uncle yowled, his chest heaving and his mouth contorted in a rictus of hate.

Shocked, Emma merely held a shaking palm to her reddened cheek. A thin rivulet of blood trickled from her nostril. It followed the lines of tears down her cheek and nestled on the precipice of her quivering upper lip. She licked it away.

The number of people in the street had soon multiplied and converged on the action. Gawkers poured from the nearby shops and apartments and some even came to the windows, hanging themselves out over the street to spy the events.

"You heard me!" Theo commanded. "Get off that horse or I shall whip you within an inch of your—"

"Why don't you back up, Mister, before you get yourself a boot up your butt," Herc said, loud and crisp. He braced himself like a porcupine ready to fly quills.

"Who in the hell are you to interfere in my family matters?" Theo sneered. The foam in the corners of his mouth signified the depth of his madness to Emma. He was addressing the short, round Galahad, but Theo's eyes were unable to truly focus on him in his rage.

"Like I already spelled out, I'm the feller what's gonna stomp your sorry ass if you don't go and back the hell up. That's my client you're swingin' on."

Emma did not turn from her uncle, but glimpsed aside, smiling weakly at Herc. He caught her glance, shrugged lightly and winked at the poor child.

Dismissing the guide and his threat, Theo grabbed his niece by the arm and renewed his attempts to unseat her. He thrashed and yanked, but she did not come out from the saddle. She shimmed sideways. Theo released the reins from his other hand and whacked the girl about the head and chest as he screamed unintelligibly.

Herc pushed Estelle aside and withdrew a short pistol from inside his coat.

Estelle spotted the firearm. Her eyes widened in horror, and she tugged at Herc as violently as Theo had on Emma. "No, Herc! You cannot do that! You want the law onto you again, after all this time? This will surely seal your—"

Theo heard the warning to Herc, saw the brandishing of the weapon and, still gripping Emma hard and fast, he tugged a long barreled single-action revolver from inside his belt. He pulled the hammer back and pointed his pistol toward Herc's portion of the sidewalk.

The aghast menagerie of humanity squatted and ducked, but Herc stood tall among them, trying to aim past Emma and the horses. Neither Theo nor Herc could get a clean line of sight. More screaming and wailing were compressed into the seconds. One poor clod lost his grip from a first floor window where he had been ogling the confusion, and fell onto a bony pillow of people below.

As this potentially fatal stand-off continued, there was once again a biblical parting of the sea of people down the street. Though the crowd had increased greatly, they were used to diving for their lives, so the gap widened rapidly and cleanly.

Right down the middle of the throng came a tall, lean man, riding fast on a beautiful cream and brown steed. The man led a small train of another horse and a lightly packed mule. The rider deftly loosed the rope from the pommel and the other animals lagged behind as he surged ahead, locking eyes with Emma.

The front of his wide-brimmed hat was pushed up by the wind, revealing a handsome, sun-tanned face set in a stern grimace of action. His brown beard was close-cropped and well-groomed. His blazing blue eyes took in the depth of the situation as he raced through the crowd. He did not slow his dash as his right hand reached not for a rifle, gun or knife, but for the handle of a cast-iron skillet bouncing about on a rawhide lash from the saddlebags.

He gave no call of warning to the embroiled combatants as he closed upon them. In their struggle, none had noticed him except Emma. She was being jerked to and fro, yet she felt a wild thrumming inside her chest. Breathless and frozen on the spot, she gazed upon the approaching rider's heroics. She wanted him to save her, but was afraid of him all the same.

Directly behind Theo, and seconds from overtaking him, the rider gave a piercing, curt whistle through his teeth. Theo did not turn, so the stranger yelled, "Hey! You!"

Finally, his attention garnered, Theo turned in time to have his nose flattened by the bottom of the skillet. A sickening snap, a coronal spray of blood, a straight-arm follow-through by the rider, and Theo was pretty near lifted straight out of the saddle.

In his pain, Theo's finger tightened on the trigger and a single shot was fired harmlessly into the sky between the buildings. He spun slowly as he passed through his own gun-smoke. After he hit the road with a bounce, he skidded a rod or two and came to rest on the sidewalk, his hand still loosely clasping the revolver.

