

Chapter Twelve

Herc went and stoked the fire and put a pot of coffee on. "This place is quite cozy, though I miss a soft pillow . . ."

Silas unwrapped a package or two. He took the wrapping paper and folded it up and over the frames of the windows. The lantern was lit so they might see the supplies and each other.

"I wish you all would have awakened me," Emma said, sitting back down on her blanket, "I would have liked to help."

"If you'd a gone with, we'd be horseless right now," Herc reminded. "Besides, women go shopping and all the money's gone with nothin' but lace and frills to show for it."

She let it roll past her, "What did you intrepid fellows buy?" She looked among the parcels wistfully.

"Nothing too unnecessary," Silas said as he bent to pick up a large hat box. "But we did pick this out for you."

She saw the the box and pictured a new bonnet or perhaps some other chic hat. He handed it to her and she struggled with the string. A smile faded as she opened it and removed a wide-brimmed, felt cowboy hat.

Noting her displeasure, Silas pointed out, "It's a Stetson! Says so inside."

She indeed looked inside, but her expression was as if she had eaten a bug. A small bug, but a bug nonetheless.

"We need to discuss something with you, Miss Emma," Herc confided.

By the way he switched from using "Miss" when he had been using "Emma," she knew things were about to turn.

"I'll put it plain," Silas interceded. "They are searching for two men and a young woman. We need to put you in disguise."

"This hat will surely not fool anyone, Mister McDonough," she bristled.

"Please call me Silas, Miss, and that ain't the full extent of your illusion."

Herc crossed with two cups of coffee, handed her one and then picked up another longer, flatter package. "I guessed at your size. I hope they fit."

She opened the parcel and instead of just the one bug, she looked as if she'd downed a whole swarm. Inside this wrapping was a pair of green denim trousers, a black belt, a white shirt and a thin jacket of doeskin.

Silas handed her a pair of brown boots with wide toes. "A woman's shoe size is a mystery, but I hope I unraveled it."

She was set to fluster plenty, but the look they had on their faces reminded her of her father's on Christmas mornings. He had always picked the presents himself, and though they were never in any proximity of what the girls wanted, he was always excited and expectant as to their approval. Once, Emma's spoiled sister had said some snotty remark about his gift and her father sank into a funk till New Year's.

She took a deep breath and fabricated a smile. "Why, these are just lovely. I'm sure you gentlemen have judged my size perfectly."

Their spirits were buoyed so, that if not for the rafters and the patchy excuse of a roof overhead, they may have floated away into the night.

Other comestibles and canned goods were flaunted, as well as traveling gear and clothing. It was not a tremendous amount of provisions, for Silas was cited as being frugal as ever.

The light banter fell away, and Silas grew pensive again. "There's just one more matter that needs tending to."

Herc and Silas exchanged worrisome glances.

"What in the world else could you two want?" She sighed. "You already have me masked beyond recognition." She swept her arm across the new duds.

"We need to probably cut your hair," Silas blurted out, his face turned a deep red. "In case you should lose your hat or some such."

Once again, she paused to take in the men's sorrowful countenances. Oddly, she pictured her uncle's reaction if she ever had the misfortune to lay eyes on him again. He had always stroked her hair when he began to . . .

She shook the image from her mind. "Fine," she said cheerfully.

They both looked at each other silently for a minute, surprised.

"Silas here is a fine barber," Herc testified. "He tames my tresses when things get too shaggy." With that, he doffed his ludicrous cap and displayed his wretched mane.

"I will strike a bargain with you two," Emma said. "I will let Silas here cut my hair *if* and only if you two barber up, too—and that includes those beards. I have always hated beards."

The two men were aghast. Herc's mouth opened and shut with not one intelligible word escaping. Silas was silent a moment, but having come to a decision, said, "A deal it is, but we get to keep our mustaches."

"Trimmed, at least?" she asked.

"Yes, trimmed."

Herc still worked his mouth silently. He looked at Silas, unable to recognize this traitor before him.

"Deal," Silas said, coming over to shake her hand.

She spit in her palm and held her hand out. Silas dittoed her and they shook. Herc watched as they lingered for a moment.

Silas turned back to Herc, who was struck dumb as a plank. "Herc, it's only fair play. Plus, they're looking for two bearded gents and if we shed our crumb-catchers, we might shift from under the eyes of the law."

Herc squirmed, but at last relented.

Herc fetched a fresh supply of water from the shop as Silas sharpened a pair of scissors on a stone, both from his chef roll.

Emma watched as Silas oiled the stone and ran each blade carefully across. If there was a time for Emma to back out, the moment had come. He brought over an onion crate, set it on its length and tested the durability. Satisfied, he swept his hand in a welcome gesture., "Next!"

She took a deep breath and rose while Silas turned up the lamplight. "You can't tell none by Herc's shaggy head, but I am real good at cutting hair. I been doing it since—" He snipped himself off and switched to a different strand. "I have to admit, I ain't never cut a woman's hair before, though I can't imagine it bein' worlds different. Once I get it most cut away, I guess it'll be 'bout the same."

"You are not inspiring much confidence, Silas," she chuckled.

"Sorry. I just don't want to disappoint."

She smiled at that.

Herc arrived with the water. Emma dipped a cup, went to the balcony and rinsed her hair out.

She sat down on the crate. "You may begin."

Silas was poised with scissors held midair in one hand and a comb in the other. His face screwed up in consternation.

"What is it?" She asked, looking up at him.

"I, I ain't never cut hair when it were wet," he confessed. "We never had a surplus of water to wash up much, so I was always of the practice . . ."

"Surely it ain't a heap different, boy," Herc said absently as he stowed sacks of flour and cans of beans into their luggage.

"Just begin slowly," Emma coaxed. "You will do fine."

There was a clacking sound beyond the door out on the landing. It reminded her of someone striking two hollow sticks together rapidly. They all turned and looked through the open doorway to see Ezra Bean perched on the rail, puffing his face feathers out and in rapidly.

"Is there something wrong with him?" Emma asked.

"No, girl," Herc answered. "He just gets squirrely if he can't see us for long stretches."

"Oh."

She looked on the raptor as he stared wide-eyed into the room. He bobbed his head up and down repeatedly and looked closely at the floor and threshold. It looked as he wanted to enter, but instead he stood on one leg, outstretched the opposite wing full and worked his beak along the feathers. It reminded Emma of a grooming cat.

Even in this awkward position, he was a majestic and beautiful animal. The talons and beak shone brightly in the lamplight and the pattern of brown, then gray, then white rows of feathers was hypnotic. The most striking thing to her were the bird's huge yellow eyes which glowed from some hidden fire inside him. They took in all passively and gave nothing but glorious incandescence in return.

Silas began barbering. He separated, collected and lifted small sections of her wet locks. She felt the back of his hand as it brushed her cheek here and the back of her

neck there. A small surge of anxiety welled. She smoothed down her emotions as she remembered this man touching her was only cutting her hair and he was a million miles away from being the person her Uncle Theo was. She tried to distract herself by watching the long hunks of hair fall around her feet, but this only heightened her unease.

She hoped conversation would be helpful. "May I ask where you learned such a useful trade, Silas?"

He stopped snipping for a beat and continued.

"You want I should tell her our little saga, or do you want the pleasure?" Herc asked, settled from his packing and sitting back against the wall with his pipe.

She heard Silas sigh, and for his assent, he said, "Barbershop chatter always did tend to get personal."

Herc began telling their tale, smoke rolling from his mouth as he spoke. "I met this young pup here in Belle Island back in '64." He puffed and donned the requisite faraway look.

"We was both prisoners of war there on that slip of land cross the river from Richmond, Virginia. Would we had our 'druthers, we would rather have been left there. Silas was captured outside Knoxville. He was . . . what was it? Third, fourth?"

"Second Volunteer Infantry, Kentucky," he corrected.

"Hold a moment," Emma interrupted. "You couldn't have been in the army. You couldn't have been more than—"

"Fourteen," Silas said. "I was tall for my age and they needed tall boys to get shot at. They may have knowed I lied, but they did not care."

"But what about your family? How could they let you enlist?" She asked, true concern flowing.

"I didn't have no family then. My sister and poppa was dead and I never knew my momma," Silas replied.

"Oh, Silas," she said, pivoting her head to gaze up at him sorrowfully.

"It ain't as awful as it sounds, Miss," he assured her, splaying the tips of his fingers on her scalp and turning her head forward again. "Keep your head still." His tone was soft despite his chastising. "Most often, I can only remember one or two things so far back, and on the whole, they's good memories."

"Can I get back to my tale, here?" Herc sighed, puffing hotly on his pipe.

He took their silence as his cue. "Old Silas was the camp pet. He ran around doing errands and brokerin' deals between the prisoners and the guards. He once traded a fine blanket of mine—I had three I had *negotiated*—and he turned it into the whole bottom half of a hog. He was a magician at that. We hit it off real fine and not just 'cause I like me some hog bottom. I drafted him into a group of men I was camping with. It was always best to coagulate into a protective circle of men. You survived by standing together with men you trusted and respected.

"We was together there for a month or two, and it was fine living as far as confinement went, but we were unjustly uprooted and shoved off to hell on earth. This Gehenna in Georgia, Andersonville—it's old history, so you mayn't heard of it—"

"Oh, my," she gasped. "Daddy told me about it—"

"I don't know what he told you, but whatever it was, it was not black enough to describe its true nature. I will not attempt to tell you now, either, for it was a hard place to survive and even harder place to discuss. Suffice it to say, if you came in a man at Andersonville, you left either a dead man or a shell of one. Most everyone from our group succumbed to scurvy or one of the host of other diseases being passed around. We was down to three of us when we took old Romeo in our ranks.

“Most often black and white prisoners kept themselves separate—much the same as outside, in the glorious sunshine of freedom, but Silas here convinced me, Romeo, and our other members of the intelligence of such an alliance. Unheard of, but fortuitous, nonetheless.

“Right there in the lowest pit of hell, a man was forced to show his truest nature. A fellow as big and blustery as a snot-flyin’ bull was reduced to fawning and weeping. A mouse of a man could roar so loud the Gods became deaf. That is the truth. One bad man could—and did—lead his peers into the rampant pillaging of his more defenseless and downtrodden neighbor. It was humanity at its worst.

“With much back-watching, we transcended starvation with Silas’ cunning, political imbroglios with my tactful guile, and the many physical assaults with the help of Romeo’s strength, but we had us no negotiator against the sickness sweeping around those confines. Too many men too close together.”

Silas was finishing up, but slowed his snipping so as to not break Herc’s stride. Emma did not notice Silas staring at her, for she was enthralled with the story.

”Despite the pitiful conditions, the Confederacy could barely feed and clothe their own troops, so rations were slim. The Union Army, in its great wisdom, had broken off talks of prisoner exchanges, so morale was abysmal. We got sicker and weaker every day no matter how we foraged and traded. That’s when Silas here started the barbering trade. It helped mightily for a while there, as many men saw a trimming as a ray of hope. We did good, but I was losing teeth and muscle and I was older than them three. I was sure I would wake up dead one day. That’s about when we stumbled upon Ezra Bean. I should say he stumbled on us.”

When his name was mentioned, the large avian opened his eyes, clacked his beak and gave a soft succession of ”Whoo, whoo’s.”

"Yeah, that's right, Ezra," Herc went on, "you're 'who, who' I'm talkin' 'bout. He was but a tiny fluffball unable to fly when he was thrown from his nest one morning by a murder of crows. He landed in the dead line. That's a patch of land that ran around the inner side of the stockade with but a bunch of picket fence poles sticking up to warn you not to go past them and near the wall. If you was spotted in the dead line, you got shot. I seen men mad with heat and such go runnin' past them sticks, just to see 'em an instant later shot down where they stood. Some fellas did it just to end the misery.

"Anyways, here this snowball is waddling around in the dead line and all these fellers is hollerin' to the guards that they ought to shoot him for he was in the space between them pickets and it weren't fair to discriminate just cause he was a fowl and not a man. Soon they was bets flying as to his fate. It got fervent.

"Here is me and Romeo and everybody else watching that little bird when some poor fool comes shooting out through the spikes. He sweeps down on the thing and all of a sudden shots are fired and the ground is explodin' all around this idiot, but he keeps on movin'. The prisoners was wild with excitement and I'll be darned if that fellow made it back through the dead line pickets and to safety. Them guards didn't care if he made it back, they just didn't want him goin' the other way.

"Well, imagine my surprise when I find that the derved idiot who risked life and limb for a poof of feather was my none other than my ward, Silas McDonough."

Emma, wide-eyed and mouth agape, leaned back to look at her sheepish barber. He put a finger on her brow, tilted her head back down and snipped.

"You know, every fellow was sure impressed by Silas, but the runout of the excitement was they all wanted that bird to eat. Why, we silenced many a hungry suitor over the next few days. I ain't seen so many busted lips and split noggins in my life.

Silas here took on two men at once—real big men, but he outlasted 'em and soon they all found some piece of boiled bark or char-grilled onion root to gnaw on instead.