He lay in a motionless heap as some of the crowd cheered the rider, while others queried the fallen man's mortality. In one motion, the rider snatched off his hat, leapt from the horse and landed with sure feet next to Theo. Skillet still brandished, he bent on one knee and checked Theo's breath. Having satisfied himself the man was alive, he wiped the skillet bottom on Theo's white shirt, leaving a long smear of blood and soot, and turned to join Herc and the ladies.

Emma was as lively as a stump. She uttered not a word as the rider walked right up to her, grabbed her by the hips and lifted her out of the saddle. He set her gently on her feet. She swayed slightly, so the man kept one hand upon her shoulder to steady her.

"You okay, Miss?" he asked.

"Glurk," was her response.

"I bet she's a little shook up," Herc said as he came up to them. "You got here just in time, friend. This man over here almost broke out in a case of bullet holes."

Estelle joined them, looking around the crowd of gawkers suspiciously. "I do not think we should be lingerin' around. You all need to get on the road."

The words from Estelle broke the mesmeric state the stranger had Emma under. In shock, she looked from Herc to Estelle to the stranger and asked, "Is this . . ."

"Miss," Herc swelled proudly, "I introduce you to the other half of our traveling group, my partner and friend, Silas McDonough."

Silas took her hand lightly, and with a wry grin, said, "Miss."

Emma flushed, smiled weakly, then bent over the gutter to empty her stomach of the biscuits and apple butter.

Chapter Four

Estelle held off the stirred-up crowd from smothering Emma with their concern. Silas was greeted with much earnest hand-shaking and patting on the back as he strapped the skillet back onto his saddlebags.

”Good work learning him some manners,” one fellow told him. Another offered him a comically fat cigar, which Herc took and put away in his breast pocket.

A third admirer, a middle-aged woman with two starry-eyed girls, thanked him for his gallantry and keeping the streets of Saint Louis just that much safer. ”In broad daylight, no less, a man treating a woman such!”

The accolades and astonishment ebbed and finally Silas conferred, ”What goes on here, Herc?” pointing to the fallen scoundrel and the affronted maiden.

”As far as I can surmise, Silas, that fella you griddled is the uncle of our charge here, Miss Emma.”

The news was as a cold pail of water tossed on Silas. His jaw dropped and he turned a shade whiter beneath his bronzed face. ”Oh, well, ain’t this just pickles! We finally get a way out of this town—a way that pays—and we end up souring it by pulling her uncle’s eyelids down.”

”*We?*” Herc asked with a grin. ”How is it when something is my fault, it’s ’me’ and when you goof, it’s ’us?’ No, that ain’t the kick in the pants, anyway. Not only is this fellow her uncle, he claims she done stole that horse, too. Plus—there’s always gonna be a plus that’s a minus with us—the girl here ain’t got but ten dollars to her name.”

”*Ten?*” Silas cried. ”You mean the ten per man, right?”

”No, Sir. Ten to spread liberally between us.”

Silas turned and spit on the ground, narrowly missing the women who had been adoring him seconds before. Noses turned upward as their opinions turned down.

"Sorry, ladies," he said absently before he turned back to Herc. "We ain't got much choice but to persevere, my friend. Still, *ten dollars*? Has she at least said if we are gonna be gettin' any other payment? Later on, perhaps?"

While Emma stood, silent, Herc related Emma's comments about the money being sent on to Houston.

"Dang," Silas said. "Houston's a long way off the track we was gonna take. Hell, that's Mexico, almost."

"Yup. It is truly discommodious."

Silas paused and shook his head. "You really feel the need to have me ducking those big words right now?" It clearly vexed Silas, but he realized it was not the time to grapple. He sighed, "Well, we better get ourselves moving afore the local constabulary gets their fat bottoms waddling this way."

Silas rejoined the two women. Emma's composure was fully regained, so Silas prompted farewells between the women and urged haste. He looked on as Estelle slid a small roll of bills into Emma's shaking fingers.

The young woman protested, but Estelle's resolve was great. Emma placed the money in the waist pocket of her jacket. Emma wiped tears from Estelle's face. Estelle removed her maid's apron, spit on a corner and wiped the blood from Emma's mouth and nose.