“That bird done ate better than us some days, but soon he was big and healthy enough to fly and fly he did. He went away one morning and did not return for a good two days. We thought for sure he had abandoned us. Then one night we was all sittin’ around the biggest fire you could get out of a pile of twigs when this dead squirrel drops right down in the middle of our camp circle. We jumped and scattered until Silas here reasoned out it was supposed to be our dinner. Up there on our tent pole was our proud provider, that dern owl. Silas cut the scrawny squirrel up and tossed them pieces into the air and Ezra Bean caught them like some high-flyin’ acrobat. We char-grilled the rest—you will eat a fresh squirrel when ain’t nothin’ else but moldy pig feet to cross your tongue.

“That night Silas named him as a member of our own. ‘Ezra’ in honor of one of our fallen troops who had passed a month or two before, and ‘Bean’ because he loved them beans Silas always fed him. I ain’t never seen a bird gobble up beans like that. That bird done saved our lives, for he brought in an amazing array of vermin for us to dine upon. The only thing we turned our noses up to was a skunk, but when we tossed it over the dead line, Ezra Bean ripped into it heartily. I will say, though, he never once brought us another skunk. That there is one smart fellow.”

Silas ruffled Emma’s hair, signifying his being finished. She motioned for Herc to hand her the mirror. She held it up while Silas waited for reactions.

For a moment she merely turned her head for different views. She was shocked at having lost her long locks, but ultimately realized the necessity for such drastic measures. She smiled and nodded to the barber.

”Whew,” he said.

"Okay, Herc, now it's your turn," Silas said.

"Can't you go first?" he asked Silas.

Emma stood and ran her fingers rapidly through her new coif. "You sit down and I'll cut you," she told Herc.

Herc rinsed and sat, Emma started on his mop.

"So you all survived, I surmise," she said, cutting away large clumps.

Herc paled as he as he witnessed them falling away, "You sure you know how to barber?"

"I used to cut my daddy's hair," she said, but did not add more.

Herc's color returning, he continued the tale. "We didn't so much survive as we ran away."

She stopped cutting for a slash of a second, but picked back up.

"We was called out on a work detail, me, Silas, and some fellow camp member we had an acquaintance with. He was real sick, but they needed three and they wouldn't let no blacks work with no whites, so Romeo got left inside. The blacks were usually held out for much more grueling and hazardous details. We was marched out to cut into a line of saplings along the woods. They was gonna clear them then burn out the stumps so's they could dig a new trench for to throw the dead in."

There was more silence for the long-since passed.

"It was not too hot outside the fence, for we had a constant breeze we were not accustomed to inside. Then there was the lovely aroma of pine trees and tall grass instead of the horrible . . ." He looked to Emma and decided to leave the description be. "So anywho, we was out there hackin' and axe-ing with only this one young reb guard watchin' over us. I was whisperin' to Silas non-stop about why shouldn't we just overtake him and grab his gun, but Silas wouldn't hear none of it. Our companion was

so bad off, he had to stop and rest every other minute or so, which left the brunt of the chore to us. We was about thirty trees down when this commotion was unleashed up by the stockade door. Seems some poor soul out on detail as well had given up and decided to leave off his mortal shell, so he goes off runnin' out the gate, screamin' like his butt was on fire. He was out of his mind by two counties. Our guard, being green as the saplings we was hewing down, goes off and leaves us just standing there. I am a little slow on the uptake sometimes, but you didn't have to spell out the word freedom to me right then. Silas and I was gone before they was even done fillin' that lunatic with lead. We was yellin' and yellin' to the other fellow to follow us, and he did, but he couldn't keep a pace as he had scurvy all through his bloated legs. He was a hollerin' for us to wait up and we was a hollerin' for him to come along. In the end, we unfortunately had to go on without him. You wouldn't want to hear some of the names he was callin' us, but . . .”

Emma had finished his haircut and started cutting his beard down so he could be shaved. ”Silas is gonna have to finish, cause I need your jaw to stop waggin’.”

”You’re probably gonna have to knick him once, so he gets the idea,” Silas said. ”He ain’t kept his mouth shut for more than a minute since ’65.”

A harmless glower kindled in Herc’s face, but he kept his mouth shut.

”We started running and didn’t stop till we dropped,” Silas picked up the story. ”If it weren’t but for luck and the kindness of many sympathetic souls along the way—mostly black folk—we wouldn’t have got far. But we did, all the way to Texas in the end. We thought about going back and telling the Army we was okay and all, but after debate, decided they didn’t care enough to trade us out of that swamp, so our bargain with them was ended. We think they was looking for us for a while, but finally quit at it. They weren’t looking to punish no deserters—the government said as much when

the war was ended, but we thought it best not to chance it, so we kept low down. With the help of a lawyer friend, we finally took our case to the President and he gave us a pardon. It was done and done, but you know how the government is about them things, and we was pretty good at the road by then, so . . .”

”Yeah,” Herc said between snips, ”with our luck, they’d change their minds about them pardons and we’d be the ones they’d want to make an example of fifteen years after the fact.”

Emma pushed his chin up, shutting his mouth. ”I know Romeo made it out fine, but what about the other fellow, the one on your work detail? Have you any idea as to his fate?”

Silas had rinsed his hair and beard in preparation for his transformation. He shook the loose water off, much like a dog. ”No idea, though we have speculated on it often. I will say however, if anger could be a tool for a man’s survival, he had a warehouse full of hate toward us.”

”Yes, sir. He sure did,” Herc said. ”Why, I swear we could hear that fellow hollerin’ curses all the way to Arkansas. What was his name, Silas? I cannot remember just now.”

”Kemper. Kemper Bidwell.”

Chapter Thirteen

St. Louis Insane Asylum, 11:56 p.m.

Kemper Bidwell lay in the Saint Louis Insane Asylum infirmary, clutching the letter. Though the spring night was chilly, he was drenched from head to toe with sweat. He was in no way physically ill—that was an elaborate ruse to gain entry to the weakest point of the Asylum, the sick room.

After discovering the thrilling news the correspondence contained, Kemper had gathered his stores of letters, and the list of contacts, tore them into small pieces and disposed of them down the privy. The only one he kept was the letter from Hercules Bennet's sister.

Here, in the dark infirmary, amongst the bedridden and feeble detritus of America's fringe, he once more contemplated the contents. It was too dark for him to read it, but it didn't matter, for he had memorized it completely. He always returned again and again to the same sentence:

It should be emboldening to your quest to know Hercules and his companion, Silas, are actually in the same fair city where you presently recuperate.

The boys were *here*, in Saint Louis! What were the chances? His mind was too cramped with excitement to even think about chances and numbers. The letter even told where they were employed. After all those years and so many dead ends, his long quest was so near to completion. He'd never given up hope—no matter how bad it got. Hercules Bennet and Silas McDonough were finally within reach.

The short list of contacts the Army had given him was all played out, save Mrs. Abigail Crismon, Hercules Bennet's sister. His hopes danced upon that last frayed whisper of a thread—yes, by God, danced a fine jig indeed!

As was often the case in the still and quiet of his nights, the memory stole upon him of his one other escape attempt from confinement at the altogether more sinister Andersonville. When life begins to look fine and right indeed, who in this world does not let doubt creep in to whisper evil things? Who does not dream on the myriad ways it may all crumble? He had long since ceased trying to control the thoughts and had learned to use them to sustain himself through his days of waiting.

I was left behind by those two bastards.

Those long smoldering embers were rekindled once again. The phantasms of the days following his recapture haunted him even more than the hellish days prior to his attempted escape with Silas and Hercules.

He remembered the confusion, the running, the pain and anguish he felt as he watched the two men on their fast, healthy legs as they disappeared first into the high grasses and then beyond into the thickening woods. He heard their calls for him to keep up. It was a cruelty he had not thought possible from the generally personable men. How could he keep up with weak, infirm legs made of soft, dying tissue? They knew his condition and yet selfishly kept running, without even a single attempt to help. Heartless, cold-blooded and mean, it was.

Andersonville had a way of stripping a man to show what lay beneath. It also had a way of changing a man too, from the bones up.

Then there was the truly awful shock of being shot. His leg, already with weakened bone and puss-filled flesh, could not withstand the glancing blow of the iron ball as it ricocheted from a nearby moss-covered tree trunk and slammed into his calf.

He had heard the bone crack. Blood flowed so freely, it was a wonder it had not all leaked out as they dragged him back to the compound. He remembered the taunts and laughter from the Rebs as they took him not back to the inner circle of the stockade, but to the nearby hospital.

Why did his fellow inmates—his ‘friends’—leave him, and why on earth had the guards not pursued the others immediately? If they had recaptured them, too, this long road of revenge would never have been set out upon. Inefficiency. How he loathed it. In Kemper’s opinion it was why the South lost. They were too lazy to win.

The hospital at Andersonville was more a depot to the other side of the veil than it was a station for the healing arts. Any man who was lined up inside the prison walls for conveyance to the infirmary was all but dead anyway. He had seen dozens upon hundreds writhing and moaning in their own filth in the shadow of the big gate. Few men laying there in that bald patch of ground would ever walk through any gates again—other than the pearly ones high above. There he was lying on the other side, living the horrors of Andersonville Hospital for himself.

Medical care consisted of resetting his broken leg bone and cauterizing his leaky flesh. Maggots had been administered as the Confederate witch doctors reasoned the larvae only ate the rotten flesh. It was a truth of nature, but it did not bring him an ounce of comfort as he felt them wriggling around in and about his leg. He was bound to the cot with hemp roping, as he was considered probable to try another escape. If his hands were free, he surely would have flayed himself from the kneecap down.

Anesthesia consisted of the most minuscule dose of morphine possible and a stick to bite down upon. Pain and anger were his nursemaids. The other prisoners who had given up on this world dropped with clock-like regularity around him. To his doctor’s

astonishment, he actually improved and was soon sent back into the ranks of the Union soldiers inside.

The fools thought their medical talents had saved him. They had no notion of the healing benefits of insanity and revenge. For the remainder of his days and nights in Andersonville, he had the focus and clarity of revenge to nourish him as others languished in despair and all but surrendered to death.

Kemper let the memories pass and returned his awareness to the infirmary in St. Louis. He wiped the tears from his eyes and looked about the room to find the simple-minded wretches surrounding him were all asleep. Despite their various illnesses, they were lulled into fitful slumber by the doctors and their pharmaceutical phalanxes. They had plied him with similar bounty, but Kemper was able to hoodwink the staff into thinking he had taken their medicines.

The laudanum, being an old friend, was a different tale altogether. He gulped it down as soon as it was in his hands. He had even managed a steady influx of the poppy juice beyond his prescription by bartering with the other patients using the surplus of medication he did not want and did not take.

Alone amongst the flock of sheep, it was time for him to shepherd himself on out of there. He folded the letter and slid it into a fold of his hospital "fatigues." He swung his legs over the side of the cot and winced at the godawful squeak the urine-rusted coils made.

The sheep did not stir.

He used the slight starlight cast throughout the ward to navigate down between the beds. His sweat-soaked garb chilled him as he rushed in a right jolly crippled dash to the nurse's station door. A thick plate of glass was centered in the heavy iron barrier. There being a disturbing amount of heat emanating from the sick, sleeping bodies, a

mist had formed on the infirmary side. Kemper wiped it away slowly. The glass was so thick it was impossible to peer more than a few feet into the office.

There, however, next to the door, he saw the night orderly, Felix, head lolling back as he reclined in a chair. His feet were crossed and resting upon Nurse Elber's desk. How she would rail upon Felix if she were to witness his nonchalant laxity and disrespect!

Being locked inside, Kemper contemplated how he could find himself on the opposite side of the door and past Felix with the least amount of hubbub. Using the only weapons at his disposal—his wits and his pants, he shed his trousers and twisted them into a long, crude rope.

He knocked lightly against the glass so as to awaken the semi-conscious Felix, but not the others in the room. No response, except the tall, doughy man shifted his girth, causing a barely audible groan from the chair as he wedged his fat in even deeper between the arm rests. In his orderly whites, Felix resembled a three hundred pound sack of wet flour stuck in a chair.

Kemper was irritated with this impediment to his escape, but also with his lifelong intolerance for ineptitude in others.

This man should be on guard at all times for the needs of the sick!

Kemper gave a healthier knocking upon the iron door itself, which yielded a very satisfactory, low, booming echo. He spied as Felix came to with a start. He ducked back behind the door and awaited the man's entry. Nothing happened for a moment and Kemper assumed the lummoX must be peering through the window. Kemper had a lifetime of waiting. He reckoned a second more would not crush him, so he waited. Finally a faint jingle of keys, the rough tumble and click of the lock and the door was opening toward Kemper.

Kemper waited for Felix to enter. When he had cleared the door, Kemper rushed toward him, holding the ends of his trousers; he looped the middle section over Felix's head and around his neck. He put his weight into it and yanked back hard.

Felix struggled with the cloth around his neck and shuffled his feet but did not pitch backward as Kemper had hoped, so Kemper planted his one good leg into the orderly's back. This had the desired result as Felix came crashing backward. Kemper swung out from underneath him but lost his grip on one end of the trousers. He managed to stay on his feet as Felix spun and landed face down on the rough plank floor.

Felix squirmed to get his feet and hands under him, the shock giving way to anger. A low growl was heard from deep within his throat, rising as he did.