Silas was sure the script called for much female emotion and he let them play it out on their own. This gave him a moment to absorb Emma. His fighting ire had waned, so he let his eyes linger upon her.

She stood a foot taller than Estelle. Her dark brown boots were durable enough, though if they had to do much walking, her tallish heels could give rise to spills and complaints. She was plainly dressed in a long, heavy, tan skirt—the practical kind designed to withstand a ride to town and back, but not the rigors of road life.

His eyes climbed.

Her top was a pale yellow blouse with a white lace collar, beneath a close-fitting waist-length light brown vest.

He was a practical traveler, and after having taken in the readiness of her outfitting, his gaze poured over her in general.

Strands of her auburn hair floated free from a loose knot. She lifted her long, graceful fingers and tucked away a lock caressing her forehead. Her face was smooth and faintly rounded as cherubic youth blossomed into womanhood. Her lips curved up at the corners, and when she smiled at something Estelle said, the right corner curled into a bit of a dimple. With her mouth stretched into a smile, he noticed a thin, pale scar on her upper lip. He did not know how it was possible, yet that small imperfection made her perfect.

The sunlight shined in her eyes where it collected, reflected and radiated shards of bright and deep amber, illuminating a long-since dark corner of his heart. Those eyes missed nothing before them—including Silas staring directly at her.

Silas broke away from his trance, coughed absently and looked away. He imagined he had snagged a glimpse of a smile from her, but dared not venture if it was for him. He had already been caught goggling once, so he let it be.

Silas wheeled around to his partner. There, in view of all who cared to witness, Herc was knelt over Theo, rummaging through his pockets. He saw the butt of Theo's pistol protruding from the top of Herc's shiny boot.

"Hercules!" Silas hissed. Herc continued his pillaging. Silas looked about for witnesses to find many a suspicious brow raised. "Herc, You are gonna get us hunted for robbery now too!"

"I'm just makin' sure the feller's not carryin' anything else he could hurt someone with. Besides, if I *was* the stealing type, he ain't got a thing to take," he said peevishly.

The tall man looked down at the gun in Herc's boot.

"Hello, now!" Herc explained. "I picked this gun up off the sidewalk there where he dropped it, so it ain't like I mugged him. Losers are indeed weepers . . ."

Silas helped Emma back onto her horse and collected her reins. He paused and stroked the neck of her mount. "I can see why your uncle would be missing such a horse as this." His eyes, keen and sparked with admiration, traveled across the animal. "He's a fine one." He ran his hands across Shot's fore flanks. "Needs a little muscling."

The horse leaned his head into Silas and nudged to prompt more scratching.

"I beg pardon, sir, but this horse is mine," she corrected. "Uncle Theo *gave* him to me, for my birthday. It's mine and he can say what he will, but nothing shall change that in my eyes."

Silas thought of the birthday remark, but did not ask her age. Instead he simply replied, "It may not be looked upon that way by the law."

Before she could give him any sour response, Silas collected his horse, checked his skillet and mounted. He doubled back down the street to get hold of the mule, which had not strayed far from where his lazy hide was let loose. The other horse, being hitched to the mule, was forced to idle nearby.

For being a nexus to the wild and rowdy West, Saint Louis had her share of civilized souls, for some good citizen had looped the lead rope around a streetlamp.

Silas tethered the mule to his saddle once more and checked the gear under the pack lashing. Thankfully, nothing was lost or loosened.

Herc bounced on one leg a moment trying to get up momentum and cheat gravity, and finally thrust himself up in the saddle. After he was done fiddling with the stirrup, he too was in for the ride.

The troop was fully assembled and horsed. Estelle went inside the hotel and came right back out with Herc's pack. He slung it behind him across the back of his scarred-up saddle.

Herc's mount mirrored the rider. The legs were brushed and polished, but his belly slung low and the mane was wild and coarse. A tired, bloodshot eye nervously took in the chaos. Emma wondered if the poor animal would even make it out of the city limits alive.

Herc noticed the judgmental gaze from Emma. "He's got more miles ahead of him than he does behind, just like me."

Emma turned away, blushing.