Kemper laid his foot in the center of Felix's back and pushed down, pinning the big man. Kemper reached out and gripped the edge of the open door and swung it hard into the top of Felix's skull.

Felix howled and tried to protect his pate against the next blow but he was too late and Kemper rammed the door into him again and again.

It lasted an excruciatingly long time, in Kemper's opinion, but Felix eventually stopped struggling and lay still, his legs and arms sprawled out as a small puddle of blood pooled under his face.

After the commotion, a few of the patients stirred. Curiosity was one thing, but Kemper didn't need them interfering.

Kemper removed the attendant's large shoes, dropped the orderly's legs with a thud and padded barefoot into the nurse's station.

He closed the door behind, locked it and removed the keys.

Kemper stood there shivering with excitement, staring down the corridors of the administrative wing as the gas-lamps cast their light and laid their shadows. He was thinking about the few steps until he was on the road to Hercules and Silas. He entertained the delightful notion of ransacking the offices and setting the whole place on fire, thereby destroying his records by result. He knew the records did not reveal his intentions or give away his plans, and setting the hellish dungeon ablaze, killing hundreds in the process, was not conducive to the stealth he required in future. Kemper hunted men and he was aware the infamy such an act would shoulder upon him. It would make him a glaring target instead of the odd footnote he intended to be. Still, it would have been a glorious explosion of destruction and one hell of a farewell party.

Knowing his limited time, Kemper stuck to the plan and focused his electrified attentions on the important next step. He crossed the expanse of the nurse's station, his feet slapping on the cold black and white tiles. He approached the dispensary and dropped Felix's shoes by the door. The clatter echoed up and down the corridor.

With trembling hands, he found what he imagined was the right key and worked it into the lock. He used too much force and the blade of the key snapped away from the bow. His panic consumed him. He raced about the small office, searching with abandon for some tool to open the room or get the sliver of the key from the lock.

He knew he could not continue this journey without his old friend.

He placed his weight behind the heavy desk in the center of the room, and after much maneuvering, managed to slide it across the smooth floor to the dispensary door. He climbed the desk and stood on the top to reach and open the transom window. He heaved himself up and slipped through the opening, crashing to the floor inside.

Ignoring the throbbing of his gimpy leg, he opened cabinets, searching in the faint light until he found the stores of laudanum. Opening one immediately, he

swallowed a good, satisfying dose. The world soon felt tolerable around the edges. He hummed a light tune from his younger days and meticulously picked through the small, labeled bottles only taking the one favorite opiate. The others were sad, sloshy imitators.

He cradled the bottles and realized he had nowhere to put them, for his shirt barely covered his buttocks and had no pockets. He had left his pants in the infirmary wrapped around Felix's neck. Despite his predicament, he giggled uncontrollably as he puzzled things out.

He placed the bottles near the door in a careful group and returned to the cabinets. As he tried to read the labels of the various chemicals—Nitric Acid, Carbolic Acid, Chlorine, Alcohol—he imagined the effects of mixing them to create some sort of explosion to blow open the door. He thought at the least it would burn away the inner workings of the lock, but ultimately this was abandoned as he realized any noxious gasses or smoke may kill him.

“We cannot have that...”

He stepped to the door and inspected the hinges and clawed at the pins until his fingertips nearly bled. He took another sip and finally the solution was simple in his mind. He rushed over and found a stack of linens in a closet in the corner. He sat on the floor near the door, his bare bottom chilled by the cold tiles, and he meticulously wrapped the laudanum in pillowcases and then the whole bunch in a sheet. He pushed one of the medicine cabinets against the door, placed the bundle on top and climbed.

He held the parcel over the desk in the hallway and lowered it as far as the loose ends of the sheet would reach and let go. He winced in anticipation of the sound of the shattering bottles, but the sound never came. Filled with joy at his success, he threw himself through the transom, bouncing off the desk and onto the hallway floor.

The anguished, pudgy face of Felix filled the thick window of the infirmary door. He was quite livid as he mouthed some obscenities while pounding on the iron barrier. Kemper could not make out what the orderly was trying to communicate, but then again, he didn't care. He knew it would be hours yet until the fat man was let out of the wrong side of the door.

He collected his drugs and hugged them close, turning toward the door leading out back. As he walked quickly down the hall the wind rushing against his legs and around his privates shocked him into realizing he was not attired for mingling with the world beyond the confines of the asylum.

Inside these walls there was nothing remarkable or shocking about seeing a man or woman wandering aimlessly in nothing but a dirty nightshirt, but outside he would cause quite a stir and surely be transported right back.

Kemper knew there was a changing room where employees kept their belongings while they worked. He shuffled down the hall and tried every room. Some doors were locked and others were storage or offices. He went from side to side until he had but one room left. At the final door, just beside the exit, Kemper wrapped his fingers around the cold brass knob, closed his eyes and made a wish.

The room was filled with tall lockers on either side. He laid the bundle on a low bench in the center of the room. He quickly padded to the locker nearest the door and clawed at the latch. Inside he found a coat and trousers. As he unfurled them, he realized they must belong to an exceptionally large person. He held the trousers to his waist and the hems flopped over his feet. He inspected the jacket and found a strip of white cloth sewn into the collar with Felix's name stitched in.

Not wanting to waste a precious moment, he slipped on the trousers, rolled up the hem, tucked in his nightshirt and donned the jacket. He rummaged around for a pair of shoes and remembered he had left Felix's footwear outside the dispensary.

He was scornful of the enormity of Felix's clothes, but realizing the extra storage they provided, he smiled with deep contentment at the serendipity as he unwrapped the laudanum and shoved them in the various pockets.

He hobbled back to the desk, his pockets tinkling. As he slipped into the huge shoes, he looked up to see the infirmary window was completely fogged over and Felix was wiping it clean with the ball of his hand. He poked his blood-streaked face once more into the glass and mouthed a few very clear, quite obscene words.

Kemper gathered himself, stopped, saluted the corpulent caretaker and let himself through the service entrance out onto the rear grounds.

Awareness of time and sense of direction had long been unnecessary since he had been inside the poisoned womb. His knowledge was limited to daytime, nighttime, left or right. His rebirth found him racing across the lush grass under a spectacular canopy of stars to guide him. He would soon find out where and when he was by the manner and mass of traffic beyond the confines of the St. Louis Insane Asylum acreage.

Kemper made the wide trek around the south side of the asylum. He reached the low wall and sat upon it. It was not designed for anything other than creating a facade of austerity and beauty. No one was intended to be kept in by it. Each patient's own mental and pharmaceutical walls kept them safely inside. He swung his legs out and over and carefully hopped down. He strolled with purpose out to Arsenal Avenue. He surmised it was late in the evening by the light traffic and unlit windows. Still, the front desk of a hotel such as the Crawford was no doubt manned at all hours for the arriving guests who recognized no civilized timetables.