Herc leaned down from his saddle to give a farewell peck to Estelle. She stood on tip toes and got under the man's weight to fondly receive the gesture. She placed her hands upon his chest to prevent him from falling right out of the saddle.

Estelle approached Silas and whispered, "You are gonna take the highest care with these two? Please promise me."

"Now, 'Stelle," he replied, "you know I am gonna keep them safe. I ain't got the smarts or stamina to hide from your wrath should I allow danger to befall them."

The familiar gilded caps of several constables bobbed through the crowd at the head of the street.

"Hate to cut our tidings short, but we got company," Silas said, nodding to the policemen.

"Don't you all worry," Estelle assured them. "I'll make sure they know what that man had done—everything. You all need to scat. Now!"

Emma wondered how much detail would be relayed of her uncle's crimes. She knew Estelle was aware of everything beyond the altercation today, because she was the only person outside her family who Emma had told.

She had no time to ponder as Silas turned them expertly in a tight circle. They trotted away from the scene in the opposite direction of the approaching lawmen. As with the seas behind Moses and his exodus, the crowd quickly spilled into the void in their wake.

They reached the corner and turned right onto Grand Avenue, back toward the park. Neither in a visible hurry, but not quite dallying, their gait was akin to hurried sightseers.

They passed before the breathtaking Eastern entrance of the park on Grand, between Arsenal and Magnolia. She took in the low curving walls, fine ironwork and two impressive huge iron griffons on either side facing each other atop limestone columns.

Silas was also looking intently in the park, searching the trees for something. He halted his group behind him by holding his arm straight out, palm flat toward them.

Emma and Shot did not fathom the command and they bumped Silas. He turned and gave her a brief, stern look but went back to his searching the foliage.

"What is he doing?" Emma whispered to Herc. She found him less intimidating than Silas.

"Ezra Bean," was all he said.

Silas released his reins, cupped his hands and placed his thumbs to his lips. His cheeks puffed as he blew out a low, loud whistle. It was an uncanny reproduction of an owl call. Two quick hoots followed by three rapid-fire ones. He repeated the call. Far off in the thick of bright blossoms and green buds, a similar call answered back.

Without a word of explanation, Silas took the reins back up and led them onward. Emma shot Herc a quizzical glance. He answered with a wink and a smile, his gold tooth twinkling like a far off star in his mouth.

Emma heard a soft flapping and felt the rush of air over her head before she saw anything. A blurred mass of brown and grey feathers swooped right between Herc and Emma. The tips of gliding wings brushed both riders. Emma watched in awe as the bird passed before her, right toward Silas. She spied the huge obsidian talons clenching and flexing as the bird flapped his immense wings once, then twice, sweeping above and ahead of the lead man.

Emma's horse whinnied and shook his head in disapproval of their new companion.

Silas reached into a saddle bag with one hand and pulled out a small and . . .furry object.

One of the most beautiful, terrifying—and largest—Great Horned Owls she had ever seen was focused on Silas. He did not stop as the bird circled and slowed to match speed. Silas raised the item from the pack up into the air. It was a bit of a small grey blur on some kind of string. Silas swung it up high. The owl wasted no time as he flung himself at the morsel and clamped his strong talons around it. In the brief second of capture, Emma realized it was a small mouse.

Wings beat silently as the owl rose into the sky with the mouse's tail flicking in the wind below him. The owl circled tightly and found roost on the cross of a small

church tower nearby. She saw the bird ripping into the feast with his sharp, shining beak.

Emma had not realized her mouth was wide open until Herc leaned across, put his hand under her chin and pushed up.

"Don't want to catch no flies, Miss," he laughed. "Stunning, ain't he?"

"But, but," she stammered, "you have a pet bird? A trained owl?"

"He's no *bird*, Miss," Silas said curtly, "he's a raptor. And he ain't no pet, neither. He is as free as you or me." The word free was said with force.

"Don't pay him no mind," Herc interceded. "His name is Ezra Bean and he's been our friend and traveling companion since—"

"Hercules Bennet, do you always need to be so open about our private matters?" Silas barked. He stopped dead in the road and turned his head whilst his shoulders faced ahead, resembling an owl himself. He shot the old man an icy look.

"Oh, come on now, Silas," Herc pined. "I reckon she's gonna find out all about us soon enough. It's a long ride to Houston and even longer beyond, to Arizona. We gonna have to fill up the time with some words, ain't we?"

"You know what your problem is, Herc?" Silas asked. "You jaw too much. I would truly relish one ride that ain't so full up with words. Is that too much to ask?"

"You at least gonna tell us where in the world you takin' us?" Herc queried. "You know the west is over that way, right?" He swept his hand back behind him, but Silas did not turn to see the gesture.

"I reckon I know which way is west," Silas said. "Them po-lice is gonna be heading out that way as we speak. You want we should wait at the train depot back there for them to come along and collect us? Should we go on and travel the road in

the exact direction they think we would be headed? We're going to the docks. I got an idea."

"Well, it sure would be nice if you let us into your sage council every once in a while, Sire," Herc drawled.

Emma saw Silas shake his head lightly, but he rode on in silence.

Chapter Five

St. Louis 10:45 am

Farther north up Grand, into the bosom of the city, the ragged parade turned right, down Park. Ezra Bean was seen in the sky between rooftops and alleyways as he drifted ahead, then sometimes back behind. She only noticed him among the other array of birds due to his outstanding size, but resting here and there among the buildings, he was invisible.

Silas took a wild, zig-zag pattern toward the river. Still, there was a purpose and direction as the men did not dally, or show signs of distraction nor disorientation. Main streets and sun-starved alleyways swirled into a blur of brick and pavement. One moment the Mississippi River was seen ahead, beyond the downward curve of the cobbled streets and the next moment it was behind them shimmering through the dance of commerce. Carts, carriages and people flowed like water about them, though her protectors kept a keen eye for constables or other pursuers.

She worried about relinquishing control to these two strangers, yet the makeshift rank-and-file had a calming, encouraging effect. Even the anxiety of her escape was beyond the definition of the word improvement since she was free of her uncle.

As they clopped down a long passageway between two high warehouses, she watched the thin blue slash of sky at the end grow wider until the troupe burst forth onto the levee. The whole of the waterfront exploded before them.

Emma had never been to the levee in all the years she lived in Saint Louis. Her father had wanted to show her the bustle of life as the world prepared to spread out

west. Her mother forbade it, following her decree with frightening tales of the low men and women who dwelled there by the river.

The levee was bustling as far as the eye could see along the banks.

Several dozen steamboats eclipsed their view of the river and its banks. Crowded closely, some of them bumped none too gently together with the rocking waves. They groaned or squeaked behind the general din of commerce. One or two ships belched thick, black smoke from their upright stacks as boilers boiled and engines idled in readiness for voyages long or short, up or down the wide waters. This smoke drifted in across the sloping landing, filling the eyes and nostrils of all nearby before it emigrated up to meld into the great, hazy, metropolis.

Smaller craft were outfitted with gangplanks angled steeply down to the hard-packed dirt banks. If they had the great fortune find closer access, the planks gently slanted out to the rough-laid brick road sprawling up to the city.

Sweaty men—blacks and whites, in various states of dress or undress, with muscles strained, tended to their respective hives of activity around each gangplank. There was always one man hovering around each group, this man invariably white. He was not sweaty, was better-attired and, by surrounding standards, was an unimpressive weakling. It was clear these were the foremen as they checked manifests and barked high-pitched orders.

The myriad goods they swarmed around ranged from piles of bailed cotton to barrels of liquor to simple stacks of raw timber planking and a few other things Emma could not recognize and wanted to ask Herc about.

To the north, the larger packet companies had permanently-docked, covered barges—essentially warehouses on the swirling water, which had wider gangways reaching even farther into the landing. The wagons drove onto the barge through one

doorway, then exited from another on the far end. The steamboats loaded from these barges were docked on the other side out in the river. These were closely gathered in the shadows of the majestic Eads Highway Bridge, the two level wonder spanning the Mississippi, connecting Missouri to Illinois.

Set in the pattern of bricks of the landing were rails laid from the south end of the levee through the Eads arches and out of sight to the north. No train was there, but Emma imagined the imposition a hulking locomotive with full complement of cars would have on this already crushing chaos.