He sipped a small dose for the long walk. He must be careful not to run dry.
This would be a long trip, one to savor.

Chapter Fourteen

Smitty's

Sunday, 7:40 a.m.

Emma awoke disoriented, in a high state of nausea. The brash glare of morning light bullied her vision. She took little notice of the room or its occupancy as she bolted out the open door onto the balcony. A surge of bile rose involuntarily upward into her mouth. She gripped the rail and leaned out, prepared to vomit.

From below came Herc's greeting, "Mornin', Miss Em!"

She blinked tears away to see Herc, his face upturned and smiling. He waved.

Not wanting to shower her companion below with whatever may still be in her stomach, she pulled herself, hand over hand, to the eastern side of the balcony. She glanced over and found no victims save a small pile of wood in a stack.

The retching commenced in spectacular and dramatic fashion, however, the output was a dry disappointment. Emma had only taken but a sip of Herc's wine last night. It was an unpalatable fermentation and, to Emma, it had a kerosene flavor. She wondered if she had been drunk. The symptoms of the morning were similar to those her Uncle Theo had exhibited after a night of much too much whiskey.

She straightened weakly to upright and turned to find Ezra Bean perched on the railing a mere two rods away. Aside from his swooping on her yesterday, she had never been this close to a bird of prey, and though he was a friend to her companions, she was still quite frightened.

Ezra Bean cocked his head to the left and the right. She felt he stared right into the heart of her. He hooted softly and ruffled out his breast feathers then smoothed

them back down. The opaque nictating eyelids swept from the inside corners of his huge eyes outward and then back again. His outer eyelids closed then raised halfway in a drowsy-looking gaze.

She was loath to move. Partially due to fear, but also because she was so taken by the beauty of this animal. She was afraid if she stirred, Ezra Bean may fly off and she may never again get the chance to behold him this closely.

Ezra Bean released her by turning his head full around and lifting one of his down-covered legs up into his belly.

Below, tending to the horses, Silas and Herc exchanged quizzical glances.

Silas bent down, lifted the back foot of Emma's horse, Shot, and asked Herc, "You don't think she got a sour stomach from my biscuits yesterday, do you?"

Herc smiled. "Don't you all think you or me or Dee Dee or Romeo would'a fallen ill too? No, my friend, I am formulating the opinion Miss Emma may need some time to gain the constitution required for life on the trail. You need to remember she is but a young woman used to a soft and safe cradle. Here she is leaving home and hearth and mother all in one big gulp. She is more than a little nervous yet. Don't you go gettin' your feelin's bruised. You are a formidable gourmet and I am sure she was duly impressed."

Silas waved him off in frustration, but stole another glance up at Emma as she shuffled back inside.

Dee Dee came bouncing along and Herc sent her upstairs to check on Emma.

"Morning, Miss Emma!" Dee Dee said with true open-hearted regard, "Uncle Silas asked me to point out the coffee's still warm and they's some bacon and biscuits up on the sill. Can I help you pack?"

”No, little dear. Truth be told, I believe it may not take but a moment as I have not much to my person.”

Emma realized that since her purge, the mention of the bacon and such created a unusual and strong greed in her belly. She tried not to frighten the child as she devoured the tepid breakfast like a wild animal.

Romeo called to his daughter from the courtyard below, ”Dee Dee, get on down here and help me with this woodload!”

”Daddy don’t really need no help. He just can’t stand having me outta his sight for too long,” she confessed. This reminded Emma of the nature of Ezra Bean with the boys. Ezra Bean flustered if his charges were not within eyeshot too. Dee Dee added, ”He asked me all kinda questions about you last night, but I didn’t tell him nothin’ about what we said.”

In deep delight of secret-sharing, she winked her scarred eye at Emma long and hard.

”I see y’all downstairs,” Dee Dee said, already out the door, ”Y’all call me if you need anything!”

Emma stripped bare and first donned the underclothes the boys had purchased.

The long Union Suit itched like nettles and instantly she broke out into a widespread sweat. She was used to layers of clothing, but to her, this was akin to rolling in molasses and then feathers. Next, she slipped on the pants which were so stiff it felt they may cut right through the underclothes. She had never worn pants and though the idea was scandalous, the true experience was irritating—literally—as she felt the inseams clutch her thighs. The shirt was a fine and loose-fitting one. She had worried about her bosom being conspicuous when in disguise (though she was aware they were not yet too pronounced) but the spaciousness left it a moot point.

Wool socks even coarser than the underclothes were slipped on next. Oddly, these were quite comfortable and even airy. The new boots looked as if they had been cobbled from a petrified cowhide, with the dullest sheen and they bent only under considerable coercion. When she managed to force them over the socks, though, they fit snugly, but not too tight. Having never worn trousers with her footwear, she was unsure as to whether the pant legs should be sported inside or outside her boots. Silas and Herc went untucked and so did she.

Emma did not try on the coat, for she felt as if she was standing inside a steamboat boiler. At that thought, she heard a whistle from a boat directly outside on the levee. Being Sunday, there was little to none of the usual cacophony and this lone whistle stood out like a fart in church-service.

At the window, she gazed out and saw how low on the horizon the sun had risen and realized it must yet be very early.

Out on the edge of the riverbank, an odd-looking steamer pushed her bow onto the sandy landing. It looked similar to any one of a thousand other sternwheelers, with the modest, two story decks on the rear half of the boat, topped off by the pilot house.

The middle section was bereft of cargo, but the thing that set it apart was an imposing, immense crane dominating the entire front section of the foredeck. She wondered why the entire ship didn't tip forward under the weight of the great iron frame and huge hook.

The ship had been painted with the standard whitewash, but the plank sidings were chipping and peeling in small patches here and there. Her eyes drifted to the sign hanging below the pilot house which read, "Lulabelle, Salvage/Snag, St. Lo, Mo., F. Smith, Cap'n."

Romeo, Silas and Dee Dee went out to meet the ship. Two young black men on deck commenced to throwing out lines to the greeting party. Silas and the others tugged hard on the ropes, walking the boat toward shore. They wound them around huge iron lanyards set in immense cement blocks sunken into the levee.

Though clearly trying her hardest, Dee Dee was pulled forward, as her strength and weight were not ample to the pulling of the drifting boat. Her father came over and finished her valiant efforts.

Soon a host of other men were milling about the cabins and the deck. There were a dozen or so all told, mostly black men with a few whites burned to a near brown from the sun on the open waters. The two men Emma had initially seen with the ropes were clean-shaven, and were wearing light colored shirts with brown pants rolled up to the ankles above bare feet. The other men were hairy, dirty and naked except for their trousers, which looked to fall off if there was a malfunction of the ropes holding them up.