Silas drove the group down into the middle of the action, finding a stream of travelers to join and flow northward. In the steamy, smoky thickness of levee life, motion was incessant and focus was futile. Yet, they managed a semblance of order amidst the chaos. A single-file, modest corps on the march to freedom and an unknown destiny.

Anonymity was a natural assumption in this ocean of humanity, but soon, a pattern of recognition manifested itself. At first, one black laborer and then two white ones called to the group and waved heartily.

Emma saw this and a sense of pride swelled inside. Her saviors were well-known and well-liked, for the hails were genuinely given with broad smiles and loud hoots. It spoke well of their character, even though this was a rough and randy-looking crowd. She realized these two men helping her were the same men her mother had cautioned against.

She glanced ahead to Silas and saw no change in his demeanor to signify recognition of the salutes. If anything, the pace of the trio quickened. The working men did not leave their toils, but did give small signs of consternation. One tall, white

fellow, with a chest as broad as a carnival strongman, pulled off his hat and scratched his shiny, bald head in puzzlement.

With no return of hello, the men gave shrugs and played at being offended. They returned to the tasks at hand as a new wave of attention blossomed further along.

Silas increased the pace to a trot, his eyes leaping to any suspicious point or person. The mule and other horses instinctively hurried to follow.

Emma heard a grumble from Silas. He spoke while facing dead ahead, but could not make out his words in the riverbank racket.

Herc replied, which Emma made out clearly enough. "My word, boy! What did you expect, bringing us down here through the old stomping grounds? I am surprised we did not meet a bigger fan-following seeing as we spent three years working with these grand fellows . . ."

Silas finally turned back to address his old friend and companion. His face was set hard. The sinew over the bones in his jaw clenched and bulged in an agitated rhythm. "I swear, Hercules, if you don't have the most irritating habit of riding every little misstep I make. You should just put a saddle on me and run me to ground. I know *now* this wasn't the ten dollar idea I thought it was, but dang! —I didn't hear you spouting no sage notions with the law bearing down on us back there."

To Emma's surprise, this tirade only brought an amused hoot from Herc.

"No, this ain't right at all," Silas said looking around. "We need to get out of this little revue before we get some malicious—"

He did not finish, for a short, loud man came striding up from a loading crew and stood directly in Silas' path, thereby stopping the whole group.

"Well, well, well!" The man sneered, fists on his hips. "Look who has the acorns to show their faces 'round here!"

He was five feet tall or so, hips wider than shoulders. His once-fashionable white shirt had digressed to a dingy yellow—especially around the collar where it was a deep ochre. His feeble suspenders had the hopeless task of spanning his pot belly while trying to hold up his heavy, woolen trousers, which ran shy of his knobby ankles by at least two inches. His soiled face was pudgy and pock-marked. At the apex of all that mess was a ratty black bowler with a salty white sweat-ring around the crown. Even from a distance, he emitted the blended aromas of bilge-water and old butter.

Emma had to suppress a snicker, not at his appearance but his peevish nature.

Silas and Herc expressed quiet disdain as they both rolled their eyes and shook their heads.

”Silas, you still owe me for that fine chair you saw fit to reduce to kindling the day I threw you two off my boat,” he sneered.

”Pie, I wouldn’t have had to whack you with any chair if you’d have just payed us our wages. Move out of my path.”

”I didn’t owe you nothing ’cause you two didn’t finish the run,” Pie replied, his finger rising in accusation.

”You didn’t tell us you were running stolen goods,” Silas shot back. ”That’s why we left—and you *did not* ’throw’ us off your broke-down raft, we quit.”

Pie looked around to see if any in the confluence of people had noted Silas’s smuggling accusation. ”You watch your tongue, boy! It’s a bad thing to go tossin’ around a man’s reputation like that. Ain’t none of that haul was stolen!”

”Why am I even speaking with you?” Silas asked. He turned to Herc. ”Why am I even speaking to this carbuncle, Herc?”

Herc gave a single laugh, shrugged. ”Dunno.”

"I lost my boat 'cause of you two. You gonna give me my due, or am I gonna have to summon an officer of the law?" Pie warned.

"What are you gonna testify, Pie?" Silas threaded true irritation and impatience through his tone. "You gonna tell him about that tobacco haul you stole, too?"

"Dang you," he practically screeched. "I said it once, you better watch that loose talk!"

"Or what, Pie?" Silas queried with disdain. "Am I gonna be obliged to break more chairs over your cranium? A lamp, perhaps?"

Herc laughed happily.

"You!" Pie spun on Herc and growled at him. "You took your liberties with my sister! You de-flowered Isabelle! And then you up and left her!" His anger was focused into an ugly squint and a crooked, pointing finger.

Emma tossed a questioning look at Herc, which he caught uneasily.

"That was 'afore I met 'Stelle," he assured Emma quietly. He returned to Pie. "Your sister has had more liberties rung on her than the bell in Philadelphia, Pie. She was not interested in me for but the moment—though I will say, I'd rather be tied down on an ant hill and covered in molasses than be staked to that little shrew."

It was Silas' turn for a chuckle.

Pie shook with anger. Then he spied Emma behind Herc. His ire miraculously dissolved as he ogled her up and down.

"Well, hello," he crooned. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure—"

He took his hat off and held it with sincerity over his heart.

"I wouldn't do that, Pie," Silas said.

"Oh, you hush, now, Silas," he said airily. "If you two were to give me a few minutes alone with your little friend here, I'm sure I could be persuaded to consider your debt expunged."

"I'm only gonna say it one more time, Pie," Silas said, "I wouldn't do that."

"Why is that?" he asked without waiting for an answer. As he smoothed his few strands of hair across a freckled scalp, he continued to Emma, "I surely cannot fathom why you would find yourself in the company of these two . . . *hoodlums*, but I reckon if you were to favor me with a—"

"Yup, that's enough," was Herc's only warning as he moved his mount alongside Pie. He tightened his legs against the sides of his horse, and grabbed a fistful of the back of Pie's filthy shirt. Suspenders and all, he lifted Pie high off the ground and over his head.

Emma was amazed at the ease with which Herc manhandled the fellow.

Herc circled his horse and headed toward the river with Pie, mid-air and dangling, wailing and flailing all the way. In the struggle, however, Pie managed to clutch his bowler tightly to his head.

By now, a fine audience had assembled for this altercation. Nearby, Pie's crew took advantage of their boss being preoccupied by sitting on the cotton bales, wiping the sweat from their brows, smiling and laughing at the foreman's plight. It was good entertainment to them, indeed.

Herc ignored Pie's protestations and wriggling and found his way to an open spot on the banks. The horse was led into the water up to his belly. Herc stopped, swung Pie back and forth to gain momentum, then flung him a good distance over the water. One of Pie's shoes came free and flew even farther out, disappearing instantly into the muddy swirl.

The splash was more impressive than the man who made it. He sputtered and spit out the river water as he found his footing. He stood, swaying in his dripping clothes, his bowler still clinging to his head. Cheers and jubilant clapping arose from Pie's laborers. He was not as popular as he liked to think.

"We need to move on," Silas told his friends.

No complaints were lodged as they gently pushed their mounts through the thickening swarm.

The people let them slip away quietly, for the scene of Pie slogging in the river shallows, looking for his lost shoe captured the crowd's attention. Knowing whether the poor lost shoe would be reunited with the owner was an intrigue and a keen delight to all.

"So much for our low notice," Emma opined.

This brought a smile and wink from Herc, who admired her spirits in light of her just having been affronted.

Silas even let a light smile grace her as he looked back and said, "Yes, Miss, we sure should try to keep a lower profile."

"Or a smaller splash, if you will," she answered. "I had no idea you were so strong, Mister Bennet."

"Thank you, Miss," he tipped his hat. "My parents named me Hercules, and the Lord must have thought it fitting to grant me a fraction of my namesake's famed strength."

Silas and Herc were still smiling as they threaded through the center of the five great stone arches sculpted into the north end of the Eads bridge. Once through the passage, they turned sharply to the left and headed back up among the warehouses and storefronts to sink into the shadows.

The bells of St. Louis pealed the noon hour.