The gangway was lowered and Silas received it, swinging his end down onto the sunbaked levee. A tremendously round man in black trousers and jacket with a white shirt emerged from the rear cabins and strode imperially toward the fore of the craft. To Emma, he resembled a cannonball toddling along on a pair of twigs.

He carefully waddled down the plank where Romeo, Silas and Herc converged on him. There was a good amount of gesticulating, with the captain pointing far downriver and shaking his head in a negative fashion.

Silas pointed back toward the compound and up at Emma. The fat man removed his hat, shaded his eyes with his hand and looked up toward her perch. She ducked back into the shadows of the room, still able to see the events riverside.

The fat man finally nodded. A slap on the back, a wild handshake and the crowd dispersed to unknown chores in preparation for the voyage.

From her high vantage, Emma absently stared out into the morning firmament. Banks of clouds stretched out across the pale blue horizon. They rose uniformly in long tufts trailing high billowing fronts, an ethereal armada with sails full as the wind swept them across the ocean of American sky. She had never seen a sky so beautiful, but she noted she had only lately felt reason to look up.

She returned to her packing, as it was. She removed the mirror from the satchel and looked at her reflection with a gasp. Her long tresses had normally left her a fright to witness in the morning, but this short cut was a terror. Tufts and spikes were arranged in a chaotic mess from the night's slumber. She lifted the heavy Stetson onto her head and looked again. She realized the reason behind man's proclivity toward headwear, for not one stray golden straw was visible. In fact, she was pleased with her authentic cowboy look.

Emma emptied the other items from the satchel and placed her extra change of menswear, neatly folded, inside. To her, the array of memorabilia felt like antiques from another person's life, though she had treasured them so just yesterday. The mirror and comb were frivolous and indulgent, the rag doll ridiculous and the pipe was painful to gaze upon. She collected the wardrobe of her previous days, folded them neatly and placed mirror, comb and doll carefully inside the bundle.

The pipe felt good curled in her hand, reminding her of the nights she filled it for her father. She tucked it down beneath her new gear in the satchel. She could not give it up yet.

Soon her dress and other items were bound in the leftover paper wrappings of the shopping expedition and her bedroll was secured across her bag with leather

strapping. She took a last look around the room. Though she had only spent one night there, it had been a temporary home, or at least a pivotal station on the line of life.

She joined the bustle downstairs.

Chapter Fifteen

St. Louis, 8:20 a.m.

Early as was respectable, Alexis Free rode alone from the family estate to the home of Estelle Rowland, the friend and neighbor to the Colson family and apparent confidante to the two men accompanying Emma. She had wanted to visit the other family first, but Estelle's closer proximity made up her mind on that. The robin's pre-dawn chorus was dwindling and the chipper, crisp warble of the cardinal was in overture as she rode under the bright morning sky.

She went over her questions again and tried to formulate responses to Estelle's answers from there. The road ahead had many forks and Alexis wished to have some notion of where it all led. She rarely got lost if she prepared herself.

Every day as she went to work, Alexis had passed the small farmhouse Estelle and her children lived in. She had always admired the little garden near the log fence running around the modest acreage. She was aware of the rumors about the woman of the house losing her husband in the fire a few years back. A damaged portion of the house had slowly been rebuilt, but it was evident money was an issue, for the general upkeep had waned in recent times.

She turned into the carriage drive and dismounted, tying her horse to a small crabapple tree a good distance from the house. She hoped to be seen and therefore not come as a complete surprise.

The porch roof, while sturdy-looking enough, leaned a touch to the right like a drunk holding fast to anything for support. Under this, the door opened inward revealing a woman squinting at Alexis. She wiped her hands on a lace-trimmed apron

and stepped onto the porch, which spread out and around one corner of the house. It looked idyllic in its promise of leisure with a hanging bench built for two and one old, regal rocking chair.

”Mrs. Rowland?” She hailed, still twenty rods away. ”My name is Alexis Free and I was wondering if I might trouble you to ask a few questions about a mutual friend.”

”That depends, Mrs. Free,” she replied dryly, ”on what those questions are, who they are about and how long you intend to take. I have to get these children ready for services.”

”It’s *Miss* Free, actually,” she corrected, wishing she hadn’t, ”but call me Alexis, please.”

A moat circled Estelle’s castle as she gave absolutely no reply, and no bridge was quick to be lowered.

A pair of tow-headed children, one boy about six and a girl near nine or ten, stuck their curious faces out from behind Estelle. Another, brown-haired child who shared no resemblance to the rest of the clan, peered through a window nearby, ducking her head back inside as Alexis waved to her.

Though the sun was beginning to warm the earth around her, Alexis felt a distinct chill.

”Come on in and let’s get this inquisition begun,” Estelle said as she turned and ran smack into the two spies at her side. ”If you two don’t run upstairs and get churchy, I am liable to leave you all there for Bible studies after service!”

Estelle’s frank response to her actually made Alexis think that, under different circumstances, she and the woman could have forged a different relationship, but these

times and this situation had been cast already. She untied her hat, stepped onto the porch and into the house.

It was clear to Alexis she was being inquisitioned by Estelle and not the reverse.

Before Alexis had even cleared into the kitchen, Estelle started in. "So, who are you and why are you asking after Emma?"

There it was, like a skunk on the dinner table.

"To be truthful," Alexis replied, wondering if she was allowed to sit before being strung out on the rack. "I am here because Theodore Colson—"

"Oh, well!" Estelle cut in, "I should have known! You his mistress? Come to collect his daughter? You tell him he sent her down that road alone this morning to me—in the dark—and she is in my charge now until he grows a backbone and comes to collect her himself. She's not linen you can just drop off and collect at your convenience. You think you have the vinegar to take her from me?"

Estelle jammed her hands on her hips in grand defiance, flour dabbed along her strong but tired jawline. Alexis remained undaunted.

"You misunderstand," Alexis said. "May we sit and talk over a cup of coffee, perhaps?"

"Now she wants coffee! Let me ring the butler and have him whip us up a little breakfast, ma'am!" She was livid and beyond her limit of civility. Hands flailing, head rolling about wildly, she blew a strand of wayward hair from before her narrowed eyes as she said, "I told you I had to corral these children for service and here you want *coffee* as we discuss the ruination of a young woman's life . . ."

"I assure you, I am neither Mr. Colson's mistress or his . . . whatever you think I am supposed to be." Alexis lost her patience and found her own temper. "If you would shut your wagging chin and listen to me for a moment, you would learn that, yes,

Colson has hired me, but I am now beginning to believe he may be the one I must protect Miss Emma from. You think this true as well. The fact you mentioned Emma's name before I even did, and your hostility, leads me to believe you are worried for her too. I am a private investigator for hire, but I am still a woman."

This actually did shut Estelle's mouth—after it wagged up and down for a brief time in astonishment. A slight grin whispered at the corner of her lips. Alexis knew she almost had her.

Estelle looked into Alexis' eyes for a moment, unraveling some barbed knot in her mind.

"Kaitlin Rose!" She shouted to the ceiling.

This bizarre outburst startled Alexis. Estelle was looking absently at the ceiling awaiting some reply when the girl from the porch—the spy—craned her neck around the corner. "Yes, Momma?"

Estelle gave a start herself then. "Child, you go sneaking around scaring me so . . . you're supposed to be upstairs getting set for service. Never mind. Get your brother and Louisa ready and go to the Semple's and have them carry you to church. Tell them I'll be along soon, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ask them to tell the Reverend my delay is in the concern of Emma!" she yelled to her daughter, who had already gone into the other room and was tugging a reluctant girl past the doorway.

The brown haired child stared at Alexis as she bobbed past. She waved once more to the child as she was pulled along, but the girl stuck her tongue out at Alexis.

"Wonderful little girl," she said wryly.

”Do not judge her too harshly. She has been through much in her short years and aside from Emma and I, she has not been shown much care.”

Duly chastised, Alexis said, ”I’m sorry. You are right. I must remember they come from the same situation.”

Estelle turned her back on her and did indeed begin the makings of a pot of coffee. She motioned to the table and chairs, ”Sit down, *Miss Free*. I suppose this will take some time.”

Neither woman spoke until they were both seated with steaming cups of coffee before them.

Alexis asked about Emma and Theo and why she might have run off.

”I think you know why, *Miss Free*. Why else would you have offered that whole speech about needing to protect her from Theodore? I will not speak of some things I know, but I will say she has been treated most foully. A man such as that . . . I wonder how you can work for the likes of him? When you already suspect his dark nature and darker intentions?”

”I have taken on this case. Often times, the reasons for deciding on an investigation change. Often times, the client may become the suspect,” was all she gave away.

It was not enough for Estelle.

”You take his check, but do not do his bidding? You know that money is rightly hers, don’t you? You are taking money from him to drag her back to the lair of the monster. *Her* money, I might add.”

”I haven’t deposited the check.”

”I would like to believe you, *Miss—*”

”Please, call me Alexis.”

”*Alexis*. You’ll have to forgive me, but I do not know you. I only know you are employed by a man you now say you are not working for and it all smells odd to me.”

”Fair enough. But, I cannot think of any ways in which to convince you, and if I could, you would most likely not be buying in on it anyway. All I can do is go forth in my own good conscience and hope you come along at some point to witness my true intentions. Can you tell me about Mrs. Colson? What has her reaction been to this? Has she any way to—”

”Elizabeth Colson was admitted to the St. Louis Insane Asylum this morning,” Estelle said hotly. ”*That man* put his own wife in there. He sent her youngest girl here to be cared for and now has no impediments to the goal of recapturing that child and making her . . . Theo told Louisa to inform me that Elizabeth grew distraught over Emma’s ’kidnapping’ and ’if I would be so kind,’ would I look after his poor Louisa while he took matters in hand. Humph.”

Alexis asked, ”May I speak with Louisa?”

”No. I will not allow that.”

Alexis expected as much so she judiciously cut right past the issue. ”What can you tell me about the men she left with yesterday?”

”I have no idea who you’re talking about,” she said, arms crossed tightly across her chest. Her pale cheeks turned light rose and her eyes danced along the hem of her apron.

”I suppose I should not have let you see my cards there, but I have little time for polite parlor games. I can scry from your reaction you are, in fact, acquainted with these men, but also you are not going to tell me anything about them.”

No reaction from Estelle, but a long, direct stare—the kind wielded to wither most any child’s confidence—but Alexis was no child to be brought to heel. ”It appears

my most direct route to you is to come right down the pike. I know about Emma's plight. I know also a bit about her flight. I know you have aided her by supplying your friends as a method of egress. I do not know these men as you do, so I question their natural inclinations as men who would agree so heartily to sweeping off with a very young woman out onto the trails of a hard West."

Estelle straightened and took a look of insult upon her brow.

"Your reaction at least sets my mind at ease. You obviously hold these men in such high esteem you show affront when I question their character, and you trust them enough to ward her to her grandfather out in Arizona Territory. Yes, I know about the grandfather. Unfortunately, so does Theodore Colson. After all, it is his own father. I have come to know Theodore only a short while, but in that time, I have begun to not like him and seriously question his motivations. Furthermore, I know if I do not proceed on my own to help this young woman—if I return to Theodore and tell him I will not take this case, or have not done as he has asked—he will no doubt contract another investigator from another firm. This hypothetical new detective will come crashing down on your dear friends with professional indifference, drag Emma back to Theodore, and happily cash the check."

Estelle's shoulders hunched forward while she looked away to the windows. In her mind, she spied her dear, far-off friends and the dangers ahead of them.

The stampede of children down the stairs scattered her daydreamings. "You all go straight to the Semple's now, and no stopping off to feed those chickens of theirs!"

Out the door they raged, slamming it shut in their wake.

Silence reigned for a few minutes. A log popped and hissed inside the stove and the water pump at the sink dripped.

Alexis sighed, "I can tell you are a thoughtful woman, and by that I mean stubborn, so I realize any answer or help from you will not be timely." She drained the coffee in one last gulp and stood. "Think about Emma before you loiter too long in indecision. I have been honest with you and now you must be honest with yourself. Will you do absolutely nothing for her now after you have already done so much? Are you going to help me see to it she is safe or are you going to let her take her chances on a carriage route through a landscape of rough travel and rougher humanity? I cannot say I will see her to Arizona, but I can say I will do all within my power to see justice done by her."

Estelle sat and watched as Alexis opened her riding waistcoat to reveal the pearly handle of a small firearm holstered neatly against her ribcage. Alexis reached inside the jacket and Estelle tensed. Alexis retrieved a small leather wallet, withdrew a card and slid across the table.

As she tucked the case away, she looked intently into Estelle's eyes. "Here is the information by which to contact me. Direct any information you wish to share to either my father, Benjamin Free, or myself. Once again, I realize you are reticent to help me, but I sincerely hope you will find your way past your stubborn suspicions to see to Emma's safety."

After a second time calling Estelle stubborn, Alexis turned and showed herself out. She knew she had lit a fuse and wanted to clear the blast area before it burned down.

Estelle picked up the card and listened to the fire pop once more.